**Discussion Round 1**

**What The Taylor Swift Effect Teaches Us About Influence**

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Taylor Swift attended the Kansas City Chief’s game last week in support of her rumored new beau, Chief’s superstar tight end, Travis Kelce. The result of her appearance is said to have driven a [400% spike in Kelce jersey sales, according to the e-commerce site](https://www.npr.org/2023/09/27/1201992668/taylor-swifts-travis-kelce-jersey-sales), Fanatics, and the [highest-rated NFL game of the week among female views between 12-49 years of age](https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/chiefs/2023/09/26/taylor-swift-appearance-boosts-fox-nfl-tv-rating-chiefs-bears/70972136007/), according to Fox Sports.

This influence on consumption has been deemed the *Taylor Effect*—a direct reflection of Taylor Swift’s sway on collective behavior. This designation has also been given to [Kanye West’s impact](https://www.yahoo.com/news/kanye-effect-hottest-debate-sneaker-world-110312124.html) on Adidas sales, [Cardi B’s influence](https://www.bet.com/article/9b4qcr/cardi-b-is-making-christian-louboutin-richer-by-the-day) on Christian Louboutin’s “bloody shoes” search traffic, and [Messi’s prevail on Major League Soccer](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/messi-effect-set-catapult-major-league-soccer-new-level-2023-08-10/) in the States, among a few others in this rarefied space.

This effect presupposes that the sheer influence of these celebrities is what drives people to move—primarily because of their outsized stature. The belief is that they are so big and so popular that people will move essentially because these individuals say so. In this case, Taylor goes to the Chief’s game, so everyone watches and buys jerseys. That’s the logic of the *effect*. However, if the science of influence is any indication, perhaps we have credited the sway of Taylor’s appearance erroneously—at least in part.

Scholars across a myriad of disciplines have studied the dynamics of influence and how it reverberates within a population. This research has spanned over a century’s time, illuminating what we now know of the phenomenon and debunking unfounded conventional wisdoms. Under the moniker of social contagion, [influence has been framed as the conscious or subconscious imitation](https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/6476) that leads to the spread of affects, behaviors, cognitions, and desires from one person to another or group, or even from one group to another group.

Paul Lazerfield and Elihu Katz’s 1955 breakthrough study posits that social influence is catalyzed by mass media, like television or radio, which in turn influences opinion leaders who influence others.

They refer to this as a [Two-Step Flow of Communication](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2746790). In 2007, researchers Duncan Watts and Peter Dobbs revisited Lazerfield and Katz’s study with modern research resources to further interrogate this phenomenon. Watts and Dobbs’ work revealed the most clarifying depiction of what we know about influence and information cascades: [influence is not driven by individuals but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/518527?seq=1). In fact, their research suggests that the influence of the Kim Kardashians of the world are only modestly more influential than average individuals. The reach of these individuals as a media vehicle allows them to get more eyeballs, but their influence is not much greater than our own.

This may seem counter intuitive, I know. And that’s exactly how most of the social sciences tend to work. We think we know ourselves because it’s *us*, but what we find from the research is that there are gaping holes in our understanding, especially when it comes to our affects, behaviors, cognitions, and desires—and the influence thereof. The spread of ideas and behaviors depends less on the person who starts it, but on how susceptible the collective is overall to what’s being spread. It’s not how persuasive the early adopter is per se, but whether everyone else is easily persuaded.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not declaring that Taylor Swift has no influence. That would be absurd. Trust me, I have an eight year-old self-proclaiming Swiftie at home who is obsessed with all things Taylor Swift. She is definitely influenced by Taylor and her music. It would be laughable to say otherwise. On the contrary, the literature tells us that Taylor’s true influence is on her people—the Swifties—as step one in the Lazerfield and Katz’s framing, and they—her people—have influence on their people, be it their friends or weak-tie connections, as step two. Therefore, perhaps the *Taylor Effect* should be attributed to her ability to foster a community that act in concert and collectively make meaning as opposed to a juggernaut force that pushes the masses at scale.

A useful analogy might be to consider Taylor’s influence like that of a pinball machine. Her actions create an impact that causes information, behaviors, and ideas to bounce around from person to person within a population and cascade beyond, as opposed to a bowling ball that rolls down the alley and knocks over pins in mass. In this case, Taylor serves as a spark that reverberates among her people much like any other form of media or cultural production. Akin to other bright wattage media personalities like Beyoncé and the BeyHive, Taylor’s influence acts as contextualized mass media that gives things new meaning which influences a population of people who then influence each other, catalyzing a network effect that ripples within the community and beyond.

Jessica Bolaños Vanegas surrounded by her collection of Beyonce memorabilia, Tuesday, May 3, 2016, ... [+]

HOUSTON CHRONICLE VIA GETTY IMAG

For the collection of people who self-identify as Swifties, they look to Taylor as a barometer for possible identity strategies—what to wear, what to watch, what to do, etc.—and look to each other for subconscious approval to achieve social solidarity among themselves. Remember, Taylor Swift didn’t wear Kelce’s jersey, nor did she tell her fans to do so. They constructed these consumption behaviors among themselves.

This evidences the notion that there had to be a negotiation of meaning attributed to his jersey and a concerted effort to realize that meaning through consumption. There wasn’t a drum major in the form of Taylor Swift saying, “we should all buy this jersey.” Instead, this was the process of social contagion at work, where people observed other people like themselves take action, and they subsequently took action as well. It’s us who influences us; people who influence people. Therefore, the *Taylor Effect* should be largely attributed to her people, and their ability to influence themselves and others.

That’s no small feat, mind you. The Swifties, like the Beyhive, [have impacted the national GDP](https://www.forbes.com/sites/marcuscollins/2023/09/18/deion-sanders-prime-coach-culture-consumption/?sh=342878577694) because of their combined economic behavior. Its community drives consumption, and these women have influence on their people, much like you do on your people—just not at the same scale.

There’s an important lesson for modern marketers who seek to build brands that have the kind of influence that get people to move in concert. It’s not that the brand itself is so dominant that its every move has a sway on the masses. Instead, it’s the influence of its people—the community—and their people that mobilizes large groups of people to tune in, buy, vote a certain way, and a host of other desired behaviors. That’s the real effect, the network effect, and it’s the commitment to community that helps foster its reverberation. Taylor has spent years investing in her community and fostering relationships among them—real people, not just fans who buy music. The result of investing in her people has paid off massively for Taylor. The same thing goes for brands and organizations alike; invest in your people, they’re the real heroes.

Discussion Round 2:

