

EXPLORING EASTER EGGS, PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND AGENDA SETTING
IN THE MARKETING OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S *THE TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT*
ALBUM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis applies parasocial relationship theory and agenda-setting theory to an analysis of how American pop music star Taylor Swift utilized Easter egg marketing in promoting her 2024 album *The Tortured Poets Department*. Based on empirical and qualitative analysis of social media content about the album gathered via the Brandwatch platform, the study found that Swift uses hints and messages – so-called Easter eggs – to communicate with her audience and help build a sense of community among her most devoted fans, known as "Swifties." Results found indicators of parasocial relationship formation among Swift's fans, but no substantial evidence of a connection between Easter eggs and the formation of such relationships. Rather, Swift's Easter eggs tend to attract media coverage and boost publicity through a classic agenda-setting process.

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INTRODUCTION

Largely one-sided relationships have always existed between performers and an audience, whether it be between TV show characters and fans, music artists and an audience, or just between a celebrity and fans. In 1956, Horton and Wohl coined the term, “para-social relationship” (p 215) to describe how an interaction between consumers of mass media and representations of people in the media (like actors, presenters, and celebrities) can form a parasocial relationship where consumers respond as if they have a real, direct social relationship with said celebrity. These relationships can be formed with anyone who has some type of media presence, like “newscasters, television personalities, reality show contestants and soap opera characters” (Laken, 2009, p 13). Audience members get attached to a celebrity’s character and think that they can relate to that character/ actor or even a musician on a personal level.

With such a large presence in society, social media can play a big role in creating a parasocial relationship between a celebrity and the audience. Social media can provide a fast way for celebrities and fans to connect, and social media can blur the boundaries between public and private life for celebrities. By using social media to form parasocial relationships, marketers can turn the relationships into a marketing tool within the marketing industry. “They create personalized and intimate advertisements targeted towards specific audiences. Doing so allows the audience to feel included in a community that is connected to the persona of the celebrity or product” (Tan & Kapadia, 2022, para 8).

The proposed thesis would explore the role of parasocial relationships in singer Taylor Swift’s marketing and attempt to quantify the amount of publicity it generates.

Who is Taylor Swift?

Taylor Swift is arguably one of the world's most famous pop stars. Born December 13, 1989, Swift has swept the nation with her songs and her tours. Swift first made an impact on the country music world when she was just 15 years old. She went from performing at local Nashville venues to international tours (Ray, 2024). Swift started writing songs around age 12 and taught herself how to play the guitar. To help Swift pursue her country music career, her family moved to Hendersonville, Tennessee - the country music capital - where she signed with Big Machine Records at the age of 15 (Ray, 2024, para. 4). Swift released her first single “Tim McGraw” in 2006, and “The song was an immediate success, spending eight months on the *Billboard* country singles chart” (Ray, 2024, para. 5). She followed up her success with her debut album, *Taylor Swift*, and it went certified platinum in 2007, “having sold more than a million copies in the United States” (Ray, 2024, para. 7). She made history in her first year in the business by “becoming the youngest artist ever to win the prestigious title of Entertainer of the Year at the Country Music Association Awards in 2009” (Bose , 2024).

After signing with Big Machine Records, Taylor Swift gained the opportunity to release songs that resonated deeply with listeners, expressing raw and heartfelt emotions that many could relate to on a personal level. She expertly transformed her experiences of challenging relationships into a highly successful country music career, writing songs that were praised for their emotional transparency and vulnerability. As noted by White (2018), Swift’s music often featured “intimate and intricate lyrics that resemble diary entries,” giving her audience a glimpse into her personal struggles and heartaches in a way that felt genuine and relatable. (White, 2018, p 1). Her storytelling ability, coupled with these emotional narratives, made her music widely popular among country music lovers around the world. When she released her second album, she

showed the world that she could create country music that also appealed to mainstream pop fans. With the release of *Fearless* (2008), Swift attracted a mainstream pop audience without losing sight of her country roots. This album marked a pivotal moment in her career, where she proved that her music could transcend genres, drawing in fans from both country and pop backgrounds.

Swift's popularity continued to grow as she released more music, and by the age of 22, Swift had earned fourteen Grammys, including Album of the Year, Best Country Album, Best Country Solo Performance, and Best Country Song (The Recording Academy, 2017). She was not only making history at such a young age by altering country music itself but was also developing into one of the world's most powerful and influential celebrities, as well as a cultural phenomenon. "Fans were enamored by her persona, her music, and the clean-cut country girl image she presented for over a decade" (White, 2018, p 3). Swift eventually moved away from country music and released her first fully pop album, *1989*, in 2014. The album proved to be another blockbuster for Swift; its first week of sales surpassed those of *Red*, and she went on to sell more than 5 million copies in the United States, earning Swift her second Grammy for album of the year" (Ray, 2024, para. 9). This album reflected her recent move to New York and showed that Swift was putting away her country roots and gaining some new perspective on life. *1989* outsold her last two albums and earned her three Grammys. "The release of *1989* was not just an introduction to Swift's new musical sound, but also the platform used to introduce the audience to Swift's new identity as a mature woman" (White, 2018). Swift realized that her fans would follow her anywhere, and instead of losing a fanbase by moving genres, she gained thousands more.

Swift vs. Braun

After her release of *1989*, her record label, Big Machine, was about to be sold, and Swift wanted the rights to her songs. The record label, along with all her studio albums, was sold to Scooter Braun, and Swift did something no other artist had ever done before. She announced that she would re-record all her albums. After *1989*, she experienced a lot of hate from social media and was involved in a feud with Kanye West when he released his song “Famous,” where he referred to her as a “bitch.” Her controversies continued when, “she took part in a widely publicized civil trial in August 2017, after former radio host David Mueller sued the singer, her mother, and a promoter, claiming that Swift had falsely accused him of sexually groping her in 2013 during the taking of a photograph and thus destroyed his career” (Ray, 2024, para. 15). Shortly after all this drama happened, she released the hit song “Look What You Made Me Do,” and her album *Reputation* became the top-selling album of 2017. Swift left her record label, Big Machine, in 2018 and she signed with Republic Records and Universal Music Group. “The following year her former label, which owned the master recordings of her six albums, was sold to Scooter Braun” (Ray, 2024, para. 16). She spoke out against the deal, stating that she was denied the opportunity to buy her own music, and while she tried to negotiate a deal with Braun, “he sold her back catalog to a private investment firm in 2020” (Ray, 2024, para. 16).

To fight the arrangement, Swift announced that she was going to re-record her albums and that anything that had “(Taylors Version)” on it would mean that Swift owned the rights to that music. She started owning her own music with the release of her seventh album, *Lover*, in 2019. While re-recording her original six albums, she released her eighth album, *Folklore*, in 2020, and quickly followed with the “sister” album, *Evermore*, in 2020 as well. During this time, Swift also re-recorded *Fearless*, *Speak Now*, *Red*, and *1989* while also releasing new songs for

each album that would be listed “from the Vault”, followed by a brand new album in 2022, *Midnights*. “Swift adopted a synth-pop sound for the candid *Midnights* (2022), which she described as ‘the story of 13 sleepless nights scattered throughout my life’” (Ray, 2024, para. 19). *Midnights* received six Grammy nominations and won album of the year and best pop vocal album. During her acceptance speech for album of the year, Swift announced she would release her 10th studio album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, in April 2024. During this time of re-recording her old albums and releasing new ones, she was touring and performing her record-breaking *The Eras Tour* throughout the U.S. and began touring internationally. She has two albums left to re-record, and her fans speculate that she must reclaim her name (debut album, *Taylor Swift*) and her reputation (her last album with Big Machine, *Reputation*). Her newest album, and the one this study focuses on, *The Tortured Poets Department* has already made waves in the music world. “*The Tortured Poets Department*, was streamed over 300 million times within the first 12 hours of its release. She released a surprise double album at 2 a.m., two hours after the original was released, called *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*. This deluxe version features 15 extra songs, meaning that Swift released 31 new songs in total” (Curtis, 2024). This album was also the fastest album in history to reach over 1 billion streams on Spotify and Swift is the most nominated artist in the Song of The Year category, and is also the first female musician to win Album of The Year three times (Bose, 2024).

During her rise to fame, Swift acquired a reputation for cultivating unusually close connections with her fans, called “Swifties,” through a range of techniques including interacting with them via social media. A review of the scholarly literature on media communication suggests that these connections can be conceptualized as parasocial relationships, and the

resulting publicity for Swift and her music may be meaningfully distinguished from publicity generated by the media through agenda-setting processes. “Taylor Swift has consistently provided her fans with immersive experiences, including relatable music, theatrical performances, and direct fan interactions. This dedication has fueled the continuous growth of her brand over an impressive 18-year career, maintaining her relevance and expanding her loyal fanbase” (Gitafitri & Kusumawati, 2024). Throughout her career, she has been nominated for over 500 awards, and has won 324. She made history this year by becoming, “the first artist to win Album of the Year four times” (Bose, 2024). She has broken numerous records with different award categories, Grammys, VMAs, Spotify streaming, Billboard Music Award, iHeart Radio Awards, American Music Awards, MTV Video Awards. “She also became the first artist to win the VMA for video of the year three years in a row” (Bose, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationships

Fans have always made personal connections with celebrities and curated one-sided relationships - called parasocial relationships - with those who are portrayed in the media. The parasocial theory has been primarily used within “communication studies, although work in psychology, sociology, and related disciplines has been done as well” (Stever, 2019, para 1). “Para-social relationship” is a term that was coined in 1956 by Horton and Wohl (p 215), and while a parasocial relationship is not a real relationship between two people, one side does invest emotionally. The phenomenon is often seen among fans of celebrities. The term was meant to be applied to, “the seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p 215). While one party invests in the relationship emotionally, the other party, or persona, is unaware of the other party’s existence.

