More than just a fan?

Exploring the influence of fan engagement and gender on brand perception of artists in popular music

A quantitative analysis employing Aaker's Brand Personality Framework

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Abstract

How do fans influence the way popular music artists are perceived, and what role does gender play in shaping these perceptions? This thesis investigates the relationship between fan engagement, artist gender, and brand perception in the popular music industry. Using a quantitative approach, it examines how engagement with fan-created content relates to how audiences evaluate artists across different brand personality dimensions.

The study draws on Aaker's Brand Personality Framework alongside theories of participatory culture, brand identity, and gender inequality in music. A survey was conducted with over 150 respondents, measuring the extent of their fan engagement and their perception of various artist traits, including excitement, sincerity, competence, ruggedness, and sophistication.

Findings show that fan engagement is a significant predictor of how artists are perceived across multiple brand dimensions. While gender did not directly predict perception across all traits, it interacted with specific fan behaviours in meaningful ways, suggesting that the construction of artist identity is partially shaped by how gendered expectations intersect with participatory fan practices.

This thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of fan-artist dynamics by showing how brand perception is co-produced through digital participation. It also offers a replicable method for studying audience influence in artist branding, relevant to both scholars and industry professionals aiming to grasp the complexities of artist image construction in the digital era.

Keywords: *fan engagement, brand perception, gender, music, participation*

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1. Introduction

"Each artist is elevated and empowered by their own fans and the feeling they give you […] They really are grafters; they work hard to be amazing fans"

-*Louis Tomlinson*, in On Demand Entertainment (2019)

The rise of digital media has transformed fan engagement in the music industry, shifting audiences from passive consumers to active co-creators of an artist's brand (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4, 22-23). This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the generation of fan-generated content that shapes and develops public perceptions of artists, such as remixes, fan art, memes, and video edits (Baym, 2018, pp. 123-124). Given that it affects audience attachment, commercial success, and industry recognition, fan engagement has emerged as a crucial component of artist branding (Duffett, 2013, pp. 165-190). Scholars have highlighted that, unlike traditional media consumption, digital participatory cultures enable users to move fluidly between consuming and producing content, actively participating in the co-creation of media narratives (Scolari et al., 2018, p. 8). Nevertheless, despite ongoing gender discrepancies in the industry, little to no critical consideration of how these processes differ for male and female artists has been addressed in existing research, as gender in popular music has become a topic of research only in the last decade (Strong & Raine, 2018, p. 17).

Although participatory culture provides fans with creative power to shape the artist narratives in the media, this power is not always equally distributed. For instance, fan-created remix videos, as discussed in the context of vidding, defined as fan-made music videos using pre-existing footage (Coppa, 2022, p. 23), and participatory culture, offer audiences creative means to reinterpret media texts, which in turn shape the public perception of artists and celebrities (Coppa, 2022, pp. 182-200), yet these participatory cultures are often shaped by gendered industry structures (Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 3-19). While male artists are frequently perceived as autonomous creators, female artists face credibility biases and are often judged based on image rather than artistry (Berkers et al., 2019, pp. 30-35). These dynamics are not unique to the music industries: similar patterns can be observed in other domains. For example, in comic book culture, gendered expectations extend to fan interactions, affecting how audiences engage with and construct artist identities (Scott, 2013, para. 3.5). Additionally, digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitter shape the circulation of fan-created narratives by influencing what content is seen and shared, as platform algorithms prioritise certain media over others, affecting how audiences engage with, discover and perceive cultural texts (Coppa, 2022, pp. 190-195). Despite these shifts, research has yet to fully address how fan-generated content contributes to gendered brand perception in music fandoms. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this

gap by examining how engagement with fan-generated media affects the brand perception of male and female artists differently.

The music industry is a multi-billion-dollar sector that not only shapes global entertainment but also influences cultural values, social norms, and industry practices (IFPI, 2022). Despite its reach, the industry remains deeply gendered, with women facing structural disadvantages in career longevity, media representation, and public perception (Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 75-78). The digital sphere has opened new possibilities for artists to engage with their audiences, yet these online platforms often reproduce existing inequalities (Berkers & Schaap, 2018, pp. 79-95). In popular music, female artists frequently encounter challenges such as sexualisation, credibility bias, and genre confinement, while cultural narratives often assume artistic autonomy and inventiveness as defaults, which are norms that tend to benefit male musicians by contrast (Lieb, 2013, pp. 4-9). As a result, gendered inequalities in the music industry continue to shape how artists are represented and promoted, with implications for both branding practices and how fans engage with these dynamics (Berkers & Hoegaerts, 2019, pp. 2-4). Although previous studies show that music audiences and genres can both reinforce and challenge dominant gender norms (Tabak, 2023, p. 54), little is known about the specific effects of gender on brand perception shaped by fan-created content. Hence, understanding how fan-created content influences brand perception across gender is critical for addressing persistent biases in the music industries.

At the same time, this study contributes to academic debates on participatory culture, branding, and gender inequality in media industries. While previous research has shown that fans play a crucial role in shaping an artist's public identity (Baym, 2018, pp. 79-80), less is known about how these fan perceptions differ across gender lines. The application of Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework to artist branding offers a useful theoretical lens, yet its gendered implications have rarely been explored. This study addresses that gap by examining how brand traits associated with artists are shaped by engaging with fan-created content, and how this process is influenced by the artist's gender. In doing so, it not only advances theoretical understanding of brand perception in participatory culture, but also reveals how fans reproduce or challenge gender-based assumptions in how they perceive and present artists.

Accordingly, by bridging both societal and academic perspectives, this study offers practical implications for industry professionals, including marketers, record labels, and artists, by highlighting the ways in which fan-driven narratives shape public perceptions. These insights can help challenge inequalities that affect how both female and male artists are branded, recognised, and evaluated by audiences. Moreover, they can help create more inclusive marketing and platform strategies that account for the role of fan culture in shaping an artist's public image and brand identity.

Consequently, the research explores the following question: *To what extent does engagement with fan-created content influence brand perception differently for male vs. female artists in popular music?*

This research explores how fan engagement influences the brand perception of male and female pop music artists. It investigates the intersection of gender, branding, and audience participation by examining fan-created content related to Taylor Swift and Harry Styles. The study uses a quantitative research design based on survey data, including factor analyses and multiple regressions to test how fan interactions correlate with brand personality traits drawn from Aaker's framework.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides a theoretical foundation by reviewing key literature on fan engagement, artist brand identity, and gender dynamics in music branding. It introduces the conceptual framework used to explore how fans engage with male and female artists and how this engagement shapes perceptions of brand personality. Chapter 3 outlines the quantitative survey design, detailing the sampling procedure, measurement instruments, and statistical analyses. Chapter 4 presents the results of the factor analyses and hypothesis testing, including gender-based differences in fan engagement and brand perception. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss findings in relation to the theoretical framework, reflect on their broader implications, address limitations, and propose directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current music industry is shaped by a complex relationship between artist branding, fan engagement, and cultural representation, with public personas increasingly constructed and negotiated through digital platforms (Marshall, 2014, pp. xi-xiv; Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 3-9). This chapter, therefore, draws on several interconnected pieces of literature, exploring central concepts such as participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4; Burgess & Green, 2009, pp. 10-11), brand identity (Aaker, 1996, pp. 67-106, 137-174; Keller, 2012, pp. 67-75), and the construction of public personas (Marshall, 2014, pp. xi-xiv, 3-4; Turner, 2014, pp. 36-44). It also draws on scholarship on brand perception, platform politics (Bucher, 2018, p. 3; Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 3-9; 24-45), and gender inequality in the music industry (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 1-4, 75-78).

The framework begins by outlining the strategic formation of artist branding and public persona, emphasising how these identities are woven across various media channels (Aaker, 1996, pp. 67-104, 137-174; Keller, 2012, pp. 72-98; Marshall, 2014, pp. xxvii-xxxvii). Fan engagement is theorised through the lens of participatory culture, demonstrating how audiences actively reinterpret, circulate, and expand artist branding through their own creative outputs. Jenkins (2006) describes this as a cultural shift where fans and consumers play an active role in shaping media content, blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer (pp. 3-4). Similarly, Baym (2018) highlights how fans "organize themselves and make and distribute their own creative transformations of the media they love" (p. 83).

In addition, the role of platform logics is explored to show how digital infrastructures shape what types of fan-created content become visible, influential, or elevated (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 3-9, 23, 29; Bucher, 2018, p. 29). To capture how fan engagement fits into perceptions of artist identity, this study applies Aaker's (1996, p. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework, which offers a structured model for analysing perceived brand characteristics such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.

To contextualise how gender mediates these dynamics, the discussion incorporates both historical exclusions (Clawson, 1999, p. 196; Whiteley, 1997, pp. 18-24) and recent empirical data (Smith et al., 2025, pp. 1-12), revealing how male and female artists navigate different branding pressures and opportunities. Lastly, the framework considers broader debates around emotional branding and authenticity, particularly how gendered expectations prompt artists, especially women, to perform emotional relatability as part of their public brand. Banet-Weiser (2012, pp. 1-14) argues that brand culture increasingly relies on "authentic" relationships based on emotion and personal narrative, with self-brands expected to be both emotionally resonant and commercially viable.

Similarly, Baym (2018) notes how artists are held accountable for the emotional illusions they construct, even when these expectations risk undermining their identity or career (p. 179).

By integrating perspectives from media studies, marketing theory, and gender studies, the framework lays the groundwork for analysing how fan engagement both reflects and reshapes perceptions of artist branding and brand identity in gendered contexts of cultural representation. While this chapter draws on multiple strands of literature, the core conceptual tool guiding the analysis is Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-145) Brand Personality Framework, which provides the structured lens through which artist brand perception is ultimately measured.

2.1 Brand Perception and Aaker's Brand Personality Framework

Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework serves as a foundational model for understanding how audiences perceive brand identities. The Brand Personality Framework proposes that brands, much like individuals, can be described using human personality traits. Aaker outlines five core dimensions that structure how consumers perceive and emotionally connect with brands: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Each of these dimensions consists of specific characteristics, such as sincerity being associated with honesty and wholesomeness, or excitement with being imaginative and up-to-date. Aaker argues that these personality traits are central to building strong brand identities, as they influence how consumers relate to and differentiate between brands. Rather than focusing solely on visual identity or functional attributes, the framework emphasises the importance of emotional resonance and consistency in shaping consumer perceptions and loyalty (Aaker, 1996, pp. 142-145).

The framework has remained widely applicable across industries, as confirmed by Calderón-Fajardo et al. (2023, pp. 1-12), who conducted a comprehensive analysis of its use in brand research. Although Aaker's model was originally developed for corporate brands, scholars such as Marshall (2014, pp. xi-xiv) and Banet-Weiser (2012, pp. 1-14) highlight how public figures increasingly construct and perform branded identities, making it a suitable framework for exploring audience perceptions of artist branding.

