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Rap is for ruffians, long live pop music: Taylor Swift vs. Kanye West

Seminar Paper

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1 Introduction

When talking about music genres, there are clear stereotypes that categorise each genre and associate them with certain characteristics. Classical music is for clever, smart people, the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocracy; pop music is for the general public, the ones that do not think much about music, the ones that are satisfied with the four same chords and meaningless lyrics, but it is this syrupy, feel-good music that can fit anywhere; metal is for these weird people that wear makeup and dress in black adoring Satan; rap is for ruffians, barbarians, uneducated thugs prone to violence and rebellion.

These stereotypes that we use for music genres have a direct influence on the way we imagine each community of listeners. If we believe that classical music is for smart people, an avid listener of classical music will appear smart, educated, clever to us. On the other hand, if we believe that rap is a music preaching violence and rebellion, we will see rap listeners as people who do adopt violent behaviour and permanently seek confrontation with others.

However, despite these stereotypes, there is also this saying that “music brings people together”, it unites people beyond differences of race, gender, social class, or borders. Given that the stereotypes will more likely have an effect similar to echo chamber for the listeners of each genre, i.e., they will praise their favourite genre against the other ones and tend to less engage with them, it seems difficult for both stereotypes and the saying to exist together. If stereotypes divide people and isolate listeners into their own favourite genre, music cannot realistically bring people together. Given this, this study aims at studying the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud as an example of interaction between communities of different genres.

To understand our research, it is mandatory to understand the context, not quite complex but extensive, of this feud. Everything starts in 2009 during the MTV Music Video Awards, live broadcasting to 9 million people (BBC 2018). A 19-year-old Taylor Swift

receives the Best Female Video award for her song “You Belong With Me”. As she delivers her acceptance speech, Kanye West interrupts her by hogging the microphone and telling live in front of millions of people that “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time”, undermining the young artist’s legitimacy for the award. Their relationship afterward had some ups and downs until Kanye West releases his track “Famous” in February 2016. In this track, he declares “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex//Why? I made that bitch famous”. The music video also featured a naked wax doll of Taylor Swift on a bed, along wax dolls of other celebrities. Kanye West tried to defend himself by saying that he had got Taylor Swift’s approval beforehand. His wife at the time, Kim Kardashian, released footage of the alleged phone call of her husband getting approval of Taylor Swift for releasing the song. She also launched a trend of “trolling” the artist with snake emojis. Taylor Swift denied that she had approved the final line that appeared on the track. In 2017, Taylor Swift announces her sixth album, *Reputation*, which she teased with videos of snakes. She released the single “Look What You made Me Do” from which, according to many, some lines were referencing her feud with the rapper. In the music video, she wears the outfit that she had during the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards. The video broke some YouTube records. In 2019, both parties stated that they had been reflecting on the feud and moved on from it. Taylor Swift explained that reappropriating the snake symbol for herself instead of letting it in the hands of her detractors helped her overcome this difficult period (Us Weekly 2024). The same year, she engages in a battle with Scooter Braun who had just acquired ownership of her masters when he bought her label Big Machine Records in June. Braun had served as a manager for Kanye West and was still one of his friends. In August, she releases “I Forgot That You Existed”. The song, from her seventh album *Lover*, also, according to some, refers to her feud with Kanye West, in a more mature way than her 2017 single. Following the dispute with Braun, she starts to rerecord her albums from her Big Machine Records time in a series of albums called “Taylor’s Version”.

2 Theory or/and existing research

To understand our topic, we need to mobilise previous research from various horizons. For instance, much ink has been spilled on research analysing the impact of music on certain behaviour, on beliefs and political attitudes. Literature has shown that music can be understood as a variable explaining political attitudes depending on musical preferences for certain genres (Feezell 2017). In this precise case, Feezell explains that the selective group feedback model is a way to understand the influence of music on political behaviour. Based on three theories of political communication (selective expose, two-step flow of information, reference group theory), the selective group feedback model explains that individuals are more likely to listen to content that already match their values and beliefs, and the corollary is that they will avoid content that may conflict with their predispositions to avoid cognitive dissonance (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Mutz and P. S. Martin 2001). The two-step flow of information from Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) applied to music is relevant since there are countless songs and artists carrying political messages in their content. Rap is especially political since it has been since its origins an “experimental musical form in which certain Afro-American issues were aired” (Beighey and Unnithan 2006, (p. 134)). On the other hand, pop music is not inherently political but there is no doubt that “popular song has long been a device for making propaganda” (Street 2003, (p. 114)). The last component of the selective group feedback model is the reference group theory which entails that there exist groups that act as standard for individuals to compare to. Applied to music and listeners behaviour, it would mean that “it is not simply direct exposure to music content that influences opinion, but the elite signals that music sends about what to believe that carry influence” (Feezell 2017). In other words, it is not only the music itself that would influence behaviour but also the reference group transmitted through music and the wish of listeners to align with this group.

Older research has also found that stereotypes exist in the discourses framing each music genre and their listeners. Binder (1993) showed that compared to heavy metal, rap was more associated with the idea of danger for society, framing rap listeners as threats to

peace and harmony of society. But these stereotypes, in their less extreme conceptions, are sometimes actual characteristics of listeners groups of certain genres. For instance, Mulder et al. (2007) found that listeners of urban, exclusive rock and rock-pop music were more prone to showing more transgressive behaviour and aggression than groups listening to elitist or mainstream-oriented music. They suggest that the difference in behaviour may be explained by the themes explored by each genre with the fact that “hip hop and the harder rock forms project images of resistance to adult authority combined with increased peer orientation” (Mulder et al. 2007, p. 321). But other studies have shown that, contrary to popular beliefs, hip-hop does not necessarily induce violent behaviour (Fearing et al. 2018). Nevertheless, in their meta-analysis, Carbone and Vandebosch (2024) find that “exposure to song-specific messages, rather than genres or more general exposure, was the most common type of exposure and the only type of exposure that significantly predicted the expression of music-consistent beliefs”. In other words, it is not the genre more than the song individuals listen to that induce their behaviour. Rap music is a good example to understand this distinction. Indeed, as they are multiple subgenres for overarching genres (such as metal which comprises heavy metal, symphonic metal, power metal, etc.), rap comprises multiple subgenres whose names actually demonstrate the difference of purposes and messages transmitted. For instance, political rap and conscious rap are much more political than just gangsta rap although all have an emphasis on lyrics contrary to cloud rap or chopper that focus on rhythm and musical performance rather than conveying messages.

Another area of research concerning music is how music is indeed a way to bring people together. The Music Lab, a laboratory jointly managed by the School of Psychology of the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and Yale Child Study Center of Yale University, New Haven, published several papers on ethnology of music for instance. One example supporting the thesis that music can bring people together despite borders and differences is the universality of music in its composition (Mehr et al. 2019). They found that variations in music are more to be found within societies than across them, meaning

that “music is in fact universal” (Mehr et al., 2019, structured abstract). Another of their papers found that music created in another foreign context of an individual can actually be interpreted behaviourally by the individual (Yurdum et al. 2023). As the authors put it themselves: “listeners’ inferences about the behavioural contexts of unfamiliar, foreign songs are accurate, similar to one another, and relatively uninfluenced by cultural proximity” (Yurdum et al. 2023, p. 9). These research tend to prove that indeed music can bring people together, across music genres and that it should be possible to intelligently understood mutually.

However, these findings are faced with the reality of contemporary consumption of music. The rise of the internet and digitalisation of music changed the paradigms of older research in music (Carbone and Vandebosch 2024). And both articles from the Music Lab primarily focus on an ethnological point of view of the topic. But in the age of social media, music induces behaviours not only in the real world, but also in the digital world on social media. Although social media are not an issue *per se*, the problem lies within the content that people are exposed to on them, and the behaviour that it induces. With the proliferation of violent content online, people spending more and more time on social media have an increased risk of adopting an aggressive behaviour (Delhove and Greitemeyer 2021). And it is even more sharpened on online behaviour itself. Anonymity is a characteristic component of online activity. When interacting with others on social media, one can choose to hide their personal information or to display them for the world to see. When there is no use for displaying real identity, people choose to build an online identity at least from a username. But anonymity has been proven to be linked to digital aggression (Kim, Ellithorpe, and Burt 2023). All these studies put together seem to suggest that online behaviour may be characterised by aggressive behaviour. In other words, social media, to a certain extent, foster polarisation. Drawing from political science, there are two forms of polarisation that we may distinguish. The first one is ideological polarisation (Dalton 1987). It focuses on ideas, political opinions, beliefs, and attitudes toward political opponents. The second is affective polarisation. This kind of polarisation is

based on research around the role of identity in politics (Mason 2018) and on how strong group identities increase hostility toward people from opposing groups (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). In other words, affective polarisation deals with how people feel and react to their political opponents. As explained before, music can be political. Therefore, affective polarisation may come into play when linking political identification and music taste (Mack and T. R. Martin 2024).

A final research area to be taken into account about polarisation is the way it is expressed. Previous studies have linked group polarisation in digital spaces with online toxicity (Binns 2012; Salminen et al. 2018; Singer 2010). This can be referred to as “toxicity polarisation” (Mall et al. 2024). In online discussions, toxicity polarisation highlights the contrast between communication styles and online behaviours of communities. It is basically the opposition of one group resorting to high toxic behaviour with another group remaining neutral or using non-toxic discourse.

Finally, the last theme we need to take into account in the question of fan communities is parasocial relationships. Although parasocial relationships may prove to be beneficial for mental health of people notably by establishing a compensatory relationship instead of real life ones (Stein, Liebers, and Faiss 2024), there are three forms of parasocial relationships varying in degree of intensiveness (Giles and Maltby 2006). The first one is entertainment-social relationship where “fans are attracted to a favourite celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain and to become a source of social interaction and gossip”. This one underlines the fact that the person is aware that they actually do not know the celebrity and that they do not have any kind of real relationship with them, they merely enjoy following them and talking about them. The second type of parasocial relationship is intense-personal relationship. It is characterised by “intensive and compulsive feelings about the celebrity, akin to the obsessional tendencies of fans”. This is a step further in intensity and obsession than the entertainment-social relationship. In its most extreme form, it can pose a threat to one’s personal life, impeding on its

work, school, or real life relationships. The third form of parasocial relationship is the borderline-pathological parasocial relationship. This case is the most extreme form of parasocial relationship as it entails “uncontrollable behaviours and fantasies about [one’s] celebrities”. It goes beyond merely impeding one’s personal life, it also poses a threat to others, and to the celebrity. Actions can go up to stalking or erotomania (the strong belief that you are engaged in a romantic relationship with the celebrity).

