

The Gag City Grammar Police: Language and Algorithmic Community on Stan Twitter

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Abstract

Barbz are a group of fans who have formed an online community devoted to Nicki Minaj. Known broadly as a ‘stan’ group, they form speech communities on Twitter/X and present as a closed group despite remaining public. Taking advantage of the algorithm’s composition of an individual’s feed, they use linguistic strategies to conceal the group, while remaining discoverable to a defined and mutable audience. I begin by engaging with sociolinguistic theories of variance and enregisterment to describe language in the social landscape. Then I explore fandom studies, cultural capital, and structural theories of the internet. Observation of nonstandard English use on Twitter showed Barbz discouraging their posts from spreading to the general public. I analyze the spread of memes, showing that Barbz strategically open their community at specific times and in specific ways that are advantageous to them. Finally, I discuss direct mentions of the algorithm. I found that on Twitter, Barbz strategically employ language to manipulate the borders of both their community and their audience. In order to understand group maintenance, formation, and relationality online it is vital to account for the role of the algorithm as companion, rather than rigid structure.

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1. “It’s Not Your Language, It’s Just for Us”

In a 2018 YouTube clip from American Idol, a flushed young man auditions a song before three judges:¹ “My name is Noah Davis, I’m from Royal, Arkansas, and I am 18 years old,” He quickly mutters, “Wig, okay,” to which Katy Perry, one of the judges responds, “Wig—did you just say wig? I know, wig, I feel that already.” Her fellow judges Luke Bryan and Lionel Richie are befuddled: “Wig? What’s wig?” But Katy cuts them off. “*It’s not your language, it’s just for us,*” she says to Noah, “I am ready for my wig to go flying...out of this room” (American Idol 2012). This exchange, which went viral on many social media platforms, hinges on the use of language to define a group and limit the intelligibility of the message to an intended audience. Know Your Meme (2018) traces ‘wig’ to African American Vernacular English (AAVE, explored in more depth later) as a shortened form of ‘wig flew’ or ‘wig snatched,’ an expression of shock, excitement, or praise of excellence. They also note the term is connected to fandom and stan Twitter.

‘Stan’ is an *in vivo* term: it is actively used within fandom circles as a descriptive category. Some say it is a portmanteau of ‘stalker’ and ‘fan,’ while others argue it was adopted from Eminem’s eponymous single from 2000 (Crow 2019). Eminem’s “Stan” music video tells the story of an obsessed fan named Stan whose desire to connect with Eminem drives him to violence (Eminem 2002). The word ‘stan’ was used as both noun and verb to describe obsessive devotion by 2008 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). It made its way into the OED by 2017, and Merriam-Webster added the word to their dictionary in 2019 (Chuck 2022). Merriam-Webster understands stan to be a derogatory term except when used in self-reference. Subcultures often reclaim derogatory terms

¹ Noah Davis’ American Idol audition can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EhgLrKqvrY> (American Idol 2012)

as markers of in-group identity (Peeters et al. 2021, 8). In exploring stan Twitter, I ask, *what is the role of language in online stan communities?* More specifically, I intend to describe what lies at this intersection of social media, fandom, and sociolinguistics.

This study draws on digital, critical, and multimodal discourse analysis to interrogate the communication that takes place beyond semantics. It is necessary to explore the role of these external factors in processes of meaning-making (Norris 2011). Observation took place on the platform known as X/Twitter—after buying the platform, Elon Musk renamed it X in July 2023, but users continue to recognize it as Twitter rather than X (CivicScience 2023; Pahwa 2023). Language like ‘wig’ proliferates on platforms like Twitter due to its reliance on the algorithm to assemble customized feeds based on perceived interests and social networks. By turning my gaze toward the algorithm, I intend to unveil a layer of social mediation that is necessary to understanding the sociolinguistic landscape that leads to the possibility of interactions like Noah Davis and Katy Perry’s. Understanding this dimension of digital life is vital to ensuring positive future relations with technology.

2.1. A ‘Lit’ Review

Fans use language to define themselves and their roles in a community and to perform authenticity (Crow 2019; Malik and Haidar 2023). Past researchers who have examined the internal structure of fan communities have paid scant attention to how the fan community interacts with the rest of the SNS (social network site). Authenticity and celebrity have also been studied (Marwick and boyd 2011a; 2011b), but these studies do not describe the ways meaning becomes *inaccessible in certain contexts*. The representation of ideas in words, also known as encoding (Hall 1980, elaborated in §2.2), is my fundamental matter of concern in this study.

I begin my literature review with a discussion of sociolinguistics to explain my disciplinary framework. Next, taking the field of fandom studies as a critique of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), I apply capital to the fan as producer and structural agent. Finally, I look at context collapse (boyd 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011a) and Abidin's (2021) response to the concept which displays the unique structures and challenges of online research.

