Merchandise Ownership and Social Stratification: Study on Taylor Swift Fandom in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how merchandise ownership can create social stratification among Taylor Swift fans (Swifties) in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach with a critical paradigm, primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with six purposively sampled Indonesian Swifties representing variations in merchandise ownership. Secondary data came from digital observation of a fan's account identified by informants as an influencer and a community's WhatsApp Group's transcript. Analysis utilized Miles & Huberman's (1994) interactive model within the theoretical frameworks of Illouz's (2007; 2018) Emotional Capitalism, as well as Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) Distinction and Cultural Capital. Findings reveal that social stratification in Swifties Indonesia's community is driven by emotional capitalism, making consumption feels unlike economic transactions. As a result, merchandise becomes cultural capital, consumed unevenly due to disparities in economic power and constraints on structural distribution. That inequality is used as a means of differentiation, leading to stratification. Rooted in false consciousness, this hierarchy resists change. Therefore, researchers propose that fans break free from false consciousness, community becomes more introspective, and the entertainment industry becomes more inclusive to transcend from a hierarchy framed as love. Future research suggestions include international comparisons, extending the research period, and focusing on peripheral perspectives.

Keyword: *Merchandise, Fandom, Distinction, Social Stratification, Indonesian Swifties.*

INTRODUCTION

The question of who a person truly is may seem simple, but it has long been debated in the social sciences. Identity is often assumed to be an innate, fixed trait given at birth. However, modern social science treats identity the opposite way: as Hall (1997) explains, identity is not something naturally given to humans, but something constructed and continuously shaped through social processes and culture. Butler (1990) extends this by arguing that identity is essentially performative. It does not exist simply because it is held, but only to the extent that it is continually demonstrated through actions, words, and repeated choices, and it must be recognized by others to be considered complete.

This need for recognition is what drives people to actively display and prove their identity to others, not out of vanity, but because social recognition is intrinsic to how identity functions. In modern society, this need increasingly meets the logic of the market: emotional values that were

once private are transformed by the capitalist system into commodities that can be bought and sold, a process Mosco (1996) calls commodification. In practice, this is visible in how a person expresses themselves through the goods they consume, supported by industries that specifically target this need for expression, from lifestyle and clothing to music. As a result, the line between genuine self-expression and market-driven consumption becomes increasingly blurred: a purchase that feels like an authentic expression of self has often already been shaped by the market long before the decision to buy was made.

One social space where this dynamic is most visible is the fan community, or fandom, a community formed around a shared love for a character, work, or cultural phenomenon (Duffett, 2013). Because fandom's foundation is genuine emotional attachment, it becomes a platform for identity performance: to be recognized as a fan, one cannot simply keep their love for an idol private, but must consistently display and prove it to fellow community members, especially in the era of social media, where such performances are no longer bound by space or time. Uploading collection photos, sharing event experiences, or discussing admired works are all ways fans display and validate their identity, and the entertainment industry fuels these performances by supplying commodified products that embody narratives of devotion to the idol.

Yet, from a political-economic perspective, this content creation and interaction is not simply free self-expression; it constitutes a form of unpaid digital work, or what Fuchs (2021) calls digital labor. The creativity, time, and energy fans devote to producing content and interacting on digital platforms generate enormous economic value, more active users, richer behavioral data, and more advertisers, all of which is captured by platform owners while the fans who produce it receive no compensation. This mechanism works precisely because it is not recognized as work: fans experience it as enjoyment and self-expression, so the boundary between recreation and exploitation disappears, allowing platforms to keep harvesting value from user activity for free.

Illouz (2007) names this dynamic emotional capitalism: an economic system, so called because it operates through genuine emotion rather than against it, in which industries manufacture and trade what were once private emotions as commodities by building narratives of authenticity between consumers and brands. Under this system, feeling is not enough, emotion must be continually proven, and that proof almost always takes the form of consumption, so that affective relationships once considered personal are gradually redirected into consumption behavior that benefits industry. Illouz (2018) adds a further dimension relevant to fandom: performative acts in which social recognition is granted only to those able to display expensive symbols of emotional consumption, so that emotion becomes a form of socially displayed capital, realized through material consumption rather than feeling alone.