3 Research questions/hypothesis

Through the examination of the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud, this study seeks to explore the interaction between music genres and associated listeners communities. The following questions will guide our research:

1. **To what extent does the feud between Taylor Swift and Kanye West influence the discourse within and across their fan communities in YouTube comments?**

This question stems from the theories of selective group feedback and polarisation. It aims at understanding how fan communities interact within each other, and how their behaviour reflects ideological (Dalton 1987) or affective polarisation (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018). Indeed, although both concepts are usually used in the discipline of political science to understand people's behaviour, we can extend their scope to any existing polarised space. Therefore, in the context of music with public figures engaged (here the artists), ideological polarisation would refer to an argument-based criticism, a rational reasoning which expresses one's discontent with the artist or their music while affective polarisation would refer to blatant attacks against the person or their music, denigrating comments and unconstructive criticism.

2. **What role does music genre (here pop vs. rap) play in shaping perceptions and stereotypes of the artists and their listeners?**

Existing literature suggests that stereotypes associated with music genres, such as rap fostering aggressive behaviour and pop music universality, shape opinions of the public regarding artists and their fans (Binder 1993; Mack and T. R. Martin 2024). Given the large fanbase of each artist, we seek to explore how these stereotypes can be found in online practices of each community.

3. **How do fan communities each construct and express their online behaviour in relation to their parasocial bonds with the artist?**

This question stems from the three parasocial relationships framework of Giles and Maltby (2006). The idea is that YouTube is a platform for fans to construct and express their behaviour in relation to their artist through the comment section under their music videos. The corollary in the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud is to see how their online discourse about their artist is shaped around a certain form of parasocial relationship indicated by a certain level of intensity.

4. Does the language used in comments reflect the different levels of civility between Taylor Swift and Kanye West communities?

As we said, social media such as YouTube provide anonymity to the users. This can foster uncivil behaviour (Kim, Ellithorpe, and Burt 2023). Therefore, the question is to determine the extent of uncivil language in comment sections of both artists in the context of their feud. More specifically, we want to examine and compare the behaviour of each community online in the context of toxicity polarisation (Mall et al. 2024).

5. How do song-specific messages influence fan discourse compared to broader genre affiliations?

Part of the existing literature suggests that, in spite of the overarching general genre, it is actually the song itself that drives and shapes certain behaviour and attitudes (Carbone and Vandenbosch 2024). In the context of the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud, we evaluate the extent to which specific songs (such as “I Forgot That You Existed” by Taylor Swift, or “Famous” by Kanye West) shape online discourse of their communities. Given that each of the three songs we analyse was released in a specific context, we analyse how each context influences the comments under the song.

4 Methods and data

We choose to study three songs, two from Taylor Swift, one from Kanye West. Each of them was released a different year and at a different point in the timeline of their feud. “Famous” by Kanye West was released in 2016 and directly attacks Taylor Swift. “Look What You Made Me Do” was released in 2017 by Taylor Swift and is one of her comeback singles after a one-year break. Many people believe that it refers to her feud with the rapper. “I Forgot That You Existed” was released in 2019 after Scooter Braun’s acquisition of Taylor Swift’s masters through the purchase of Big Machine Records, her previous label. We were limited in the choice of songs because in the history of their feud, only one song clearly addresses the dispute, that is “Famous”. Kanye West never made any other song related or believed to be related to the feud. On the other hand, Taylor Swift never explicitly released a song addressing the feud. This is why we pick two songs for her instead of only one. In addition, since both of her songs were released at a different time in a different context in the feud timeline, it enables us to explore research question 5. The material for our research consists in the comment sections of each of the three songs.

Comments for “I Forgot That You Existed” were retrieved on 19 December 2024 while comments for both “Famous” and “Look What You Made Me Do” were collected on 28 December. We get them by directly inputting each video ID from their YouTube URL into the tuber search. The total number of comments for “I Forgot That You Existed” was 6673. It was 146 144 for “Famous”, and 667 602 for “Look What You Made Me Do”. We initially use a transformer model on comments from “I Forgot That You Existed” to zero-shot classify the dataset. We use [MoritzLaurer/deberta-v3-large-zeroshot-v2.0](#) with 3 classifiers: positive, neutral, negative. These labels were supposed to be used for sentiment analysis. We also get a sample of 500 comments that we manually label for verification. After running the transformer model, we get a Kappa of 0.4251. We fine-tune with [cardiffnlp/twitter-roberta-base-sentiment-latest](#) and we get a Kappa of 0.5489. However, since the context is quite complex, we get numerous false positive.

We switch to ChatGPT 4o-mini for classification since it enables a better comprehension of context when classifying comments. Here is the prompt we give ChatGPT API to classify the comments:

Classify each YouTube comment into one of the following categories. Return a single number.

Category	Description
1. Supportive	Admirable or enthusiastic about Taylor Swift or her music
2. Neutral	Descriptive, factual, or unrelated to sentiment
3. Critical of Kanye West	Critical, attacking, or subtly targeting Kanye West
4. Negative toward Taylor Swift	Critical, attacking, or negative about Taylor Swift or her music

We swap “Taylor Swift” for “Kanye West” when classifying comments of “Famous”. To avoid hitting OpenAI API rate limits, which we initially did, we randomly sample 600 comments for each dataset. Random sampling with 600 comments provides a sample representative enough of the overall datasets while ensuring a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% for each dataset.

One of the issues for our analysis with comments on YouTube videos, and especially for Taylor Swift’s music video, is that although primarily written in English, there are some non-English comments as well. There is also the case of emojis which, although they can provide a lot of context, are not correctly handled by the script and ChatGPT has trouble reading them. For example, 🥹 (crying face emoji) is widely used under Taylor Swift’s videos but does not always convey sadness. Sometimes, it is used to convey crying of happiness, for instance if Taylor Swift released a much-anticipated song that the user is extremely happy to see. Given all this, we clean the 3x600 comments samples to delete non-English comments, remove emojis, ensure there are no duplicates, remove

short comments of less than five characters which are meaningless.

After cleaning our samples, we get 748 comments for “I Forgot That You Existed”, 434 for “Famous”, and 396 for “Look What You Made Me Do”. We stay above the sample sizes required to ensure a confidence level of at least 95% and a margin of error of at least 5%. They should respectively have been at minimum of 364 for “I Forgot That You Existed”, and 384 for both “Famous” and “Look What You Made Me Do”. We then feed our three cleaned samples to ChatGPT to classify given the prompt.

With our classified samples, we analyse different variables. We first get the distribution of comment categories between the 4 classifiers that we provided to ChatGPT. We then analyse words frequencies to get an aperçu of how fans behave in respective comment sections, what themes are the most recurring, etc. We generate wordclouds for each of the classifiers apart from neutral (e.g., wordcloud for comments supportive of Taylor Swift under “Look What You Made Me Do”, or wordcloud for comments critical of Taylor Swift under “Look What You Made Me Do”). We also count the amount of likes per classifier and run a correlation test to see if there is a trend or not. Likes are a way to see which behavior is the most favored by other users. For “Famous”, we remove the outlier comment which received more than 3500 likes since it distorts results. We also look at amounts of comments by category since release for each video to detect any fluctuation in time.

After having run these analyses on the three samples, we create two categories: comments critical of Taylor Swift, and comments critical of Kanye West. To create them, we merge the comments classified as each for one video with the comments classified as the same for others (e.g., we merge comments critical of Kanye West from “Famous”, “Look What You Made Me Do”, “I Forgot That You Existed”). We get two datasets that we run through zero shot classification with transformer model [MoritzLaurer/deberta-v3-large-zeroshot-v2.0](#) (see Appendix A). We use the labels “civil” and “uncivil”. After getting the

labelled datasets, we give them to [civility-lab/roberta-base-namecalling](#) for name-calling classification. Therefore, we have two datasets with both civility classification and name-calling classification. For each dataset, we analyse the distribution of civility labels and the distribution of name-calling by civility label.

5 Results

5.1 “I Forgot That You Existed” (2019), Taylor Swift

We have a sentiment analysis with transformer model since we tried with this song before switching to ChatGPT. As expected, when skimming through the comment section, the sentiment distribution in the comments of this video are mostly positive (see Appendix B). The negative comments are very marginal which highlights that Taylor Swift’s music videos seem to overwhelmingly garner positive reactions from users. However, since the labels used for categorisation are not very effective given the complexity of the context behind our research, we turn to ChatGPT categorisation. We see that with a more detailed categorisation, most comments fall within the range of being neutral (around 55%), i.e., they are irrelevant to our analysis (see Appendix C). Comments supporting Taylor Swift remain the second most important category, representing about 40% of the entire comment section. Negative comments toward Taylor Swift are a minority with about 2% of the whole, while comments targeting Kanye West represent roughly double those aimed at Taylor Swift. Unsurprisingly, overall, there are very few comments criticising Taylor Swift, her music, or her video. In addition, these comments tend to be the least liked of all categories of comments (see Appendix D) although it seems to be a weak correlation if not non-existent (see Appendix E).