Sociolinguistic analysis is an interpretation of both speech content and the spatial, temporal, and social context in which speech acts occur (Hymes 1964). Relevant here is the *speech community*, a group whose speech acts are unique according roughly to the limits of their community (Gumperz 1968). Speech acts are contextually dynamic, leading to inconsistent norms within the group (Agha 2004). Over time, these organic changes become standardized, leading to in linguistic variance between groups. These changes in the use of language are called enregisterment (Agha 2003). Enregisterment may index (refer to, via correlation, context, or evidence) psychical or social characteristics of an individual but cannot define them. Through these presentations, individuals speak in specific ways to signal traits for a contextual advantage (Agha 2003, 240; Ilbury 2020). Enregisterment is an important concept in the linguistic presentation of self.

Whether online or offline, interpretation of enregistered speech is a positional act, dependent on the surrounding perceiving context. The theory of characterological enregisterment aligns with the move made by Penelope Eckert (2012) describing the three waves of sociolinguistic variation studies. The first wave intended to identify variation through empirical methods like surveys, and was superseded by second wave ethnographic studies concerned with variation as indexical of social identity (Eckert 2012, 88) like race and geography. These strategies are giving

way to the third wave (Eckert 2012, 94), concerned with how individuals navigate social landscapes using language.

This work on variation and enregisterment has been deployed to understand how language is used in the presentation and performance of the self. Observing enregisterment of African American Vernacular English² (AAVE) by gay men on Twitter, Ilbury (2020) argues that certain registers of language are situationally adopted in order to present a persona, in this case the ‘Sassy Queen.’ Such strategic performances take advantage of existing essentialized traits associated with Black Americans and their speech communities, which diverge from Standard English (the variety of English commonly found in formalized education and writing), implicating them into the speaker’s identity under construction to alter their social position. Viewed in isolation, this characterological enregisterment signals the use of language to construct a dynamic and adaptable identity, but a broader, more political analysis may view this event as a form of digital blackface (260 n6). Language is the foundation of community online.

The register of language sometimes known as ‘stan Twitter speak’ or ‘internet slang,’ while often perceived as a phenomenon of online genesis, is largely lifted from AAVE (Chery 2022) and language used by Black trans women in the underground ballroom scene of the ‘80s (Luti [@lutibot] 2023; Alex Rocca [@AlexDRocca] 2023; Davis 2021e). It is not possible or productive

² My focus is on nonstandard language variation, so I have chosen to use the term AAVE, rather than AAL (African American Language) to be explicit about the nonstandard nature of the language (see Winford 2015, 85). However, in this distinction, I recognize Sharese King’s notes (2020, 286–87) that ‘AAVE’ inaccurately defines ethnicity (African Americans are not necessarily the only speakers of AAVE), its relationship to English (it is unclear whether AAVE is, in fact a variation of English or rather a de-creolized language in its own right), and the group of speakers (vernacular is a classed term gesturing toward inner-city Black male youth, see Labov’s pioneering 1972 *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*).

to define ‘stan Twitter lingo’ as a de-racialized conglomeration of AAVE and ballroom language. Rather, it is the social landscape that gives rise to these variations on Twitter.

The ballroom/house scene was born in response to the drag balls which systemically excluded Black and Latin competitors from winning titles (Skinner 2021). Representations of ballroom language like *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990) show it as tied to the ballroom community and its spaces, a necessarily underground culture. Ballroom language has been far less studied than AAVE. In 2009, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* premiered, ushering in a transposition of ballroom language into the mainstream gay slang (Goodman 2018). Before *Drag Race*, most representation of ballroom language came in the cultural context of ballroom culture; their inclusion of queens who came up in the ballroom scene decontextualized this language while bringing it to the mainstream. Without AAVE’s foundation of existing study, I draw mainly on Chloe O. Davis’ notes in *The Queens’ English* (2021d) to confirm that the terms I encountered came from the ballroom scene.

Linguistic self-definition of groups often takes place in part through code-switching, the insertion of one linguistic system into another. For example, if I were to say that “Beyoncé’s performance skill is a *conditio sine qua non* of her success,” the code-switch to Latin assumes that my audience is highly educated and perhaps learned an ancient language in school. De Fina’s (2007) observations in an Italian-American cultural group show that the level of intelligibility of language to a general audience is often known and considered when code-switching. This principle may also be used to intentionally exclude individuals or declare authenticity: Johnson et al.’s (2006) study of the specialized language of cannabis users in New York City found code-switching instrumental in the construction and maintenance of authenticity. It also offered protection of their information from outsider encroachment and an identity separate from other drug-centred

communities (Johnson et al. 2006, 61, 55). These studies have crucial implications for understanding subculture-specific language use and the intentional definition of audience, in the context of fandom communities.