This relationship is often manipulated by television networks and producers because they “seek attractive television personalities so that audiences will form relationships with the characters, and audiences do” (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p 279). Horton and Wohl (1956) discovered how an interaction between consumers of mass media and representations of people in the media (like actors, presenters, and celebrities) can form a parasocial relationship where users respond as if they have a real social relationship with said celebrity. “The performer draws in the spectator to the illusional relationship, either being his or herself or a friend character, with contrived and cued performances. The performance may seem to speak directly to the at-home spectator, making it appear private and personal to the spectator” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p 215). This type of staging of a performance to make it appear as if it were private and personal to the spectator creates the illusion of some type of intimacy. In reality, the relationship is one sided;

while the performer is technically in control of the parasocial relationship due to scripts or cues on camera, the spectator in the parasocial relationship has “little to no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility” to the performer (p 215).

“A character's ‘personae’ is a part of the parasocial concept. According to Laken (2009) an audience develops a parasocial relationship with the fictional character that an actor plays. Audience members can get very attached to a celebrity’s character and think they can relate to that character and actor on a personal level. Audiences can discern characters' personalities as easily as recognizing family or friends. In turn, the audience can recognize and “know” performers, “through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p 216). The more often a celebrity reprises a character in a show or movie, the more the audience is going to connect with that character and form some type of relationship with that character, whether it be good or bad. Eventually, the audience member or fan “comes to believe that he ‘knows’ the personae more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives” (p 216). During White’s (2018) study, she found that “the fan of the personae is happy with this fantasy because they are being given the feeling of friendship and connection, while the persona is being validated by growth of their successful fandom” (White, 2019, p 31).

Parasocial relationships can be formed with anyone who has some type of media presence, including “newscasters, comedians, television personalities, reality show contestants and soap opera characters” (Laken, 2009, p 13). The formation of parasocial relationships occurs in a variety of ways. Media representation plays a significant role in forming these relationships due to social media; if certain genders are featured more often and portrayed in a more relatable

way, consumers are more likely to feel some connection to that specific gender. Scholars have investigated how a parasocial interaction or relationship can influence behavior, and they have tried to show how parasocial interactions affect celebrity fans specifically. While parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions have often been interchanged for the same idea, Schramm and Hartmann (2008) recommended clarity for these two terms. They established that a parasocial interaction is defined as pertaining "to the interpersonal processes between persona and users that take place during media exposure," while a parasocial relationship is "the cross-situational relationship a viewer or user holds with a persona" (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p 386). A parasocial interaction has elements of "perception and judgment, influence and feelings and behavior stimulation of the viewer," while a parasocial relationship affects the audience's "future motivation and selection processes, as well as a parasocial interaction process in subsequent media exposure sequences" (p 386). Both parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions are agents of causality with each other but separate constructs that result from media exposure. Media personalities can frame discussions around a particular issue in a way that their audience can relate to, which leverages the parasocial relationship to make certain frames more important.

Rubin and McHugh (1987) discovered that a "parasocial interaction was related strongly to social and task attraction towards media personality, and importance of relationship development with said personality" (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p 288). Horton and Wohl stated that most parasocial relationships are normal and healthy and that the people most likely to form them are lonely and isolated. This assertion is supported by Giles (2002), who said that "parasocial interaction can be regarded as a dimension of normal social behavior... as well as an extension of normal social cognition, specifically regarding the use of imagination" (p 286-287).

Once a parasocial relationship crosses the line of objective reality, that relationship is considered pathological (Horton and Wohl, 1985). People who join parasocial relationships may invest “time, emotions, and possibly money into the other person, while the other party is unaware” (Tan & Kapadia, 2022, para 1). Horton did a follow-up paper with Strauss in 1957 that examined three different forms of social interactions. While one form was a parasocial interaction that Horton and Wohl (1956) established, there was also personal interaction and vicarious interaction. Personal interaction is the opposite of a parasocial interaction.

While parasocial interaction is through media, a personal interaction is face-to-face between a performer and fans. This is an intimate relationship between the performer and an audience because of the in-person interaction between the two (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p 579). On the other hand, a vicarious interaction happens when the audience member doesn’t interact with a performer and only watches (p 580). Parasocial, as established above, seems like a personal interaction, but the spectator’s experience is illusionary and one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

While Horton and Strauss explained that there are three different social interactions, Giles and Maltby (2006) established that there were three different levels of intensity to a parasocial relationship or “three different aspects to celebrity worship” (Giles & Maltby, 2006, p 83). The first level was “Entertainment-social,” where fans are just simply attracted to a celebrity due to the celebrity’s ability to entertain an audience and become a source of social interaction and gossip. The second level was “Intense-personal,” reflecting “intensive and compulsive feelings about a celebrity, akin to the obsessional tendencies of fans” (Giles & Maltby, 2006, p 82). The last level was classified as “Borderline-pathological,” which is where fans have uncontrollable behaviors and fantasies about their chosen celebrities. “From the fan’s viewpoint,

intense-personal aspects of celebrity worship are associated with a passive parasocial relationship... with borderline-pathological aspects, the parasocial relationship involves individuals imagining themselves in a special relationship with the celebrity” (Giles & Malthy, 2006, p 83). Often, fandoms of a certain celebrity feel as if they have a personal connection to that performer and would fall in between a borderline-pathological and intense-personal relationship.

A couple of decades after parasocial relationships were defined, Rubin and McHugh (1987) developed a multi-step process to break down the development of parasocial relationships and interactions. “Parasocial relationship development follows a path (a) social and task attraction to (b) parasocial interaction to (c) a sense of relationship importance” (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p 279). Rubin and McHugh (1987) explained that the more interaction there is between fans and a celebrity, the more likely it is for a relationship to develop. They suggested a formula for parasocial relationship development using three key factors: communication, liking, and intimacy (p 281).

Media Influence on Parasocial Relationships

Most parasocial relationships are commonly observed and found through different forms of media, like television, social media, and celebrity culture. Horton and Strauss (1957) explained that technology controls what an audience sees and hears, but the performer does have a responsibility to the audience. The performer “is competent at eliciting appropriate responses in his audience” (p 583). A lot of parasocial relationships are formed with TV show characters, because the audience can experience everything with the characters, and this immersiveness creates a parasocial bond. But this relationship is still one-sided, which Horton and Wohl suggest creates the illusion of intimacy. This type of intimacy is encouraged by news networks, in the

hope that the audience will grow attached to regular anchors/reporters; and, in turn, have a sense of loyalty to that specific network. People who regularly watch the news tend to be attached to their anchors and reporters because they see them the most and trust them. Rubin and McHugh (1987) explained that viewers of news networks who found a parasocial interaction more gratifying watched news more often. “Television personalities encourage parasocial involvement with viewing by using conversational style and gestures within informal face-to-face settings that mirror interpersonal communication and invite interactive responses” (Rubin et al., 1985, p 156). According to Horton and Wohl (1956), TV personalities and celebrities exist in the media only for the parasocial relationship with the audience (p 217).

The TV camera, according to Horton and Wohl (1956), enhances the illusion of intimacy, and the fan thinks that he or she has a personal relationship with that celebrity; the fan becomes invested with that one person, even though the fan has never met in person (p 216). While a parasocial relationship is one-sided, the persona/celebrity does have a responsibility to “act out his or her reciprocal role very aptly, like holding up a magic mirror to his followers that idealizes the illusional relationship” (p 222). Certain steps are taken with news production and the creation of TV shows that help the audience create that parasocial relationship with a fictional character or with a specific anchor from news. “The relationship is magnified by production techniques, such as close-up shots and camera zooms, which promote a sense of intimacy... these factors work together to make the persona a predictable, non-threatening, and, hence, perfect role partner for the viewer” (Rubin et al., 1985, p 156).

Oftentimes with shows that have multiple seasons, fans will create a parasocial relationship with a specific character and in turn with that actress or actor that is the face of that character. Sometimes, that actor will forever be known as that character. Heath Ledger will

forever be known for playing the Joker, and Ellen Pompeo will be known for her role in *Grey's Anatomy*. Oftentimes, these fans become obsessed with a show and in turn become obsessed with that actor/actress. Sometimes, actors who play villains on shows will be reviled by fans due to the role. Dan Scott on *One Tree Hill*, for example, was played by Paul Johansson, who has described incidents where people have come up to him and yelled at him for what his character did in the show. In an interview with Pettiti (2023) about his time on the show, Johansson explained, "I have had people move their seats to get away from me ... she was afraid of me because of my character" (Petitti, 2023, 20:11).

Social media can play a large part in creating a parasocial relationship and provides a fast way for celebrities and fans to connect. Social media blurs the boundaries between a public and private life for celebrities. Before social media, parasocial relationships were based on conventional media programming, like TV shows, radio, talk shows, and interviews. With social media, celebrities are "able to show their brands and personalities better while displaying a little more authenticity" (Tan & Kapadia, 2022, para 2). Social media platforms allow unrestricted access to celebrities and influencers. Fans can follow their favorite celebrities and interact with their content. Fans can even receive responses through likes and comments. Even though interaction between a celebrity and a fan is typically one-sided, fans will still feel connected to that celebrity. With everyone on social media, it's easy for fans to gain regular exposure to their favorite celebrities, which deepens the connection and enforces the parasocial relationship.

The increased accessibility helps create and nurture a sense of closeness and intimacy, which fuels a parasocial relationship. Social media "platforms provide fans with momentary glimpses into the professional and personal backstage of their favorite media figures that would otherwise be unknown" (Hoffner & Bradley, 2022, p 1). Fans can even create a community

through social media with other people who favor the same celebrity. We see this often with music celebrities, like Taylor Swift, whose fans are called “Swifties,” Ariana Grande whose fans are called “Ariantors”, Selena Gomez’ fans are called “Selenators,” Harry Styles’ fans are called “Stylers,” and the list goes on and on (*Some of the best fandom names in pop*, n.d.). Fans can create content about their favorite artist with other like-minded people and discuss their shared appreciation and love for a particular celebrity. These types of communities can provide a sense of belonging and solidarity with others, which reinforces parasocial relationships among fans.