Furthermore, when looking at respective wordclouds for each category, we see that some topics are more prevalent than others even within categories. For example, the wordcloud of comments supportive of Taylor Swift shows an overwhelming use of positive words or are positively linked to her music (see Appendix F). The words that come up the most are obviously “Taylor”, “love” and “song” which would be the most straightforward way to describe her music. In the lesser frequent words, she is described as a “genius” and her song is sometimes labeled as being a “masterpiece” or a user’s “favorite”. We also find the word “haters” which comes up when the comments are supporting Taylor Swift against her “haters” such as Kanye West’s fans. This is further demonstrated in the wordcloud of

comments critical of Kanye West (Appendix G). The most prevalent words are “forgot” and “existed”, which are part of the song title. They are also supposed to describe the way Taylor Swift and her fans feel about Kanye West and his then-wife Kim Kardashian after the “Famous” incident. The word “mannequin”, for instance, directly refers to this incident with the Taylor Swift mannequin in the music video of the song. “Haters” also appears as in the wordcloud for supportive comments, but this time the comments are more vehemently directed at Taylor Swift’s haters without necessarily lauding her in contrast. However, when looking at the wordcloud of comments critical of Taylor Swift, we see that users never really criticise her within the context of her feud with Kanye West (see Appendix H). Most critical words are used by people in the broader context of being disappointed because they thought she would announce her new re-edited album or such another announcement. This is why we see words such as “disappointment”, “release”, “album”, or even her name because most critical comments follow this kind of structure: “I am disappointed with Taylor because she didn’t drop her new album”. Other real critical words are ways for users to describe their usual dissatisfaction with her as an artist and with her music, e.g., “terrible”, “unenjoyable”, “worst”, etc. This could mean two things: Kanye West fans did not swarm in Taylor Swift’s comment section to defend their artist, or the song does not hold any real significance itself within the context of their feud. The latter seems to be the right answer. When looking at the overall wordcloud of the comment section, all categories together, we see that Kanye West is never mentioned (see Appendix I). There does not appear to be any indirect reference to him either. Other artists are mentioned such as “Drake” or “Calvin” for Calvin Harris. These artists come up because there have been rumours of Taylor Swift dating each of them at a point of her career. Therefore, for most people, it seems that “I Forgot That You Even Existed” hints more to her past relationship with one or the other than with her feud with Kanye West. It is to be noted that there has been a small peak of supportive comments for Taylor Swift in the first half of 2024 (see Appendix J) because she had been nominated for the Grammy Awards in February and she released a new album in April. Also to be noted, in November, Billboard posted a video to celebrate Taylor Swift, but they included

a reference to Kanye West’s “Famous” which sparked controversy amongst the Swifties. However, it does not show on the graph although data was retrieved in December.

5.2 “Famous” (2016), Kanye West

The distribution of comment categories for the song “Famous” contrasts a lot with the one for “I Forgot That You Existed” comment section. While the most important category for both songs is the one comprising “neutral” comments, for “Famous”, comments are even more neutral than they are for “I Forgot That You Existed” (see Appendix K). In fact, about 64% of comments under “Famous” music video are neutral, representing a 10-percentage points difference with “I Forgot That You Existed”. But the most striking difference is the reverse distribution of supportive and critical comments compared to the previously analysed song. Whereas supportive comments represented the second most important category of comments for Taylor Swift’s song, leaving the remaining two categories almost dismissible, here, the balance tends more toward an even equilibrium between categories 1, 3 and 4. In this way, comments supportive of Kanye West only represent 10% of the comment section while Taylor Swift could boast about an overall 40% supportive comment section. Only about 8% of comments under “Famous” attack in a way or another Taylor Swift even though the song quite explicitly take a shot at her. Even more interestingly, comments critical of Kanye West are more numerous than the ones praising him or attacking Taylor Swift, representing about 17.5% of the total comments. If we consider that categories 1 and 3 are comprised of comments leaning toward Kanye West in one way or another, the comments critical of Kanye West almost amount to the same number as both categories 1 and 3 together. However, average like count by comment category goes in favour of comments critical of Taylor Swift with an average of 102 likes per comment (see Appendix L). Nevertheless, this figure is biased by the fact that one comment alone (“I can see why Taylor was just a lil upset by this...”) garnered 3574 likes (see Appendix M). A new analysis without this extreme value gives another look at the distribution of likes across categories of comments. We see that despite removing the outlier, comments critical of Taylor Swift remain the most liked ones

on average (see Appendix N). They average 3.46 likes, about 1 more like than neutral comments, the second most liked category on average. The contrast between average likes between comments critical of Taylor Swift and comment critical of Kanye West is about twofold. Therefore, we may interpret these figures as another form of *modus operandi* for Kanye West supporters. But this interpretation is to be nuanced given that there does not seem to be any strong correlation between comment categories and number of likes (see Appendix O).

When turning to the analysis of word frequencies, it is clear that Taylor Swift's name quite often occurs in the comment section (see Appendix P). From all the "celebrities" appearing in the music video as a "wax" doll, her name comes up the most before Donald Trump or Kim Kardashian, his ex-spouse. We can also notice that the overall frequent words are more polarised than the overall wordcloud for "I Forgot That You Existed". We see words objectively describing the content of the music video such as the names of the celebrities, "naked" or "sleeping". But some other words describe how users feel watching this video. And this is where opinions are polarised. Some describe the video and the song as "great" or the "best" but most adjectives and other words expressing feelings show disgust and discontent with the music video. Thus, we get adjectives such as "disgusting", "weird", "creepy" or "trash" whereas some think that "Famous" "sucks" or that they "hate" it. The wordcloud of comments critical of Kanye West reveals even more vocabulary linked to Swifties' discontent with "Famous" and Kanye West (see Appendix Q). We find again words such as "disgusting" or "creepy" which refer to the video and the song, engaging directly with the "art". But we also have some words discrediting Kanye West as a person, attacking his personality and his personal life. Users qualified him as "pathetic", a "fallen" artist, or even as a "nazi" following his numerous comments tainted of antisemitism, and his endorsement of Donald Trump for the 2016 US presidential election campaign. However, as much as his detractors find his music video "creepy" or "disgusting", his supporters laud his artistic creativity (see Appendix R). They often talk about the "music" or the "video", calling it "art".

Some comment on the “humoristic” tone of the song while acknowledging its provocative stance with words referring to the controversial content such as “nude” or “gross”. In comparison, the wordcloud of comments criticizing Taylor Swift shows that most people attacking Taylor Swift focus on her as a public figure (see Appendix S). They refer to her as “classless” or “fake”. The words “snake” and the portmanteau “snaylor” refer to Taylor Swift’s long history of disputes with other artists such as Calvin Harris, as seen through the comments of “I Forgot That You Existed”. Some comments also directly engage with the community of Taylor Swift’s “fans” notably by mocking them for being “upset” or telling them to “stfu”. All in all, these wordclouds tend to reveal that while quite offending to some people, this provocative stance is a trademark of Kanye West that his fans very much appreciate about him, denoting a polarizing artist and personality. To be noted, the trends in comment categories since the video was published show a small surge in comments supportive of Kanye West toward the end of 2024 (see Appendix T). This should correspond to the Billboard reference to “Famous” in their video celebrating Taylor Swift in November. Since this video sparked Swifties discontent and revived their hate of Kanye West, the surge of supportive comments of Kanye West in November may be the response of his fans to this renewed controversy.

5.3 “Look What You Made Me Do” (2017), Taylor Swift

We use the comment section of “Look What You Made Me Do” as a comparative population to see if the one under “I Forgot That You Existed” can be considered representative of Taylor Swift’s fans’ behaviour in her feud with Kanye West. As with the two previous comment sections, neutral comments are the most represented (see Appendix U). About 58% of the comments are categorised as neutral, not too far from the proportions that we got for the first two analyses (which also seems to prove that the neutral category appears to be consistent in terms of proportions). In fact, the distribution of comments categories under “Look What You Made Me Do” somewhat follows the same pattern, i.e., neutral, supportive of Taylor Swift, critical of Kanye West, critical of Taylor Swift in a descending order. Nonetheless, it seems that Swifties’ behaviour is less homogeneous

than for the former song. Indeed, supposing that comments supportive of Taylor Swift and comments critical of Kanye West both come from Swifties in a broad sense (Taylor Swift listeners who openly support her, not necessarily being hardcore fans), 22% of total comments were aimed at supporting Taylor Swift. It was almost 40% of the comment section for “I Forgot That You Existed”. 14% of the comment section for “Look What You Made Me Do” criticised Kanye West while they only represented 4% for the previous Taylor Swift song. If we only look at Swifties comments, for this song, the ratio between comments supportive of Taylor Swift and comments critical of Kanye West is 60/40. It was almost 90/10 for Swifties comments under “I Forgot That You Existed”. Therefore, it seems that Swifties adopted a different strategy in defending their artist for the present song. On the other hand, critics of Taylor Swift were relatively low as for her 2019 song around 5%. The average like count by comment category show a different distribution than the one for “I Forgot That You Existed”. For the 2019 song, comments supportive of Taylor Swift drove the most engagement while for this song, neutral category tops the chart followed by comments critical of Kanye West (see Appendix V). This contrasts with the figures for the 2019 song since it seems that in the context of “Look What You Made Me Do”, criticising Kanye West seemed to be the more rewarding than just supporting Taylor Swift. However, despite this, correlation analysis tends to show that there is in fact little to no polarisation in the comment section (see Appendix W).

The wordclouds for overall comments, supportive of Taylor Swift, critical of Kanye West, and critical of Taylor Swift also highlight a contrast between the themes and strategies for the two Taylor Swift songs. Overall, they are also mostly positive and focus on Taylor Swift’s artistry with words such as “love”, “amazing”, “good”, “video”, or “song” (see Appendix X). This is further showed with the wordcloud of supportive comments with words such as “love”, “amazing”, “queen”, or “best” which highlight the adoration and admiration that Swifties have for their artist (see Appendix Y). Even though criticism of Kanye West is stronger here than for “I Forgot That You Existed”, it seems like mild criticism without any direct aggression or attack. This is denoted by the use of words

mostly unrelated to him and revolving around Taylor Swift herself (see Appendix Z), e.g., “taylor”, “nobody”, “trust”, “reputation” (the album’s title), etc. But there are still some words directly addressing Kanye West such as “trash”, “diss”, “hate”, “drama” or “evil”. On the other hand, comments criticising Taylor Swift use more often words directly addressing the feud between Kanye West and her with words such as “tilted”, “diss”, also resorting to discrediting her and her music, e.g., “bullshit”, “stupid”, “white”, “cringe”, etc (see Appendix AA). The trends in comment categories of the music video is relatively flat after high engagement at the release (see Appendix BB). There is no small surge toward the end of 2024 which could correspond to the Billboard incident. The difference in trends and behaviours of fans between “Look What You Made Me Do” and “I Forgot That You Existed”, especially the more targeted criticism of Kanye West in the former, most probably stems from the respective dates of release. “Look What You Made Me Do” came out as a single after Taylor Swift’s break in her career following “Famous” and the subsequent dispute with Kanye West and his then-wife Kim Kardashian over the infamous phone call. In 2019, when “I Forgot That You Existed” is released, she is already engaged in the dispute with Big Machine Records, her previous label that Scooter Braun acquired.