When material consumption becomes a performance of identity that can be valued and compared between fans, a social hierarchy forms within the community, for which Bourdieu (1984, 1986) offers the most relevant framework. Bourdieu views society as an arena of struggle in which individuals, families, and groups compete not only for money and formal power but for the right to define what counts as valuable within a social order, what he calls cultural capital, which exists in three complementary forms: objectified (recognized objects, such as an art collection), internalized (embodied knowledge, such as the ability to appreciate a field in depth), and institutionalized (formal recognition, such as membership in an elite organization or an academic degree).

Distinction is the mechanism by which individuals convert this cultural capital into social position: as Bourdieu (1984) puts it, "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier," using consumption and taste to create distance from those deemed inferior while claiming equal standing with those deemed superior. Within a community, this mechanism of distinction is what produces hierarchy, an ordered structure in which those with high cultural capital occupy positions of honor while those without are marginalized. It is this layered relationship between cultural capital, distinction, and hierarchy that this study uses to analyze social stratification, understood here as the durable, unequal ranking of fandom members based on merchandise ownership.

All of these dynamics, identity construction, performative acts, commodification, digital labor, emotional capitalism, cultural capital, and distinction, are highly relevant to contemporary music fandom. In this context, merchandise consumption refers specifically to the purchase and

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display of officially licensed fan objects, such as albums, apparel, and concert memorabilia, as the material vehicle through which fans convert emotional attachment into a visible, comparable marker of status. Among the many fandoms available, the Taylor Swift fan community is one of the richest to study, both for its massive scale and for the diversity of its internal dynamics: from casual listeners to collectors of every merchandise line, and from varying levels of community involvement to varying levels of economic access that shape how much someone can demonstrate their love through consumption. The industry behind Taylor Swift produces a wide range of products carrying her personal narrative, multiple album editions named after specific lyrics, merchandise designed around each era's aesthetic, and large-scale concerts that stage her personal narrative through fashion and performance, all engineered to encourage emotional consumption and strengthen fan engagement.

Several studies support this picture. Khanal (2024) shows that Taylor Swift's authentic branding effectively encourages emotional consumption of her products, while Ambadar (2024) demonstrates how the personal narrative in her concert film The Eras Tour fosters fan loyalty and further consumption. Ayuning Gitafitri and Kusumawati (2024) add that Swifties are willing to invest heavily in their idol to build this brand loyalty, a pattern Bengtsson and Edlom (2023) describe as choreographed engagement, fan participation that appears spontaneous but is in fact orchestrated by the industry for commercial gain, and Satya and Susilastuti (2024) similarly find that concerts and other fan gathering spaces serve as stages for displaying and validating identity during The Eras Tour.

These five studies illuminate the relationship between artist, industry, and fans, from communication dynamics to the exchange of fandom cultural symbols, but studies that critically examine what happens between fans themselves remain limited, particularly how merchandise ownership functions not only as an expression of love but also as a means of establishing hierarchy within the community itself. This gap is even more pressing in the Indonesian context, where Taylor Swift merchandise is not easily accessible: her official website does not ship directly to Indonesia, and stock from her official label store, Universal Music, is limited and often unavailable, forcing Indonesian Swifties toward consignment services, especially for exclusive items.

Beyond substantial international shipping costs, exchange rate losses, and high taxes and customs fees, Indonesian Swifties must also pay for these consignment services, pushing the final price beyond the purchasing power of the average young fan and creating a sharp gap in access to cultural capital within the fandom. This is where distinction emerges: those who can access original merchandise automatically occupy a different social position from those who cannot, often producing social exclusion or marginalization, an effect Hills (2002) also identifies as a general vulnerability of fan communities once material consumption becomes a marker of legitimate membership. Jenkins (2006) adds that participation in any community is never equal, since some members will always be more involved, knowledgeable, or capable than others, a hierarchy that, though unwritten, is felt and practiced daily by community members, and understanding it requires attention to the subjective experience of informants rather than simply measuring behavior from the outside.

This deeper understanding matters not only for the study of fandom itself, but for the broader study of the sociology of consumption and the political economy of media in Indonesia. This study, "Merchandise Ownership and Social Stratification: A Case Study of Taylor Swift's Fandom in Indonesia," was therefore conducted to critically examine how material ownership creates social barriers within the Taylor Swift fandom in Indonesia, using a critical paradigm and qualitative methods: primary data through in-depth interviews with fans on the distinctive motives behind their consumption, and secondary data through social media observation of how this stratification is practiced and displayed in digital spaces. The main question is how merchandise ownership creates social stratification among Indonesian Taylor Swift fans, with the aim of analyzing how merchandise functions as a status marker among Indonesian Swifties and how digital spaces demonstrate this stratification.