Importantly, although Aaker's framework has not yet been widely applied to music artists in academic research, its relevance in music-related contexts has been noted by scholars and graduate researchers. For instance, Ringstad (2014, p. 9) applies the framework to explore how in-store music contributes to brand perception. Additionally, Sylvester (2017, p. ii) explores how popular music artists function as brands, underscoring the importance of structured approaches to understanding artist brand identity, even if not using Aaker's model directly. This continued relevance underscores

the framework's utility in examining artist branding, as well as its potential for deeper exploration within music branding.

Fan-created content plays a critical role in reinforcing certain brand dimensions (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84). Firstly, emotional tributes and personal stories shared by fans can be related to perceptions of sincerity, while dynamic, humorous media creations align with traits such as excitement. This kind of meaning-making finds resonance in Baym's (2018, p. 83) argument that fans deploy media texts and brand messages as cultural resources, actively shaping how artists are perceived. Secondly, competence is often highlighted through content celebrating professional achievements, whereas sophistication is accentuated through visual styling and prestigious collaborations, reflecting brand personality traits outlined by Aaker (1996, pp. 142-145) and exemplified in celebrity branding practices (Marshall, 2014, pp. xi-xiv). However, ruggedness is a dimension more commonly attributed to male artists, particularly within rock and hip-hop genres (Tabak, 2023, pp. 50-55). While Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) framework is widely applied in branding studies, its gendered implications remain underexplored, necessitating further investigation into how fan-created content influences perceptions of male and female artists differently.

Given that fan-created content can elevate different aspects of an artist's brand personality, this process aligns with Baym's (2018, p. 83) argument that fans engage with brand messages not just as consumers but as active cultural participants, suggesting that their creative practices can reflect specific traits of an artist's brand personality and situate them more deeply within fan communities. Hence, this study aims to address whether fan engagement is positively associated with each of the Aaker's five dimensions separately. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of sincerity.*

H2: *Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of excitement.*

H3: *Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of competence.*

H4: *Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of sophistication.*

H5: *Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of ruggedness.*

2.2 Artist Branding and Public Persona Construction

Artists in the contemporary music industries are increasingly understood as brands, whose public identities are carefully constructed to achieve strategic goals (Marshall, 2014, pp. 3-4; Aaker, 1996, pp. 67-106). As Marshall (2014) notes, "…celebrities are the production locale for an elaborate discourse on the individual and individuality…" (p.4), emphasising how public personas are carefully created to balance constructed images with perceived authenticity. Brand identity, as defined by Aaker (1996, p. 68), refers to a set of associations that a brand aspires to create and maintain, offering audiences a consistent and meaningful representation. Similarly, Keller (2012, pp. 68-75) highlights that successful brand identities incorporate attributes, imagery, and emotional connections that guide consumer perceptions and foster loyalty.

Accordingly, the formation of an artist's public persona is a purposeful process, involving multiple aspects, such as storytelling, visual aesthetics, and interaction with media. Marshall (2014, p. xxxvii) describes celebrity culture, which in this case is an artist's public persona, as a practice of managing visibility, where every appearance, whether through interviews, performances, or social media, contributes to a stable and recognisable identity. Similarly, Turner (2014, p. 30) characterises the notion of celebrity as a "manufactured commodity," developed through commercially strategic processes that construct public personas to fulfil specific cultural and economic functions.

Moreover, the rise of digital media has further intensified these branding efforts. Marshall (2014, pp. xi-xii) introduces the idea of "new public intimacies", where artists engage directly with audiences through participatory platforms, making the negotiation of brand identity more immediate and continuous. Van Dijck (2013, pp. 5-6) similarly notes that social media enables ongoing interaction, often merging private self-expression with public-facing artist branding. As a result, fan engagement becomes central to shaping how artists are seen, playing a significant role in reinforcing or even challenging existing perceptions.

Additionally, maintaining consistency across communication channels is crucial for effective artist branding. Keller (2012, p. 249) explains that coordinating brand communications across media helps create a consistent and cohesive brand image, making it easier for consumers to understand and remember the brand. While Keller's (2012, p. 249) emphasis on message consistency across platforms provides a valuable foundation, more recent scholarship acknowledges the additional complexity introduced by social media dynamics (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84) and algorithmic governance (Bucher, 2018, pp. 29, 36-38), which require artists to balance coherence with adaptability in fast-changing digital spaces. Furthermore, maintaining consistent brand messaging is widely recognised as a strategy to enhance brand recall and coherence (Keller, 2012, p. 249), which can contribute to deeper emotional connections over time, particularly in the context of artist

branding. Additionally, it can also support cultural representation and shape market visibility through public persona construction (Marshall, 2014, pp. 3-4; Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84).

Therefore, understanding public persona construction as a branding strategy is key to exploring how fan engagement with fan-created content influences the brand identity of artists. Rather than existing separately, fan participation operates alongside industry branding efforts, creating a dynamic exchange between official narratives and audience-driven reinterpretations.

These constructions, however, do not operate in a neutral environment, as they are shaped by longstanding structural, and sometimes systemic, inequalities that affect how artists are perceived and valued across the industry (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 75-79).

2.3 Gender Inequality in the Music Industry

2.3.1 Gender Disparities in the Music Industries

The music industry has long been characterised by structural gender disparities, with female artists frequently facing distinct obstacles in multiple aspects of the job (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 1-2). For instance, male artists are usually considered as independent creators, while female artists manage expectations of emotional expressiveness and aesthetic appeal (Berkers & Hoegaerts, 2019, pp. 2-4; Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9). These industry norms shape branding strategies, influencing how artists are positioned and received by audiences.

Moreover, gender disparities within the music industry extend beyond executive positions and market visibility, also manifesting in instrumental roles and media representations. Clawson (1999, p. 199) illustrates how women in alternative rock scenes were often relegated to playing bass guitar, an instrument deemed less prestigious than lead guitar or drums. This division not only limited women's creative roles but also perpetuated the perception of their technical inferiority, positioning them as secondary contributors rather than primary innovators. These structural biases in musical roles highlight how gender inequalities are embedded within the practices of music production itself.

2.3.2 Historical Bias and Inequalities in the Digital Age

Similarly, historical examinations of music media reveal that female artists have long been portrayed through restrictive, gendered narratives. Whiteley (1997, pp. 19-24) argues that popular music culture has often portrayed women either as passive inspirations or as overly sexualised figures, narrowing the scope of acceptable artistic identities for female performers.

Recent empirical research confirms that gender inequalities in the music industry persist into the digital age. For instance, Smith et al. (2025, pp. 1-12) demonstrate that male artists continue to

receive disproportionate visibility on platforms such as Billboard and Spotify, with playlisting and other platform mechanisms reflecting and potentially reinforcing existing gender disparities in the industry. Furthermore, Kolokytha et al. (2025, pp. 2-8) acknowledge that global production networks in music and gaming reflect broader structural inequalities, including gender-based disparities that may shape creative participation. Meanwhile, Strong and Raine (2019, pp. 1-9) highlight the broader challenges and tensions surrounding gender equality initiatives in the music industry, while movements such as Keychange (Keychange, n.d.) aim to address disparities in festival lineups and executive roles. Hence, these recurring and evolving representations reinforce structural inequalities by shaping audience perceptions and industry norms, ultimately making it more difficult for women to establish varied and authoritative roles within the popular music sphere.

Contemporary empirical research reinforces the ongoing presence of gender inequality in the music industry, extending beyond historical patterns of exclusion. According to the Inclusion Initiative Report (Smith et al., 2025, pp. 1-12), women comprised just 22.3% of artists on the Billboard Hot 100 Year-End Charts from 2012 to 2023. The report also notes that only 12.8% of credited songwriters and 2.8% of producers were women during this period. Furthermore, women of colour accounted for only 7.1% of all credited artists, highlighting the ongoing intersectional inequalities within the music industry. These figures point to a deep-rooted imbalance in creative and leadership roles-domains that are essential for shaping artist branding and influencing industry power dynamics.

The report also includes key case studies, notably Taylor Swift, whose widely publicised case over the ownership of her master recordings brought systemic inequalities into the spotlight (Smith et al., 2025, pp. 3, 10). Hence, her strategic decision to re-record her earlier albums can be considered as both a reclaiming of creative control and a powerful statement of brand identity. This example highlights how female artists often face additional burdens-legal, emotional, and creative-in maintaining autonomy over their artist branding.

Ultimately, the data presented by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (Smith et al., 2025, pp. 1-12) emphasise how gendered power structures continue to affect visibility, credibility, and cultural representation within the music industry. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing how gender impacts not only access to success but also the ways in which brand identity is constructed in contemporary popular culture.

Fan engagement can also perpetuate gender inequalities: female artists are more likely to be judged based on appearance rather than artistic ability, whereas male artists are frequently associated with creativity and innovation, reflecting persistent gender inequalities in how musical

ability is perceived (Tabak, 2023, pp. 51-54). Fan-created content may reinforce or challenge these biases by either amplifying traditional portrayals or subverting them through alternative narratives.

2.3.3 Brand Perception through Aaker's Framework

As previously stated, Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) Brand Personality Framework is widely used to conceptualise brand perception across five core dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Although originally developed in the context of corporate branding, the concept of brand personality has since been applied across various sectors, particularly in tourism, luxury, and digital environments such as social media and AI (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2023, pp. 1-12). Therefore, considering that artists, similar to brands, construct public personas that shape audience perceptions, the framework provides a useful lens for understanding how fan engagement contributes to artist branding. However, despite its broad applicability, its intersection with gender in the context of the music industry remains underexplored. Hence, despite the fact that Aaker's framework (1996, pp. 142-145) does not explicitly account for gendered branding differences, its application in this study allows for a structured approach to examining how fan-created content interacts with gender differences in artist branding.

Accordingly, the application of Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) framework to artist branding necessitates a gendered analysis of each dimension. Female artists are often expected to embody sincerity through emotional openness, whereas male artists' sincerity is linked to perceived authenticity and control over their artistry (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Marshall, 2014, pp. xi-xiv). Within Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) brand personality framework, excitement is characterised by traits such as being daring, spiritedness, and imagination, which is more closely aligned with male artists through associations with rebellion and innovation. In contrast, female artists are more frequently linked to stylisation and visual appeal, reflecting persistent gendered expectations in genre coding and media representation (Berkers & Schaap, 2018, pp. 12-13, 79-95). Competence is a dimension often assumed of male educators in technical areas of music, while female teachers are more likely to have to actively demonstrate their skills and credibility to gain the same recognition (Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 52-54). Expectations of elegance and refinement, which are aligned with Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) dimension of "sophistication", are more frequently assigned to female artists, while male artists are afforded greater flexibility in constructing their brand personas (Berkers & Hoegaerts, 2019, pp. 1-4). In Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) Brand Personality Framework, ruggedness refers to toughness and masculinity, which are traits that Tabak (2023, pp. 50-54) discusses as most often linked to male artists in genres like rock and hip hop, and rarely applied to female performers.

Although fan-created content plays a significant role in shaping artist branding (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84; Duffett, 2013, pp. 165-190), existing studies indicate that gender remains a key factor in

how artists are perceived (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 1-2, 75-78). Additionally, understanding these longstanding gendered power structures is crucial for analysing how fan engagement interacts with artist branding. While Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) Brand Personality Framework provides a structured approach to evaluating brand perception across sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, its application within gendered contexts remains underexplored.

Accordingly, this study investigates whether gender moderates the relationship between fan engagement and brand perception, proposing the following hypotheses:

H6: *The relationship between fan engagement and overall brand perception varies by gender.*

Beyond this overall relationship, the study also investigates whether gender moderates each specific brand personality dimension:

H7: *The effect of fan-created content on sincerity perception differs between male and female artists.*

H8: *The effect of fan-created content on excitement perception differs between male and female artists.*

H9: *The effect of fan-created content on competence perception differs between male and female artists.*

H10: *The effect of fan-created content on sophistication perception differs between male and female artists.*

H11: *The effect of fan-created content on ruggedness perception differs between male and female artists.*

These gendered dynamics extend beyond industry structures and into audience interactions, where fan communities play an active role in mediating, or challenging established brand identities (Baym, 2018, pp. 82-84; Duffett, 2013, pp. 165-190).

2.4 Fan Engagement and Participatory Culture

The concept of participatory culture, as introduced by Jenkins (2006, pp. 2-4), redefines the role of audiences in media consumption by integrating them into the creative and promotional processes (pp. 1-4 21, 169). Rather than passively receiving media content, fans actively engage in shaping cultural narratives, particularly through co-creation and digital circulation (Baym, 2018, p. 79). Moreover, Duffett (2013, pp. 165-190) explores how fan participation extends beyond traditional consumption, with fans engaging in practices such as digital content creation, networking, and discourse-building that boosts an artist's public image. For instance, through platforms like TikTok and Instagram, fans generate remixes, memes, and edits that contribute to an artist's brand identity beyond formal industry narratives, fostering deeper emotional bonds, which are practices that align

with Duffett's (2013, pp. 165-190) broader discussion of fan creativity and participatory meaning-making.

Jenkins (1992, p. 23) describes fans as "textual poachers," people who actively reinterpret and reshape media content to generate alternative meanings that either question or explore mainstream representations. Moreover, academics contend that, by consistently creating conversation and attention, fans engage in forms of participatory and transmedia practices that help expand media narratives and enhance audience engagement (Scolari et al., 2018, pp. 55-57). Thus, fans may incorporate their own narratives and interpretations into an artist's brand through this process, which is frequently called co-creation (Baym, 2018, p. 79). Fan networks provide artists with greater exposure and expand their audience beyond industry-driven marketing tactics through fan-driven promotion and circulation (Duffett, 2013, pp. 165-190).

Additionally, the emotional aspects of fan engagement play a vital role in understanding its cultural significance. Hills (2002, pp. xii, 2, 25) suggests that fandom often serves as a tool for shaping personal identity, with emotional connections to cultural figures becoming closely tied to how fans understand themselves. Baym (2018, p. 83) similarly emphasises that emotional commitment drives much fan behaviour, encouraging the creation, circulation, and collaborative shaping of content. As a result, fan-produced materials go beyond simple admiration, as they actively contribute to the ongoing construction of an artist's public image.

Furthermore, brand perception is shaped differently by various forms of engagement, from active content creation to passive consumption (Scolari et al., 2018, pp. 8-17). Burgess and Green (2009, pp. 10-12, 52-56, 90-92) suggest that platforms like YouTube support both active and passive forms of user engagement. While creators contribute remixes and collaborative content, passive users may reinforce dominant narratives through views, likes, and shares, which helps shape what content gains visibility and traction.

The concept of spreadability, developed by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013, pp. 2-6), provides further insight into the dynamics of fan engagement. Instead of passively consuming media, fans intentionally select, adapt, and circulate content across digital platforms, supporting certain parts of an artist's brand while reshaping others. This participatory process of distribution plays a critical role in influencing how artists are presented and understood both within fan communities and in bigger public discourse.

As previous research has demonstrated, fan engagement plays a crucial role in constructing an artist's brand identity (Baym, 2018, p. 83). Moreover, as this study defines overall brand perception using Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) Brand Personality Framework, proposed dimensions

provide a structured way to measure how fans perceive and engage with artists' brand personalities. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H12: *Fan engagement with fan-created content positively predicts overall brand perception across all five dimensions*.

As Tabak (2023, pp. 50-55) observes, audiences can play a dual role in music culture by either reinforcing dominant gender norms or resisting them, suggesting that the participatory nature of fan engagement may similarly uphold or challenge industry-driven branding strategies. Therefore, despite the significance of gender, existing literature has largely overlooked the role of it in shaping these interactions. While fan-generated content plays a crucial role in shaping artist branding (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84), gender biases in the music industry influence how male and female artists are perceived, with male artists distinguished as self-sufficient creators while female artists face credibility challenges, image-based judgments, and restrictive genre classifications (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Berkers et al., 2019, pp. 30-34). These gendered dynamics extend to fan interactions, where participatory cultures reinforce or challenge industry-driven branding strategies in different fields (Hopkins & Berkers, 2019, pp. 45-55; Scott, 2013, para. 3.4-3.5; Coppa, 2022, pp. 11-14). Fan engagement may have numerous impacts on how male and female artists are viewed, either supporting or challenging established gender stereotypes in the field.

While fan practices are central to the participatory reshaping of artist brands, they are increasingly mediated by platform architectures and algorithmic systems that prioritise certain narratives over others, as shown by Bucher (2018, pp. 36-38, 41-44), Van Dijck (2013, pp. 12-13), and Burgess and Green (2009, pp. 90-92). These logics significantly shape which aspects of artist branding gain visibility and recognition.

2.5 Platform and Algorithmic Visibility

The circulation and visibility of fan-created content within digital spaces are significantly shaped by the underlying logics of social media platforms. Rather than functioning as neutral environments, platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok use algorithmic systems that give preference to commercially successful and highly engaging content. (Bucher, 2018, p. 41-44; Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 23, 155-157). Consequently, not all fan practices receive equal exposure, which inevitably influences how artists' brand images are shaped in the public sphere.

Bucher (2018, pp. 29, 34-35, 53-56) conceptualises algorithms as decision-making entities that filter and rank content according to specific platform values. This filtering process affects the visibility of fan-created materials, reinforcing some narratives while marginalising others. For instance, content that aligns with platform logics, such as high engagement rates, or visual appeal,

might be more widely disseminated, whereas other creative outputs go largely unnoticed. Such mechanisms subtly shape which aspects of an artist's brand become prevalent within participatory cultures.

Similarly, Van Dijck (2013, pp. 26-32) argues that platform architectures are designed to foster particular ways of interaction and self-expression, thereby directing user behaviour in ways that align with larger, corporate interests. Algorithms, thus, do not simply mirror fan activity but actively participate in the construction of meaning by privileging specific kinds of engagement over others. In the context of fan-created content, this means that the brand perceptions co-produced by audiences are always already filtered through platform-specific dynamics.

Moreover, Burgess and Green (2009, pp. 4, 6, 89-92) observe that participatory culture on YouTube, while enabling broad fan engagement, also integrates participants within a commercial infrastructure that shapes how cultural products are distributed and valued. Visibility becomes a function not only of fan engagement but also of how well fan practices align with algorithmic preferences for virality, attention, and advertiser-friendly content. As a result, artists' public personas are continually negotiated through a complex interplay of fan agency and algorithmic governance.

To systematically capture how these layered dynamics translate into audience perceptions of artist identity, this study draws on Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) Brand Personality Framework, offering a structured analytical approach to assessing brand meaning across multiple dimensions.

3. Research Design and Methods

This chapter outlines the rationale for employing a deductive quantitative research design to investigate how fan engagement with fan-created content influences the brand perception of male and female artists in the popular music industry. By using survey methodology, this study systematically measures how audiences perceive artist branding across gender, focusing on the five dimensions defined in Aaker's Brand Personality Framework. The chapter details the sampling strategy, operationalisation of variables, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques used to test the study's hypotheses.

3.1 Research Design and Justification

This study employed a quantitative survey to examine how engagement with fan-created content influenced brand perception differently for male and female artists. A survey-based approach was appropriate as it allowed for the collection of large-scale, standardised data, ensuring reliability and generalisability (Babbie, 2014, Chapter 9). Given the objective of testing hypotheses derived from Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework, a deductive approach was used to assess how fan-created content impacted perceptions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.

Surveys are a widely recognised method in quantitative research due to their efficiency in capturing subjective perceptions and behavioural patterns (Babbie, 2014, Chapter 9). Therefore, the structured nature of survey questions enables statistical comparison (Babbie, 2014, Chapter 9), making it possible to analyse relationships between fan engagement, brand perception, and gender-based differences.

Thus, this study adopted a survey design, collecting data at a single point in time to assess these relationships among respondents.

3.2 Sample and Sampling Strategy

The study targeted individuals who actively engaged with fan-created content on social media, as these participants were most relevant for understanding the research question. Non-probability sampling was used, combining convenience sampling and snowball sampling to reach fan communities on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Convenience sampling allowed for the selection of participants based on accessibility and willingness to participate, making it a practical choice when random sampling was not feasible (Babbie, 2014, p. 199). Additionally, snowball sampling was used to expand the sample by having initial respondents recruit others from their

networks, a method particularly effective for reaching socially connected but hard-to-access populations (Babbie, 2014, pp. 200-201).

- Convenience Sampling: The survey was distributed in public fan groups, artist hashtags, and fandom-specific communities, ensuring accessibility to respondents who actively engaged with fan-created content.
- Snowball Sampling: Participants were encouraged to share the survey link within their networks, increasing reach and diversity in the dataset.

Since fan-created content consumption and participation varied globally, the survey remained open to international respondents. However, to ensure interpretability, the questionnaire was made available only in English. Despite efforts to keep the survey open to international respondents, the exclusive use of English language may have introduced bias by limiting participation among non-native English speakers, potentially affecting the representativeness of the sample.