Celebrities can use their social media platforms to brand themselves to consumers and use social media to curate a parasocial relationship with millions online. Chung and Cho (2017) explain that with social media, consumers can hear directly from their favorite celebrities and that helps consumers form relationships with these celebrities. Before social media, celebrity and consumer interaction was extremely limited. “In prior decades, consumers’ engagement with celebrities was based on information in traditional media, and consumers were passive audience members” (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016, p 345). Hearing directly from celebrities through social media helps consumers feel as if they have a personal connection with the celebrities. Social media platforms can be used by celebrities to get in touch with their fans and sell or promote a specific product. “Celebrities use Social Network Sites to keep their fans updated with upcoming events such as concerts and movie premiers, to write about personal projects, and to promote charity events. But the most obvious reason for using SNSs is to create a sense of closeness and connectedness with their fans by disclosing their thoughts and emotions” (Chung & Cho, 2014, p 49). Social media is part of the continuum of social communication and technology: a convergence between old and new media, which has altered the nature of the engagement between consumers and celebrities (Thomas, 2014).

Celebrities use their personal social media platforms to strengthen their own personal branding by offering an insight into their personal lives, thoughts, and emotions. Studies have shown a relationship between social media interactions and celebrity endorsements, which means that those who have created a parasocial relationship with a celebrity will be more likely to buy products that those celebrities endorse (Cho & Chung, 2017). This personal connection that fans feel towards their favored celebrity can be used as a marketing strategy for celebrities.

“...Parasocial relationships can generate this sense of belonging without some of the negativities that come with regular social relationships” (Kuiper, 2024, p 23).

Marketing through Parasocial Relationships

With social media having such a big role in creating parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities, this relationship is now being used as a marketing strategy for celebrities and entertainers. Parasocial relationships play a crucial role in modern marketing strategies; they allow celebrities to use their relationship with their fans to drive engagement, awareness of different brands, and ultimately, sales. Celebrities have been curating these parasocial relationships on social media to engage with fans, promote personal brands, and even endorse products or causes. Celebrities can connect with their audience and drive engagement and loyalty with fans by cultivating a sense of authenticity between themselves and fans. Oftentimes, we see parasocial relationships being formed between fans and music celebrities because they are using parasocial relationships as a core marketing strategy. Music celebrities will often create a strong personal brand that reflects their values and interests by sharing their passions and experiences with fans. Doing so cultivates a strong and loyal fan base that feels a strong, emotional connection to the celebrity.

Swift has been depicted as taking parasocial relationship marketing to a whole new level, with her *The Eras Tours* becoming the highest-grossing tour of all time and the first tour to hit over a billion dollars (Millman, 2023).

Swift has been able to curate one of the music business's largest fan bases, consisting of fans who obsess over everything she does, no matter how minor. "The lively discussion of her Easter eggs among fans is what transforms them from a group of individuals into a community characterized by shared interests, understanding, and camaraderie" (Kuipers, 2024, p 25). Her "Swifties" – she has trademarked the name – are among some of the most engaged and devoted fans around. She has "been credited with redefining the relationship between celebrities and fans, creating an intimacy, if only perceived, between herself and her ever-growing throng of admirers" (White, 2024, para 8). Swift has been able to create a large and loyal fan base who stand by her no matter what, even taking that loyalty to another level. "While their parasocial relationship with Swift already makes fans experience a sense of belonging, their investment in this relationship provides them a community to belong to and in which they can explore their own identity" (Kuipers, 2024, p 24). When Swift fell out with her former record label, Big Machine—who sold her music to Scooter Braun—she asked for her fans to write to Big Machine and Braun to express their feelings about her not being allowed to play her own music. "Legions of Swifties inundated Big Machines offices with messages (including, allegedly, a number of death threats)" (Théberge, 2021, p 42).

After everything that happened with Big Machine and Scooter Braun, Swift announced that she was going to re-record her albums and that anything that has "(Taylor's Version)" means that Swift owns the rights to that music. Swift began owning the rights to her music after the release of her 2019 album *Lover*. Since then, she released 4 more albums: *folklore*, *evermore*,

Midnights, and *The Tortured Poets Department*. “She re-recorded 4 of the 6 albums she made with Big Machine” (Gomez, 2023 para 13). With each new re-recorded album, she also releases several songs “‘From the Vault’ on each newly re-recorded album like the bonus tracks she originally put out when the first releases happened” (Gomez, 2023 para 5). Swift has been able to build her own personal brand based on authenticity and relatability by sharing personal experience, emotions, and challenges she has faced with her fans through her music. By Swift being open and vulnerable, she has cultivated a strong sense of trust and connection with her audience, fostering a deep parasocial relationship.

Swift is known by her fans to hide small details in her work, whether it be through her lyrics, music videos, or even her outfits, that hint at something that she has planned for the future. Recently, “the process of music rollout has been built up by the concept of Easter eggs: hidden messages that artists implement to hint at secret meanings or foreshadow future events” (Goldstein, 2022, para 1). While some artists have done this in the past, none has been as successful as Swift. Her fans now go through every little thing the celebrity says or releases. They also look for codes within her lyrics. “It started with secret messages hidden within song lyrics in album booklets...when she stopped printing her lyrics with the 1989 album is when she started hiding Easter eggs within music videos, media, and various projects” (Kuipers, 2024, p 19). Swift admitted she routinely hides clues for her fans to find and decode. During a *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* interview (2021), Swift said, “It’s sort of a tradition that we started a very long time ago ... I wanted to do something that incentivized fans to read the lyrics, because my lyrics are what I’m most proud of ... When it got out of control was when I started to realize that it wasn’t just me that had fun with this, that they had fun with it, too” (Fallon, 2022, 0:33-1:45)

The use of parasocial relationships between an artist using Easter eggs and her fans has proved to be a good marketing strategy for Swift, and the success of *Evermore* is just one example. “*Evermore* debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart and topped it for four weeks, opening with 329,000 units and becoming Swift’s second #1 album in 2020...Swift’s album had more successful statistics, which can be attributed to the anticipation build-up and marketing from Easter eggs” (Goldstein, 2022, para 5).

This type of Easter egg marketing strategy is mostly used to interact and engage consumers on a deeper level that encourages fan interactions and fosters a sense of discovery. “By hiding Easter eggs, Swift taps the deep-rooted human love for puzzles and fosters strong parasocial relationships with her fans... through these parasocial relationships, Taylor Swift has created a passionate community to which her fans can belong” (Kuipers, 2024, p 25-26). When applied, Easter egg marketing can help contribute to the development and strengthening of parasocial relationships between consumers and celebrities or brands. So, when fans uncover some type of potential Easter egg, they may share their discoveries with friends, family, or other fans through social media platforms. This word-of-mouth marketing can amplify the reach of a celebrity's message and attract new consumers who are intrigued by the hidden elements, which further expands the parasocial relationship.

This type of marketing encourages fans to actively engage with a celebrity's content in search of hidden clues or messages, and when found, this can strengthen a fan’s loyalty to the celebrity. By rewarding fans for their attention and loyalty with hidden messages, fans feel valued and appreciated for their efforts in discovering Easter eggs, and they are more likely to develop a deeper sense of loyalty towards that celebrity and continue to engage with the celebrity’s products and/or content. “Belonging to a community allows fans to shape their own

identity through dialogue that consists both of interpretation and direction...Swift's Easter egg mayhem has created a bond between fans that goes further than just the search for secret messages... members of the Swift fandom feel connected through their love for the singer and her work, but it is their interaction with each other that really brings them together. ” (Kuipers, 2024, p 24-25). By incorporating hidden elements into their marketing efforts, celebrities can create memorable experiences that resonate with consumers and contribute to the development of strong parasocial relationships. “Swift is a masterful marketer. She plays the long game and has an incredible ability to create an engaging, mysterious and sophisticated fan-experience ecosystem, all the while taking advantage of some key psychological principles of behavioral economics” (Mirzaei, 2024, para 4). These parasocial relationships between Swift and her fans is what has helped Swift become the star that she is today. “The sense of belonging itself is important, as it provides a safe place to be vulnerable and initiate fearless dialogue...where Swifties can express themselves and explore what is important to them in conversation with other fans” (Kuipers, 2024, p 25).

Agenda Setting

Media agenda setting theory offers a possible alternative model for understanding Swift's approach to marketing her music. The agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can shape public opinion by determining what issues have more attention and the way news stories and topics that impact public opinion are presented is influenced by the media. According to Feezell (2017), “conventional models of agenda setting hold that mainstream media influence the public agenda by leading audience attention, and perceived importance, to certain issues” (Feezell, 2017, p 482). Swift nonetheless gets plenty of publicity through mechanisms that predate social media or the idea of Easter egg marketing. Much of the attention she receives

comes to her because the media simply consider her newsworthy. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw formed the concept of agenda-setting theory during the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The news media may not exactly tell people what to think about a topic, but the media is successful in telling people what to think about—a theory that became known as agenda setting (McCombs, 2004).

The theory asserts that topics and topic attributes that appear frequently in media in content often become prominent in public discourse. When the media spotlight specific issues, individuals cite those issues as more critical problems. “For example, if the news media increases coverage of domestic issues, individuals cite domestic issues more. If the news media shift focuses on increasing coverage of foreign affairs, individuals then cite foreign affairs as the most important problem facing the nation” (Kowalewski, 2010, p 8-9).

The results of McCombs and Shaw’s Chapel Hill study revealed that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by influencing the salience of specific issues. This study, conducted during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, demonstrated how the media’s focus on certain topics could elevate those issues in the minds of the public, determining what people consider important. This eventually became known as first-level agenda settings; this level speaks to whether general issues covered in the media will appear on the public’s agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As media studies evolved, researchers expanded on this framework, recognizing that it wasn’t just about which issues were discussed but also how they were framed. Thus, the concept of second-level agenda setting, also known as attribute agenda setting, emerged.

This process examines why some attributes or aspects of a particular issue are emphasized over others, influencing the way the public interprets and understands those issues.