2.2. STANS: THE APES OF GENIUS?

Some of the first fandom studies arose as a response to the portrayal of mass or popular culture as less refined or complex than high culture in Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). Where he uncovered the vertical movement within and between classes. Fiske (1992, 32) argues that this delineation is reductionist and paints an inaccurately general portrait of popular culture as repressed, dominated, and based in need (Bourdieu 1984, 154), rather than desire or creativity. Bourdieu called the middle class "apes of genius" (Kant, qtd. in Bourdieu 1984, 326), imitating the achievements of bourgeois cultural insiders. The rising middle class reflects the views and practices of the bourgeoisie imperfectly and limits their self-expression to act out their desired status.

The novelty of their status prevents the middle class from fully integrating into bourgeois society: class is both cultural and economic. A topical example is the "name five songs" test, where someone wearing a classic band t-shirt, such as Nirvana or Led Zeppelin, is asked to name five songs by the band in order to assess their true fandom. The implication of such a test is that the 'fake fan' is using their economic capital for access to a certain group without cultural experience to back it up. This experience is also often gendered, as men assume that young women buy their band tees from chain retail stores because they want to seem cultured, not because they are authentic fans. By melding their middle-class habitus with the high-class field, such "heterodoxy experienced as if it were orthodoxy" (323) only serves to betray petit bourgeois imitation, their marked otherness.

Fandom researchers often interpret the fan as an active co-producer of media,³ rejecting the notion that popular media “would necessarily fail if it could not rely on the complicity of the consumers” (Bourdieu 1984, 323). This has been argued across various fields: fanfiction (Korobkova and Black 2014), fan videos (Fiske 1992), translation (Duggan and Dahl 2019), and the experience of consumption itself (Sandvoss 2003). Fiske claims that the consumption of media generates new meaning, which leads to altered experience and renewed identity (Fiske 1992, 37). From this interior meaning, the fan externalizes, producing content related to the object of their fandom through enunciative acts (speech or self-expression,), and textual generation (writing and sharing, notably driven by enjoyment and not for profit, 38-40). This results in a merging of the fan and corporation in the role of producer.

Memes are one way that fans pick up content as their own. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first conceived of the meme as analogous to genetics—he even shortened the Greek word *mimeme* to align with *gene* (Dawkins [1989] 2006, 192). Dawkins’ memes were a form of cultural transmission, changing through fusions and reproductions. Our current use of the term is conceptually close, but practically quite distanced from his vision, rejecting the universalizing laws of evolution implied by Dawkins (Peeters et al. 2021, 3). Today, memes are used to describe virality. The genetic metaphor is not far off! A meme is something that is not only popular, but replicable, “remade and recombined” (McCulloch 2019, 240) according to a textual or visual format. In the necessarily imperfect replication of memes, variations are stabilized and incorporated into the speech community. Linguistic variance is still gatekept by cultural capital,

³ This is a generalization. For a nuanced outline of the history of fandom studies as well as a more critical perspective on Fiske’s thought and the structure/agency debate in the field, see Chapter 1 of *Media Audiences and Identity* (Bailey 2005).

and orthodox conformity grants access to the community. A meme of Sean Bean from *The Fellowship of the Ring* describes this process below.⁴



Figure 1: "One does not simply make a meme..." Generated using imgflip.com.

This mutation produces a dense cultural network, which constitutes a legitimate in-group of those who can effectively communicate using memes (McCulloch 2019, 258). Such a division from the mainstream reflects Bourdieu, as the in-group's separation from the masses is prized and prioritized as a marker of status, while access by outsiders is deliberately limited (Bourdieu 1984, 155). Peeters et al. (2021) attribute subcultural linguistic variation on 4chan to a Bourdieuan self-definition through the rejection of another. These conditions merit an investigation of power dynamics that fruit in the "social complicity" between speaker and audience in formal conventions (Locke 2004, 20). If memes are a formalized *speech genre* (Bakhtin 1986, 60), they must stabilize the distinction between groups online. Even self-identity relies on the cyclical movement of

⁴ As someone who has not seen *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I demonstrate that the preconditions for reproducing a meme are not necessarily knowledge of its history, but rather knowledge of when, how, and why it is used, and its memefied meaning.

cultural capital between online and offline spaces (Levina and Arriaga 2014, 480). Barbz' employment of linguistic strategies such as memes, AAVE, and ballroom language is a linguistic exercise of cultural capital. In restricting the use of language through closing their community, Barbz unite language, culture, and power.

The productive fan described by Fiske seizes the ability to externalize cultural production and internalizes the production of the self and meaning. Describing a homemade music video contest for Madonna fans, he argues that “fans ‘became’ Madonna in a way that denied any distance between performer and audience; they participated in constructing and circulating the ‘meanings of Madonnaness’ in their own culture,” (Fiske 1992, 46). By turning the fan-object into an aspect of the self, the idol's success is the fan's narcissistic catharsis (Sandvoss 2003, 40). This attachment of the self to an object of economic and cultural success also validates Bourdieu's proposition of the cultural economy while extending its reach into mass culture.

