

American popular music as ritual: Exploring the meaning of religion in interactions between Taylor Swift and Swifties

Ahdi Sakha Hamidan

American studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta

*Corresponding Author

Email: ahdisakhamidan@mail.ugm.ac.id

Abstract

Music as a product of popular culture has a considerable influence on social life. Music is not only limited to entertainment but has become a form of cultural expression. This can be seen in t Music as a product of popular culture has a considerable influence on social life. It is not only limited to entertainment but has become a form of cultural expression, as seen in the relationship between idols and fans that often resemble religious rituals. This article explores how popular music can function as a ritual that creates a special closeness through the interaction between Taylor Swift as an idol and Swifties as her fans. Using a qualitative approach, this research applies content analysis of Taylor Swift's songs, live performances, and social media interactions to examine how rituals and symbols emerge in these fan practices. The findings show that Swifties construct their collective identity and build a seemingly sacred relationship with Taylor Swift through rituals such as chants, symbolic attributes, and participatory culture online and offline. This study concludes that popular music can act as an alternative form of spirituality, where fans are not merely passive consumers but active participants who find emotional connection, identity, and even transcendent experiences through their engagement with music. he relationship between idols and fans that form certain patterns as seen in religious rituals. This article explores how popular music can function as a ritual that creates a special closeness through the interaction between Taylor Swift as an idol and Swifties as her fans. Through analysing the relationship between Taylor Swift and her fans during concerts, interactions on social media, and her music, this article shows how Swifties construct their collective identity and build a seemingly sacred relationship with Taylor Swift. Using a cultural approach, this research will look at the ways in which Swifties express and adopt Taylor Swift's music as part of a social ritual that includes their emotional side. Through this relationship, popular music can create its own space, and fans are not only seen as passive consumers, but they also play an active role in the formation of a strong identity and community.

Keywords: *Taylor Swift;Fandom;Popular Culture*

INTRODUCTION

Music has entered people's daily lives as entertainment. But apart from being entertainment, music also has a considerable influence on people's inner lives until a strong bond emerges. This emotional influence does not only occur in individual personal relationships, but can even create collective relationships between individuals through a group. The emotional experience created by music can build strong relationships between individuals. They can exchange stories, sing together, dance together and feel the same emotions while listening to their favorite music in a music event. The number of communities formed on the basis of a passion for certain genres of music such as metal, jazz, rock, and so on, makes a clear example that music has the power to unite people and build collective relationships. Popular music, also known as pop music, can influence many aspects of people's lives. Its great influence can happen because of the characteristics of pop music that are easy to digest and hear. Easy to catch melodies, simple lyrics and easy to remember, make it a strong formula and powerful enough to capture the enthusiastic feelings of the listeners. The themes in the songs are also close to everyday life, such as romance, youth life, self-discovery, parties, and the joy of living life. These themes that are close to society make pop music have a wider market. Because, these themes are like a reflection of the reality of everyday life that evokes empathy and touches the emotions of the listeners.

Apart from the personal aspect, pop music also has an influence on the social aspect. It can influence trends, lifestyles, fashion, speaking styles, and the way people perceive things. Especially if someone idolizes his favorite singer or musician, he will usually tend to imitate the style of his idol.

Popular music as ritual develops a different perspective to traditional religious rituals. Rituals in pop music focus more on the emotional connection created by the music industry. However, the similarity in characteristics between traditional religious rituals and pop music as ritual is that both have elements of sharing a common experience through the power of symbols and emotional catharsis. Symbolism is an element that is close to religious rituals. In pop music, symbols are carried through songs, musical performances, singers, and visuals in the artist's music albums. Fans often adopt these symbols through wearing certain hairstyles, wearing t-shirts of their favorite musicians or bands, and accessories that their idols often use. This can show their way of expressing their loyalty and identity to their idols. In bridging the feelings of its fans, pop music utilizes universal emotions that are built through songs, music concerts, and meet and greet events that are organized intimately between idols and fans. This can foster a strong sense of belonging and emotional experience, allowing them to connect with each other. These strong feelings make pop music not just passive entertainment. This is because fans actively participate by always trying to engage with the music. It is this active participation of the fans that makes music a ritual. Pop music rituals discuss how the power of pop music in connecting emotions, and see aspects of spirituality through various participation and interactions between idols and fans.