“Issue agenda setting is concerned with the media’s ability to influence public perceptions about which issues are important; by contrast, attribute agenda setting examines whether the media affects the public’s perceptions about those issues or objects” (Lee, 2015). While first-level agenda setting directs public attention to specific issues, second-level agenda setting delves deeper into how the media frames those issues, shaping perceptions by highlighting certain characteristics, aspects, or interpretations of the topic at hand. This understanding of agenda setting highlights the media’s role as a powerful agent in influencing both public discourse and public opinion.

Need For Orientation

The “need for orientation” is a concept within the agenda-setting theory in communication and media studies. It summarizes the human desire for guidance and information about events in the world around them. This need for guidance about current events comes from the complexity of day to day life, where people encounter a wide variety of issues and topics that hold significance but are not always fully comprehensible or clear for people. People seek information to better help them understand what is happening around them. The "need for orientation" thus becomes important for assessing the strength of agenda-setting effects (Chernov, Valenzuela, & McCombs, 2011).

NFO highlights the importance of the media as a source of information, showing how people rely on news outlets, social media, and other platforms to clarify on issues that pertain or affect them. A person's specific motivation for seeking more information, based on their need for orientation, was considered important for assessing the strengths of agenda-setting effects (Chernov et al., 2011). The concept of NFO was introduced to explain how individuals’ motivations relate to agenda-setting effects. NFO “measures voters’ desire for more information

on the issues” (McCombs & Stroud, 2014, p 70) and is defined as “a psychological concept that describes individual differences among people in their desire to understand a new environment or situation by turning to the media” (Shaw et al., 2010, p 4).

In the context of agenda-setting theory, Swift’s Easter eggs could be understood as a tool for adding to the considerable need for orientation fans feel regarding information about Swift’s forthcoming albums, tours and personal life. A new Easter egg may signal the availability of a new tidbit or insight and may send fans scrambling to the media for help decoding the egg. It is also possible that Swift’s Easter eggs encourage the media to publish stories about Swift. Media are aware that Swift fans value Easter eggs and hints about finding and interpreting them. A new Easter egg may produce media coverage about the egg in particular, and Swift in general, for the same reasons that a new development in any story of interest to media audiences produces media coverage of the development. And agenda-setting certainly comes into play when, as they frequently do, the media publish Swift-related stories that have nothing to do with her Easter eggs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study assumes, therefore, that some portion of the public attention Swift receives stems from the parasocial relationships she builds and maintains through social media and “Easter egg” marketing tactics, while some other portion of the attention stems from agenda-setting processes in which media direct attention toward Swift because media consider Swift newsworthy. It also assumes that both Easter egg marketing and agenda-setting processes played roles in publicity surrounding Swift’s latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, and that the roles both played in the publicity of that particular album typify the roles they play any time Swift releases an album. Finally, it assumes that analyzing manifest content of social media posts gathered via a commercial social media listening tool can reliably detect social media posts about *The Tortured Poets Department* album generally, about album-related Easter eggs in particular, and about album-related expressions of parasocial relationship sentiments. Mindful of these assumptions, this study explored the following research questions:

1. How many social media posts about the album came from news organizations?
2. How many social media posts about the album came from individual fans?
3. Did one type of source produce a significantly higher volume of album-related posts than the other?
4. What proportion of album-related posts alluded to at least one Easter egg?
5. Did the proportion of album-related posts alluding to Easter eggs differ significantly among posts from news organizations compared to posts from individual fans?
6. What proportion of album-related posts came from individual fans evincing a parasocial relationship with Swift?

7. Did individual fans evincing a parasocial relationship with Swift produce a significantly higher volume of album-related posts about Easter eggs than other types of individual fans?

Answers to these questions are important, because if Swift's Easter egg tactics truly are effective at generating online buzz, then artists everywhere could benefit from imitating them and understanding how they work. But if they mainly create and sustain parasocial relationships between Swift and a small segment of her fans, then putting time and resources into Easter eggs (that diamond-watch choker wasn't cheap!) might, ultimately, yield little return. The research also will inform further research on the broader topics of agenda setting and parasocial relationships.

Methodology

To investigate the research questions proposed, this research relied on Brandwatch to gather social media posts alluding to Swift's, *The Tortured Poets Department*, album during the time before, during and after the album's April 19 release. Brandwatch, a social media listening and analytics platform for analyzing and monitoring online discussions across different social media platforms, news outlets, blogs, and online forums, "offers a world-class suite of connected products for collaborative social media teams" (*The social suite*, n.d., para 4). Brandwatch can analyze data from, "all the premier social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok, as well as Shopify" (*The social suite*, n.d., para 9), although not all of these platforms allow Brandwatch to collect the type of scope of data needed for this analysis.

The research employed empirical quantitative techniques to classify posts based on the presence or absence of key words or phrases in their content and Brandwatch-supplied information about the source of each post. All quantitative analyses were conducted using open-source data tools and packages from the R Project for Statistical Computing (R Core Team, 2021). The appendix includes the R code used, and a digital data file will be archived along with this report. Occasionally, subsets of posts were examined qualitatively to assess the accuracy and validity of quantitative post categorizations. The following sections discuss specific aspects of the methodology.

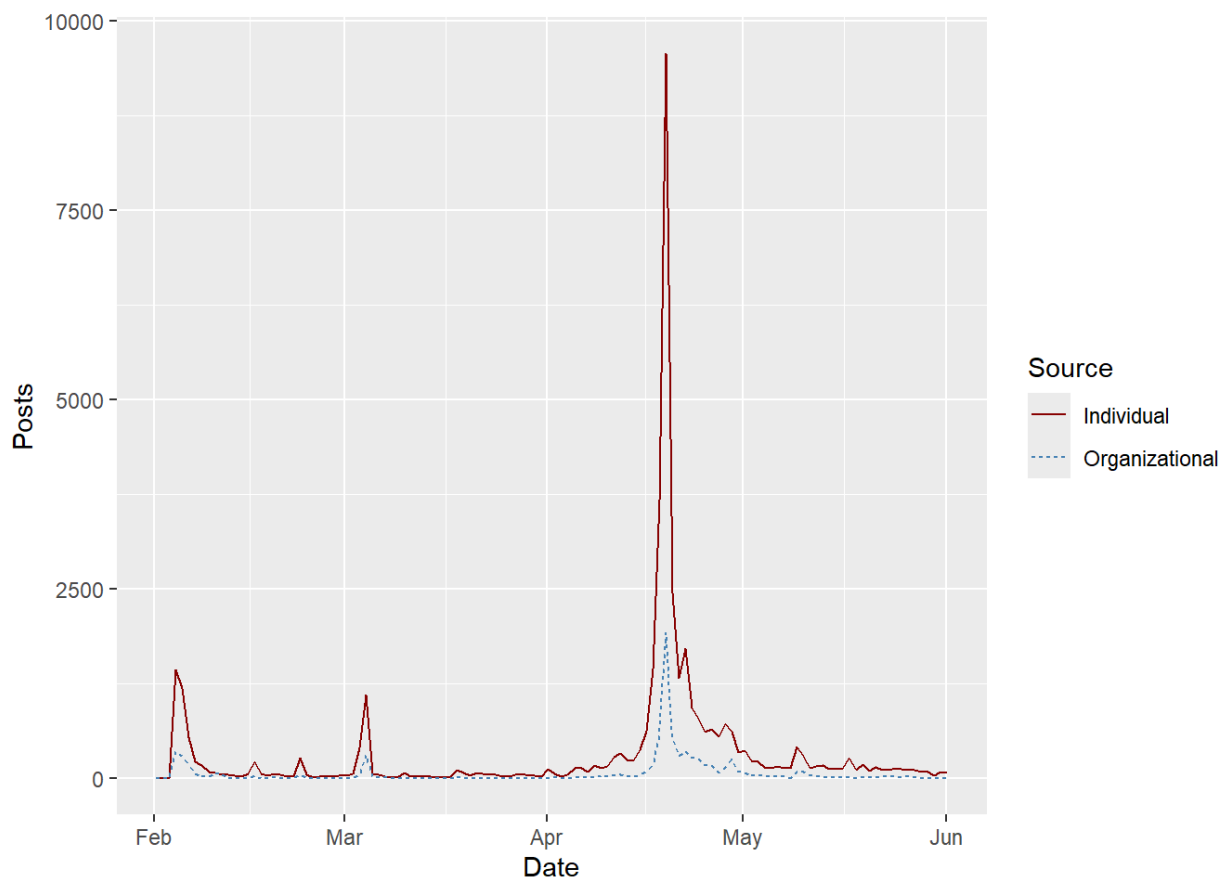
Data

Data collection began by instructing Brandwatch to search social media content posted from Feb. 1 through June 1, 2024, using the query: "Taylor Swift" AND ("Tortured Poets" OR "#TSTTPD" OR "#TTPD" OR "#TTPDTheAnthology") NOT "RT @." The date parameters

reflected the time between Swift’s announcement of the album’s title and a number of weeks after the album’s release. Automatically switching to a 44.92% sampling rate due to the sheer volume of the matching content, Brandwatch found about 41.7 million posts from accounts identified by Brandwatch as “individual” accounts and another approximately 8.6 million posts from accounts identified by Brandwatch as “organizational” accounts. Plotted by day, in units of 1,000 posts, both individual and organizational volume showed a distinct peak during the latter half of April, a period corresponding to the “Tortured Poets” album release.