5.4 Civility by comments category

Comments critical of Kanye West are dominantly uncivil (see Appendix AA). This reflects the emotionally intense reactions that Swifties have against him, both as an artist and as a person. These comments often go beyond just simple critique of Kanye West since they involve name-calling (see Appendix AB). As we have seen, some of the most recurring words in these comments fall clearly within the spectrum of offensive language, involving insults or personal attacks.

Additionally, comments critical of Taylor Swift are distributed in a similar fashion to comments critical of Kanye West. The distribution also goes in favour of uncivil comments (see Appendix AC). However, unlike the uncivil comments aimed at Kanye West,

the uncivil ones aimed at Taylor Swift appear less violent in the vocabulary used (see Appendix AC).

When looking at both populations, we see that criticism relies heavily on uncivil discourse often associated with name-calling. This shows that, for both artists, detractors usually resort to derogatory language that goes beyond constructive civil criticism. However, as we saw, it seems that Kanye West stirs more harsh criticism than Taylor Swift. Indeed, the ratio of name-calling comments amongst uncivil comments is more important than name-calling ones in uncivil comments targeting Kanye West.

6 Discussion and outlook

This study aimed to provide insights into how fan communities construct and express their online behaviour, particularly with the case of the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud. Drawing from several concepts ranging from patterns of polarisation to parasocial relationship, we analysed the comments of three songs central to the feud. The findings reveal significant differences in fan discourse and highlight the broader implications for online culture and music fan communities.

6.1 Key findings

One of the primary findings of this study is the very distinctive behaviours displayed by the two fan communities. Taylor Swift’s fans, or Swifties, showed higher levels of cohesiveness in their support of their artist, notably through overwhelmingly positive comments under her music videos. As for Kanye West, his fan community also demonstrated some levels of positive feedback and support but in lesser levels than Swifties for Taylor Swift. This difference does reflect the nature of each artist’s public persona: Taylor Swift, as a pop star, appeals more broadly to an audience and she is the clear victim in the feud; Kanye West is a quite controversial figure and although our findings highlight how much controversial he is and how public opinion may be divided about him, our research does not account for his political stance and his comments especially on the Jewish people.

Our analysis of civility further highlights the divide in emotional intensity between the two fan communities. While comments critical of Taylor Swift (i.e., comments made by Kanye West community) often contained uncivil language and name-calling, there were not on par with the intensity of uncivility and name-calling displayed in the comments critical of Kanye West. This suggests a strong affective polarisation around Kanye West, especially from Swifties who antagonised the rapper. This shows that group identity is at play in music in the digital era, where criticism of one’s chosen artist might be perceived as personal attacks. This also suggests that contrary to what popular belief may tell us

about rap and pop listeners and their expected behaviour online, toxicity polarisation is more shifted toward the Swifties, meaning that they are more prone to toxic behaviour in the comments.

This divide in emotional response in the context of the feud also extends its scope to the role of parasocial relationships in shaping online discourse. Indeed, the much intense display of uncivility and name-calling from Swifties toward Kanye West tend to suggest that they are engaged in a parasocial relationship beyond the mere admiration of Taylor Swift's art. They denote at least an intense-personal relationship with a very strong identification to Taylor Swift and her community, notably with the use of vocabulary such as "mother" or "mothering" to refer to the artist. In that, they show a deeper emotional investment in the feud than Kanye West's listeners. One explanation for the less emotional response of Kanye West's listeners might be the rap environment, which fosters competition and feuds between rappers. Therefore, to them, this feud with a pop artist may just be one of the multiple cases of Kanye West's disputes with other artists. The comments praising him also highlight this difference in the parasocial behaviour of both communities vis-à-vis their artist. They mostly praise him or his art, never his behaviour or his opinions.

Lastly, the study revealed that song-specific contexts play a crucial role in shaping fan discourse. Indeed, each of the three analysed songs has been released in a specific context in the feud and sparked different behaviours in the comment section. "Famous", which revived the feud after the seemingly appeased relationship between the two, directly targeted Taylor Swift, fuelling more polarised reactions with stronger critical reactions from the Swifties. On the other hand, "I Forgot That You Existed", released in 2019 (three years after "Famous") received generally positive or neutral comments, as well as comments referencing others of Taylor Swift's relationships, suggesting that as prior research showed, individual song induces listeners' behaviour rather than the overarching general theme.

6.2 Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is the reliance of samples of 600 comments for three songs. While statistically sufficient, the samples may not completely capture the nuances present in the larger datasets. The exclusion of non-English comments and most of all of emojis during preprocessing may have led to a loss of emotional context or culturally specific meanings.

Another limitation lies with the classifiers used for the ChatGPT prompt. While they accounted for the complex context of the feud while classifying the comments contrary to transformer models, they may not have been specific enough to account for all nuances of comments. Critical classifiers were also built without distinguishing between different topics of criticism, e.g., criticism about the artist, their music, their opinion, etc. are not explicitly given. This leads to a potential limitation which does not seem to have much impacted the comments: the political divide between Taylor Swift and Kanye West, i.e., Kanye West has officially endorsed Republicans in the past while Taylor Swift has officially endorsed Democrats. In addition, these classifiers may not account for more complex comments which do not display one single sentiment: this could be the case for sarcastic comments that may be seen as positive when they are critical, or vice-versa. The use of ChatGPT may also inherently pose a problem since as a machine-learning model, it is not free of inherent biases linked to its training.

6.3 Future directions

To expand the scope of the present study, there is also the possibility to analyse different artists and different feuds, i.e., other inter-genres feud or intra-genre feuds which are more frequent (pop artist vs. pop artist with Katy Perry-Taylor Swift, or rapper vs. rapper with the recent Kendrick Lamar vs. Drake which Kanye West joined briefly with

his remix of “Like That” by Kendrick Lamar, or even within bands with Zayn Malik vs. Louis Tomlinson both ex-members of One Direction). This would be possible by including comprehensive datasets and additional platforms such as Twitter/X where communities are highly active and where content is also known for being highly polarised. It could also allow for potential cross-platform comparisons. The recent and ongoing case of Kendrick Lamar vs. Drake is quite interesting given that both are some of the top figures in rap music and that their feud has gone far beyond merely referring to the other, with revelations of personal details or accusations of paedophilia. However, when looking through the comments of songs that constitute the main medium of their feud, listeners rarely seem to take a stand, they just enjoy the content. This example could be another one to further discuss the stereotypes surrounding music genres.

6.4 Conclusion

This research sheds light on the complex interaction between music, identity, and online behaviour, revealing how fan communities construct their identities and engage in online discourse through the lens of the Taylor Swift-Kanye West feud. This feud serves as a microcosm for understanding how music fan communities reflect patterns of polarisation, emotional attachment, and digital toxicity. As digital fan communities continue to grow and evolve, as global artists get more and more involved in social issues (Kamala Harris’ endorsement by Taylor Swift, K-pop band BTS giving a speech and performing at the UN General Assembly, etc.), understanding these dynamics is crucial to address issues of online toxicity, assess their influence on people, promote dialogue, and expanding the significance of music as a unifying yet divisive force.