A target sample size of at least 150 participants was set to enable robust statistical testing, including ANOVA and linear regression analyses (Hair et al., 2019, pp. 278-279, 391-392). The study acknowledged the limitation of self-selection bias, as respondents who engaged more with fan-created content may have been overrepresented.

3.3 Operationalisation

To systematically analyse the impact of fan-created content on brand perception, key variables were operationalised into measurable components.

Firstly, in this study, popular music was defined as a commercially driven and mass-mediated form of music that reaches broad audiences through mainstream media, and is shaped by its cultural context and position within the wider musical field (Shuker, 2022, p. 4).

Furthermore, male and female artists were represented by Harry Styles and Taylor Swift, respectively. Taylor Swift and Harry Styles were selected as case studies due to their global fan influence and distinct artist-fan relationships (Shah, 2024; Snapes, 2024). Taylor Swift's "Eras Tour" was described as one of the most significant cultural events of the 21st century, redefining the concert experience and demonstrating the power of deeply engaged fan communities (Shah, 2024). Meanwhile, Harry Styles' concerts emphasised fan participation and collective experiences, reinforcing the idea that his audience played an active role in shaping his performances (Sharif, 2023). Moreover, given their ongoing media and fan comparisons, they served as strong cases for examining how fan-created content contributed to shaping artist branding in gendered ways (Snapes, 2024).

3.3.1 Independent Variable (IV)

Fan engagement was conceptualised as the frequency and type of interaction with fan-created content. This included behaviours such as sharing, creating, or participating in fan-led activities on social media. Engagement was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Never” (1) to “Very Frequently” (5).

Moreover, to capture the nature of engagement, participants in the survey were asked to identify themselves within the frame of content creators, content consumers, both, or neither:

- Content creator: actively producing fan content, such as edits, remixes, or memes.
- Content consumer: primarily watching, liking, or sharing fan content.
- Both: engaging in both content creation and content consumption.
- Neither: not engaging with fan content.

Participants were also asked to categorise the types of content they engaged with into three predefined categories. These three categories (celebratory, interactive, and narrative content) were developed for this study to capture key dimensions of fan-created content. While they do not originate directly from prior typologies, they align with Jenkins’ (2006, pp. 3-4) concept of participatory culture by reflecting how fans engage, co-create, and reinterpret media. The categories are as following:

- Celebratory Content: posts explicitly praising the artist, such as hashtags or fan edits.
- Interactive Content: media encouraging community participation, including TikTok trends or challenges.
- Narrative Content: long-form creations like fanfiction or video essays.

This operationalisation ensured comprehensive coverage of fan behaviours while aligning with Jenkins’ (2006, pp. 3-4) concept of participatory culture.

3.3.2 Dependent Variables (DVs)

Brand perception was measured using Aaker’s (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework, which categorised brand traits into five dimensions:

- Sincerity - perceptions of honesty, genuineness, and emotional authenticity.
- Excitement - energy, creativity, and dynamic appeal.
- Competence - reliability, professionalism, and artistic skill.
- Sophistication - elegance, glamour, and exclusivity.
- Ruggedness - toughness and resilience.

While the five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, were retained from Aaker’s original model, the specific wording of the items was adapted to reflect

the context of music artist branding and digital fan culture. Many of the original adjectives identified by Aaker (e.g., “honest,” “trendy,” “confident,” “tough”) were preserved for conceptual consistency, while others were rephrased to align more closely with the way artists are represented and interpreted through fan-created content. For example, the original Aaker item “reliable” was expanded into “confident and reliable” to better reflect how fan-created content highlights artistic competence. Similarly, “tough” was adapted into “tough and resilient” to capture fan narratives about artists overcoming industry pressures. These adaptations were made to ensure both theoretical rigour and contextual relevance, allowing participants to evaluate brand traits in a way that reflected the tone and dynamics of popular music fandoms.

Each dimension was assessed using pre-validated scale items adapted from Aaker’s framework, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Moreover, for the survey questionnaire, to measure the dependent variable of brand perception, shared definitions were used to guide the survey item development and ensure conceptual clarity for participants. The five brand personality dimensions and their core definitions (e.g., sincerity as honesty and genuineness; excitement as energy and creativity) were taken from Aaker (1996, pp. 137-174). However, to ensure contextual relevance for the study of fan-created content, these definitions were further adapted in line with Jenkins’ (2006, pp. 2-4) concept of participatory culture, Baym’s (2018, pp. 83-84, 178-180) exploration of relational labour and emotional connections, and Burgess and Green’s (2009, pp. 1-14) analysis of user-generated media on digital platforms. These helped shape definitions that would make sense to participants, especially when tied to TikTok trends, remixes, or emotional tributes. Therefore, while the heart of the definitions is based on Aaker (1996, pp. 137-174), the additional framing reflects how these traits play out in today’s digital fan environments. This makes the survey more valid and understandable for respondents in the context of this study. The shared definitions are as following:

- “Sincerity refers to being honest, warm, and genuine. It’s about how emotionally connected and relatable an artist seems, especially through fan edits, stories, or tributes.”
- “Excitement refers to being energetic, creative, and modern. This is often shown in high-energy content like TikTok trends, remixes, or funny videos.”
- “Competence refers to being skilled, professional, and reliable. Fan content might show this by celebrating an artist’s achievements or highlighting their career success.”
- “Sophistication refers to elegance, charm, and luxury. This trait might be reflected in fan content that focuses on fashion, style, or high-profile collaborations.”
- “Ruggedness refers to being strong, bold, and resilient. Some fan content shows this by portraying an artist as fearless, tough, or able to overcome challenges.”

These shared definitions ensured consistency in the development of the brand perception items and allowed for more reliable interpretation of the data across both artist cases.

3.4 Procedure and Measures

To ensure clarity and validity in the development of the survey instrument, a pre-test was conducted with ten participants who represented the target audience. They were invited to complete an early draft of the questionnaire and provide feedback on the clarity, structure, and wording of the items. Based on their responses, minor adjustments were made to improve the phrasing of certain questions and the overall flow of the survey. For instance, the survey was initially structured with the full demographic section at the beginning; however, following pre-testing, this section was moved to the end to reduce respondent fatigue and ensure engagement with the core content questions. Moreover, the item measuring fan identification was also modified, shifting from a simple yes/no format to a Likert scale to capture more nuanced degrees of fandom. Additionally, 'Other' options were added to the social media platform and country questions to accommodate respondents whose answers did not fit the predefined categories. These adjustments, though minor, improved the clarity, inclusivity, and overall flow of the questionnaire. The final version, which was distributed online via Qualtrics, is included in Appendix 1. Every effort was made to ensure that the survey was accessible, ethical, and theoretically grounded, with careful attention paid to how each item related back to the study's conceptual framework. The structure and content were designed so that even a participant unfamiliar with brand personality theory or fan studies could engage meaningfully with the questions.

The survey was structured into five key sections: age verification, fan identification, fan engagement, brand perception, and demographics. It was designed to assess both behavioural and perceptual aspects of fan involvement with artist branding. The first question asked participants to report their age. This functioned as an ethical screening mechanism: respondents under the age of 18 were immediately redirected to the end of the survey and presented with a thank-you message, in accordance with ethical standards on research with minors. This exclusion introduced a minor selection bias, as the experiences and perceptions of underage fans were not represented in the final sample. Out of the initial 200 respondents, 8 were under 18 and thus redirected, leaving a final sample of 192 adult participants.

Following the age filter, participants were asked to indicate their identification as fans of Taylor Swift and Harry Styles through two 5-point Likert scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). This allowed for the identification of active fans versus casual respondents and served to mitigate potential bias arising from pre-existing emotional investments in the artists.

Moreover, Likert scales were chosen for their ability to capture gradations of opinion and frequency, which is particularly relevant in assessing nuanced perceptions such as sincerity or excitement. Their standardised format also allowed for easier comparison across respondents and dimensions. The inclusion of these items enables further analysis to determine whether fan identification influenced responses, particularly in relation to how participants perceived and responded to different types of fan-created content.

The next section focused on fan engagement. Participants were asked to report the frequency with which they engaged in four specific activities: consuming fan-created content, sharing or reposting such content, commenting on or interacting with it, and creating original fan material. These items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). In addition, participants were asked to identify their fan engagement role, whether they saw themselves primarily as content consumers, content creators, both, or neither. To capture intricacies in fan behaviour, participants also selected the type of fan-created content they engaged with most often, choosing from three categories: Celebratory, Interactive, and Narrative. This structure was designed to reflect different modes of participation and align with Jenkins' (2006, pp. 2-4) conceptualisation of participatory culture.

The central section of the survey examined perceptions of artist branding using Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework, which outlines five core brand personality dimensions: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. Participants were asked to rate five sets of statements, three for each artist per dimension, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). To enhance clarity and ensure consistency in interpretation, a brief explanation of each brand dimension was provided before the set of items. These definitions were included to strengthen the face validity of the instrument and to ground responses within the framework of brand personality.

The final section of the survey collected demographic data, including participants' gender, country of residence, and social media usage habits. An additional item asked whether English was the participant's first or native language. This question was included as a precautionary measure to account for potential language barriers, especially as the survey included culturally and linguistically nuanced terms. If future statistical analyses, such as factor analysis or internal consistency checks, reveal unexpected inconsistencies, this variable will offer an avenue to explore whether comprehension may have influenced response patterns.

3.5 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The survey was distributed through the Qualtrics platform, ensuring a secure and structured data collection process. To reach the target audience, the study was promoted in open online fan communities on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, where engagement with fan-created content was highly active. No incentives were offered for participation, and the survey post clearly indicated that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Moreover, due to the informal and unstructured nature of fan spaces in online communities, no follow-up with non-respondents was conducted.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary consent (Babbie, 2012, pp. 64-65), and respondents were required to provide informed consent (Babbie, 2012, pp. 65-67) before proceeding. The survey remained anonymous, with no personally identifiable information collected, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with ethical research standards (Babbie, 2012, pp. 62-88).

To maintain ethical integrity, only participants aged 18 and older were included in the study. This decision aligned with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, as minors require additional consent procedures and safeguards (Babbie, 2012, pp. 65-67). Additionally, given that fan communities often include younger individuals, limiting participation to adults ensured that respondents could provide informed consent independently, without requiring parental approval. Furthermore, given the study's focus on media engagement and branding, adult participants were more likely to have developed media literacy and critical awareness of branding processes, enhancing the validity of the responses (Babbie, 2012, pp. 62-88). By restricting participation to individuals over 18, the study also avoided ethical complexities associated with surveying minors, particularly concerning data protection and potential psychological implications of media consumption (Babbie, 2012, pp. 64-67).

3.6 Data Analysis, Validity, and Reliability

The data collected through the online survey were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.1.0). The analysis proceeded in three stages, each designed to systematically assess the relationships proposed in the study's hypotheses.