The dialectical expropriation and reappropriation of culture by fans and institutions reflects Stuart Hall's (1980) discussion of the encoding/decoding processes of mediated communication. A message is first encoded into a piece of media, then transmitted to the audience, who decodes it in their interpretation of the message. Crucially, a message is not meaningful until it has been decoded in a meaningful way by the consumer, who does this in their own context. Corporations rely on fans to decode and interpret their messages. Fans are a result of culture's commodification—they are, indeed, the apes of genius! Yet these fans are not simply subordinated under the structure of capital. Fandom determines cultural production, and the apes will rise again... next time online.

2.3. DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE STANS

Fandoms have become increasingly extreme in their consumption and production habits since Madonna's contest. K-pop (Korean pop music) is the focus of many fan studies due to its

uniquely fervent fanbase. Some K-pop fans form and enact online networks of collaboration to ensure their idols' success based on various measures such as music chart leaderboards and trending pages on social media (Kang et al. 2022). However, these practices are not limited to Koreans or K-pop fandom exclusively. On Weibo, a popular Chinese platform, Yin & Xie (2021) observed a reaction to the reductive algorithmic interpretations of fans' posts, the 'datafication' of their language. Weibo fans developed specific norms of speech in order to take advantage of algorithmic preferences and push certain topics to the Trending page (15). Crucially, this demonstrates that a certain type of fan can be identified solely by the way they speak. Fandom is a speech community.

Many fan practices are tied to authenticity. Sandvoss (2003) argues that there is an academic misrepresentation of fandom, which caricaturizes fans as obsessive, contrasting this with a widespread self-identification as fans. An Anthropology master's thesis (Crow 2019) similarly problematizes fan identity. The multiplicity of fandom leads Crow to typologize 'stans' as individuals with a social investment in a person or group "to the point of obsession" (8) to describe varying identities within fandom. Other researchers have pursued a solution by differentiating "fan" from "fandom" (Jenkins 2006; Abd-Rahim 2019). However, this distinction does not allow for community to form among casual fans, because 'fandom' also means a community of fans. 'Stan' is necessary for academics to avoid conflating *locals*, who are generic casual fans (fourpointoh 2018), with stans while minimally restricting their practices by defining them.

The role of a stan is fluid and encompasses a wide range of practices. However, for the purposes of this study, I am working with a definition of the stan as *a fan whose love for their idol is so intense that they feel unlike locals, thereby seeking closed communities of likeminded devotees*. In a sense, stanhood is more about being in the community of stans than any one specific

practice. Some may self-identify as fans, not stans, but I choose to include them in my stan analysis because of their entanglement in the stan community and their clear removal from casual fandom.

In many cases ‘fan’ and ‘stan’ are used interchangeably,⁵ and they are no doubt fluid and overlapping groups. As such, establishing legitimate fandom online is a barrier to conducting internet research (Duffett 2013); there is no way to confirm the nature of an individual’s relationship to their fan-object without asking them. Data that is decontextualized in this way is not objective or universal (Blommaert and Dong 2020). However, many stan accounts are explicit about their fandom, with their profile signalling the fan-object. Others present a fusion of identities, intentionally collapsing their personal social media presence with their idol.

Take one Nicki Minaj stan account, @ONIKASTHONG, also known as “tyler.” They were described by one user as “head barb” (#158), but their bio describes themselves as a “fan account” (“Tyler. (@ONIKASTHONG)” 2024). Their profile is full of signals to Nicki Minaj: profile photo, header photo, bio, username, and link are all signalling her. However, they identify as a fan and use (what is presumably) their own first name as an identifier rather than another sign of the idol. They have not socially dissolved themselves into Nicki Minaj, their identity is fused with her. While the fan/stan boundary is blurry and continuous, it must be divided for analysis’ sake.

The nature of the online space is one factor behind the formation of the Barbz. danah boyd describes the digital mediation of structure and agency, seeing SNS as characterized by architectural traits (boyd and Ellison 2007; boyd 2011). *Affordances* (see Gibson 1979) describe how the structure of a platform can reshape publics through impositions and opportunities for

⁵ Radulovic and Haasch (2018) describe the two as “essentially synonymous” in their otherwise fascinating account of the movement of homophobic memes about Millie Bobby Brown from stan Twitter to local Twitter and the failing assumption that stan Twitter is a private community.

users, while also spurring new practices to circumvent them (boyd 2011, 46). Affordances like automatic archiving and searchability shape how people interact on SNS.

Because many platforms do not afford their users the ability to manage their audience as they might in-person, the user must collapse many different contexts they encounter in their network into one space: their social network Self (Marwick and boyd 2011a). *Context collapse* leads to the poster's construction of a 'nightmare reader,' often resembling a boss or parent, and causes self-censorship (Marwick and boyd 2011a, 125). If anyone can see your posts, you must prepare yourself for the worst-case scenario. A user calling Taylor Swift an eco-terrorist or a capitalist white-feminist cannot speak exclusively to those critical of Taylor Swift; they must contend with the fact that hateful content could be encountered by any number of fellow users with or opposing perspectives. And hell hath no fury like a Swiftie scorned!