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Appendix A: Python code for civility labelling

```
1
2 1. import pandas as pd
3 2. from transformers import pipeline
4 3. import numpy as np
5 4. from sklearn.model_selection import train_test_split
6 5. from sklearn.metrics import accuracy_score, f1_score,
   precision_score, recall_score, cohen_kappa_score
7
8 1. file_name = 'critical_ts_comments.xlsx'
9 2. df = pd.read_excel(file_name)
10
11 1. pipe =
   pipeline(model="MoritzLaurer/deberta-v3-large-zeroshot-v2.0",
   device = 0)
12
13
14 1. # Write the function for the classification (consider what
   labels you want)
15 2. # here you add the labels
16 3. labels = [ "civil", "uncivil",]
17 4.
18 5. def uncivil_pipe(text):
19 6.     output = pipe(text,
20 7.                     candidate_labels = labels,
21 8.                     # here you add the hypothesis - {} indicates
   where labels are added
22 9.                     hypothesis_template = 'This tweet is {}',
23 10.                    # if you get RAM issues, decrease the batch
   size to 8 or 4
```

```

24 11.                batch_size=16
25 12.                )
26 13.    labs = output["labels"]
27 14.    return labs[0]
28
29 1. %%time
30 2. df['y_pred'] = df['textOriginal'].apply(uncivil_pipe)
31
32 1. sentiment_pipe = pipeline("text-classification",
    model="civility-lab/roberta-base-namecalling")
33
34 1. # first check the general output:
35 2. def analyze_sentiment(text):
36 3.     result = sentiment_pipe(text)
37 4.     return result
38 5.
39 6. # Example usage
40 7. text = "!"
41 8. sentiment_result = analyze_sentiment(text)
42 9. print(sentiment_result)
43
44 1. def analyze_sentiment(text):
45 2.     try:
46 3.         result = sentiment_pipe(text)[0]
47 4.         # if you use a different model, you probably have to
    change this part
48 5.         return result['label'], result['score']
49 6.     except Exception as e:
50 7.         # Handle any exception (e.g., no output from the model)
51 8.         return None, None
52 9. # Example usage

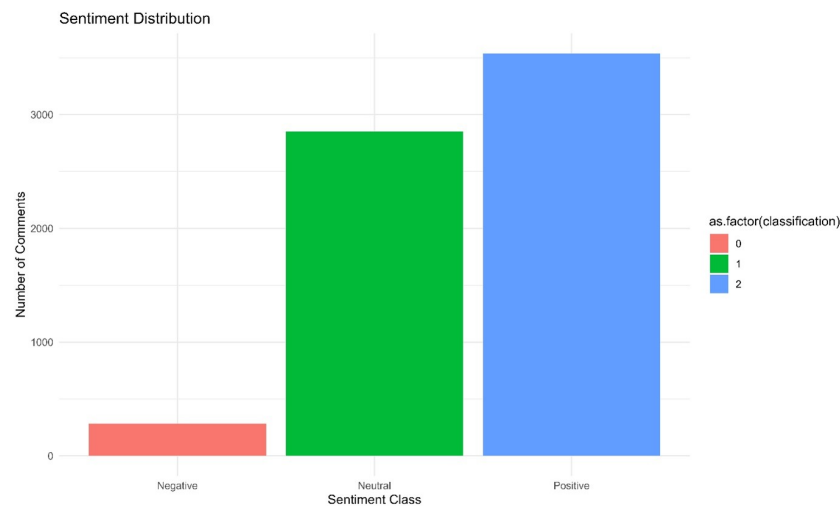
```

```

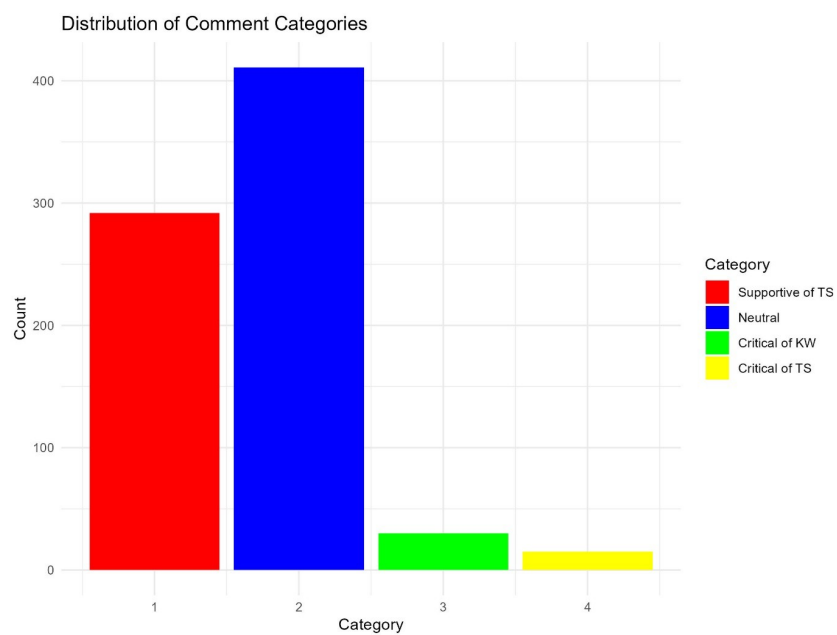
53 10. text = "I feel great today!"
54 11. sentiment_result = analyze_sentiment(text)
55 12. print(sentiment_result)
56
57 1. %%time
58 2. # here you maybe need to change or add the names of the columns
   depending on the classifier
59 3. df['sentiment_label'], df['sentiment_score'] =
   zip(*df['textOriginal'].apply(analyze_sentiment))
60
61 1. df.to_excel('unciviltweets_df_sentiment.xlsx', index=False)

```

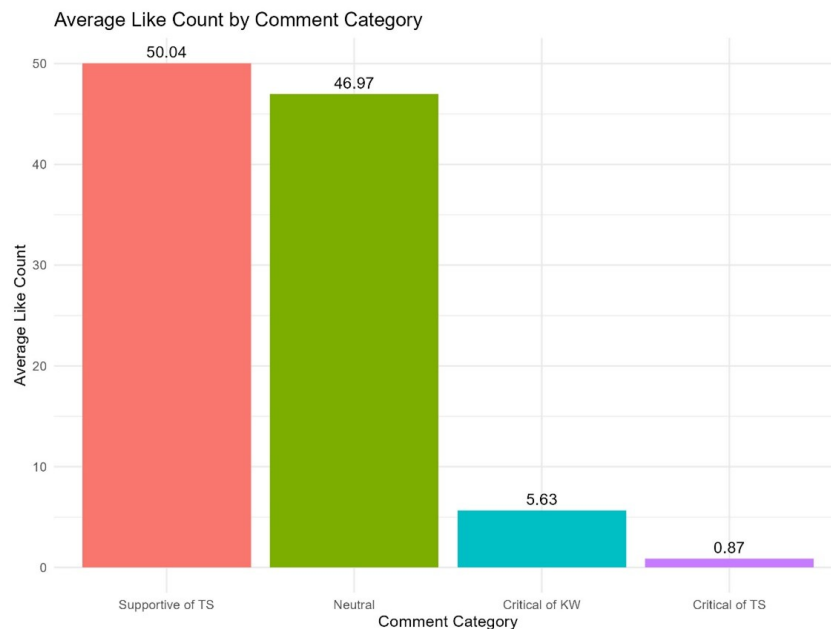
Appendix B: Sentiment distribution with transformer model for “I Forgot That You Existed”



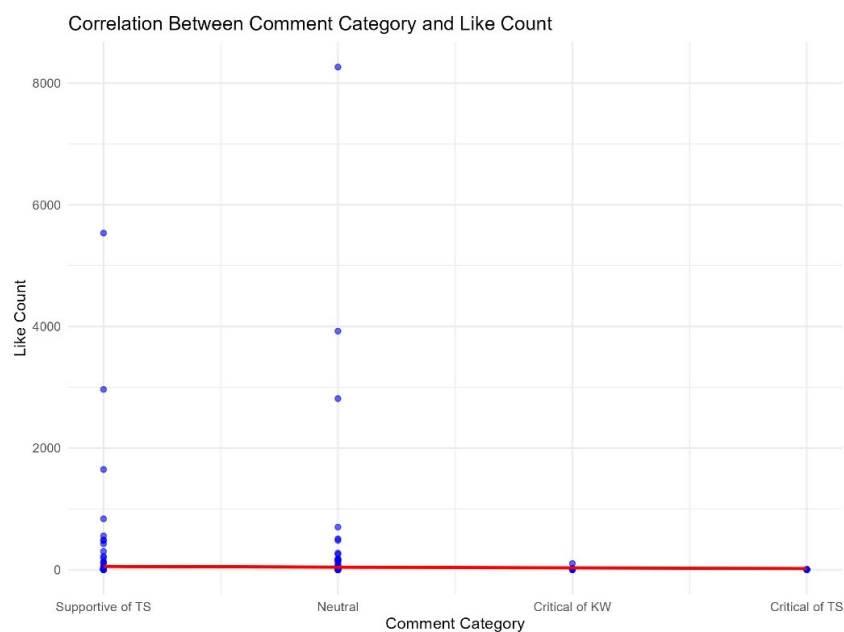
Appendix C: Distribution of comment categories for “I Forgot That You Existed”



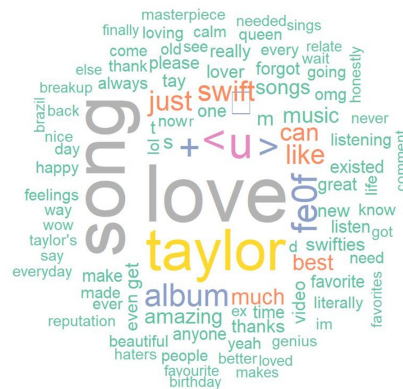
Appendix D: Like count by comment category for “I Forgot That You Existed”



Appendix E: Correlation between like count and category for “I Forgot That You Existed”



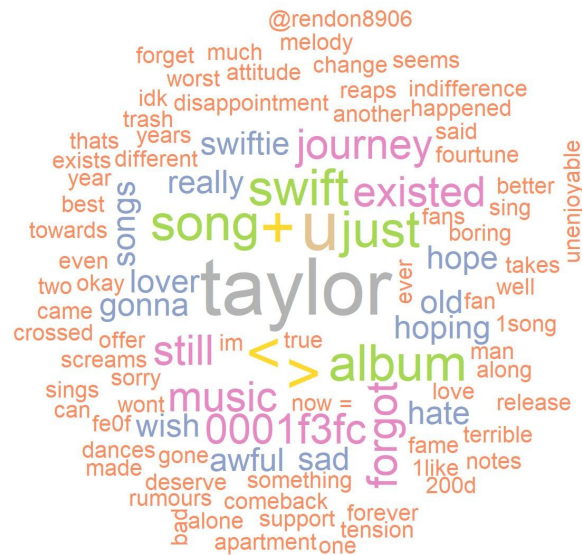
Appendix F: Wordcloud for comments supportive of Taylor Swift for “I Forgot That You Existed”



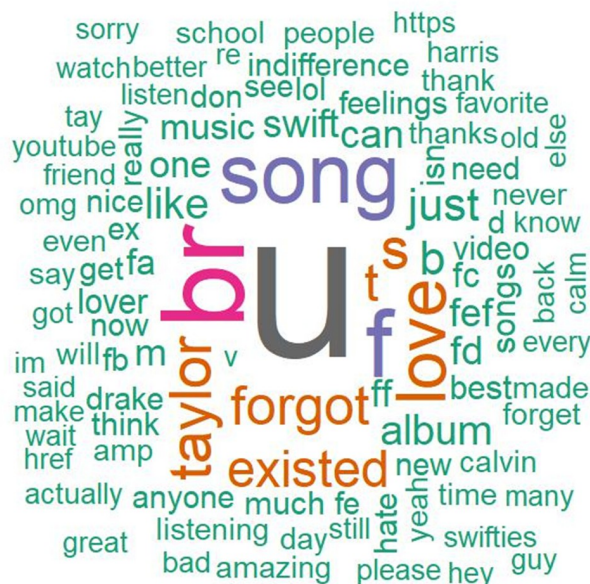
Appendix G: Wordcloud for comments critical of Kanye West for “I Forgot That You Existed”



