

Swifties, “Lavender Haze”, and a Big Reputation

In her lifetime, Taylor Swift’s prose has been compared to William Shakespeare and her popularity to Beatlemania. Swift, in this day and age, needs no introduction. Her avid fans have attributed her success to her authentic prose and witty lyricism. However, Swift’s unprecedented success is due in no small part to the fans themselves. Their constant consumption and financial support have made her billions. This speaks to the “active nature” of the audience who is “viewed as part of the democratization of cultural production” (Hills 2018, 183). Swift’s fans are a testament to the power of fandom and the agency that audiences can maintain and mobilize. This agency is the audience’s capability to establish and execute their own agenda in relation to media consumption (Hills 2018, 183). Swift’s genius lies in her ability to cultivate and encourage this agency to further the consumption of her product, begetting more fame and more fans. More than a songwriter, she is a poet, and she has amassed an empire by hiding “easter eggs” in her products for fans to find. These easter eggs are intentionally hidden, “encoded” nuggets of lore or references to her life that can be “decoded” or interpreted in a myriad of ways by audiences (Hills 2018, 187). This level of self-referential openness has sparked high levels of intimacy with her fans who have developed intense parasocial relationships with Swift, or “blondie” as they endearingly call her. These easter eggs, some more obvious than others, are not only found in the lyrics of her music, the packaging of her vinyl records, on her social media, and in interviews as well. They are a brilliant marketing strategy that encourages extremely close consumption by fans who hyper-fixate on Swift’s content to find and decode every possible hidden meaning. Through these encoded narratives Taylor Swift has gamified the agency of her fans, encouraging high levels of product consumption and redefining the experience of making meaning in art as a collaborative one.

Swift’s mastery of storytelling is identifiable in the embedded layers of meaning in her lyrics, engaging fans in a dynamic interpretive process. It’s easily spotted in any of her songs, but the first track on her 2022 *Midnights* album is an excellent example. “Lavender Haze” is rife with personal and cultural references, the first of which is the title. A “lavender haze” is a term coined in the 1950s referring to the blissful fog of love clouding the minds of those it enraptures. The song was released during Taylor Swift’s 6-year-long relationship with actor Joe Alwyn, so it was easy for many fans to deduce that the “you” she refers to in the lyrics is none other than him. The bridge reads “Talk your talk and go viral // I just want this love spiral” and coupled with the chorus “I feel // the lavender haze creepin’ up on me // surreal // I’m damned if I do give a damn what people say” suggest that Swift is commenting on her love with Alwyn in the face of fame and celebrity scrutiny – that she is blissfully enthralled in her relationship despite haters, tabloids, and internet commentators (“go viral”). She seems to praise Alwyn in the line “I’ve been under scrutiny // You handle it beautifully”. The song is littered with other less personal easter eggs, as well, the most obvious of which is the very first line. A synth, robot voice introduces the song before the first verse with the hook “Meet me at midnight” which is a nod to the album and the time of album release. The album *Midnights* dropped at midnight on October

21st, 2022, so as the first line of the first track, millions of swifties heard Taylor sing the words “Meet me at midnight” in a cute, self-referential wink as the clock struck midnight in real-time. Fans were ecstatic at the chance to digest and decode this song along with the rest of the tracks on *Midnights*. The song's popularity speaks for itself. On November 5, 2022, after its first week on the air debuted at number two on the Billboard Top 100 and stayed on the chart for the next 29 weeks (Billboard 2024).

“Lavender Haze” is one example of a rich history of encoding her work that has, over time, developed an agreement between Swift and her fans – that nothing she does can be taken at face value. It’s with this spirit in mind that a subsection of Swifties called “Gaylors” have oppositionally decoded themes in “Lavender Haze”. Taylor Swift has been making music for almost two decades, releasing eleven original albums and four rereleases. Given the intimacy fans feel with her, and the love songs she’s known for, it’s no wonder that fans speculate frequently on her love life and relationship status. “Gaylors” are a group of fans that believe Taylor Swift is a member of the queer community and uses easter eggs to encode the truth of her sexuality and relationship history with women in her music. Her intense friendships with other women such as Diana Agron and Karlie Kloss, as well as internet scandals like “Kissgate” have sparked Gaylor communities on Tumblr and other social media sites (Norton 2023). The implication of the word “Lavender” in the song set the Gaylor community ablaze to evaluate potential meanings. Many believe it’s a cultural reference to the Lavender scare of the 1950s, when LGBTQ+ community members were outed, mistrusted, and discriminated against, using the line “No deal // the 1950s shit they want from me” as evidence (Hourihane, 2024). The myriad of potential meanings fanned flames of speculation and further consumption of the product as fans raced to find the truth of Swift’s intentions. Though Swift has stated outright that she “is not a member of the [LGBTQ+] community” in an interview with *Vogue*, Gaylors maintain this narrative (Aguirre 2019). The genius of Swift’s writing is that it doesn’t matter what the intention is as long as fans continue to seek it out. The power of the active audience is that they do.

Through encoded narratives and a strategic relationship with her active audience, Taylor Swift transforms her music into a collaborative interpretive experience, redefining the role of the modern pop artist. By embedding easter eggs and cultivating an active fanbase, she has transformed her music into an interactive text that extends beyond the act of listening. Fans engage deeply with her art, decoding layers of meaning and constructing their own interpretations, often in ways that spark broader cultural conversations. Whether through personal revelations, cultural nods, or oppositional readings like Gaylorism, Swift’s work invites participation and challenges the traditional boundaries between artist and audience. Her mastery lies not just in her lyricism, but in her ability to gamify fandom, creating an intimate, collaborative relationship with her listeners. In doing so, Taylor Swift proves that in the modern era, the audience's power to interpret and engage is just as essential to the art as the artist’s own intent, if not more so.

Citations

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