Figure 1

Post volume by source, Feb. 1 through June 1, 2024



Considering the obvious April peak and the limitations of sampling the full period at a rate of well under half of the relevant posts, the analysis focused on posts shared between April 14 and

May 1, 2024. The album was released on April 19, 2024. Repeating the Brandwatch query for posts shared during this more compact timeframe yielded 168,828 posts. Because of the smaller volume, Brandwatch retrieved all available posts instead of retrieving only a sample. The standard Brandwatch export includes 135 variables, many relevant to only one of the monitored platforms. This analysis retained only seven:

1. Date: The date the post was shared
2. Url: The full URL of the post
3. Domain: The Web domain of the post's source. For example, posts from *The New York Times* would show a domain of nytimes.com. Posts from X/Twitter would show twitter.com.
4. Page.Type: Brandwatch's classification of the post's source type. Possible source types were: blog, facebook_public (posts from public Facebook pages), forum, news, reddit (Posts from Reddit), review, tumblr (posts from Tumblr), twitter (posts from X/Twitter), and youtube (posts from YouTube).
5. Account.Type: An indication of whether the post, if an X/Twitter post, came from an "individual" or "organizational" account. Individual accounts are accounts registered to individual X/Twitter users. Organizational accounts are accounts registered to organizations, usually news organizations. This variable was blank for posts originating on platforms other than X/Twitter.
6. Author: The name of the post's author, if available. For platforms like X/Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr, the name was the user name of the post author. For posts from news websites, the Author field was generally blank but sometimes indicated the name of the reporter who had composed the post.

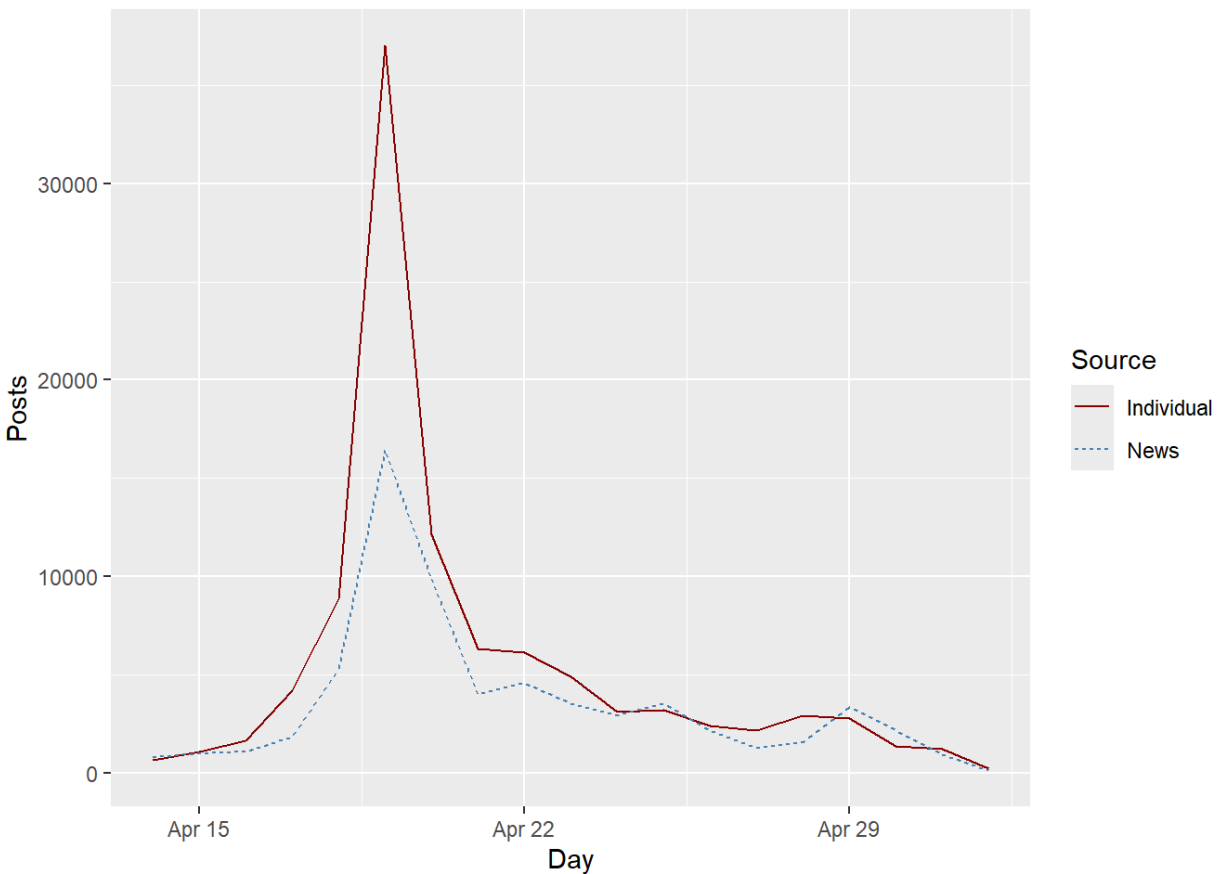
7. Full.Text: The full text of the post, including any emojis or URLs.

Figure 2 shows the daily post volume for the compressed timeframe, by source type.

Here, the “news” category was refined to include posts not only from news platforms (like nytimes.com) but also from sources with an X/Twitter-specified Account.Type categorization of “organizational.” Classified accordingly, posts from news sources occasionally, but not frequently, exceeded individual posts in daily volume, and typically on days after the album’s release.

Figure 2

Post volume by source, April 14 through May 1, 2024



Detecting Easter eggs

Detecting posts alluding to Easter eggs purely by searching for keywords or phrases posed challenges. A reference to an Easter egg could be as oblique as something like, “This:” accompanied by an image related to an Easter egg. Given such possibilities, relying on key words and phrases to detect posts about Easter eggs could produce false negatives and underestimate the volume of such posts. But scrutinizing each of nearly 169,000 posts was not feasible, and a random sample large enough to accurately represent potentially small subgroups of posts would be only minimally more practical. Because of these realities, the research classified posts as being about, or not about, Easter eggs by searching for sets of words or phrases likely to be associated with nine different Easter eggs and also by searching posts that include either the phrase “Easter egg” or “Easter eggs.” The Easter eggs searched for are shown in Table 1, along with their counts and percentage for the number of posts treated as associated with each egg. Below Table 1 is a description of every egg and the egg’s key words and phrases.

Table 1*Different Eggs found and percentages for the number of posts treated*

Characteristic	N = 168,828¹
aIMee egg	4,221 (2.5%)
High School egg	5,919 (3.5%)
London egg	5,617 (3.3%)
Black Dog egg	3,017 (1.8%)
Alchemy egg	6,887 (4.1%)
Cassandra egg	1,548 (0.9%)
Hate it Here egg	4,149 (2.5%)
Second Album Time Release egg	6,367 (3.8%)
Release Date egg	541 (0.3%)
Generic egg	778 (0.5%)
¹ n (%)	

“thank you aMee” egg

The odd capitalization in this title from one of the album’s songs led Swift fans to believe that the song was aimed at insulting Kim Kardashian, with whom Swift has feuded, along with Kardashian’s ex-husband Kanye West, since at least 2016. Key words and phrases for this egg were “thanK you aMee,” “Kardashian,” “diss track,” “bully,” “lessons learned,” and “Kim.” The “Kim” item included a leading and trailing space to avoid false positives based on words containing the pattern “kim,” such as the last name of late-night comedian and host Jimmy Kimmel. This song appears on the second album that Swift dropped at 2 a.m. called *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*

“So High School” egg

“So High School” is the 22nd song on Swift’s album, and fans immediately recognized a reference to Swift’s current boyfriend, Travis Kelce, who is an NFL tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs. The lyrics for “So High School,” compare her love affair with Kelce to a sweet high school romance. Swifties found out that this line references an interview back in 2016, when “a reporter asked Travis Kelce to play ‘Kiss, Marry, Kill’ about Swift, Ariana Grande and Katy Perry” (Mitchell, et al., 2024, pp 18). One of the lyrics in the song is a very obvious hint that the song is referencing Kelce, “ You know how to ball, I know Aristotle...” (*Taylor Swift – so high school*, 2024). Key words and phrases for this egg were “So High School,” “Kelce,” “Marry Kiss or Kill me,” “how to ball,” “I know Aristotle,” and “love track.” This was one of the first songs that explicitly referenced Swift’s newest relationship, a relationship her fans are becoming obsessed with. This song is on the second album, *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*, at number 22.

“So Long, London” egg

“So Long, London” egg references Swift’s previous long-term relationship with actor Joe Alwyn. This song is her fifth song on the album, and this number holds significance because Swift usually makes her fifth song on her albums the most emotionally revealing of all of her songs. We see this with her album *Red*, with “All Too Well” being the fifth song on the album. “So Long, London” reflects the end of her long-term relationship to Alwyn, “...who previously inspired ‘London Boy, and the memories they shared in the city together over the years.’” (*Taylor Swift's Tortured Poets Department Easter Eggs*, 2024). Key words and phrases for this egg were “So Long, London,” “diss track,” “heartbreak song,” “Joe Alwyn,” “London Boy,” “Had a good run,” “demise of relationship,” “Every day of a love affair.” The song offered some of the first hints that Swifties got about what happened to her relationship with Alwyn.

“The Black Dog” egg

“The Black Dog” egg is the first track of the 16-song collection that makes up *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*. This song draws its title from The Black Dog, a well-known pub located in South London. Over time, fans have speculated that this particular pub holds personal significance for Swift, as it is rumored that she and musician Matty Healy spent considerable time together there. According to Gilchrist (2024), Swift uses the song to express feelings of confusion and sadness, lamenting the fact that her former lover now frequents the very same pub, but with his new girlfriend. This is particularly painful for her because it seems as though he has moved on without any regard for the shared memories they once created in that space. Key phrases and words associated with this song include “The Black Dog,” “pub,” “ex,” “bar,” and “forgetting his location,” all of which evoke the haunting feeling of being forgotten and left behind, despite the sentimental value attached to a specific place. Once again, a

leading and trailing space was added to each of the terms that could produce a false positive by being part of a larger word irrelevant to the egg.

