

# The power and pleasure—and occasional backlash—of celebrity conspiracy theories

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With Taylor Swift pulling in over half-a-million audience members on her Australian tour, we've been thinking a lot about fans. In this series, our academics dive into fan cultures: how they developed, how they

operate, and how they shape the world today.

For years, people [have claimed](#) Elvis Presley is alive and well. Theories that his death was faked to escape the pressures of fame were even [stoked by his record label](#), who, two years after his death, debuted a performer who sounded like and resembled Presley, but performed wearing a mask.

Of course, it was all a publicity stunt.

In the digital age, conspiracy theorizing does not require media or record label boosting. Social media acts as a platform and amplifier of fan-led conspiracy theorizing.

Have you heard that the Canadian singer Avril Lavigne is dead and has been replaced by a body double called Melissa Vandella? Perhaps you've seen TikTok's theorizing that American actor Lea Michelle [can't read](#)?

For years, people who claimed Britney Spears was being held in her conservatorship against her will [were considered fringe conspiracy theorists](#). However, [legal events](#) demonstrated this was substantially true. In recent years, Taylor Swift has famously [mobilized cryptic clues](#) to tip off [fans](#) to upcoming album and tour announcements and so, in a sense, encouraging fans to make conspiracy theories about what she's doing next.

This leads us to one of the more satisfying aspects of conspiracy theorizing: sometimes, they might just be right.

## Decoding Taylor Swift

When we think of conspiracy theories we tend to think of theories that have [resulted in societal harms](#), such as QAnon or COVID-related

conspiracies. However, [conspiracy theories](#) increasingly include many of the everyday practices of celebrity and fan culture.

Examining Swift's engagement with her fans reveals that fans are not always "delulu"—[a phrase popularized by fans](#) to playfully reference their "delusion" when it comes to conspiracy theorizing. The release of 1989 (Taylor's Version) was predicted by fans across social media through the [meticulous interpretation of clues](#) including color-coded tour outfits, significant dates and social media traces left by the singer.

Another popular conspiracy theory within the Swift fandom is the "missing album".

Prior to the release of 2017's Reputation, Swift had been operating a clockwork schedule of album releases: one every two years. But there were a little over three years between 1989 and Reputation. The excess space between these release dates led to the theory about a "missing" album called Karma.

In one scene in her [music video](#) for her 2019 song The Man, the word "karma" is written in orange graffiti on a wall alongside Swift's other albums, with adjacent text that says "MISSING: IF FOUND RETURN TO TAYLOR SWIFT".

Swift's albums [are color coded](#), and orange is the color fans have chosen to associate with the missing album. At the end of her Era's tour show, Swift sings Karma, a song from her most recent album Midnights, and exits through an orange door.

The clues are all there, the fans say, that Karma is the missing album, and maybe, just maybe, Swift is telling her watchful fans that they were right all along: Karma is coming next.

## An internet archive

Fan conspiracy theorizing allows a sense of intimacy at scale. Swift frequently [jokes](#) about "seeing everything" fans do and say online, creating a sense of a real dialogue: a call and response between fan theorizing and Swift's output.

Social media has substantially changed our relationship with celebrity, as expectations around access to and intimacy with celebrities [has been transformed](#).

The [social media](#) presence of celebrities—necessary to sell themselves in a crowded marketplace—provides fans with access to more digital traces and data points of celebrity behavior to analyze and dissect. The internet functions as a vast, collective archive, storing and producing a seemingly endless amount of "evidence".

But there is a trade off. Intense public discourse about Swift's [private life](#) recently prompted her camp to push back against the "[invasive, untrue and inappropriate](#)" speculation around her sexuality.

## Community building

Platforms create opportunities for fans to collectively analyze evidence, share their theories and gain recognition within the fandom for their "expertise". The pleasures of [feeling like an expert](#) have long been part of fandom, be that arts or sports.

Conspiracy theorizing can activate many of the [collective pleasures of fandom](#), such as insider expertise, community building and a sense of discovery through close reading of key texts.

In understanding the pleasures of conspiracy theorizing about celebrities, we can gain insight into the pull of more harmful conspiracies. While there is a world of difference between QAnon and celebrity conspiracy theorists, participants in both are seeking community, the satisfaction of "putting the pieces together" and a sense of expertise.

We know from research that conspiracies are almost [infinitely flexible](#). If one aspect [is disproven](#), or fails, the [boundaries shift and change](#) to encompass and explain the incongruous.

Fans failed to predict the announcement of 1989 (Taylor's Version) many more times than they succeeded. Each failure meant a return to the clues, to re-read and reinterpret the signs. Even though fans eventually successfully "predicted" the announcement, in the absence of success, failure is simply folded into the expanding horizon of speculation.

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