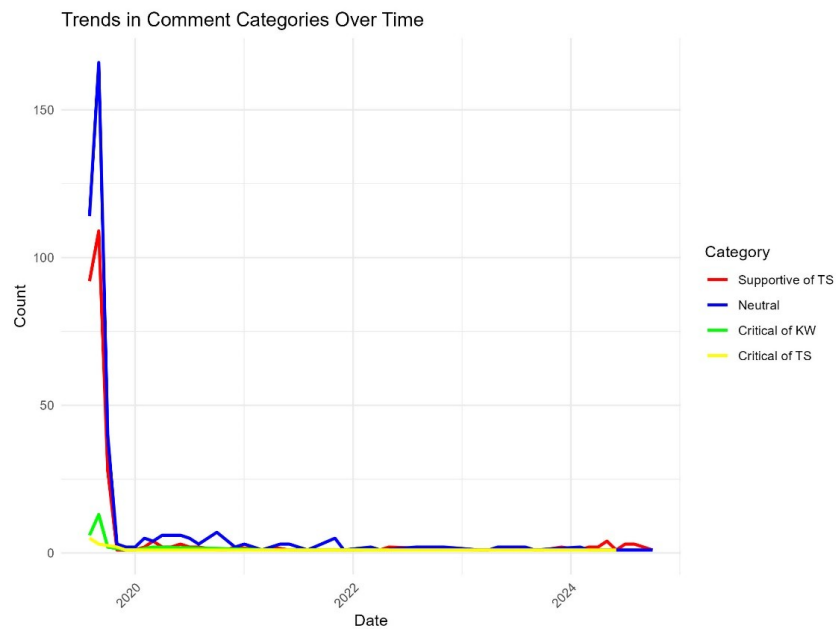
Appendix H: Wordcloud for comments critical of Taylor Swift for “I Forgot That You Existed”



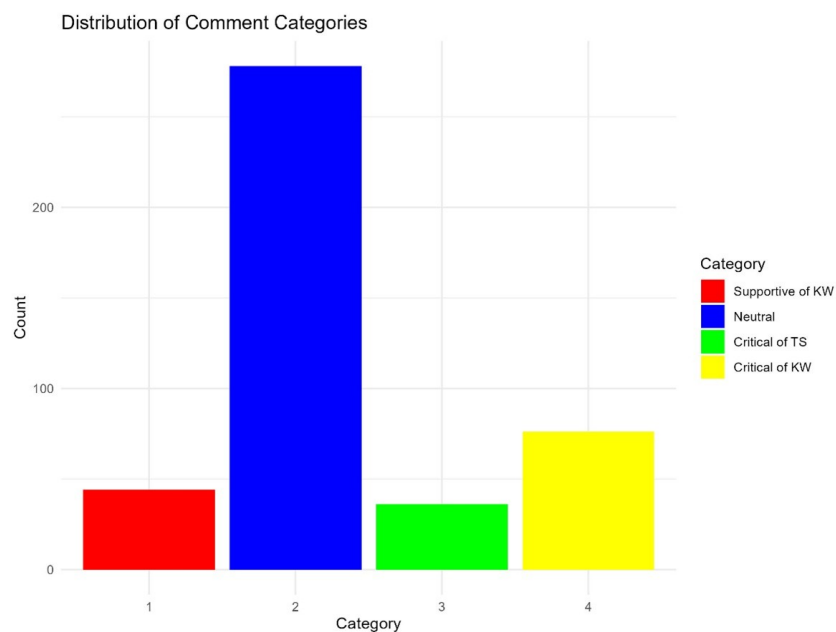
Appendix I: Wordcloud for the overall comment section of “I Forgot That You Existed”



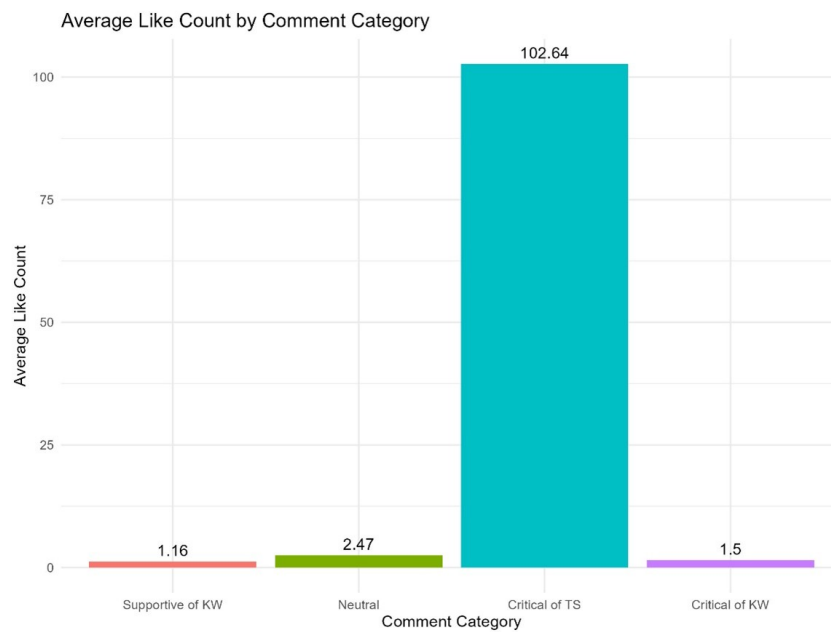
Appendix J: Trends in comment categories since the release of “I Forgot That You Existed”



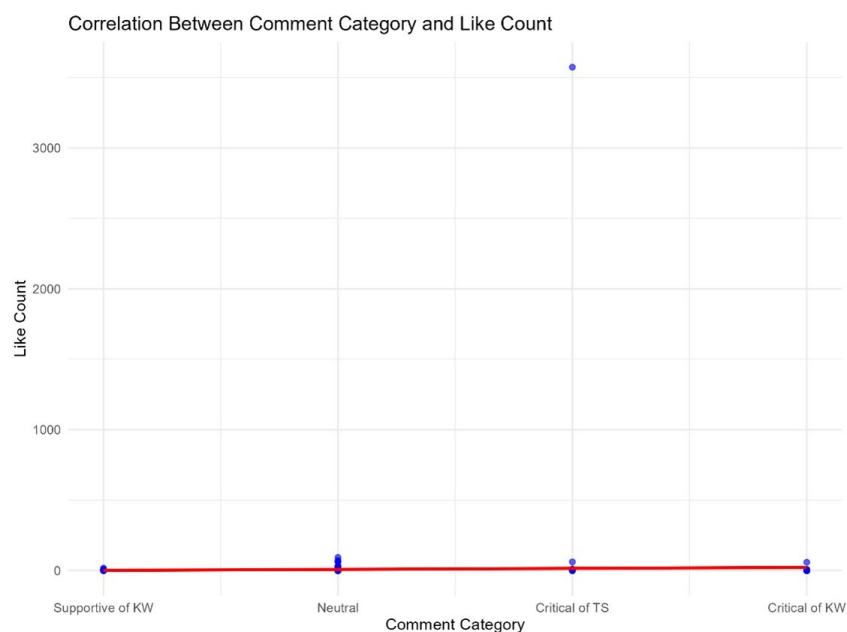
Appendix K: Distribution of comment categories for “Famous”



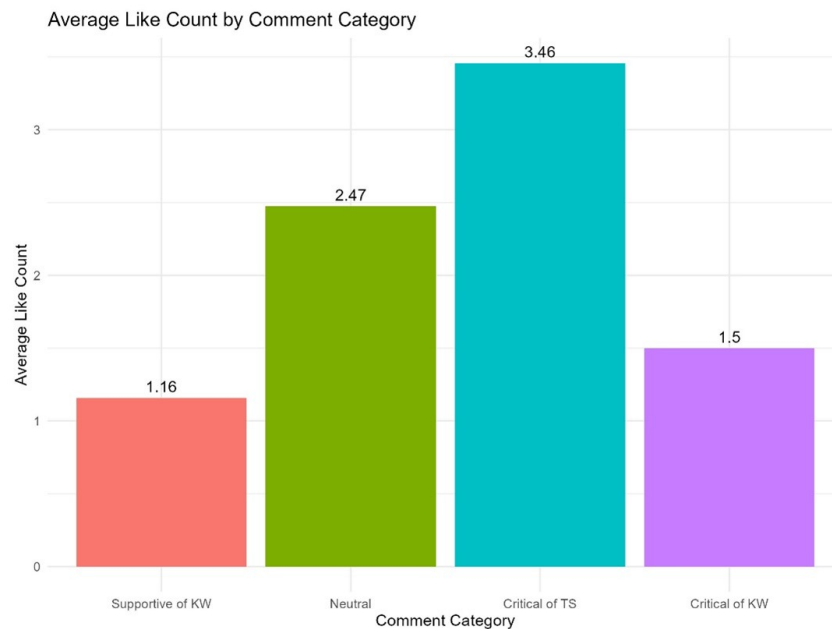
Appendix L: Average like count by comment category for “Famous”



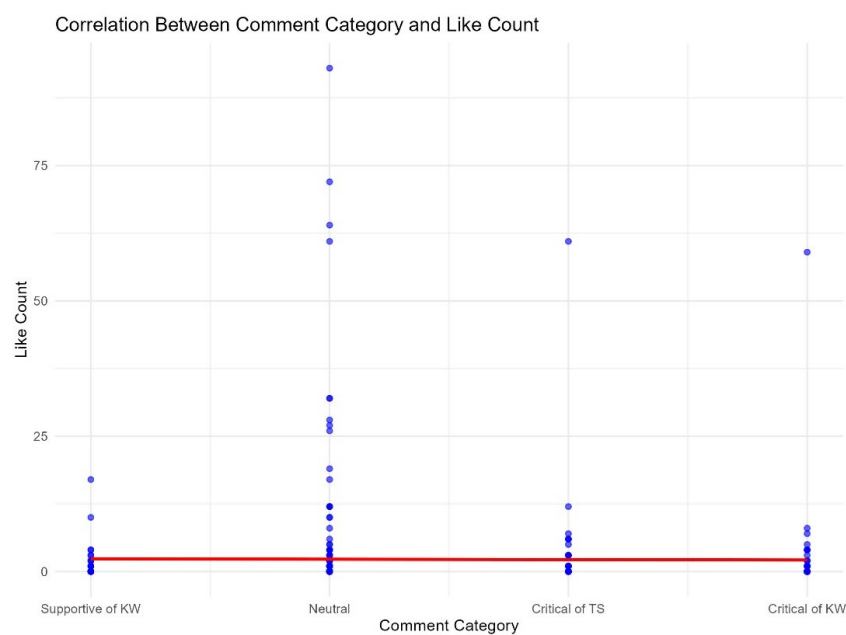
Appendix M: Correlation between like count and category for “Famous”



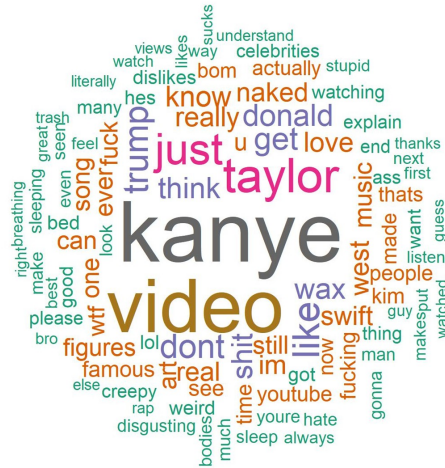
Appendix N: Average like by comment category for “Famous” without outlier



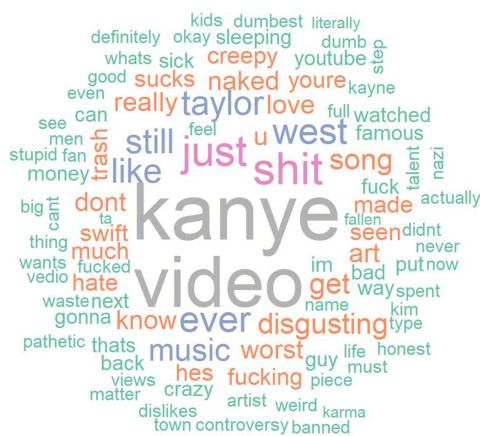
Appendix O: Correlation between comment category and like count without outlier for “Famous”



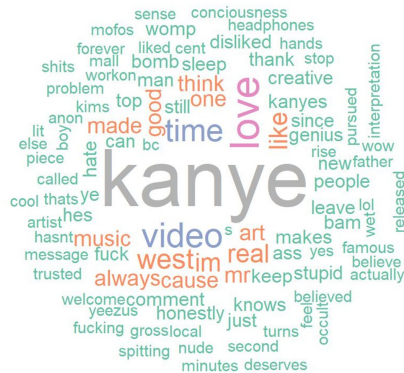
Appendix P: Wordcloud for the overall comment section for “Famous”



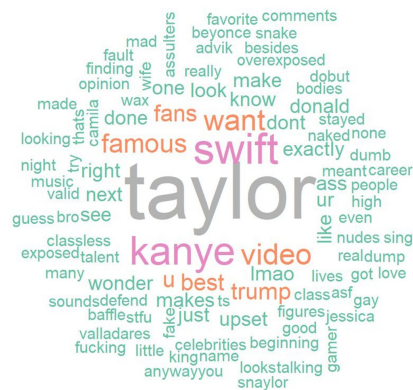
Appendix Q: Wordcloud for comments critical of Kanye West for “Famous”



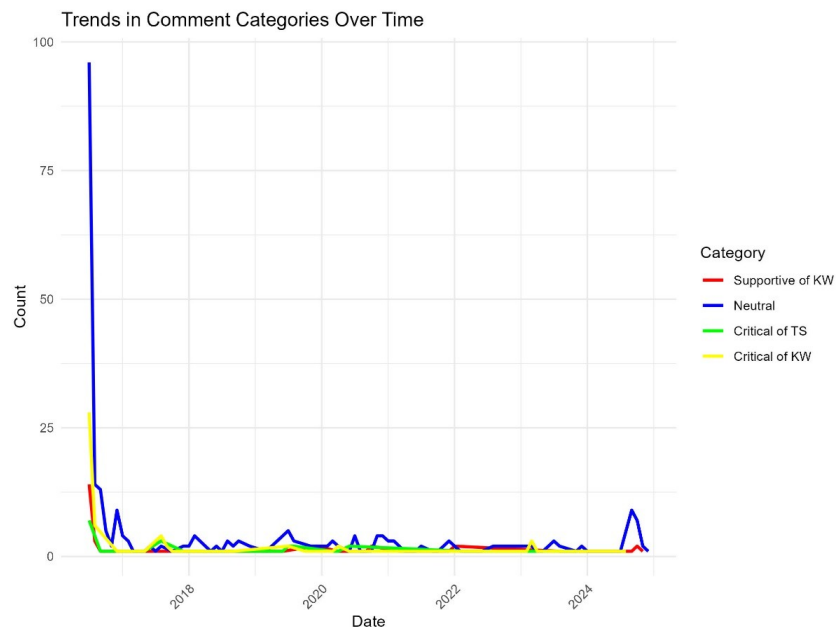
Appendix R: Wordcloud for comments supportive of Kanye West for “Famous”



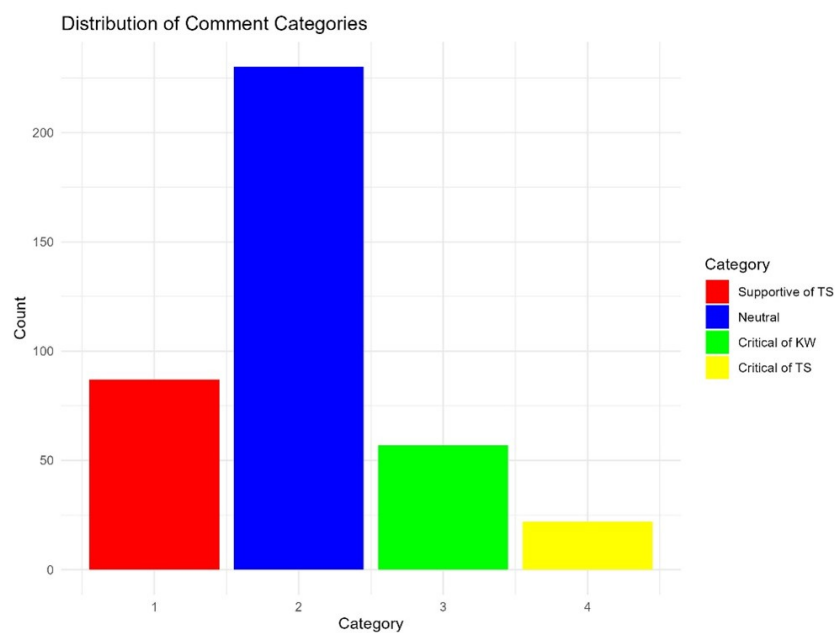
Appendix S: Wordcloud for comments critical of Taylor Swift for “Famous”



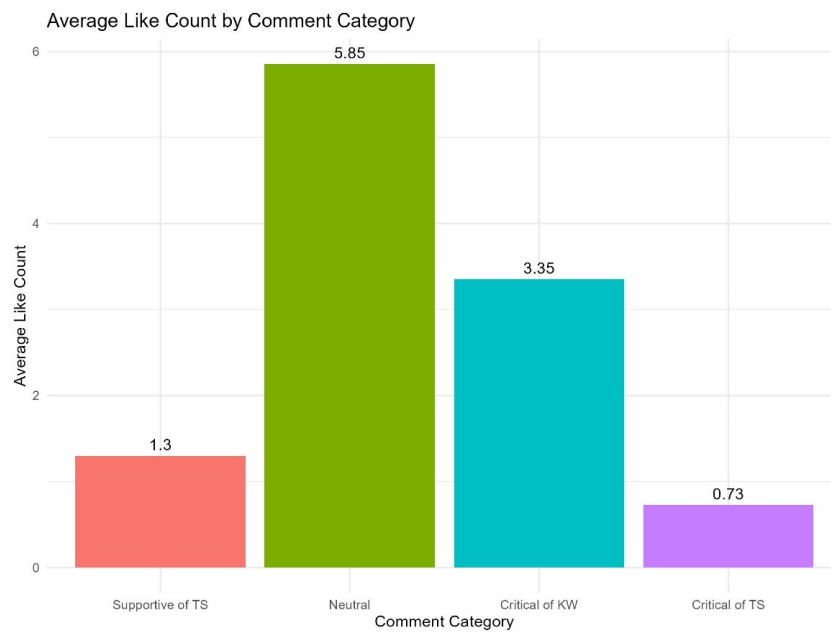
Appendix T: Trends in comments categories over time for “Famous”



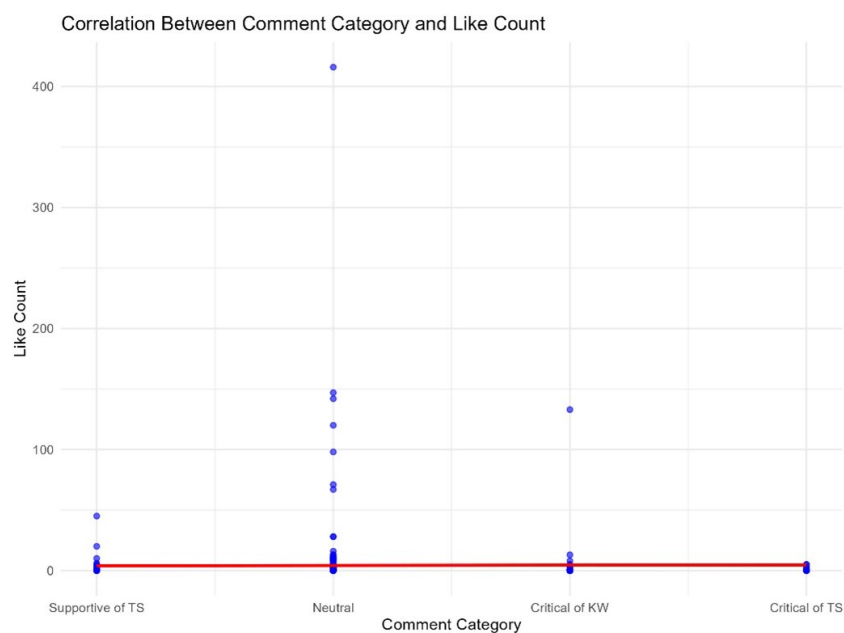
Appendix U: Distribution of comment categories for “Look What You Made Me Do”