This research is limited to Indonesian fans, who may have different characteristics than fans in other countries where official distributors of Taylor Swift merchandise are more easily accessible, and its focus on physical material objects also limits the scope of other, digital forms of

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capital that are not explored in depth here. These boundaries are acknowledged so that the findings are read as context-specific rather than as a universal claim about fandom stratification.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach to address issues related to processes, meanings, and human experiences (Creswell, 2009). A critical paradigm is also employed because the goal of this research is to uncover the causes and who benefits from the system (Neuman, 2014) of merchandise-ownership-based stratification within fandom.

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with six informants, identified as R1 to R6. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on several variations. The first is based on the level of merchandise ownership—starting with R1, who has the largest collection, R2, who collects all CDs and some concert items, R3, who only owns one CD from a giveaway, R4, who focuses on rare merchandise, R5, who owns five hoodies, four t-shirts, two CDs, and numerous friendship bracelets, and R6, who owns nine CDs. The first variation was chosen to gain insight into the dynamics of stratification from several perspectives—from fans at the top of the hierarchy to those with more limited positions. The second variation is based on the level of involvement in community groups. From R1, who is very active and has close connections with the administrators, to R6, who provides a peripheral perspective. These two variations are also linked to the informants' economic conditions, ranging from R1 and R5, who are the most economically stable, to R3, who is still looking for permanent employment.

Secondary data was obtained from two sources: digital observation of the Instagram and TikTok accounts of a fan most frequently mentioned by informants as an influential figure (referred to as O1), and transcripts from a WhatsApp group belonging to the Swifties community in Indonesia with over a thousand members. This digital observation method follows Kozinets' (2015) netnographic approach, allowing researchers to study digital communities without direct intervention.

The data obtained was then analyzed using Miles & Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, which can be carried out in a back-and-forth, rather than a linear, process. The analysis was conducted following the framework of Emotional Capitalism Theory (Illouz, 2007; 2018) and Distinction and Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Emotional capitalism was used to examine why individuals are willing to spend significant amounts of money on merchandise. Cultural capital was then used to understand the function of merchandise within a fandom, while Distinction was used to examine how merchandise ownership can serve as a medium for producing hierarchy within the fandom.

Data saturation was reached after the sixth interview with the informant, as no new themes or patterns were discovered (Patton, 2002). All informants participated voluntarily after receiving an explanation of the research purpose and providing informed consent, and their identities were anonymized throughout this study using the codes R1 to R6 for interview informants and O1 to O2 for observed community figures, consistent with the ethical clearance obtained for research involving human participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Merchandise as a Commodified Expression of Love

Data collection revealed that all informants interpreted merchandise consumption not as a simple economic transaction, but as an expression of love for Taylor Swift. This pattern consistently emerged across all informants, although the intensity varied.

R1 explicitly stated, "For me, it's a form of support... If I'm a fan, I prove it by having merchandise. That's a form of loyalty." This statement demonstrates how merchandise isn't simply viewed as an ordinary object. For R1, owning it is a declaration of identity as a Swiftie. R1 embodies this abstract loyalty through merchandise ownership, allowing it to be displayed and recognized by fellow community members.

R2 even explicitly described a deeper emotional dimension, where "The Cardigan" merchandise made her feel like she was being embraced by her idol. The garment, worn by Taylor Swift in one of her music videos, creates the illusion of a physical presence for fans who own it. These findings align with the concept of Emotional Capitalism (Illouz, 2007; 2018), which asserts

that in this modern era, industry also sells feelings. Products are designed to provide consumers with specific emotional experiences, from feeling like they can prove their loyalty, like R1, to feeling the physical presence of their idol, like R2. Merchandise consumption is perceived not merely as an economic transaction, but as a means of experiencing something.