Previous studies, such as Moberg's analysis of metal music, have shown how popular culture can adopt religious and spiritual elements, particularly using occult and anti-Christian imagery in Nordic metal scenes. His work demonstrates that music fandom can serve as a medium for alternative spiritualities and resistance to mainstream religion. However, while Moberg's focus is on the darker side of spirituality in metal music, less attention has been paid to how mainstream pop music rituals, like those of Taylor Swift and the Swifties, function not through opposition to religion, but by offering emotional and symbolic practices that fulfill spiritual needs in contemporary culture. This distinction opens a research gap that my study seeks to fill by examining how popular music fandom can act as a substitute for religious ritual in more inclusive and emotionally driven ways (Moberg, 2009).

While much scholarship has focused on how rituals in pop music mirror religious experiences, fewer studies have examined how these rituals intersect with fans' political and moral commitments. For example, Simone Driessen's research on Taylor Swift's political coming-out highlights how fandom practices extend beyond concerts and music into acts of political expression and negotiation of values. Her findings show that fans do not simply consume music passively but also reinterpret an artist's persona when confronted with political or social issues, sometimes even creating divisions within the community (Driessen, 2021).

In the context of the analysis to be discussed, the writer uses Taylor Swift and Swifties as his research subjects. Meanwhile, the object to be discussed is pop music as ritual. And the research question that will be developed is how the role of religion is currently being taken over by popular culture through the American music industry. The role of religion in question is the inner needs of humans in expressing their emotions, until they reach a certain stage of spirituality, which will be seen in the relationship built by Swifties in strengthening their identity as a Taylor Swift fan community.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of American popular music as ritual, focusing on the relationship between Taylor Swift as an idol, and Swifties as fans. The methodology will be based on content analysis methods, through songs, videos, and social media platforms that aim to help a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction of symbols and rituals in the relationship between Taylor Swift and her fans. As Mayring emphasizes, *qualitative content analysis is a rule-guided procedure for the systematic, yet flexible, analysis of textual data that preserves methodological rigor while allowing interpretation of meaning* (Mayring, 2014). This makes the method suitable for examining not only lyrical and visual texts but also the symbolic practices and participatory interactions that constitute the ritual dimension of fandom.

In understanding the dynamics of popular culture and fandom, John Fiske's perspective provides a useful framework to see how fans construct meaning and identity through their engagement with media texts and celebrity figures. Fiske explores how fans actively interpret popular culture through their involvement in responding to what they get through the media. This study can be used to analyze how the relationship between idols and fans create rituals specific to pop music, such as creating a community of fellow fans, wearing merchandise and accessories related to their idols, watching live music performances, or creating online forums. As Fiske puts it: *Stars have a glamor that sets them apart from and above their fans: personalities have a familiarity that offers their fans a much more intimate, equal relationship* (Fiske, 1987). The analysis through this study can help to elucidate how pop music rituals create a special experience, both individual and collective that allows fans to strengthen their identity, as well as build spirituality through the emotional power connected between individuals, communities, and their idols.

Expanding from Fiske's view of how fans interpret and create meaning from popular culture, Henry Jenkins expands the discussion by emphasizing the active participation of fans in producing and circulating cultural content. Henry Jenkins' participatory culture theory looks at how fans actively engage with media. This blurs the line between creating content and consuming it. This can be seen in Swifties as a fandom that participates in Taylor Swift's music through its various activities in creating content. As Jenkins said: *My initial use of "participatory culture" to refer to fandom relied on a not fully conscious blurring between forms of cultural production and forms of social exchange; fans understood fandom to be an informal "community" defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity.* (Jenkins, 2015) This suggests that media and celebrity culture can shape audiences intimate engagement with public figures through various social platforms that further blur the lines between an idol as a star and their off-stage persona. This allows idols to present themselves as accessible and approachable. This relationship not only produces an authentic culture, but also social connections.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The New spiritualities: Exploring the meaning of religion in popular culture

Popular culture in America has evolved over a long period of time from entertainment to a cultural phenomenon that provides a place to share experiences, form identities, and build communities. This has led to a new form of spirituality, through non-traditional channels. Seeing this new form of spirituality is a response to the evolving and expanding religious landscape. Meanwhile, religion also plays a similar role to music. Religion provides the same space for human emotional connection to connect with each other. In the context of popular culture, religion is not only limited to the traditional realm that is fully organized, structured, has special

procedures, rules, and refers to certain holy books. Religion in general has a definition as stated by Bruce David in his book *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, quoting from Julia Mitchell Corbett's that "religion is an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting themselves to what they take to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value." Just like popular culture, religion does not have a universal or single definition. This makes understanding religion in popular culture even more complex. Especially with the potential of popular culture to make sports, music and movies a new form of spirituality in religion.

New spirituality presents a broader understanding of the relationship between popular culture and religion. Popular culture forms its own worldview through its cultural products such as music. Music, as a product of popular culture, offers its own worldview that influences people's perspectives on religion. The narratives presented through music, both as performances and available on various media platforms, offer alternative new perspectives on spirituality in understanding traditional religious views. This can take the form of ideas about moral values, human relationships with something bigger than themselves, and the meaning of life and wisdom. Religion as a social function is tasked with organizing society to live in groups. In this case, the role of religion is to provide rules so that social life becomes more organized. This reflection of religious values and functions in popular music is reinterpreted by the audience. This reinterpretation is obtained by the audience through listening to music, which then transforms into a space for self-reflection. The contemplation while listening to a song through the combination of its tones and lyrics, can be an inspiration, and bring them to reflect on their values, beliefs, identity, to bring their emotional state and spirituality into a contemplative space. In addition to personal experiences, music can also bring its audience to collective experiences. Such as when watching concerts, going to music festivals, and gathering with fellow fans of the same genre or singer through direct participation or digital media platforms.

2. Swifties: A musical ritual of connection and faith

Taylor Swift is an American pop singer who is known as a pop music superstar, with many awards. Starting from 14 Grammy Awards, Album of the Year, and Person of the Year 2023 by Time magazine. With a series of awards and other achievements, it's no wonder Taylor Swift has so many fans, not only in America, but around the world. The large number of Taylor Swift fans, who are then referred to as Swifties, makes a phenomenon of its own because Swifties as a fan base is known for its high level of loyalty, creativity, participation, fanaticism, and togetherness woven through the community. They are often the subject of coverage in mainstream media. The Swifties have become a global phenomenon, bringing to light the fact that music can go beyond mere entertainment to a deeply personal and collective experience. This is no coincidence, but a direct result of music as ritual. Through her songs, Taylor Swift pours universal emotions and personal narratives that extend to the ears of listeners in an intimate, deep way, providing a sense of understanding, comfort, and shared experience. The lyrics in her songs are close to the lives of many people, especially young people, such as the experience of falling in love, young people's lives, parties, and also the concept of relationships feels so relatable to Swifties, who are mostly young people. In this case, music becomes a unifying language that allows Swifties to connect with each other.

The ritual aspect of Taylor Swift's music is built by Swifties through the symbols that accompany it and are inherent in their activities, especially when watching concerts. Some of the traditions they build through the use of attributes when watching concerts and activities in the community, such as bracelets, t-shirts, and other attributes allow them to connect with each other emotionally in order to strengthen their identity. In addition to attributes, Swifties also have chants that are always sung as a shared ritual to be sung when a song in Taylor Swift's concert is performed. The emotional reinforcement and sense of community through symbols in their clothing and accessories, and the rituals before or during the concert that Swifties bring make

this activity similar to traditional religious rituals. This shows how Taylor Swift's music is connected to the idea of traditional religious rituals that open the way to transcendent experiences, As stated by Brent Plate in his book Religion and Film, he brings an understanding of ritual through the perspective of religious anthropologist Bobby Alexander who says that:

"Ritual defined in the most general and basic terms is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed.... Traditional religious ritual opens up ordinary life to ultimate reality or some transcendent being or force in order to tap its transformative power." (Plate, 2017)

Taylor Swift's music acts as a bridge for Swifties, allowing them to use its transformative power to transcend the ordinary in their daily lives. However, while this is not a religious experience in the conventional sense, it offers an alternative relationship that utilizes strong emotional feelings and allows them to experience the transcendent. Swifties' rituals such as attending concerts with special attributes can create a sacred space, similar to religious ceremonies in traditional religions. The experience created through this sacred space can bestow shared emotions that are processed collectively in the crowd. Singing chants and farewell songs during a concert can be a relieving experience, in the same way that religious rituals provide a remedy for feelings and suffering. The experience of singing songs collectively in a performance is like prayers and holy verses being blown up to reach the heavens. It is this appreciation when singing Taylor Swift's songs that can provide a transcendent experience for Swifties.

Religious rituals often carry certain narratives that engage followers with larger entities. In this case, musical performances have a similar effect. Taylor Swift can be seen as a worship leader who stands on stage, and delivers her sermon through prayers in the form of her hit songs to her fans as a congregation that gathers under the stage to increase their level of faith. The narratives in Taylor Swift's songs have been built by her since the beginning through the creation of her music albums that are always related to a certain era and theme. This creates an active participation from Swifties to always connect with her works through her interpretation of each narrative contained in each album. This narrative approach is similar to how religious texts are often divided into chapters to emphasize a series of concepts and frameworks to aid the interpretation and understanding of the narrative.

3. From lyrics to beliefs

Taylor Swift's music albums are uniquely packaged to make them feel special. Each album seems to describe its own emotional journey that can bind the music to the individual feelings of its fans. The lyrics in her songs are rich in universal emotional experiences. This makes her music resonate more deeply with her audience, creating a connection. Taylor Swift explores themes such as relationship complexity, empowerment, vulnerability, fear, teenage life, trauma, and other emotional events, creating a special space where Swifties can find affirmation for their feelings and experiences. The cycles in each of her albums are often linked to various phases or eras in a particular life that become an ongoing narrative. This makes Swifties feel that they can find a reflection of their feelings, especially those related to love, heartbreak, self-development, and self-discovery through music through the relationship between the themes in each album and their personal lives. This connection makes the music album a shared identity. In a broader sense, the seemingly personal lyrics become more universal, as music offers not only entertainment but also meaning that can shape how fans view their world. Swifties often find validation, solace, and motivation in the lyrics. These songs become the soundtrack to Swifties' personal lives, and also serve as anthems that unite fans in their shared experiences. For this reason, the author will discuss in more detail some of her songs to show how the strong narratives in Taylor Swift's songs can create emotional feelings and collective experiences for her fans. This will further explore how the themes in her songs reflect ritualistic concepts similar to spiritual experiences in religion.

a. A place in this world (2006)

This song is in the first album titled Taylor Swift which contains songs with themes close to the lives of teenage girls, such as love, hope, and fear. The songs on this album became the first approach for Swifties in getting to know Taylor Swift's works. Like the first phase of one's spiritual life in religion that often intersects with these things. The search for the meaning of love, hope for life in the world, and fear of life after death. As in the song A Place in This World, Taylor Swift tells how she feels lonely, alienated and confused about the life of the world, but still believes in herself.

*I'm alone, on my own, and that's all I know
I'll be strong, I'll be wrong, oh but life goes on
Oh, I'm just a girl trying to find a place in this world
(A place in this world, 2006)*