“The Alchemy” egg

This was another song that Swifties got excited about because it blatantly referenced her current NFL player boyfriend, Kelce. The song makes several sports references, like the one alluding to the Kansas City Chiefs in winning the Superbowl. “Shirts off, and your friends lift you up over their heads/ Beer sticking to the floor, /Cheers chanted, cause they said,/There was no chance, trying to be/ The greatest in the league/ Where's the trophy? /He just comes running over to me” (Swift, 2024, line 36-41). Key words and phrases for this egg were “The Alchemy,” “Kelce,” “Travis,” “Chiefs,” “love song,” “Where’s the trophy,” “he comes running over to me,” “So when I touch down, call the amateurs and cut em from the team.”

“Cassandra” egg

The “Cassandra” egg prompted considerable speculation among fans regarding what Swift was trying to convey to them through the song. This song was on the second album released at 2 a.m., and it was the 27th song on the *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology* album. It is speculated that this song is also referencing the feud she had with Kardashians and Kardashians’s ex husband, West. “ Swift compares herself to the mythological prophetess, doomed to see the future but have no one believe her... this one seems to be a much more bitter Kardashians-West diss track. The snake imagery in the song — ‘So they filled my cell with snakes, I regret to say / Do you believe me now?’ — pairs nicely with the serpentine aesthetic that fueled Swift’s *reputation* era. Allusions to family, greed, and a “Christian chorus line” all point towards KimYe, and the feud that’s still on Swift’s mind” (Lampen & Craighead, 2024). Key words and phrases used for this egg were “Cassandra,” “KimYe,” “Greek

Mythology,” “snake imagery,” “doomed to see the future,” “no one believes her,” “greed,” “family,” and “Kardashian-West diss track.” The “greed” term includes a leading and trailing space.

“I Hate it Here” egg

Fans speculated that this song referenced Swift’s six-year relationship with Alwyn, during which she was known for hiding from the public. “Swift hints that hiding away in her relationship with Alwyn was painful for her, despite saying while they were together that they *both* chose to be private” (Sager, 2024, pp 55). Key words and phrases used for this egg were “I Hate it Here,” “Alwyn,” “ex,” “relationship was painful,” and “hiding in the relationship.” The “ex” term included a leading and trailing space.

“2 a.m. Release of Second Album” egg

After releasing the album, Swift surprised many when she released a second album at 2 a.m. on the release day called, *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*. This included the original 16 songs on the *The Tortured Poets Department* album, but added 15 songs to make the album 31 songs in total. Fans realized that Swift had been hinting at the second release album for a while, because she kept referencing the number two with her grammy acceptance speech and during past projects, like the clock inside the Midnights room. Key words and phrases used for this egg were “2am Release of second album,” “Clock in Midnights room was 2am,” “2 fingers during album announcement,” “past mentions of 2am in past songs,” “pocket watch in Bejeweled video,” “double album,” “31 songs.

“Album Release Date” egg

“Album Release Date” egg was created because fans who follow Taylor Swift and TaylorNation realized that the release date, April 19th, referred to a dinner in New York last year.

Rumors that Swift and Alwyn were breaking up remained unconfirmed until fans saw Swift, Blake Lively, and Ryan Reynolds go to a dinner on April 19, 2023, after which they all unfollowed Alwyn on social media. The incident confirmed to fans that Swift and Alwyn had broken up. Key words and phrases used for this egg were “Album Release Date,” “famous dinner,” “Blake Lively,” “ Ryan Reynolds,” “ announced breakup,” “April 19th,” “all unfollowed Alwyn.”

Generic Easter egg

As noted earlier, it was possible for a post to reference Easter eggs broadly, without mentioning the terms or phrases associated with any particular one. To capture such posts, this “Generic Easter egg” category looked for posts that mentioned “Easter egg” or “Easter eggs.”

Detecting “Parasocial Relationship” Fans

Swift used her personal X/Twitter account, *taylorswift13*, to post on the platform three times between April 14 and May 1, 2024, the time period under study. One, posted on April 14, 2024, urged fans to preorder a clear vinyl version of the album that would be sold exclusively by Target. In the second, from April 18, 2024, Swift shared a link to a *Billboard.com* review of the album. The third post, shared on April 19, 2024, included a link to an *NPR.org* review of the album.

There is no reason to assume that every X/Twitter user who responded to one or more of the three posts had developed a parasocial relationship with her. But it is plausible to assume something like the reverse: that Swift fans on X/Twitter who had developed a parasocial relationship with her would reply to at least one of the three posts. It is unlikely that such fans – “PSR fans,” for short – would pass up an opportunity to attempt communication with Swift. Put another way, the group of X/Twitter users who responded to one or more of Swift’s posts likely

would include, but not necessarily be limited to, PSR fans. Adopting this assumption, the analysis used Brandwatch to download all replies to Swift's three posts, isolated the X/Twitter usernames of the post authors, then cross referenced them with the usernames of X/Twitter authors among the posts about the album release. The process made it possible to know whether each of the posts about the album had, or had not, been shared by someone who at least might be a PSR fan. Given this approach's high potential for misclassification of both users and posts, a random sample of 100 replies to Swift's X/Twitter posts were examined qualitatively to determine whether they seemed to reflect sentiments that a PSR fan might express. Similarly, 100 posts were randomly chosen for qualitative inspection from among the album posts shared by a PSR fan but not containing any Easter egg indicators. Finally, a qualitative inspection was conducted of all album posts that were both shared by a PSR fan and contained at least one Easter egg indicator. There were only a small number of such posts, so random sampling was not needed.

Data Analysis Procedures

With the data prepared in these ways, analysis involved percentaging counts by categories, and sometimes cross-tabulating categories of one variable with categories of another. A chi-squared test is the suitable procedure for such category-by-category analysis. Base R's `chisq.test()` function was used to perform all chi-squared tests, while the `getsummary` package for R (Sjoberg et al, 2021) provided summary table and cross-table formatting functionality. Finally, the `tidyverse` package (Wickham et al, 2019) was called to help with sorting, selecting, filtering and other data-wrangling functions.

A Qualitative Check of Some Measurement Assumption

As described earlier, the study's approach to distinguishing parasocial relationship fans from ordinary fans involved some assumptions that, if invalid, could result in a high number of misclassifications. Specifically, the study assumed that all of the responses to Swift's three posts on X between April 14 and May 1, 2024, had come from fans who at least might have parasocial relationships with Swift. Research questions 6 and 7 asked how many of those fans had posted about Swift's album and whether they had been more likely to allude to Swift's Easter eggs when doing so. But did posts from these fans truly show parasocial relationship indications? And did those flagged as alluding to Easter eggs truly talk about Easter eggs? To answer these questions, the study included a full-text reading of three sets of posts:

- All 53 posts are presumed to have been authored by a PSR fan, to have mentioned Swift's album, and to have alluded to an Easter egg.
- A randomly selected 100 posts from among the 1,489 presumed to have been authored by a PSR fan, to have mentioned Swift's album, but to have included no allusion to an Easter egg.
- A randomly selected 100 posts from among the 3,045 replies to the three X posts Swift shared during the time period examined.

Reading the 53 posts classified as both coming from a PSR fan and alluding to an Easter egg revealed that a majority of these posts focused on The Tortured Poets Department, with only some specifically addressing Easter eggs embedded in Swift's work. Fans either speculated on hidden meanings or expressed excitement about the album's success, including its impressive streaming numbers. While some posts analyzed potential Easter eggs, many merely celebrated Swift's achievements with the new album, highlighting how quickly the album broke streaming

records. Remarks about the release date or the dual album didn't specifically allude to Easter eggs about those topics but nonetheless triggered false positives.

This mix of content reflects the dual engagement of parasocial fans—those who decode Swift's Easter eggs and those who celebrate her successes as personal victories, strengthening their emotional connection to her. This is a prime example, “In the album's first four days of release, the set's collected 31 songs (on its deluxe edition) generated 602.3 million on-demand official streams in the U.S. – breaking Swift's own record for the largest streaming week for an album by a woman” (Manoban, 2024).

Many of the 53 posts referenced the “2 a.m. Release of Second Album” Easter egg, a hidden clue related to the release of *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*, which debuted at 2 a.m. Of the total 53 posts analyzed from possible parasocial relationship (PSR) fans, around 16 specifically mentioned the double album and tied it to this Easter egg. The presence of this theme shows how deeply fans engage with Swift's work beyond simply enjoying the music. This focus on Easter eggs highlights a unique aspect of parasocial relationships. Fans don't merely consume the music—they feel like insiders who are part of a special group that understands and decodes Swift's subtle messages.

Meanwhile, reading the 100 randomly sampled posts from PSR fans who did not allude to Easter eggs revealed that most of the selected posts were, indeed, not focused on Easter eggs, but rather focused on Swift herself. This type of pattern lines up with the behavior that is typically seen among fans who have formed a parasocial relationship with an artist. Rather than dissecting the hidden messages or Easter eggs within Swift's lyrics and content, fans made posts that were focused on their admiration, praise, and emotional attachment to Swift and the album.

The content suggested fans focused on Swift herself, which reinforced the idea that several people had developed a parasocial connection with the artist. Typical of these posts was one that read: “this didn’t feel like a *Taylor Swift* album, this felt like taylor. so raw, so real. so insanely beautiful. she’s let us in to the deepest part of her life and i have so much respect for her choosing to do that #tsttpd” (Abby, 2024). In another example, a user wrote, “I just feel oh so grateful to exist in the same universe as taylor swift #TTPDTheAnthology #TSTTPD” (Francesca, 2024).

Many of the posts were centered around various reviews and opinions regarding the album, and like the majority of the content analyzed, these posts did not mention Easter eggs. They were filled with different types of declarations of love and admiration for Swift. These posts were not analytical or focused on deciphering hidden meanings; rather, they revolved around the emotional connection fans feel with Swift, frequently sharing how much they adored her and her music. Within these 100 posts, there were a couple that went beyond a fan’s personal review of expressions of admiration for Swift and were more promotional in nature, urging others within the fan community to support the album. Whether expressing personal feelings or promoting the album, the posts consistently reflected the deep attachment fans feel toward Swift and her work, further highlighting the parasocial dynamic present in this community.