In response to publicity and searchability, some underground groups form *refracted publics*. These groups intentionally use affordances to “enhance, deflect, or defer” the public's gaze (Abidin 2021, 3). Here searchability becomes discoverability: information is “unknowable until chanced upon” (Abidin 2021, 4) and communities are buffered from outside perception. In these scenarios, collapsed context does not pose a challenge—it becomes *weaponized context*, where information is moved and meaning perverted with ease. A study of online subculture on 4chan found that the volatility and instability of language was weaponized in this way and leveraged to form exclusive in-group dynamics (Peeters et al. 2021, 4). Refracted publics are only enhanced by the introduction of algorithmically curated feeds and the movement away from Following feeds. By becoming discoverable and weaponizing context, refracted publics like the Barbz edit their audience without becoming unilaterally closed.

For this study, I have collected data from Nicki Minaj’s Twitter stans, known as the Barbz, around the release of her 5th studio album, *Pink Friday 2*. The name *Barbz* is a shortening of *Barbie*, a significant symbol to Nicki’s brand of femininity—she is a real-life Barbie—“the fucking Black Barbie” (Minaj and Mike Will Made It 2016). Beginning in 2009, Minaj began compiling *Nictionary* (Nicki Minaj [@NICKIMINAJ] 2009), a mobile app that catalogued some of the Queen of Rap’s most outlandish sayings, including “Alfred Bitchcock” (Nicki Minaj Wiki, n.d.), a term of endearment supposedly used between Barbz. While many such terms are not in active use, they set the tone for an engagement with language that is deeply tied to emergent community practices rather than prescriptive orthodoxies.

Nicki has a strong connection to both the Black and queer communities, two groups I have identified as being crucial to emergent language on Twitter. In “Black Barbies”, Minaj describes herself as a “Black Barbie,” a term which some Black women later criticized non-Black people for adopting (Schroeder 2021; Minaj and Mike Will Made It 2016). They highlighted the song as an opportunity to exalt their Black femininity and emphasized that the intrusion of white bodies into this digital space of Black women’s pride was inappropriate. The image of Nicki Minaj as a Black Barbie may be viewed as a strategy of infusing the Black identity with Camp,⁶ thereby encouraging Black women to embrace their identities in ways that were generally excluded from discussions of Black women’s empowerment (McMillan 2014). On a similar note of community empowerment, Minaj’s 2012 GRAMMYs performance⁷ featured her alter-ego Roman Zolanski⁸ persevering

⁶ Susan Sontag’s landmark essay (1966) describes Camp as focused on artifice and exaggeration, highlighting Being as playing a character rather than naturalizing the performance of self.

⁷ Nicki Minaj’s GRAMMYs performance can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKxzX6TogSM> (LaRon 2020).

⁸ Minaj maintains that Roman Zolanski has “No relation to Roman Polanski” (Minaj 2011).

through an exorcism aimed at expelling the demon his mother believed was causing his homosexuality (Vena 2012). This performance was censured by the Catholic Church (Chaney 2012), but this moment is reverently referenced by Barbz as a daring theatrical performance (Seb [@sebminajj] 2022). Minaj has labelled herself as gay and bisexual, although now identifies as straight (Street 2020). In sum, both Black and queer communities have close ties to Nicki Minaj and her generative language practices, especially as the highlighted moments came into being through Nicki's famously clever lyricism.

Nicki Minaj is also an ideal choice of subject because the Barbz are so extreme in their devotion. It is a well-known fact among the Barbz that Nicki Minaj's husband, Kenneth Petty, is a registered sex offender. Minaj has rigorously defended him, and in 2021 she was sued for harassing and intimidating Jennifer Hough, his accuser (Jacobs 2021). Minaj was later dropped from the lawsuit (Burke and Dasrath 2022). Yet the Barbz stand by her, and to this day they actively dissuade mentions of Kenneth Petty reference to Nicki's life and accomplishments (#3). In 2024, general public audiences came to knowledge of these events when Megan Thee Stallion's single "HISS" referenced Megan's Law, which requires sex offenders to register publicly (Genius 2024). When local fans were turning against her, many Barbz fiercely and publicly supported Minaj, demonstrating stanhood as a commitment that extends beyond being a fan. Events like this are part of what sets stan communities apart from the mainstream and encourages them to construct semi-permeable boundaries.

3. Ready Player One: Making Kin with the Algorithm

As SNS move toward curated feeds, users expect algorithms to assemble relevant content from beyond their list of Friends. In this context, I am taking *algorithm* to mean *a computerized*

*system of input and output that is capable of acting and adapting according to a user's behaviour.*⁹

In practice algorithms are rarely functioning independently and have intense human oversight, they are not functionally independent sociotechnical actors (Seaver 2018, 378). Seaver sees this as a naturalized hierarchy of dependence, but it could also be interpreted as slavery, a violation of our duty to approach AI as our kin (J. E. Lewis et al. 2018, 10). Nonetheless, interactions with algorithms play a significant role in cultural production (Maly 2022a).

Given their differences from other social sciences, media and internet studies often necessarily diverge from traditional methodologies. One Sociology Master's thesis (Boucher, 2022) describes a unique form of participant observation, with the creation and use of false profiles with pre-existing interests to experience the algorithm's direction. Boucher argues that this allows him to gain insight into the experience of being on an algorithm driven SNS. Online data is necessarily participatory, not objectively observable (Blommaert and Dong 2020). Because Boucher did not sample data from the replies of a post (Malik and Haidar 2023; Marwick and boyd 2011a), by account (Chun 2017; Ilbury 2020), or through scraping large swaths of data from the platform's API (Kang et al. 2022), the researcher accessed information fed to him by an algorithm that knew his interests, not just his search terms. This information is inaccessible to the other methods described above due to discoverability (Abidin 2021). Boucher's adoption of the algorithm as a research companion highlights the growing inability of traditional online research methods which rely on searchability to retrieve data that is relevant to SNS.

3.1. THIS IS HOW WE DO IT: METHODS

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion on defining algorithms between the technical and social sciences, see Nick Seaver's PhD dissertation *Computing Taste* (2015, 13–20).

So, I enter into collaboration with the algorithm as a sociotechnical actor (Maly 2022a) to retrieve data. The algorithm is not an impartial party, it has a vested interest in both circulating and producing specific information, and thus cannot be treated as a non-actor (Maly 2022b). Because Twitter feeds are assembled from posts that are datafied by the algorithm, everything a user sees is informed by the algorithm. Drawing from the idea that observation on the Internet is never neutral, that it is always participation and must be recognized as such (Blommaert and Dong 2020), I created a new Twitter account and interacted with posts according to a set of criteria in order to curate a feed of discoverable content assembled by the Twitter algorithm. As stated in Latour's methodological treatise on actor-network theory (2007), it is not the researcher's task "to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities" (12), it is to follow the actors as vital nodes inside networks. Indeed, algorithmic anthropology is devoted to uncovering the complicated relationships between people and the algorithms they collaborate with as actors (Seaver 2018). Algorithms are not autonomous, but rather adaptable and often rigorously supervised sociotechnical beings (333). Given these limitations, the experiences that I am describing are a result of my own position and interactions in the sociotechnical climate of my observation and should not be extended beyond the context of their relationship in the moment.

To enter into a relationship is to prove both parties changed. Donna Haraway's influential "A Cyborg Manifesto" ([1985] 2016) investigated challenges that technologically inflected life poses to the strict divisions of the modern world. Haraway claims that communication and information technologies are tools for recrafting our bodies (33), and that we who live in concert with technology, even in its legacy, are ourselves cyborgs, intricately bound up with technology in life itself (60). This blurs the divisions vital to modernity itself. Later, in "The Companion Species Manifesto" ([2003] 2016) Haraway updates this challenge to modernity in an ecological

paradigm, arguing that difference itself is an inaccurate paradigm with which to understand the world (107). She proposes the model of the companion species, cohabitating in difference as mutually constitutive in their significant otherness: “‘the relation’ is the smallest possible unit of analysis” (111), not the individual.

We cannot think of ourselves in isolation from the entities with whom we are enmeshed. If cyborgs are companion species (113), then in our relationships with communication technology, in changing the technology we are fundamentally changed ourselves. We do not make ourselves or our worlds alone. Haraway is not the first to think along these lines, and is largely assembling pre-existing concepts from Indigenous thinkers and communities (Todd 2016; TallBear 2011). Perceiving the algorithm as *kin*¹⁰ is a turn toward the many Indigenous models of worlding that have existed for millennia, not a revolutionary new paradigm of Western knowledge (J. E. Lewis et al. 2018).

The algorithm models this co-constitutive, structured/structuring experience of social life. It changes based on how users interact with it: constantly being updated by its corporate overlords—but also readjusting in its interaction with users on the site, each like and retweet adding depth and nuance to a metaphorical ASCII portrait. Yet the algorithm also changes its users. It crafts a path to the margins: bell hooks (1990) thinks of the margin as a site of resistance against hegemony, for the margins allow a space of radical openness where conformity is not mandated. Barbz who flock to the margins find a community of like-minded supplicants who are not concerned with concealing their adoration. The issue in this study is not ‘are we using the algorithm

¹⁰ For a more extensive exploration of what it means to *make kin*, see *Staying with the Trouble* (Haraway 2016). Haraway draws on Indigenous thought in her multispecies exploration, but these ideas have been known, understood, and practiced by many Indigenous people since time immemorial.

as a tool or is it pushing us around?’—it is precisely about unresolved interplay of structure and agency, not some dialectical struggle for dominance and oppression.