The song affirms that even though we are alone, humans must still live life with strength and never stop searching for the meaning of life. This search for meaning reflects the search for spirituality that is often found in human life in practicing religion. In the journey to find the meaning of life, humans can obtain inner peace through the media found in religious rituals such as prayers in the holy book. This is what many fans feel when they hear this song. They feel they are in the same condition as the feelings described by Taylor Swift in this song. Like some comments from listeners on the youtube platform who expressed their feelings when listening to this song. A user named @annahgirov revealed: "This is exactly what I'm feeling. I keep singing this song as I'm telling my own story. Thanks dear Taylor". Another user named @bernabetorrejas3057 even frankly said that he cried after listening to this song. She commented: "Been listening to this nonstop. This song is so relevant to my situation these days, I just wanna cry" (Source: YouTube, Taylor Swift - A Place in This World, accessed on February 28, 2025). These comments reflect the emotional impact of a listener listening to this song. In this case, music can function as a means for humans to recognize themselves, and also has an emotional impact that can affect the inner life of the listener. This is certainly in line with the value and function of religion in providing emotional space for a person to self-reflect and find peace. Prayers in religious rituals refer to the spiritual dimension or even other dimensions such as gods or gods, while the emotional experience of listening to Taylor Swift's songs offers a way for her fans to create intimacy with themselves, and find meaning in their life journey. As many religious leaders do, they broadcast kindness and life guidance about a deeper understanding of human relationships with oneself and the world around them, to their congregations based on prayers and verses in the scriptures they believe in through art and music.

b. State of grace

This song is on the album Red (2016) which still contains themes such as love relationships and other emotional feelings. The song State of Grace tells about an individual's transformative experience through pain and love until he contemplates to understand the meaning of love and life. Taylor Swift describes the state of one's soul in her love experience that leads her to a state of grace or a higher state of spirituality. This can be connected to the experience of human religiosity in seeking God's grace.

*I'm walking fast through the traffic lights
Busy streets and busy lives
And all we know
Is touch and go
We are alone with our changing minds
We fall in love 'til it hurts or bleeds or fades in time
(State of grace, 2016)*

Music as ritual is reflected when Swifties listen to this song repeatedly until they find a meaning that is connected to their personal lives. As seen in the content in the comments column

on Taylor Swift's YouTube, most of which share their experiences when listening to this song. An account named @jeansarael4590 responded to the uploaded song by saying: "Huhuhu...literally crying.... Got to grow up with the songs of Taylor...the best feeling ever" then there is another user with the name @meghapradhan4872 said: "guys, we made it. i'm sure that when this was first released, a lot of us were in a bad place in our lives and had found solace in her songs while pleading for those days to go away. it indeed is gone and we are so much better than we were back then. let this be a testament to your strength" (Source: YouTube, Taylor Swift - State of Grace, Acoustic Version, Taylor's Version, Lyric Video, accessed on February 28, 2025). These comments reflect how Taylor Swift and her fans engage their feelings and experiences collectively. Swifties feel a spiritual connection with music among fans as part of a community. They feel like they are growing and evolving together to get past the bad past to become a better person through this song.

4. A worship leader

In 2020 Netflix launched a movie called Miss Americana: Taylor Swift, a documentary about Taylor Swift's career in the American music industry. This movie not only tells about her struggles, but also shows how Taylor Swift has become a popular culture icon that continues to get public attention. In the ritual system, the power of meaning of a symbol can be obtained through various aspects before it is finally believed as something that can inspire and change the situation. The narrative presented in this movie shows how every decision Taylor Swift makes in her life adds a layer of meaning to the image Taylor Swift has built. She also often shows how her fans are part of her music career. In one of the excerpts in the movie, she talks about her interconnected feelings with Swifties:

There is an element to my fanbase, where we feel like we grew up together. I'll be going through something write the album about it. And then, it'll come out and sometimes it'll just coincide with what they're going through, kind of they're reading my diary. Wilson, L. (2020). (1:13:30-1:13:09)

What Taylor Swift said reflects a very personal relationship between her and Swifties. She feels that the journey she is going through is also felt by her fans, which is enough to influence her creative process when making an album. Through the same emotional journey, the relationship between fans and idols can grow together even though they don't know each other directly.