Finally, reading the 100 posts chosen randomly from among the replies to Swift’s three X/Twitter posts revealed that a lot of these posts included statements indicative of parasocial relationships between fans and Swift. Like this post, “We love you so much <3” (Olenka, 2024). The assumption that parasocial relationship fans responded to Swift’s X posts is supported by the observation that most replies to her three posts were filled with praise for her and the new album. “We love you Taylor, this is the best album I’ve ever listened to” (Grey, 2024).

Many responses seem to come from fan accounts dedicated either to Swift's music or music in general. A significant number of these posts express enthusiasm for her album *The Tortured Poets Department*, noting how fans have been listening to it non-stop. They also commend Swift for releasing a double album amid her ongoing tour and efforts to re-record her albums. One of the most common statements among these 100 posts is fans stating how much they love Swift and the newest album.

Overall, reading the full text of these three sets of posts suggested that the study's manifest content coding tactics did a reasonably accurate job of placing posts in the various categories analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Results of the analysis provided at least tentative answers to each of the research questions posed. This section presents results relevant to each research question and discusses the answer the results suggest.

Research Questions 1 and 2

The first two research questions asked how many social media posts about the album came from news organizations, and how many came from individual fans. The Brandwatch query conducted for posts shared between April 14 and May 1, 2024, resulted in 168,828 posts across platforms and sources. These posts were divided into nine different categories to perform a more detailed analysis. As Table 2 shows, the "news" category, which included websites that are associated with online news organizations, contributed just over a third of the content.

Table 2

Categorizing Posts by Page Type of Source

Characteristic	N = 168,828¹
Page.Type	
blog	795 (0.5%)
facebook_public	6,499 (3.8%)
forum	1,474 (0.9%)
news	60,749 (36%)
reddit	33,973 (20%)
review	13 (<0.1%)
tumblr	28,385 (17%)
twitter	36,450 (22%)

youtube	490 (0.3%)
<hr/>	
<i>n</i> (%)	

Following the initial analysis of the data, an adjustment was made to the classification of posts within the "news" category. Specifically, an additional 5,680 posts from X/Twitter, originating from sources X/Twitter had labeled as "organizational," were reclassified into the "news" category. The reclassification boosted the news outlets' share of the conversation from 36% to 39%, still about a third.

However, the remaining roughly two-thirds of the conversation (61%, $n = 102,399$) came from individuals not employed by professional media. As the solid line in Figure 2 shows, individual posts maintained this numerical superiority on nearly every day of the period studied. Media posts outstripped individual posts only a handful of days later in the period. By then, most of the online buzz about Swift's album had subsided, and the media seemed like guests who stayed too long at a party. In sum, individual fans' remarks may have been separately negligible and scattered across different platforms. Collectively, though, individual fans dominated the conversation about Swift's album for most of the time, in a space professional media likely influenced but almost certainly did not control.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked whether the proportion of posts from one type of source significantly exceeded the proportion of posts from the other. A chi-squared test found the difference between the 39% of posts from news sources and the 61% of posts from individual sources to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 168,828) = 7,663.7, p < .0001$. In other words, mere random variation is not a good explanation for the preponderance of posts from individuals.

The test shows that individuals, rather than news outlets, produced a clear majority of conversation surrounding *The Tortured Poets Department*.

Research Question 4 and 5

Research Question 4 asked what proportion of album-related posts alluded to at least one Easter egg. The results revealed that approximately 15% of the total 168,828 posts gathered contained references to at least one Easter egg associated with *The Tortured Poets Department*. The figure represents 24,835 posts identified as either overtly talking about or at least mentioning one or more of the identified Easter eggs.

The fifth research question, meanwhile, asked whether the proportion of album-related posts alluding to Easter eggs differed significantly among posts from news organizations compared to posts from individual fans. As Table 3 shows, news outlet posts were nearly three times more likely to focus on Easter eggs than were individual posts.

Table 3

Easter Eggs Posts, by Source Type

	Individual	News	Total
AnyEgg			
Egg	8,662 (8.5%)	16,163 (24%)	24,825 (15%)
No egg	93,737 (92%)	50,266 (76%)	144,003 (85%)
Total	102,399 (100%)	66,429 (100%)	168,828 (100%)

Applying a chi-squared test to the percentages in Table 3 found that the 24% of news source posts that alluded to at least one Easter egg significantly exceeded the 8.5% of individual posts that mentioned at least one Easter egg, $\chi^2(1, N = 168,828) = 8,091.7, p < .0001$

Together, the answers to RQ4 and RQ5 indicate that Easter egg posts made up only a small proportion of the posts about *The Tortured Poets Department*. Furthermore, the relatively few posts that mentioned Easter eggs were much more likely to come from news sources than from individual fans. Swift may create Easter eggs for her fans. But these results suggest that news outlets are more interested than her fans in talking about them, at least via the channels and in the ways observed in this study.

Research Questions 6 and 7

Research Question 6 asked what proportion of album-related posts came from individuals who at least might have developed a parasocial relationship with Swift, while Research Question 7 asked whether such individuals had produced a significantly higher volume of posts about Easter eggs. The goal of asking these two questions was to look for evidence of a connection between an unusually high interest in Swift's Easter eggs and a marked tendency to have formed a parasocial relationship with her.

The analysis identified 559 individuals who had replied to at least one of Swift's three X/Twitter posts and also had produced at least one post about *The Tortured Poets Department*. Collectively, these 559 individuals produced 1,542 of the post's about Swift's album, or less than 1 percent. Most produced only one or two of *The Tortured Poets Department* posts, but five produced between 20 and 37. These potential PSR fans, however, showed no marked tendency to post about Easter eggs. In fact, as Table 4 shows, only 53 of their posts - about 3% - contained at least one of the Easter Egg search terms.

Table 4*Parasocial Relationship Fan*

	Other	PSRFan	Total
AnyEgg			
Egg	24,772 (15%)	53 (3.4%)	24,825 (15%)
No Egg	142,514 (85%)	1,489 (97%)	144,003 (85%)
Total	167,286 (100%)	1,542 (100%)	168,828 (100%)

Overall, the analysis found no substantial evidence of an unusually strong connection between interest in Swift’s Easter eggs and development of a parasocial relationship with her.

A Qualitative Check of Some Measurement Assumptions

A brief qualitative analysis examined the 53 Easter egg posts in which a fan replied to one of Swift’s three X posts and also posted something in the album data that got flagged as a post about the Easter egg. After analyzing these posts, it was revealed that a majority of these posts focused on *The Tortured Poets Department*, with some specifically addressing Easter eggs embedded in Swift's work. Fans either speculated on hidden meanings or expressed excitement about the album's success, including its impressive streaming numbers. While some posts analyzed potential Easter eggs, many celebrated Swift's achievements with the new album, highlighting how quickly the album broke streaming records. This mix of content reflects the dual engagement of parasocial fans—those who decode Swift’s Easter eggs and those who celebrate her successes as personal victories, strengthening their emotional connection to her. This is prime example, “In the album’s first four days of release, the set’s collected 31 songs (on

its deluxe edition) generated 602.3 million on-demand official streams in the U.S. – breaking Swift’s own record for the largest streaming week for an album by a woman” (Manoban, 2024).

Many of the 53 posts that were selected, referenced the “2 a.m. Release of Second Album” Easter egg, a hidden clue related to the release of *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*, which debuted at 2 a.m. Of the total 53 posts analyzed from possible parasocial relationship (PSR) fans, around 16 specifically mentioned the double album and tied it to this Easter egg. The presence of this theme shows how deeply fans engage with Swift's work beyond simply enjoying the music. This focus on Easter eggs highlights a unique aspect of parasocial relationships. Fans don’t merely consume the music—they feel like insiders who are part of a special group that understands and decodes Swift’s subtle messages.

Most of these posts confirmed that the fans discussing *The Tortured Poets Department* (TTPD) likely have parasocial relationships with Taylor Swift, though they did not specifically reference the Easter eggs identified in the analysis. Overall, the posts were a mix of content, with some mentioning Easter eggs, but the majority focused on how excited fans were about Swift’s new album. These non-egg posts primarily expressed enthusiasm and admiration for Swift and her work and reflected strong emotional connection between fans and Swift, which is typical of parasocial relationships. One example is, “I love Taylor Swift so much but I think it will take me much more time to be familiar with each song and memorize the lyrics because they are all beautiful and need a deep understanding. 31 songs in an album is no joke. I am just glad I stan this chairman #TSTTPD” (Hanz, 2024).

A similar qualitative inspection was conducted of 100 posts selected randomly from among PSR fan posts about the album that didn’t register as being about Easter eggs. After inspecting the selected 100 posts, it was revealed that most of the selected posts were not focused

on Easter eggs, but rather focused on Swift herself. This type of pattern lines up with the behavior that is typically seen among fans that have formed a parasocial relationship with an artist. Rather than dissecting the hidden messages or Easter eggs within Swift's lyrics and content, fans made posts that were focused on their admiration, praise, and emotional attachment to Swift and the album. The content suggested that the focus of the fans were on Swift herself, which reinforced the idea that several people had developed a parasocial connection with the artist. Typical of these posts was one that read: “this didn’t feel like a *Taylor Swift* album, this felt like taylor. so raw, so real. so insanely beautiful. she’s let us in to the deepest part of her life and i have so much respect for her choosing to do that #tsttpd” (Abby, 2024). In another example, a user wrote, “I just feel oh so grateful to exist in the same universe as taylor swift #TTPDTheAnthology #TSTTPD” (Francesca, 2024).

Many of the posts centered around various reviews and personal opinions about the album, and like the majority of the content analyzed, these posts did not mention any Easter eggs. Instead, they were filled with declarations of love and admiration for Swift. These posts were not analytical or focused on deciphering hidden meanings; rather, they revolved around the emotional connection fans feel with Swift, frequently sharing how much they adored her and her music. Within the 100 posts, there were a couple that went beyond a fans personal review or expression of admiration for Swift and were more promotional in nature, urging others within the fan community to support the album. Whether expressing personal feelings or promoting the album, the posts consistently reflected the deep attachment fans feel toward Swift and her work, further highlighting the parasocial dynamic present in this community.

