

The Taylor Swift Phenomenon

Insights for Engaging Youth in Meaningful Conversations around Taylor Swift

If you work with youth or young adults, or are at all attuned to pop culture, you know there is a Swift movement that was seen front and center with Taylor Swift's Eras tour. If you are a Swiftie, this might not be for you, but stay a while and see. If you don't quite get the Taylor Swift phenomenon, well hi, that was me a few months ago. But working in youth and young adult ministry, I caught on quickly that, for many of my youth, Taylor Swift's music and brand are deeply meaningful. So, I set out to learn more and try to understand why. I mean I am only a few years older than Taylor herself. I grew up listening to her music, but in no way was I a Swiftie.

In my typical ways to learn more, I turned to two of my favorite podcasts, *The Daily* and *Code Switch*.

The Year of Taylor Swift

Let's begin with *The Daily*'s "[The Year of Taylor Swift](#)," published December 15, 2023. The episode is described as, "Taffy Brodesser-Akner, a staff writer for The New York Times, explains why, for her, 2023 was the year of Taylor Swift." This 38-minute listen convinced me Taylor Swift was worth my time, worth sharing with my daughter and worth connecting with my youth and young adults about at church. The episode is unabashedly from someone who has bought into the movement and is a huge fan. Here are a few key takeaways from the episode I think you should pay attention to:

1. The Eras Tour is a cultural event of our day. It is even bigger than Woodstock and folks will be talking about this tour for generations.
2. Her songs are for grown women and their teenage children.
3. It takes a trained eye to see her songs as deeper than just another love song. The lyrics need decoding and then we find our way into them.
4. Her songs are specific – not general. Yet her specific stories are relatable to millions.

Brodesser-Akner closes the podcast by saying, "All great art is the art that sees you. And I know this from doing a million celebrity profiles, and I know this from my understanding of fandom, that if you show somebody that they are real, you have them for life. She has me for life, and I'm not the only one."

Taylor Swift and the Unbearable Whiteness of Girlhood

I continued my journey in trying to understand Swifties. As a white woman, I take seriously the accounts and voices over at *Code Switch*. *Code Switch* is a podcast described as, "fearless conversations about race you have been waiting for. Hosted by journalists of color, our podcast tackles the subject of race with empathy and humor." *Code Switch* did an episode called "[Taylor Swift and the unbearable whiteness of girlhood](#)" on January 31, 2024. The episode is described as, "Taylor Swift has become an American icon. With that status, she's often been celebrated as someone whose music is authentically representing the interior lives of young women and adolescent girls. On this episode, we're asking: Why? What is it about Swift's persona – and her fandom – that feels so deeply connected to girlhood?" Here are my biggest takeaways:

1. Taylor Swift, even as a business tycoon, billionaire, and adult woman is still talked about as a girl and still related to quintessential girlhood. Girlhood in America is more of an idea than an actuality for many girls growing up. So often that ideal of girlhood in America is really associated with “upper middle class, thin, pretty, white girls.” There is a distinction between black girlhood and white girlhood (insert many other races and experiences too). Girlhood can hold many women back, asking them to be innocent, good, and pure. It’s not all a good thing.
2. Compare Taylor Swift and your own understanding and connection to other female singers of her age range like Adele and Beyoncé. What makes them different and treated differently?
3. Critiquing or questioning anything around Taylor Swift to a Swiftie can be very divisive even with people you consider like-minded or close friends.
4. One push back is that Taylor Swift writes and sings so much about her personal experience she misses using her platform for others.

Discussion Questions

Taylor Swift fandom is here to stay. How do we talk about it with young people at church to understand the relevance, meaning, and critiques? If God cares about our whole selves, then God cares a lot about Swifties and their connection to her lyrics and music. Here are some discussion questions to guide you in conversations about Taylor Swift with young people:

1. How has Taylor Swift's music impacted your own life or the lives of those around you?
2. Do you think Taylor Swift's songs resonate more with certain demographics? Why or why not?
3. In what ways do you think Taylor Swift's portrayal of girlhood aligns or differs from your own experiences?
4. How does Taylor Swift's approach to songwriting compare to other artists like Adele or Beyoncé?
5. Why do you think critiquing Taylor Swift or her music can be divisive among fans? Have you experienced this in your own conversations?
6. Do you agree with the criticism that Taylor Swift focuses too much on her personal experiences and misses opportunities to use her platform for others? Why or why not?
7. How can we promote inclusivity and diversity within the fandoms of artists like Taylor Swift?
8. How do you think discussions about Taylor Swift's music and fandom can be relevant in a church?

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