Firstly, descriptive statistics were generated to summarise participant demographics (age, gender, social media use) and to assess the frequency and type of engagement with fan-created content. This provided a foundational overview of the sample and enabled the identification of patterns in audience behaviour.

Secondly, factor analysis and reliability tests were conducted to ensure that the items used to measure brand perception and fan engagement loaded onto coherent components and

demonstrated internal consistency. These procedures confirmed that each dimension represented a distinct and reliable construct.

Thirdly, linear regression analysis was employed to test the study's core hypotheses (H12, H1-H5), assessing whether higher engagement with fan-created content predicted stronger overall brand perception as well as brand perception per dimension, as operationalised through Aaker's five personality dimensions.

Moreover, because the survey design embedded gender within the stimulus material, by presenting both a male (Harry Styles) and female (Taylor Swift) artist to each participant, a repeated-measures General Linear Model (GLM) was conducted (H6-H11), with artist entered as a within-subjects factor and fan engagement included as a covariate. This approach allowed for the examination of whether the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and brand perception varied as a function of artist gender, thus aligning with the intent of the original hypotheses.

To ensure the quality of this study, the validity and reliability of the measurements were carefully assessed. Firstly, validity was upheld through two strategies (Hair et al., 2019): the use of pre-validated measurement scales and alignment with theoretical definitions (pp. 627-629). Specifically, brand perception was operationalised using Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) established Brand Personality Framework, while fan engagement categories were grounded in participatory culture definition (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-4). Additionally, all survey items were carefully phrased and tested to reflect the conceptual dimensions outlined in the theoretical framework. Secondly, as mentioned above, reliability was evaluated through both exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha. Factor analysis was applied to the items measuring brand personality to ensure that each item grouped correctly under its intended dimension (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness). Following this, Cronbach's alpha values were computed for each dimension, with almost all scales exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019, p. 776). While a Cronbach's alpha threshold of 0.70 is widely regarded as acceptable for assessing internal consistency, this value should not be applied uncritically. As Tavakol and Dennick (2011, pp. 53-54) argue, alpha values must be interpreted in context, considering factors such as item inter-relatedness, test length, and construct dimensionality. Therefore, although this study used the 0.70 threshold as a general guideline, it also considered the nature of each scale when interpreting reliability scores.

Together, these procedures were intended to strengthen the theoretical validity and statistical reliability of the study's measurements, supporting a thorough interpretation of the relationships between fan engagement, artist brand perception, and gender-based differences.

3.7 Limitations

While the methodology adopted in this study was designed to align closely with the research objectives and ethical standards, several limitations must be acknowledged. As Babbie (2014, pp. 267-268) notes, self-report surveys are inherently prone to issues such as superficiality and the inability to fully capture the complexities of social behaviour. Participants may answer in ways that reflect how they wish to be perceived, particularly when responding to questions about artists they admire, introducing the risk of social desirability bias.

Additionally, the use of non-probability sampling methods, specifically convenience and snowball sampling, limits the generalisability of the findings. According to Babbie (2014, pp. 199), while such approaches are often practical and appropriate in exploratory studies, they do not allow for confident claims about the broader population due to the absence of random selection.

The questionnaire's administration in English may also have introduced comprehension barriers for non-native speakers. Although a language identification item was included, the possibility remains that subtle linguistic differences affected participants' interpretations of key terms or rating scales.

Another limitation stems from the reliance on participants' own accounts of their behaviours and attitudes, rather than tracking actual engagement patterns.

Finally, the decision to focus exclusively on Taylor Swift and Harry Styles, though methodologically convenient for examining gendered branding, naturally restricts the scope of the study. These artists represent only a small portion of the diversity present in the music industry, and future research could expand this framework by including a broader range of artists across genres, national contexts, or gender identities.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from the survey, beginning with descriptive statistics that summarise participant characteristics and key variables related to fan engagement and brand perception. This is followed by the results of the factor and reliability analyses, which assess the internal consistency and structure of the brand perception measures. The chapter then outlines the outcomes of the hypotheses testing, providing a basis for the interpretation offered in the Discussion chapter.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Firstly, descriptive statistics were calculated after screening the dataset for implausible values. One extreme outlier (age = 2,728) was identified as an invalid response and removed prior to analysis. After this correction, the final sample consisted of *N* = 200 valid participants, excluding 8 participants under the age of 18. The final sample consisted of *N* = 192 valid participants aged 18 and above. The mean age was *M* = 23.38 years (*SD* = 4.84), with a median of 23 years and an age range from 18 to 56 years.

The final dataset included 192 participants, all aged 18 or older. However, due to item-level non-response, the number of valid responses varies slightly across questions. For instance, while questions on gender, nationality, first language, and primary social media platform were answered by 171 participants, other questions related to fan content engagement were completed by 181 participants. These variations in response counts are indicated with the relevant *N* values in the results.

In terms of gender (*N* = 171), the majority of respondents identified as female (80.7%), followed by male (16.4%) and non-binary/other (2.9%).

Nationality data (*N* = 171) indicated that most participants were from the Netherlands (22.2%), followed by the United Kingdom (8.2%), Germany (5.3%), the Russian Federation (5.3%), Italy (4.1%), Austria (4.1%), Belgium (2.3%), and a broad mix of other countries, reflecting the international nature of the sample.

Regarding social media use (*N* = 171), 60.8% of participants reported TikTok as their primary platform for engaging with fan content, followed by Instagram (31.6%), Twitter (3.5%), YouTube (1.8%), and other platforms (2.3%).

When asked whether they primarily consume or create fan-related content (*N* = 181), 48.6% identified as content consumers, 16.0% as both creators and consumers, 33.7% as neither, and only 1.7% as dedicated content creators.

Moreover, participants' first language (*N* = 171) was predominantly not English (69.0%), while 31.0% reported English as their first or native language.

In terms of content types, 63.2% engaged with celebratory content (e.g., fan art, tribute hashtags), 57.2% with interactive content (e.g., TikTok trends, Q&A sessions), and 48.8% with narrative content (e.g., fanfiction, video essays).

Lastly, frequency of fan engagement activities (*N* = 181) showed that 34.3% very often watched fan-created videos or edits, while only 14.4% very often shared or reposted fan content, and just 9.9% very often commented or interacted. Original content creation was less common, with only 3.3% reporting they very often created their own fan content.

To summarise, the sample primarily consisted of young adult, predominantly female participants who engage heavily with fan-created content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, providing a strong base for analysing patterns of fan engagement and its relationship to artist branding.

4.2 Factor and Reliability Analyses

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted on all 34 items, including fan engagement and brand personality traits for both artists, in order to explore the underlying factor structure without presupposing distinct theoretical groupings. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was excellent at .881, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(561) = 3069.49$, $p < .001$), confirming the dataset's suitability for factor analysis. Seven components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, explaining 69.81% of the total variance. Most brand personality traits loaded onto their expected components (e.g., sincerity, competence), indicating a general alignment with Aaker's framework. However, some cross-loadings between artist-specific traits and certain fan engagement items suggest conceptual overlap in how participants associate brand identity with participatory behaviours. Given these patterns, and to enhance interpretability, separate PCAs were conducted for each artist across the five brand personality dimensions. This approach followed Aaker's original structure and supported construct validity for use in any future analyses.

Therefore, to ensure that the fan engagement questions and the brand personality dimensions used in this study were both conceptually valid and statistically reliable, factor and reliability analyses were conducted for each construct. The 15 brand perception items were grouped into five theorised dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, based on Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Framework. The four items of fan engagement were grouped into one section. Separate Principal Component Analyses (PCA) were used to confirm

whether each set of items measured a coherent underlying factor, while Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess internal consistency. These tests were conducted individually for both Taylor Swift and Harry Styles to determine whether the constructs held across different artists, and to justify the use of factor scores in subsequent regression analyses.

Finally, an oblique rotation method (Oblimin) was used in all factor analyses. This choice was based on the assumption that brand personality dimensions and fan engagement behaviours are likely to be interrelated rather than fully independent. Since previous literature and theoretical assumptions suggest correlations between brand traits and with engagement styles, Oblimin allows for a more realistic representation of underlying constructs by allowing factor correlation.

4.2.1 Fan Engagement

Table 4.1

Factor Loadings for Fan Engagement

Item	Factor Loading
Watching fan-made content	0.790
Sharing or reposting fan-made content	0.897
Commenting or interacting with fan content	0.845
Creating original fan content	0.739

Note. The table presents standardised factor loadings from the factor analysis for Fan Engagement. Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization. Factor loadings below .30 were suppressed. Missing values were excluded listwise.

To explore the underlying dimensions of the four items measuring fan engagement, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues greater than 1.00. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.786, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 277.095$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 67.23% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the four measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.739 to 0.897. The communalities ranged from 0.546 to 0.805, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all four items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the four fan engagement items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.837. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.569 to 0.787, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the fan engagement items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the fan engagement items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

4.2.2 Taylor Swift Brand Dimensions

Table 4.2

Factor Loadings for Taylor Swift Brand Dimensions

Item	Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
Honest/Genuine	0.921				
Caring/Expressive	0.894				
Wholesome	0.857				
Energetic		0.854			
Trendy		0.819			
Daring		0.864			
Professional			0.907		
Confident			0.863		
Successful			0.851		
Glamorous				0.850	
Elegant				0.885	
Upper-class				0.686	
Tough					0.894
Bold					0.899
Fearless					0.865

Note. The table presents standardised factor loadings from the factor analysis for Taylor Swift's brand dimensions. Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization. Factor loadings below .30 were suppressed. Missing values were excluded listwise.

Sincerity

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring sincerity, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.715,

exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 245.825$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 79.35% of the total variance in the data, meaning that nearly 80% of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.857 to 0.921. The communalities ranged from 0.735 to 0.847, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three sincerity items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.865. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.694 to 0.802, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the sincerity items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the sincerity items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Excitement

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring excitement, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.704, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 150.150$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 71.55% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.819 to 0.864. The communalities ranged from 0.670 to 0.747, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three excitement items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.794. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.606 to 0.671, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the excitement items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the excitement items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Competence

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring competence, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.708, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 211.124$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 76.36% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.851 to 0.907. The communalities ranged from 0.725 to 0.822, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three competence items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.839. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.668 to 0.771, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the competence items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the competence items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Sophistication

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring sophistication, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.615, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 129.684$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 65.89% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.686 to 0.885. The communalities ranged from 0.471 to 0.784, indicating that all items

contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three sophistication items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.734. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.421 to 0.670, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the sophistication items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the sophistication items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Ruggedness

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring ruggedness, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.731, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 225.673$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 78.48% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.865 to 0.899. The communalities ranged from 0.748 to 0.808, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three ruggedness items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.863. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.703 to 0.763, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the ruggedness items have acceptable internal consistency

Therefore, the ruggedness items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

4.2.3 Harry Styles Brand Dimensions

Table 4.3

Factor Loadings for Harry Styles Brand Dimensions

Item	Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
Honest/Genuine	0.903				
Caring/Expressive	0.839				
Wholesome	0.871				
Energetic		0.867			
Trendy		0.776			
Daring		0.830			
Professional			0.872		
Confident			0.889		
Successful			0.914		
Glamorous				0.854	
Elegant				0.758	
Upper-class				0.659	
Tough					0.854
Bold					0.850
Fearless					0.886

Note. The table presents standardised factor loadings from the factor analysis for Harry Styles' brand dimensions. Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization. Factor loadings below .30 were suppressed. Missing values were excluded listwise.

Sincerity

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring sincerity, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.707, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 209.711$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 75.96% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.839 to 0.903. The communalities ranged from 0.704 to 0.816, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three sincerity items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.838. Item-total

correlations ranged from 0.651 to 0.763, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the sincerity items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the sincerity items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Excitement

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring excitement, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.673, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 127.449$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 68.06% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.776 to 0.867. The communalities ranged from 0.602 to 0.751, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three excitement items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.759. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.531 to 0.657, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the excitement items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the excitement items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Competence

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring competence, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.728, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 244.213$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 79.49% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be

explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.872 to 0.914. The communalities ranged from 0.760 to 0.835, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three competence items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.866. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.715 to 0.795, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the competence items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the competence items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Sophistication

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring sophistication, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.574, slightly below the ideal level but still above the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.50 (Kaiser, 1970), suggesting moderate adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 69.418$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient inter-item correlations for PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 57.93% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items loaded strongly on the single factor, with values ranging from 0.659 to 0.854. The communalities ranged from 0.434 to 0.730, showing that the items contributed reasonably well to the construct.

A reliability analysis showed a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.627, which is below the typical threshold of 0.70. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.351 to 0.559, and reliability did not substantially improve upon the removal of any item. While the internal consistency was modest, the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.627 was deemed acceptable for exploratory purposes. As Tavakol and Dennick (2011, pp. 53-54) explain, the 0.70 threshold should not be treated as an absolute rule, particularly when the scale includes fewer than ten items or is used in preliminary research. In such cases, lower alpha values can still reflect adequate reliability, especially when supported by strong factor loadings and theoretical coherence.

Hence, given that all three items loaded substantially on a single factor and explained a meaningful portion of the variance, the sophistication items were retained as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

Ruggedness

To explore the underlying dimensions of the three items measuring ruggedness, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using the direct oblimin rotation method, based on eigenvalues (> 1.00). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.715, exceeding the acceptable minimum value of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970), verifying the adequacy of the sample size for the analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 179.009$, $p < .001$, indicating sufficient correlations between items to justify PCA (Bartlett, 1954).

The factor analysis revealed that a single underlying factor accounts for 74.55% of the total variance in the data, meaning this much of the variation across the three measured items can be explained by this one shared construct. All items had strong loadings on the single factor, ranging from 0.850 to 0.886. The communalities ranged from 0.722 to 0.785, indicating that all items contributed well to the extracted factor. Hence, it indicates that all three items coherently measure the same construct.

A reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the three ruggedness items. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.828. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.663 to 0.726, and removing any item did not significantly improve the alpha value, confirming that all items contributed positively to the scale. Hence, the ruggedness items have acceptable internal consistency.

Therefore, the ruggedness items were treated as a unified construct, and factor scores were computed and saved in SPSS to be used in the regression analyses that follow.

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Table 4.4

Hypotheses Overview

Hypothesis	Association	Coefficients & Test Results	Result
H12	Fan engagement → Overall brand perception	$b = 0.274$, $\beta = 0.376$, $p < .001$	Supported
H6	Gender moderates Overall brand perception and Fan engagement	GLM $F(1, 167) = 0.898$, $p = .345$	Not supported

H1	Fan engagement → Sincerity	b = 0.386, β = 0.444, p < .001	Supported
H2	Fan engagement → Excitement	b = 0.267, β = 0.319, p < .001	Supported
H3	Fan engagement → Competence	b = 0.223, β = 0.249, p = .001	Supported
H4	Fan engagement → Sophistication	b = 0.245, β = 0.292, p < .001	Supported
H5	Fan engagement → Ruggedness	b = 0.261, β = 0.320, p < .001	Supported
H7	Gender moderates fan engagement effect on sincerity	GLM F(1, 156) = 0.000, p = .997	Not supported
H8	Gender moderates fan engagement effect on excitement	GLM F(1, 151) = 0.947, p = .332	Not supported
H9	Gender moderates fan engagement effect on competence	GLM F(1, 157) = 7.238, p = .008	Supported
H10	Gender moderates fan engagement effect on sophistication	GLM F(1, 151) = 0.173, p = .678	Not supported
H11	Gender moderates fan engagement effect on ruggedness	GLM F(1, 152) = 4.121, p = .044	Supported

Note. Results are summarised by hypothesis number for clarity. Where applicable, regression coefficients (b), standardised coefficients (β), F-values, and p-values are reported. Significance levels: p < .05, p < .01, p < .001. Hypotheses were tested in numerical order, but presented here by construct for clarity.

The following section presents the results of the hypothesis testing. While hypotheses are numbered sequentially (H1-H12) in the theoretical framework, they are reported in the order in which they were statistically tested to improve clarity and flow. As such, the presentation of results

does not follow the numerical order of the hypotheses, but each hypothesis is clearly labelled for ease of reference.

H12: Fan engagement with fan-created content positively predicts overall brand perception across all five dimensions

The regression model of "Overall Brand Perception" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 169) = 27.76$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive brand perception based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is modest: 14.1% of the variance in overall brand perception can be explained by the level of engagement ($R^2 = .141$).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall brand perception, $b = 0.274$, $t = 5.27$, $p < .001$. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall brand perception score increases by approximately 0.27 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H12, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall brand perception. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H6: The relationship between fan engagement and overall brand perception varies by gender

Taylor Swift

The regression model of "Overall Brand Perception (Taylor)" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 168) = 17.12$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting more positive brand perception of Taylor Swift based on fan engagement, though the predictive power is relatively modest: 9.3% of the variance in overall brand perception can be explained by the level of engagement ($R^2 = .093$).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with Taylor's brand perception, $b = 0.246$, $t = 4.14$, $p < .001$. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall brand perception score for Taylor increases by approximately 0.25 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

Harry Styles

The regression model of "Overall Brand Perception (Harry)" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 168) = 24.87$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting more positive brand

perception of Harry Styles based on fan engagement, with slightly greater explanatory power: 12.9% of the variance in overall brand perception can be explained by the level of engagement (R^2 = .129).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with Harry's brand perception, b = 0.303, t = 4.99, p < .001. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement, the overall brand perception score for Harry increases by approximately 0.30 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

Linear Regression Conclusion

While fan engagement significantly predicted overall brand perception for both the male (Harry Styles) and female (Taylor Swift) artists, the relationship was slightly stronger for the male artist. However, as no formal test of the difference between regression coefficients was conducted, this result provides limited support for H6. Future studies should include interaction terms or moderated regression to determine whether artist gender significantly moderates the effect of fan engagement on brand perception.

While initial separate linear regressions demonstrated that fan engagement significantly predicted brand perception for both the male (Harry Styles) and female (Taylor Swift) artists, this approach was limited in its capacity to formally test whether the observed difference between the two regression coefficients was statistically significant. Because each participant rated both artists, the data are best treated as within-subjects, with artist as a repeated measure. Conducting two independent regressions fails to account for this paired structure of the data and treats each brand score as unrelated, which violates the assumptions of independence in standard linear regression. Furthermore, the gender of the artist, central to the hypothesis, is implicitly embedded in the structure of the brand perception questions themselves (participants responded separately to Taylor and Harry, whose genders are known). Therefore, it was not feasible to include artist gender as an explicit moderator in a traditional multiple regression framework.

Therefore, to appropriately address Hypothesis 6, a repeated-measures General Linear Model (GLM) was employed. This method allows for the inclusion of artist as a within-subjects factor and tests whether the relationship between fan engagement (as a covariate) and brand perception is moderated by artist identity (e.g. gender). The GLM approach thus provides conceptually appropriate test of interaction effects in repeated-measures designs, ensuring that any differences in the predictive relationship are not due to chance or participant-level variance.

Repeated-measures general linear model (GLM)

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and brand perception varied as a function of the artist (Taylor

Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 167) = 0.128$, $p = .721$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in overall brand perception between the two artists. Similarly, the interaction between artist and fan engagement was not statistically significant, $F(1, 167) = 0.898$, $p = .345$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and brand perception did not significantly differ depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with brand perception overall, this association does not depend on artist gender. The absence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender does not moderate the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Therefore, Hypothesis 6 is rejected, and the null hypothesis is supported: fan engagement affects brand perception similarly for both male and female artists.

H1: Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of sincerity.

The regression model of "Overall Sincerity" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 169) = 41.56$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive overall sincerity based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is modest: 19.7% of the variance in overall sincerity can be explained by the level of engagement ($R^2 = .197$).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall sincerity, $b = 0.386$, $t = 6.45$, $p < .001$. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall sincerity score increases by approximately 0.386 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H1, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall sincerity. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H2: Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of excitement.

The regression model of "Overall Excitement" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 167) = 18.98$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive overall excitement based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is modest: 10.2% of the variance in overall excitement can be explained by the level of engagement ($R^2 = .102$).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall excitement, b = 0.267, t = 4.36, p < .001. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall excitement score increases by approximately 0.267 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H2, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall excitement. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H3: Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of competence.

The regression model of "Overall Competence" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, F(1, 168) = 11.07, p = .001. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive overall competence based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is low: 6.2% of the variance in overall competence can be explained by the level of engagement (R^2 = .062).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall competence, b = 0.223, t = 3.33, p = .001. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall competence score increases by approximately 0.223 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H3, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall competence. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H4: Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of sophistication.

The regression model of "Overall Sophistication" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, F(1, 167) = 15.55, p < .001. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive overall sophistication based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is modest: 8.5% of the variance in overall sophistication can be explained by the level of engagement (R^2 = .085).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall sophistication, b = 0.245, t = 3.94, p < .001. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall sophistication score increases by approximately 0.245 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H4, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall sophistication. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H5: Higher engagement with fan-created content is positively associated with perceptions of ruggedness.