In 2013, when Taylor Swift was 27 years old, she was sexually assaulted by a former radio DJ until the issue became public and went to trial. This happened after the perpetrator was officially fired, but he actually sued Taylor Swift for millions of dollars. The trial went less well, especially when the perpetrator's lawyer denied Taylor Swift's allegations and affected the trial quite a bit. But even though he felt he would lose because many did not believe him, finally in 2017 the court supported Taylor Swift by winning the lawsuit. Later in a concert footage in the movie Miss Americana, Taylor Swift shared her feelings when she won the lawsuit:

...the that day jury decided in my favor, and said that they believed me. I guess I just think about all the people that weren't believed, and people who haven't been believed or the people who are afraid to speak up because they think that they won't be believed. And I just wanted to say that, I just wanted to say I'm sorry to anyone who ever wasn't believed. Because I don't know what turn my life would have taken if somebody'd, if people didn't believe me when I said that something had happened to me. Wilson, L. (2020). (27:21-26:41)

Taylor Swift shared her story of fighting for justice and getting her rights to the entire audience at her concert at that time. She seemed to encourage everyone to take a stand and speak up. After saying this, it was seen that the audience cheered in support of Taylor Swift's statement, not even a few were caught on camera crying because they were moved by her words. Such a strong emotional connection reflects the role of an idol in influencing their fans. This can show how the influence of an idol is more than just music. Taylor Swift provides a concrete example

that regardless of their social status, one must take a stand and still be able to fight for rights and important values such as empowerment and justice. Although Taylor Swift still expresses empathy for the people out there who are still not heard and not treated fairly.

Every decision such as changes in her music, her attitude towards life from adolescence to adulthood, to her attitude in the political and social spheres play a role in influencing the way fans perceive her, and the social and political situations that are happening. In 2018, when Taylor Swift was 28 years old, she shocked the public by giving a statement through her personal Instagram that she firmly supported Phil Bredesen from the Democratic party in the election for the Tennessee senate seat. This certainly sparked the attention of the public and her fans because she had never talked about politics before. Taylor Swift thinks that her political stance is related to the issues she has been voicing, especially related to women's issues. She said that she felt the need to take this stance because she was worried about Marsha Blackburn's policies that did not support women's rights.

She votes against fair pay for women, She votes against reauthorization of the violence against women act, which is just basically protecting us for domestic abuse and stalking. Stalking! She votes, she thinks that if you're a gay couple or even if you look like a gay couple, you should be allowed to be kicked out of a restaurant. It's really basic human rights, and it's right and wrong at this point. And I can't see another commercial, and she her disguising these policies behind the words Tennessee Christian values. Wilson, L. (2020). (22:18-21:45)

This quote from Taylor Swift's statement shows her criticism and involvement in highlighting the policy plans presented by a political figure that will potentially take away the human rights of LGBTQ+ people, women, and human rights in general, which have been quite a concern for her. This is even enough to influence the number of young voters both nationally and in Taylor's home state of Tennessee. According to Kamari Guthrie as reported on the Vote.org website, there were 65,000 registrations within 24 hours of Taylor posting the photo related to her political stance on Instagram. This shows that an idol who becomes a pop culture icon through her music and public persona resonates with her fans and creates a complex relationship where fans often turn to their idols as a source of moral guidance, social justice activism, and beliefs in the same way that religious figures guide them to form values and beliefs.

CONCLUSION

Taylor Swift has become an agent of social change for her fans. Swifties consider Taylor Swift not only an idol singer, but also a hope and a role model. An agent whose every action and decision will impact the personal and social lives of her fans. In an article titled *Swifties Demand Taylor Swift 'Speak Now' on Gaza* published by Time magazine on May 29, 2024, Swifties wrote an open letter to their idol to take a stand in support of Palestine. Swifties said that Taylor Swift's stance would have a significant impact. Here, we can see the role of religion as a place that accommodates human hopes to give meaning to their lives, which can be reflected through the relationship between idols and fans. In addition to outward needs, humans also have inner needs, and religion is here to manage and fulfill these needs. Thus, we can see the power of Taylor Swift as an agent of popular culture in influencing the lives of her fans, so that in addressing the issue that occurred in Palestine, they want their idol to also have the same attitude to jointly support the issue that is considered to have violated human rights. In this sense, Swifties are no longer passive fans, but rather actively demonstrate the two-way relationship between idols and fans. They have transformed into a mobilized community and are meticulously leveraging their voices collectively to advocate for a common cause they believe in.

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