This study began with the creation of a new Twitter account specifically for this study. Initially, I followed seven Nicki Minaj/stan-oriented accounts,¹¹ identified by my prior knowledge of the community. In order to get a comparative idea of the multiple speech communities present on stan Twitter, I catalogued data generally related to Nicki Minaj, with a preference for posts that expressed stanhood or made use of stan language. At this point, Twitter saw me as a member of the general public, not a Barb, and this process of general engagement established my interests on the platform. As my topics of interest¹² were identified by Twitter’s algorithm, my engagement became more specifically directed to stans and their language.

boyd’s (2011) exploration of SNS and networked publics relies on the assumption that they are just that—public. A refracted public may not be searchable (Abidin 2021), but the information is still public and accessible, if difficult to find. Ethic texts often note that observations on Twitter are not subject to ethical considerations of privacy because SNS are public spaces containing public data. However, some methods like API scraping collect non-public metadata on users, like predictions about race and sexuality. This violates the ethical assumption of publicity (M. L. Williams, Burnap, and Sloan 2017, 1152). A survey of Twitter users in the UK found that over half expected to be asked for their consent regarding the use of their posts by a third party, and over three-quarters expected to be anonymized (M. L. Williams, Burnap, and Sloan 2017, 1155). However, the use of an individual’s creative product without credit would be an improper use of

¹¹ These accounts and relevant information can be found in Appendix A.

¹² This was measured via the list found in-app at: Settings and Privacy > Privacy and Safety > Content You See > Interests.

intellectual property. Acknowledging this double-bind, I have chosen to cite tweets with proper credit to their creators. I came to this decision in part by noting that many of the users whose posts I observed do not use full names to identify themselves, and instead opt to identify themselves with a reference to Nicki Minaj (e.g., @MAYAMINAJ, @sleezyjamie). To ameliorate concerns of bad-faith representation, I anonymize user data where it contains information that could easily lead to the person behind the account.

In early 2023, Twitter released some code aimed at explaining to users how their tweets are interpreted and promoted to other users (Stanton 2023). Table 1 describes the weights of various interactions on Twitter. This framework informs my strategic interactions on the platform, allowing me access to the content I seek. Every interaction has a value used to rank Tweets and determine which are presented to a user and in what order, described below. However, the algorithm is rough and dynamic, updated as recently as August 2023 without a clear quantitative reflection (Alex 2023). For example, the public code did not show the weight of a ‘bookmark’.

Table 1: Interactions and their weight, modified from TweetHunter (Tibo, 2023).

Action	Weight/Modifier
Like	0.5
Retweet	1
Reply	27
Click in + reply, like, or view for >2 mins	11
View profile + interact, from tweet	12
New/Unknown words	0.01x

New and unknown words are also negatively weighted (Tibo 2023), further reinforcing my partnership with the algorithm, as these posts would be less accessible through a default search. The table above informs my application of Abidin’s (2021) concept of refracted publics to describe stans as a group whose detection is augmented by affordances. However, many computers can

decode the majority of AAVE and ballroom language. For example, it is possible to ask ChatGPT to imitate the modes of speech discussed above.