The regression model of "Overall Ruggedness" as the dependent variable and fan engagement with fan-created content as the independent variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 165) = 18.82$, $p < .001$. This suggests the model is useful for predicting overall positive overall ruggedness based on fan engagement, though its explanatory power is modest: 10.2% of the variance in overall ruggedness can be explained by the level of engagement ($R^2 = .102$).

Fan engagement had a significant, moderate positive association with overall ruggedness, $b = 0.261$, $t = 4.34$, $p < .001$. This indicates that for each unit increase in fan engagement (as measured by the factor score), the overall ruggedness score increases by approximately 0.261 points. This interpretation assumes that no other variables influence the relationship.

These results support H5, indicating that fan engagement significantly predicts more positive overall ruggedness. The null hypothesis (H0), which proposed no relationship between the two variables, is, therefore, rejected.

H7: The effect of fan-created content on sincerity perception differs between male and female artists.

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and perceived sincerity varied as a function of the artist (Taylor Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate. Here, the artist factor was paired with a continuous overall fan engagement score (not separate by artist), testing whether this general engagement related differently across artists.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 156) = 0.245$, $p = .621$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in perceived sincerity between the two artists.

The interaction between artist and fan engagement was not statistically significant, $F(1, 156) = 0.000$, $p = .997$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and perceived sincerity did not significantly differ depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with perceived sincerity, this association does not depend on artist gender. The absence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender does not moderate the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Hypothesis 7 is rejected, and the null hypothesis is supported.

H8: The effect of fan-created content on excitement perception differs between male and female artists.

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and perceived excitement varied as a function of the artist (Taylor Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate. Here, the artist factor was paired with a continuous overall fan engagement score (not separate by artist), testing whether this general engagement related differently across artists.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 151) = 0.155$, $p = .695$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in perceived excitement between the two artists.

The interaction between artist and fan engagement was not statistically significant, $F(1, 151) = 0.947$, $p = .332$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and perceived excitement did not significantly differ depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with perceived excitement, this association does not depend on artist gender. The absence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender does not moderate the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Hypothesis 8 is rejected, and the null hypothesis is supported.

H9: The effect of fan-created content on competence perception differs between male and female artists.

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and perceived competence varied as a function of the artist (Taylor Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate. Here, the artist factor was paired with a continuous overall fan engagement score (not separate by artist), testing whether this general engagement related differently across artists.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 157) = 0.072$, $p = .788$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in perceived competence between the two artists.

The interaction between artist and fan engagement was statistically significant, $F(1, 157) = 7.238$, $p = .008$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and perceived competence significantly differed depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with perceived competence, this association depends on artist gender. The presence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender moderates the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Therefore, hypothesis 9 is supported, and the null hypothesis is rejected.

H10: The effect of fan-created content on sophistication perception differs between male and female artists.

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and perceived sophistication varied as a function of the artist (Taylor Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate. Here, the artist factor was paired with a continuous overall fan engagement score (not separate by artist), testing whether this general engagement related differently across artists.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 151) = 0.183$, $p = .670$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in perceived sophistication between the two artists.

The interaction between artist and fan engagement was not statistically significant, $F(1, 151) = 0.173$, $p = .678$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and perceived sophistication did not significantly differ depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with perceived sophistication, this association does not depend on artist gender. The absence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender does not moderate the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Hypothesis 10 is rejected, and the null hypothesis is supported.

H11: The effect of fan-created content on ruggedness perception differs between male and female artists.

A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between fan engagement and perceived ruggedness varied as a function of the artist (Taylor Swift vs. Harry Styles). Artist was entered as a within-subjects factor, and fan engagement was included as a covariate. Here, the artist factor was paired with a continuous overall fan engagement score (not separate by artist), testing whether this general engagement related differently across artists.

The main effect of artist was not statistically significant, $F(1, 152) = 0.005$, $p = .944$, indicating that, on average, there was no meaningful difference in perceived ruggedness between the two artists.

The interaction between artist and fan engagement was statistically significant, $F(1, 152) = 4.121$, $p = .044$, suggesting that the strength of the relationship between fan engagement and perceived ruggedness significantly differed depending on whether the artist was male or female.

These findings indicate that while fan engagement is positively associated with perceived ruggedness, this association depends on artist gender. The presence of a significant interaction effect implies that gender moderates the impact of fan engagement on how audiences perceive the artist's brand. Therefore, hypothesis 11 is supported, and the null hypothesis is rejected.

5. Discussion

This study examined the extent to which fan engagement with fan-created content influences brand perception of popular music artists, and whether this relationship is moderated by gender. The findings, therefore, offer strong empirical support for the relevance of participatory culture and brand personality theory in explaining branding outcomes in the music industry, while also revealing specific gendered dynamics in how fans co-construct brand meaning. This section interprets the results in light of the theoretical framework, drawing on Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework, Jenkins' (2006, pp. 3-4) theory of participatory culture, Baym's (2018, pp. 83-84) insights into fan labour, and relevant work on gender and branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012, pp. 1-14; Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 75-78).

The descriptive statistics offer important context for interpreting the dynamics of fan engagement and artist branding. The sample primarily consisted of young adults, with a majority identifying as female, and TikTok and Instagram emerged as the dominant platforms for interacting with fan content. These findings reflect broader patterns in participatory culture, where digitally active audiences engage in content circulation, remixing, and co-creation (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4; Baym, 2018, p. 83). The high engagement with celebratory and interactive content aligns with platform logics that reward emotional appeal and visual creativity (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 24-45; Bucher, 2018, p. 29), reinforcing Marshall's (2014, pp. xi-xiv) idea of "new public intimacies" in artist-fan relations. Although a substantial portion of participants reported viewing and sharing fan content, only a small percentage identified as frequent creators, supporting Burgess and Green's (2009, pp. 10-12, 90-92) observation that participatory cultures include both active and passive roles. Furthermore, the gender imbalance in the sample also underscores the importance of considering how structural inequalities may shape engagement practices and branding interpretations, particularly given the gendered pressures female artists face in terms of visibility, emotional labour, and stylistic expectations (Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 75-78). Therefore, the descriptive findings not only contextualise fan practices but also reflect the cultural and algorithmic infrastructures that influence artist brand perception.

Firstly, *H12* was supported: fan engagement significantly predicted overall brand perception. This supports the argument that fans play an important role in shaping artist identity and reputation through participatory practices (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4). Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram allow audiences not only to consume but also to share, remix, and reinterpret artist-related content, which contributes to the construction of brand meaning (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84). This result also corresponds with Duffett's (2013, pp. 165-190) discussion of fan activity as a form of cultural labour that builds emotional connection and visibility.

The next set of hypotheses (*H1* to *H5*) examined how fan engagement influenced each brand personality trait in Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) framework. Hence, all five hypotheses were supported, suggesting that fan-created content plays a key role in shaping how artists are seen in terms of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These findings reflect the idea that brand traits are not fixed but are instead co-created within fan communities (Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84).

In more detail, the strong connection between fan engagement and sincerity (*H1*) supports Banet-Weiser's (2012, pp. 1-14) claim that authenticity is a central part of modern branding, especially where emotional storytelling is involved. For instance, fans might create tributes and personal messages that highlight honesty and emotional openness. Similarly, the result for *H2* shows that fan participation helps reinforce excitement, including traits such as energy, modernness, and creativity, which are often seen in visual and narrative fan content. Moreover, competence (*H3*) was also positively linked to fan engagement, showing that fans can help support perceptions of professionalism and talent. Sophistication (*H4*) was influenced in a similar way, suggesting that ideas of elegance and high status are reinforced through visual and stylistic fan content. Ruggedness (*H5*) was also influenced by engagement, indicating that fans sometimes portray artists as bold or tough, even on platforms where relatable and polished images are more common.

In relation to gender, *H6* was not supported. Accordingly, this means that gender did not affect the overall connection between fan engagement and brand perception. This result challenges Banet-Weiser's (2012, pp. 1-14) argument that female artists rely more heavily on emotional branding. It may instead point to a more balanced pattern across genders in how fans shape artist brands, at least when looking at overall brand evaluation. However, this finding does not eliminate the relevance of gender, as its influence becomes apparent in the analysis of specific brand dimensions.

Additionally, two moderation hypotheses were supported. Firstly, *H9* results indicated that gender influenced how fan engagement affected perceptions of competence. This supports Raine and Strong's (2019, pp. 52-54) view that male competence is often assumed, while women must constantly demonstrate their skills. The stronger effect for male artists suggests that fans may still rely on existing cultural assumptions when evaluating talent. Secondly, *H11* was also supported, showcasing that gender affected the relationship between fan engagement and ruggedness. This reinforces Aaker's (1996, pp. 142-145) characterisation of ruggedness as a masculine-coded trait and aligns with Lieb's (2013, pp. 1-9) observation that female artists are seldom afforded the same cultural space to embody rebellion or strength. The findings indicate that fan engagement may, at times, reproduce, rather than disrupt, conventional gender norms within artist branding.

By contrast, *H7*, *H8*, and *H10* were not supported. Gender did not alter how fan engagement influenced perceptions of sincerity, excitement, or sophistication. These findings suggest that some brand traits, particularly emotional openness and style, may be more equally applied to male and female artists, at least within digital fan practices.

Moreover, while the primary focus of this study was to explore how engagement with fan-created media influences brand perception across male and female artists, attention was also paid to methodological considerations and potential limitations. Although the analysis did not examine whether a respondent's gender moderated the relationship between engagement and brand perception, this remains a valuable direction for future research. Furthermore, the study's design acknowledged the possibility of common method biases. Although Harman's single-factor test was not conducted, awareness of such biases informed the construction of the survey instrument. For instance, question wording was varied, and scale formats were balanced to reduce the likelihood of bias. The potential for reverse causality, where brand perception could influence fan engagement, was also considered but could not be addressed within the limits of the study's cross-sectional, exploratory design. Overall, while these concerns did not fall within the core analytical scope of the study, they were taken into account when interpreting the findings.

In summary, these results show that fan engagement has a strong effect on how artists are perceived across all brand dimensions, though not always in equal ways. While participatory culture allows fans to shape meaning (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4), this influence is still shaped by broader platform and cultural structures (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 24-45; Bucher, 2018, p. 29). The patterns observed here suggest that fans are working within existing social and visual norms, even as they contribute to reshaping artist identity.

Artist branding, therefore, should be seen as a shared process, influenced by platform design, fan creativity, and cultural expectations. Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) model has helped make sense of these dynamics, but further studies should explore how traits such as ruggedness and competence are applied unevenly across genders. In the end, while fan-created content increases the ways in which audiences can influence brand meaning, it also shows how deeply cultural ideas still shape who is seen as skilled, authentic, or bold.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the research question: *To what extent does fan engagement with fan-created content influence brand perception of male versus female artists in popular music?* Drawing on Aaker's (1996, pp. 137-174) Brand Personality Framework and theories of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4; Baym, 2018, pp. 83-84), the study explored how audience interaction with fan-created content shapes perceptions of artist identity and how this process is influenced by gender.