R3 and R4 add further texture to this pattern. R3 described the moment of purchase as driven almost entirely by feeling rather than calculation: "This is more impulsive, so it's like not factoring in a budget... I just buy it right away because I like it, that's why I buy it" (R3, In-Depth Interview, 2026). R4, meanwhile, explained that a snow globe became a favorite piece of merchandise not for its function as a decorative object, but because it captured a specific, unrepeatable live moment, the way Taylor Swift's acoustic piano performances change every night, sometimes tearful, sometimes playful, compressed into a small, ownable object (R4, In-Depth Interview, 2026). R5 offers a still sharper illustration of how emotion overrides calculation: her first Taylor Swift merchandise, a hoodie from the Reputation era, was purchased using government financial aid intended for low-income workers, immediately after she recovered from COVID-19, functioning simultaneously as a celebration of surviving the illness and of newly identifying herself as a Swiftie (R5, In-Depth Interview, 2026). Read together, these five accounts, R1's loyalty, R2's felt embrace, R3's impulsivity, R4's captured moment, and R5's crisis-driven purchase, do more than illustrate Emotional Capitalism (Illouz, 2007; 2018); they show the theory operating through distinct emotional registers of duty, intimacy, spontaneity, memory, and survival, which suggests that emotional capitalism does not standardize consumer feeling into a single script but instead absorbs whatever emotional register is locally available and redirects it toward the same consumption outcome.

R5's experience also reveals an inverse dynamic on the production side. Her handmade friendship bracelets began as what she called a therapeutic, joyful practice, but once demand from fellow Swifties grew ahead of the Singapore leg of The Eras Tour, filling orders left her sleeping only two to three hours a night, and she was ultimately unable to bring any of her own bracelets to the concert she attended (R5, In-Depth Interview, 2026). This suggests that emotional capitalism does not only convert fans into consumers; it can just as easily convert a fan's own creative labor into unpaid market pressure, an extension of Fuchs's (2021) concept of digital labor that the five earlier Taylor Swift studies (Khanal, 2024; Ambadar, 2024; Ayuning Gitafitri & Kusumawati, 2024; Bengtsson & Edlom, 2023; Satya & Susilastuti, 2024) do not address, since their focus remains on the relationship between artist, industry, and fan rather than on what fans produce for one another.

2. Cultural Capital as a Form of Hierarchy in Fandom

Because it is not viewed as a simple economic transaction, merchandise ownership is then organized into a meaningful hierarchy through Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of cultural capital.

First, objectified cultural capital, manifested in the ownership of the merchandise itself. And within the Indonesian Swifties community, not all merchandise has equal symbolic value. For example, R1 feels different from others because he owns a limited edition CD. Then, there's R4, who is immediately recognized at several community events because he wears a rare jacket. This level of scarcity—in terms of accessibility, stock availability, and price—confers a much higher prestige value than more readily accessible merchandise.

Second, internalized cultural capital, which is in-depth knowledge of lore, Easter eggs, and even Taylor Swift's personal life. For example, R3 is able to decode hidden symbols in Taylor Swift's works and considers fans with similar abilities to be "true Swifties." However, findings indicate that objectified and internalized cultural capital are not automatically linearly related. This second level of cultural capital is more limited, requiring in-depth interaction to establish its status among fellow fans. This is unlike R4's rare jacket, which immediately garners community recognition simply by seeing it.

Third, institutionalized cultural capital, in this case, takes the form of official recognition from the community, including recognition from Taylor Swift herself. The most significant example in this category is O1, who accumulated all three types of cultural capital simultaneously, appearing in the official Taylor Swift documentary and recognized by almost all informants as the most influential Indonesian Swiftie, placing her at the top of the community hierarchy.

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Read together, R1's, R3's, and R4's forms of capital are unevenly convertible: objectified capital, such as a rare CD, grants instant recognition simply by being seen, while internalized capital, such as R3's lore expertise, requires sustained interaction to be socially legible. This suggests that within this fandom, visibility itself functions as a form of capital that can outweigh actual expertise or financial investment, which is a more argumentative reading of the data than treating the three forms of capital as simply co-existing side by side.

3. Distinction to Reproduce Hierarchy

Ownership of merchandise, which serves as cultural capital within the fandom, also forms a hierarchy. And to continue reproducing it, fans practice differentiation. Or, as Bourdieu (1984) explains, it's a mechanism of self-distinction employed by all levels of the hierarchy.

Within the Indonesian Swifties community, active differentiation occurs when members with greater cultural capital explicitly differentiate themselves from fans with less.

One incident in the community's WhatsApp group on December 8, 2025, clearly demonstrated this hierarchy. When a member offered his album collection for sale, R1 responded by posting a photo of his personal collection and commenting that he already had a much more extensive collection. This action was normal, according to R1. He even stated in an interview that he didn't need validation for his collection. This admission aligns with what Bourdieu (1984) calls habitus, where distinction is also carried out unconsciously and feels natural to the participants.