A third qualitative check looked at 100 posts chosen randomly from among the replies to Swift’s three X/Twitter posts. The check revealed that a lot of these posts, too, included

statements indicative of parasocial relationships between fans and Swift. Like this post, “We love you so much <3” (Olenka, 2024). The assumption that parasocial relationship fans responded to Swift's X posts is supported by the observation that most replies to her three posts were filled with praise for her and the new album. “We love you Taylor, this is the best album I've ever listened to” (Grey, 2024). Many responses seem to come from fan accounts dedicated either to Swift's music or music in general. A significant portion of these posts express enthusiasm for her album *The Tortured Poets Department*, noting how fans have been listening to it non-stop. They also commend Swift for releasing a double album amid her ongoing tour and efforts to re-record her albums. One of the most common statements among these 100 posts is fans stating how much they love Swift and the newest album.

Conclusion

Taylor Swift is arguably one of the world's biggest music stars and has curated one of the most dedicated fan bases. Swift is known by fans for her emotional lyrics and relatable storytelling; she has won over 324 awards, including numerous Grammys and VMA awards. Her fan base, known as "Swifties," has helped maintain her immense popularity through personal connections and social media engagement.

Swift is known for including small, often cryptic details in her song lyrics, music videos, public appearances, and publicity that hint at future projects, insights into her personal life, or other things of interest to her fans. Many fans enjoy spotting and decoding these so-called Easter eggs, a process that includes using social media to share and debate information about them. Swift has characterized her Easter eggs as a fun way of encouraging fans to read her lyrics (Fallon, 2022, 0:33-1:45). But some observers see a savvy marketing strategy that helps Swift promote and profit from her music and that has propelled her success (Goldstein, 2022).

This study explored whether either or both of two media theories could be used as a context for modeling and understanding the role of Swift's Easter eggs in generating social media content about her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*. One, parasocial relationship theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), describes a one-sided, emotional connection that individuals form with media personalities and celebrities. Unlike real-life relationships, parasocial interactions are unreciprocated, with the audience feeling a sense of closeness or familiarity with someone they've never met. This bond often develops through repeated exposure, such as watching TV shows, following celebrities on social media, or consuming their content, giving fans a sense of connection and loyalty even without direct interaction. These parasocial relationships are essential to modern marketing strategies, and they enable celebrities

to use their connection with fans to promote products and build brand loyalty. Some observers suggest Swift has been able to use parasocial relationships as a way to maintain her popularity and help her *The Eras Tours* become the highest-grossing tour of all time and the first tour to hit over a billion dollars (Millman, 2023).

The other theory explored as a possible context for investigating Swift's use of Easter eggs was agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory suggests that topics featured prominently in media content tend to be considered more noteworthy by members of the public, and that when media emphasize some aspects of a topic more than other aspects of the same topic, members of the public tend to think about the topic in terms of the emphasized aspects. Seen from this theoretical perspective, Swift's Easter eggs could contribute to Swift's stardom by increasing the volume of content about her in media channels, including social media channels through which both professional news outlets and individual fans produce and share material.

Using Brandwatch, the study captured content posted on X/Twitter and several other social media platforms about *The Tortured Poets Department* during the days immediately before and after the album's release. Next, the study employed empirical content analysis tactics to estimate the volume of posts that referenced at least one of a selection of Swift's Easter eggs pertaining to the album. The volume among posts generated by media organizations was compared with the volume among posts generated by individuals. Furthermore, the volume among fans who showed evidence of a parasocial relationship with Swift was compared with the volume of posts from other sources. Limited qualitative checks were undertaken to assess the validity and reliability of the empirical measurement strategies.

The study found that both news outlets and fans posted quite frequently about the album during the weeks immediately before and after the album's release. However, fans consistently produced substantially more posts than news outlets did. Relatively few of the total posts - just about 15% - focused on or mentioned one or more of Swift's Easter eggs about The Tortured Poets Department. When Easter eggs were mentioned at all, they were more frequently mentioned in posts from news outlets than in posts from fans. Finally, the study identified an appreciable quantity of posts from fans who showed signs of having formed a parasocial relationship with Swift. But no evidence emerged to suggest that these fans were unusually likely to post about Swift's Easter eggs. In fact, very few alluded directly to Easter eggs in their posts.

Collectively, these findings suggest that Swift's Easter eggs played a minor role in producing online discussions about the album itself. Fans had plenty to say about the album, but relatively little of what was said pertained to Easter eggs. News outlets also said plenty about the album. However, like fans, news outlets mostly talked about things different than the Easter eggs. Notably, however, Easter eggs were more commonly mentioned in news media posts than in fan posts. This finding would be consistent with an agenda setting process in which media emphasis on Easter eggs as an attribute of the album helped bolster a tendency among fans to think about the album in terms of the Easter eggs connected to it and, ultimately, to raise the overall attention fans paid to the album, if only somewhat. Media outlets crave audience attention and the revenue that attention brings. It could be that in the media's quest to produce content that draws an audience, the media finds it efficient and rewarding to create stories that explain Swift's Easter eggs and portray fans as obsessed with them- even if many, and maybe even most, fans aren't. It also could be that Easter egg stories about the album weren't aimed primarily at Swift's hardcore fans. Instead, they may have been aimed primarily at audience

members who are not Swift fans, or only casually so, but who nonetheless seek to be informed about Swift, her Easter eggs, and her latest album.

In this way, Swift's Easter eggs may represent a successful marketing ploy, but one that works indirectly. The Easter eggs may encourage media coverage by giving the media an easy, accessible, profitable frame for telling stories about Swift and her albums. For example, stories about Swift's Easter eggs might allow news outlets to appeal simultaneously to two different kinds of audience members: hardcore fans who want an efficient way to learn about Swift's Easter eggs, and casual fans and non-fans who simply are curious about what has the hardcore fans so excited. This coverage, in turn, may reinforce awareness of Swift among her audience of hardcore fans while encouraging awareness of Swift among an even wider audience consisting of non-fans and casual fans.

The study found no substantial evidence, however, that Swift's Easter eggs fostered the widespread formation and maintenance of parasocial relationships with her fans. While the study found evidence that some Swifties had posted about Easter eggs and that some Swifties had developed parasocial relationships with Swift, it detected relatively few Swifties who had done both. This finding certainly does not prove that egg-obsessed fans who imagine themselves to have a personal relationship with Swift simply don't exist. But the finding does suggest that such fans, if they do exist, aren't easily findable via the research methods the study employed. Researchers who want to investigate parasocial relationships involving Swift would be wise to consider other approaches.

Limitations

There were several limitations throughout this study. Brandwatch, which gathered social media posts alluding to Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department*, samples only specific social

media segments. Other well-used platforms like Instagram and TikTok might exhibit different relationships between news media content, fan content, and Easter eggs. Furthermore, social media content may be an imperfect representation of other communications between Swift's fans. Fans communicating with one another in real-time or even in person may do so differently than they do through the asynchronous communication channels examined here. Additionally, the study examined manifest content but remained relatively blind to latent content - the meanings that can lie behind words and that can become visible and interpretable only through a close reading that pays attention to contextual cues. Another limitation involves the difficulty of accurately distinguishing, especially on X, between content produced by real people and content produced by automated programs called "bots." Officially, bots are supposed to be identified as such on X. But for various reasons, bot creators sometimes make their bots appear to be real users. Examining the 200 total X posts randomly sampled for the qualitative analysis found them to contain complex content and to come from accounts with substantial posting histories. These characteristics suggest bot content was not a substantial part of the posts examined. But without a wholly reliable method for detecting bots, the presence of bot-produced content cannot be ruled out. Finally, parasocial relationships are complex psychological phenomena, and the study's method for identifying fans in parasocial relationships with Swift may be inadequate.

Future Research

Despite these and perhaps other limitations, the study nonetheless points toward several promising areas for future research. For example, contrasting the role Easter eggs played in marketing Swift's latest album with the role they played marketing one or more earlier Swift albums could be informative. Swift was already a megastar when she released *The Tortured Poets Department*. Easter eggs may have played a more vital role in promoting albums Swift

released earlier, before she had achieved the stardom she now enjoys. If so, Easter egg marketing may be a particularly important tactic for artists who are trying to establish themselves.

Future research also could analyze how Easter egg marketing and parasocial relationships manifest and interact on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which were not considered here. Content on these platforms differs substantially from content on X/Twitter and Reddit, the dominant platforms this study examined. Likewise, the user demographics of those platforms differ markedly from the user demographics of the platforms this study examined. Among members of a demographically different audience, agenda setting processes could matter less, and parasocial relationships could matter more.

Also, it may be wise to examine the use of Easter egg marketing during the periods when an artist like Swift is not releasing an album or touring. Album releases and tours may attract attention mainly because they are big events with intrinsic news value and interest. Easter eggs may have a knack for drawing attention to an artist when no such big events are going on, or perhaps for prolonging attention in the wake of such events.

Lastly, a more thorough investigation could be undertaken than was possible in this study of the role Easter eggs may play in agenda-setting processes. It makes intuitive sense that Easter eggs could boost the rank of a topic or topic attribute on the media and publish agendas. An Easter egg could, for example, heighten the need for orientation (Weaver, 1980) among individuals interested in the topic the egg pertains to. An Easter egg's potential to create need for orientation among audience members could help interest news media on publishing information about the egg. An increased need for orientation among audience members about the egg's topic could drive up audience perceptions of the topic's importance. But investigation of these

possibilities would require a methodology that measures all, or at least more, of the variables involved in agenda-setting processes, like longitudinal measures of salience in both media content and audience perceptions and of need for orientation. The present study measured and contrasted how much news outlets and audience members said about Swift's album and Easter eggs. But it did so without considering a time lag between the two, and it did not include measures of need for orientation or other possibly important psychological or demographic characteristics of audience members. Mainly, it suggests that such an investigation could be worth the effort and resources involved.

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