The results confirmed that fan engagement significantly predicts brand perception across all five of Aaker's personality traits-sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. This supports the view that branding is not solely a top-down marketing approach, but a co-constructed process in which fans play an active role. Although the overall relationship between fan engagement and brand perception did not differ significantly between male and female artists (*H6*), gender did moderate the relationships between engagement and two specific traits: competence and ruggedness. These moderation effects suggest that gender shapes the way certain characteristics are interpreted within fan-driven branding. This finding aligns with earlier claims that attributes such as expertise and toughness are still unequally distributed in cultural perceptions of male and female artists (Aaker, 1996, pp. 142-145; Lieb, 2013, pp. 1-9; Raine & Strong, 2019, pp. 52-54).

These findings contribute to the ongoing discussion of participatory branding by showing that while fans help shape public artist identities, this influence remains structured by broader social and cultural frameworks. Fan-created content is a site of meaning-making, but one that does not exist outside of dominant gender norms. As previous research has shown, platforms and algorithmic environments reinforce certain traits more than others, shaping which identities are promoted or restricted (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 24-45; Bucher, 2018, p. 29).

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The sample was predominantly composed of young, female-identifying participants, which may limit the generalisability of the results to more diverse or global fan populations. The use of non-probability sampling via online distribution also introduces self-selection bias, reducing the representativeness of the sample. Furthermore, all engagement measures relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias, overestimation, or selective recall. Moreover, the survey was conducted in English, although the majority of respondents were non-native speakers, which may have affected comprehension and expression. The study also employed a cross-sectional design, meaning the results reflect associations at a single point in time and cannot support causal conclusions. Additionally, potentially influential factors such as music genre, artist popularity, and the specific format of fan-created content (e.g., narrative, visual, or interactive) were not accounted for, although

these may shape how audiences perceive brand traits. The absence of qualitative data further limited insight into the meanings fans attach to specific traits. Lastly, gender was operationalised in binary terms, restricting the analysis of more fluid or intersectional identity categories.

Building on these findings, future research could adopt mixed-method approaches to explore the mechanisms through which different forms of fan-created content, such as visual edits, narrative texts, and interactive formats, communicate brand personality traits. Moreover, analysing how these content types are received across different platforms (e.g. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) and within various fan communities could offer a more nuanced understanding of how participatory branding unfolds in distinct digital environments. Comparative studies across cultural contexts may also reveal how localised norms shape interpretations of artist traits like ruggedness or sophistication. In addition, qualitative methods, such as interviews, or content analysis, could provide deeper insights into how fans make sense of brand traits, particularly those that remain contested or unevenly distributed, such as competence or ruggedness. Such research could further clarify how gendered expectations influence these interpretations and how fans negotiate, or reinforce dominant representations. Lastly, longitudinal methods might also be used to explore how engagement and branding perceptions evolve over time, especially as platform features and fandom practices continue to shift.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that engagement with fan-created content meaningfully influences how popular music artists are perceived in terms of brand identity, and that gender plays a selective role in shaping the interpretation of certain traits. These results showcase that participatory fan practices contribute to shaping brand perceptions but do not fully disrupt established systemic patterns. Even as fans co-create artist meaning, gendered expectations continue to influence how specific traits are attributed. Artist branding, therefore, emerges as a shared process, which is driven by audience engagement but still embedded within broader norms about gender.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire

Introduction

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in this research study. I am inviting you to fill in a questionnaire that explores the relationship between fan-created content and the brand perception of popular music artists. In this questionnaire, you will be asked about your engagement with fan-created media and your perceptions of specific brand traits related to Taylor Swift and Harry Styles.

The questionnaire will take approximately 7-8 minutes to complete. Please answer each question carefully and honestly, as your personal opinions are essential to this research. There are no right or wrong answers.

All research data will remain completely confidential and will be collected in an anonymous form. I will not be able to identify you. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or choose to withdraw while completing the questionnaire, this will have no consequences. You may stop participating at any time without providing a reason.

If you have questions about this research, before or after completing the questionnaire, you can contact the responsible researcher, Anastasiia Korotina, via email: 697777ak@eur.nl, or send me a private message over the social media account through which you have reached this survey.

If you have read and understood the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, please click the "I Agree" button below to begin the questionnaire.

Section 1: Age Question

What is your age (please enter a number, e.g. 21)

[Open-ended]

Section 2: Fan Question

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

[1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree]

- I consider myself a Taylor Swift fan
- I consider myself a Harry Styles fan

Section 3: Fan Engagement

On a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often), how often do you…

[1 = Never to 5 = Very Often]

- watch fan-created videos or edits about your favourite artist?
- share or repost fan content online?
- comment on or interact with fan content?
- create original fan content (e.g., edits, remixes, memes)?

Which types of fan-created content do you engage with most often? (Select all that apply)

Fan-created content refers to creative works produced by fans, such as fan art, memes, videos, remixes, fanfiction, or tribute hashtags, that reference or celebrate Taylor Swift or Harry Styles.

A video essay is an in-depth, often analytical video exploring a topic or theme related to Taylor Swift or Harry Styles.

☐ Celebratory Content (e.g., fan art, tribute hashtags, photo collages of band moments)

☐ Interactive Content (e.g., TikTok trends such as dance challenges, viral audio remixes, fan Q&A sessions on Instagram)

☐ Narrative Content (e.g., fanfiction stories on Wattpad, video essays analysing career highlights, parody videos)

Do you create fan-related content about Taylor Swift and/or Harry Styles, or do you primarily consume it?

☐ Content Consumer

☐ Content Creator

☐ Both

☐ Neither

Brand Dimensions Introduction Page

In this part of the questionnaire, you will be asked to rate how much you agree with a series of statements about two artists: Taylor Swift and Harry Styles. These statements relate to five personality traits that are often used to describe how people view public figures.

Below are short descriptions of each trait, explained through the lens of fan-created content:

- Sincerity refers to being honest, warm, and genuine. It's about how emotionally connected and relatable an artist seems, especially through fan edits, stories, or tributes.
- Excitement refers to being energetic, creative, and modern. This is often shown in high-energy content like TikTok trends, remixes, or funny videos.
- Competence refers to being skilled, professional, and reliable. Fan content might show this by celebrating an artist's achievements or highlighting their career success.
- Sophistication refers to elegance, charm, and luxury. This trait might be reflected in fan content that focuses on fashion, style, or high-profile collaborations.
- Ruggedness refers to being strong, bold, and resilient. Some fan content shows this by portraying an artist as fearless, tough, or able to overcome challenges.

Please keep these definitions in mind as you complete the next sections.

Section 3: Brand Perception - Taylor Swift

Thinking about Taylor Swift, how much do you agree with the following statements?

[1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree]

Sincerity

- Taylor Swift seems honest and genuine.
- She appears caring and emotionally expressive.
- She gives off a wholesome, down-to-earth image.

Excitement

- Taylor Swift comes across as energetic and spirited.
- Her image is trendy and up-to-date.
- She is seen as daring and creative.

Competence

- Taylor Swift is professional and skilled.
- She appears confident and reliable.
- She is perceived as a successful and intelligent artist.

Sophistication

- Taylor Swift has a glamorous and refined image.
- She comes across as elegant and charming.
- She is associated with an upper-class or polished lifestyle.

Ruggedness

- Taylor Swift is perceived as tough and resilient.
- She comes across as bold and strong.

- She gives the impression of being fearless and determined.

Section 4: Brand Perception - Harry Styles

Thinking about Harry Styles, based on your experience with fan-created content online (e.g., edits, tributes, memes), how much do you agree with the following statements?
[1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree]

Sincerity

- Harry Styles seems honest and genuine.
- He appears caring and emotionally expressive.
- He gives off a wholesome, down-to-earth image.

Excitement

- Harry Styles comes across as energetic and spirited.
- His image is trendy and up-to-date.
- He is seen as daring and creative.

Competence

- Harry Styles is professional and skilled.
- He appears confident and reliable.
- He is perceived as a successful and intelligent artist.

Sophistication

- Harry Styles has a glamorous and refined image.
- He comes across as elegant and charming.
- He is associated with an upper-class or polished lifestyle.

Ruggedness

- Harry Styles is perceived as tough and resilient.
- He comes across as bold and strong.
- He gives the impression of being fearless and determined.

Section 5: Demographics

1. What is your gender? [Options: Male, Female, Non-binary/Other, Prefer not to say]

2. Is English your first or native language? [Options: Yes, No, Prefer not to say]

3. Which country are you from? [Dropdown menu]

-If your country is not listed, please specify it below [Open-ended]

4. Which social media platform do you use most to engage with music artist fan content? [Options: TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Other]

-If the social media platform you use most often to engage with Taylor Swift's and Harry Styles' fan content is not listed, please specify it below [Open-ended]

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

Appendix B. Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Anastasiia Korotina
Student ID: 697777
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050
Supervisor Name: Dr. Roderick Udo
Date: 25.06.2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

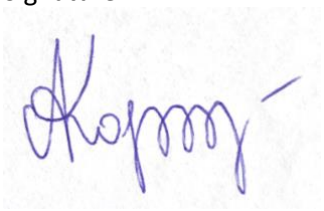
Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from

these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:



Date of Signature: 25.06.2025

AI Prompts Examples

- Can you recommend a good academic book or article on fan branding or participatory culture, something different than Baym?
- Do you know where I can download a full book of Duffett “Understanding Fandom”?
- Do you remember if the members of One Direction thanked fans directly in the movie "This Is Us"?
- How can I phrase this sentence more clearly without changing its meaning?
- Can you help me check for repeated words in this paragraph?
- Do you have any creative title ideas if I drop the name “Harry Styles” from the title?
- What’s the cleanest way to cite a TikTok trend or fan edit in APA 7?
- Where can I add a short explanation about Bartlett’s Test in the results section without repeating myself?
- How can I explain in one sentence that I reordered the hypotheses for reporting purposes?
- Is it normal to use Oblimin rotation in PCA if I assume correlation between brand traits, and they are supported by my framework?

- Can you explain why .30 is typically used as a cut-off in factor analysis instead of something like .10?
- Can you walk me through how to apply Oblimin rotation in SPSS step by step?
- How do I start the page numbers from the first chapter instead of the title page in Word?
- Is there a clean way to add subtitles inside a section without messing up my Word table of contents?
- Can you help me decide how to add the table of factor loadings, because the page keeps sliding, and I cannot lock it in in Word?
- Can you help me find a synonym for …?