However, another member, whose name was disguised as O2, acted as a show-off and could undermine the seller's offer. The incident then escalated into open conflict.

The most significant response was O2's lack of familiarity with the situation.

Another significant response was O2's response, which wasn't as close to the community administrators as R1 when he stated, "You always prioritize the higher ups, not the lower downs."

This statement was the most direct verbal articulation of the social structure that had been operating silently within the community, and it also confirmed that the hierarchy was indeed felt by members. This was especially true when the resolution of the conflict resulted in the expulsion of R1 and O2 from the community, which at first seemed fair, but was more detrimental to O2, who had been lower in the hierarchy from the start.

4. False Consciousness and the Internalization of Symbolic Dominance to Maintain Hierarchy

While those at the top of the hierarchy cultivate distinctions to differentiate themselves from those at the bottom, fans at the bottom of the hierarchy actually internalize and reproduce this hierarchical system. This situation is an example of false consciousness (Lukács, 1923), where those who are dominated actually accept and contribute to reproducing a system that is detrimental to them.

For example, R6 increasingly discouraged his involvement in the community as the conflict over merchandise escalated, further marginalizing his self-exclusion.

Furthermore, informants expressed phrases such as "know yourself, know your economic situation," "trained to understand," and "unfortunately, you're an Indonesian citizen," which at first glance seem like wise acceptance. However, these phrases fail to identify the barriers as structural inequalities. This is especially true given the limited distribution to Indonesia, requiring additional fees for delivery services to obtain merchandise. These expressions actually internalize inequality as a personal condition that must be accepted.

Emotional Capitalism (Illouz, 2007; 2018) plays a driving force in maintaining this false consciousness. By framing merchandise consumption as a sincere expression of love rather than a simple economic transaction, the system successfully renders the inability to purchase as a deficit of affection for the idol, rather than a result of structural barriers. Fans who cannot afford expensive merchandise tend to blame their personal financial situation and question the depth of their own affection, rather than questioning the unfair distribution system.

Thus, merchandise ownership creates social stratification through three systems operating simultaneously: emotional capitalism as the driver of consumption; cultural capital as the organizer of uneven consumption into a meaningful hierarchy; and the distinction and internalization of symbolic dominance, which plays a role in ensuring the continued reproduction

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of this hierarchy by all members of the community. Because the most powerful hierarchy is the one that feels like love.

This extends the five earlier studies on Taylor Swift's fandom (Khanal, 2024; Ambadar, 2024; Ayuning Gitafitri & Kusumawati, 2024; Bengtsson & Edlom, 2023; Satya & Susilastuti, 2024), which examined how the artist and industry produce loyalty and engagement, by showing that once that engagement reaches the fan community itself, it does not simply circulate as solidarity: it hardens into an internal hierarchy that fans enforce upon one another, with or without the industry's direct involvement.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This research shows that merchandise ownership in the Indonesian Swifties community is not merely viewed as a sign of love for idols, but also functions as a complex instrument of social stratification. This stratification is not formed by a system of emotional capitalism as a driver of consumption, but rather by cultural capital as an organizer of uneven consumption into a meaningful hierarchy. Furthermore, the distinction and internalization of symbolic domination contribute to ensuring the continued reproduction of this hierarchy by all community members.

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical implication of this finding is that the theories of Illouz and Bourdieu, originally developed in the context of Western society, are also relevant when applied to fandom phenomena in developing countries with more limited structural conditions. Barriers to merchandise access in Indonesia add a layer of structural complexity that actually strengthens the analysis of both theoretical frameworks.

Practical Implications

Practically, this research advocates for three parties: fans to be able to interpret financial barriers as structural inequalities rather than personal failings; the community to be more reflective about the implicit standards they reproduce; and the entertainment industry to develop more inclusive distribution models that do not simply optimize profits from artificial scarcity.

Limitations and Agenda for Future Research

This research is limited by its focus on Indonesian fans, whose access barriers and consumption patterns may not generalize to fans in countries with easier access to official merchandise, and by its reliance on six informants and two observed community figures, which, while sufficient for thematic saturation, cannot capture the full range of positions within a much larger fandom. Building on these limitations, further research could pursue cross-national comparative studies to test whether stratification mechanisms are universal or merely contextual, longitudinal research to examine the stability or change of hierarchies over time, and research specifically focusing on peripheral voices that have been most impacted but least heard.

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