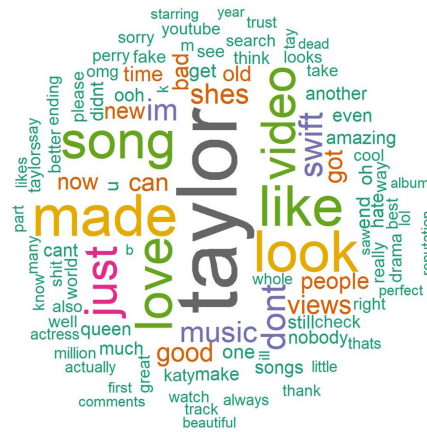
Appendix V: Average like count by category for “Look What You Made Me Do”



Appendix W: Correlation between comment category for “Look What You Made Me Do”



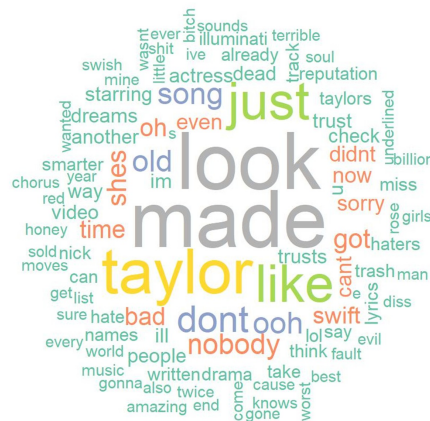
Appendix X: Wordcloud of overall comments for “Look What You Made Me Do”



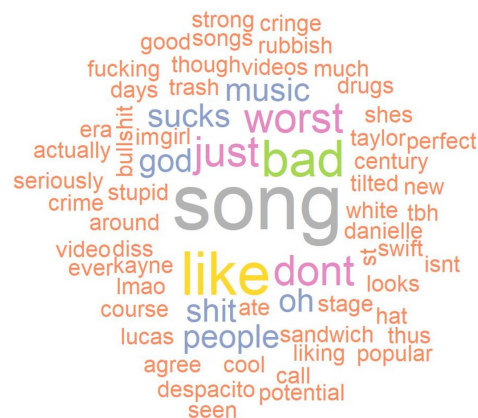
Appendix Y: Wordcloud of comments supportive of Taylor Swift for “Look What You Made Me Do”



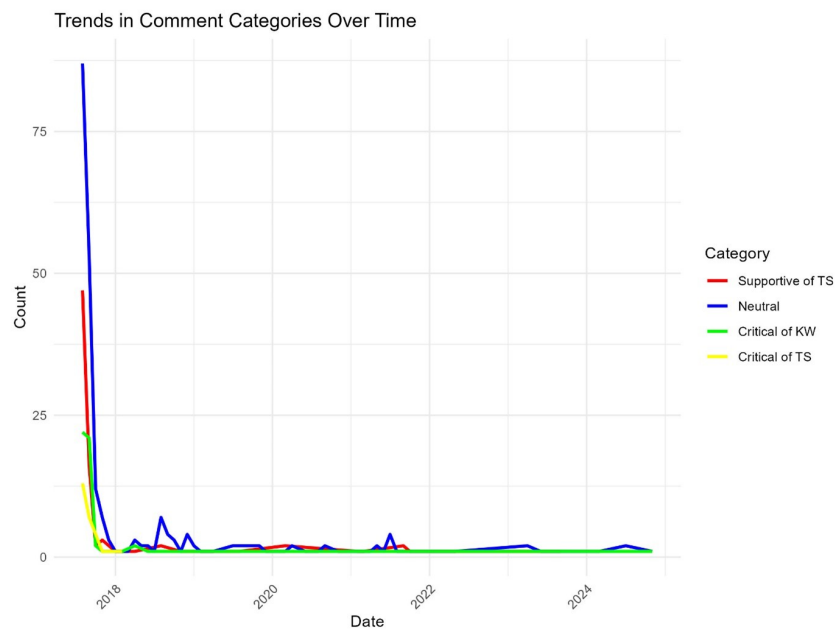
Appendix Z: Wordcloud of comments critical of Kanye West for “Look What You Made Me Do”



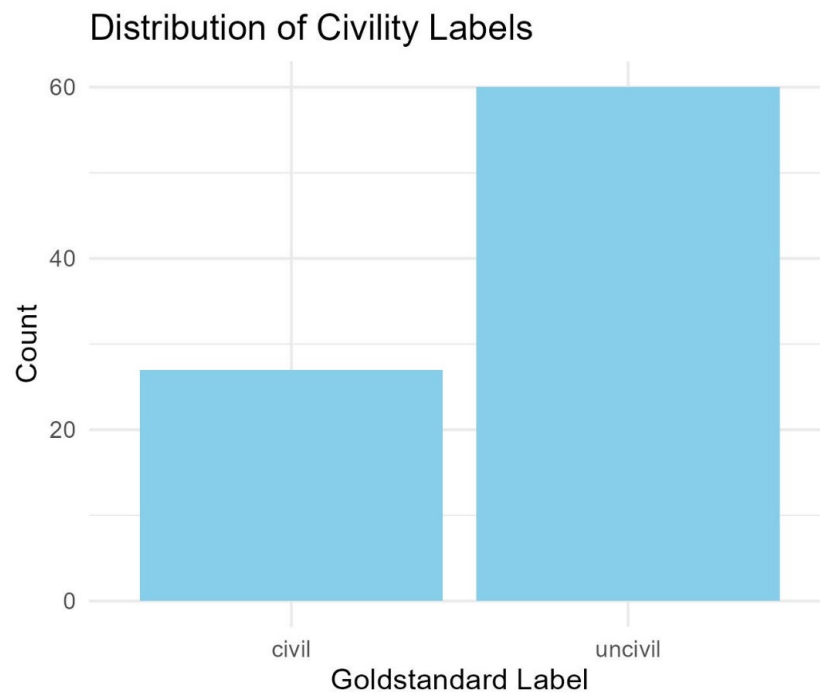
Appendix AA: Wordcloud of comments critical of Taylor Swift for “Look What You Made Me Do”



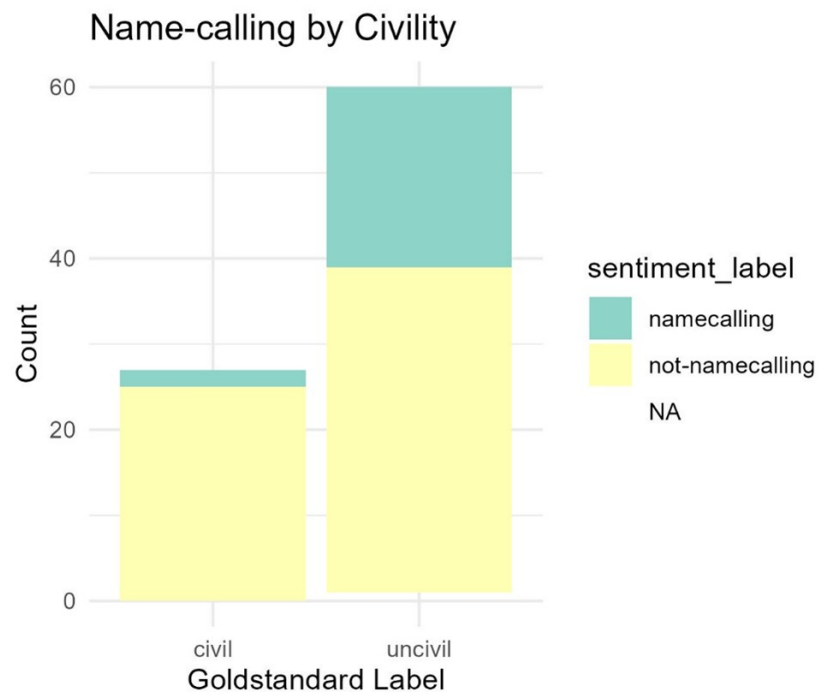
Appendix AB: Trends in comment categories for “Look What You Made Me Do”



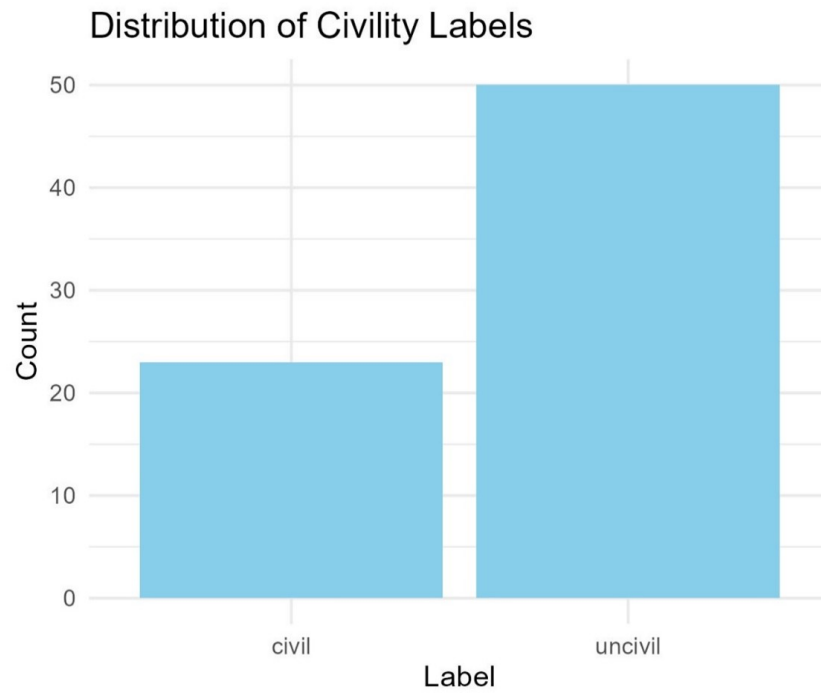
Appendix AC: Distribution of civility labels for comments critical of Kanye West



Appendix AD: Name-calling distribution by civility labels for comments critical of Kanye West



Appendix AE: Distribution of civility labels for comments critical of Taylor Swift



Appendix AF: Name-calling distribution by civility labels for comments critical of Taylor Swift