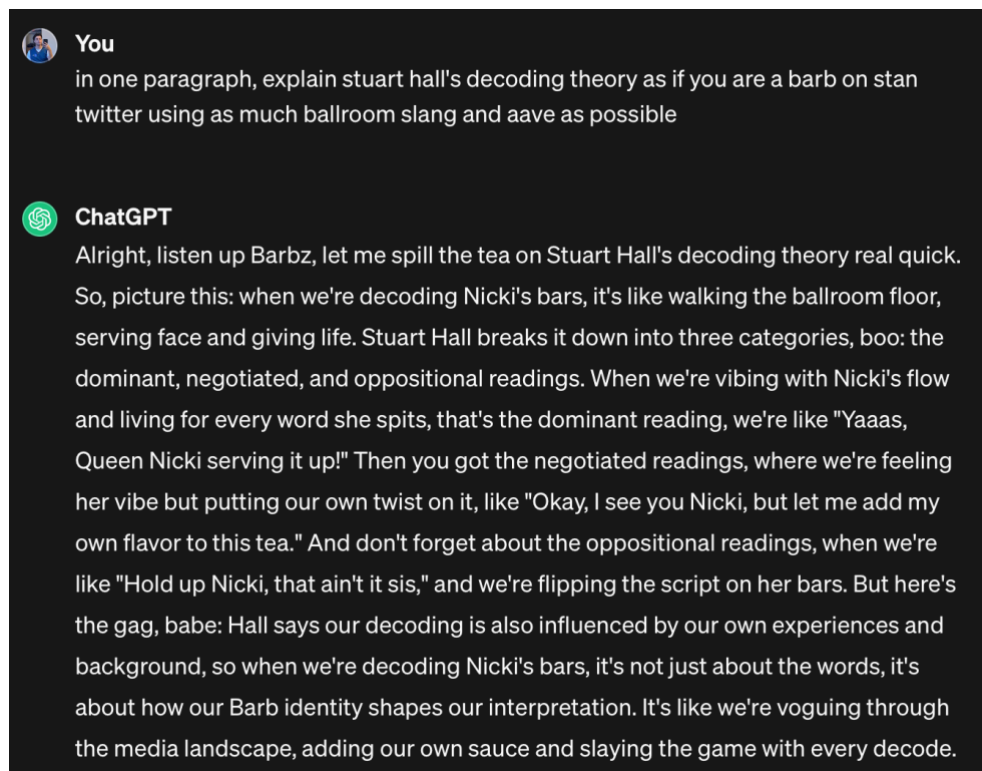


Figure 2: ChatGPT imitating Barbz (OpenAI 2024)¹³

I catalogued posts of interest alongside preceding tweets in the same conversation and noted the perceived role of the post and traits of language (such as visual media and stan-specific terms). I liked tweets that reflected stan devotion and unique language and retweeted a mixture of posts to maintain diversity in my feed. These were mostly community action, update, and comedy posts.

One branch of discourse analysis I employ is multimodal discourse analysis, which highlights the interaction of different modes of communication (e.g., text, image, colour) in the production of meaning (Ehrlich 2021). Norris (2011) understands multimodal discourse as

¹³ Inspired by a tweet (joyci unemployoci [@joyci_schecter] 2024) which was kindly shown to me by Lily Carrigan.

encompassing interactions with surrounding objects as social actors, not just elements of the speech act. Combined with my previous presentation of the online interaction as a sociotechnical assemblage, I understand datafication and algorithmic interactions as a mode of discourse. My multimodal discourse analysis will incorporate the algorithmic interaction as a mode of discourse which serves to augment the context, and thereby meaning, of the Tweets I analyze. Critical discourse analysis is another branch whose strategies I will employ. This school of thought sees discourse as entangled with power relations (Maly 2022a; Locke 2004). Through this lens, I see algorithmic interaction as an extension of power structures among users through their distinction from public gazes into discoverable sects in which understandability of esoteric language is known and leveraged in the negotiation of publicity.

The Barbz become a refracted community by nature of their interaction with the Twitter algorithm. Through this entanglement, Barbz are not the only actors responsible for the formation of their community—they rely on the algorithm to control key factors like social borders. Thus, Barbz are not simply a digital community, they are an *algorithmic community*.

4. The Algorithmic Community: Get Into It (Yuh)

I collected 279 tweets for analysis from November 2nd until December 16th, 2023. 50 tweets came from the seven accounts I initially followed, and 103 were from accounts I followed by the end of data collection. 63% were fed to me by the algorithm. Of these, I interacted with 234 (215 likes, sixteen like and retweets, two retweets)—45 tweets were collected without interaction to give context in the data document. Posts were coded into categories including “Stan Group Name,” “AAVE,” “Gag City,” and “Hating opps.” *Opps*, a shortening of *opposition*, is used to describe foes or enemies, especially in rap beef (Abad et al. 2019).

I begin my analysis by describing the use of AAVE and ballroom language, both of which I compared using meta-coding, which involved sorting the data into large groups and comparing the overlaps and divergences between them. I interpret these as antagonistic vernacular strategies (Peeters et al. 2021), aimed at delineating community boundaries. I've also chosen to highlight two other areas of interest to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis. First, I describe memeified communication to show the movement of language between public and private audiences. And second, I discuss explicit references to the Twitter algorithm. Each pillar of this analysis outlines strategies that Barbz use in collaboration with Twitter's algorithm to control the borders of their algorithmic community.

4.1. CHI— THIS IS MY LAST ERA ON STAN TWITTER: AAVE AND UPDATES

The label “AAVE” for a diverse and variant linguistic practice has been critiqued by researchers who subscribe to the three waves of sociolinguistic study of variation, because by labelling the speech patterns common in Black American communities a *vernacular*, sociolinguists confine themselves to questions of by whom, where, and how it is adopted, and quantify internal grammar (King 2020, 292). Imposing such a theory on the Barbz would reduce them to an ethnolinguistic group, defined not by community but by language. A broader third-wave approach might instead see this speech community not as a vernacular, but rather as an inherently personal practice of language (King 2020, 296). I examine AAVE as a register; that is, as a tool to signify interiority in the Barb community. This social positioning is an exercise of power and agency, and in their employment of AAVE and ballroom language, Barbz close their community.

My engagement with AAVE and ballroom language as a white researcher is informed by these three waves, and I maintain that linguistic traits do not index groups of people, but rather they describe how language is used in its social context. With this in mind, in Table 2 I draw on

Ilbury’s tripartite analysis (2020, 253), to identify lexical (vocabulary), phonological (sounds), and syntactical (grammar) features of speech in my dataset. I labelled 72 tweets as AAVE (26%). Of these, only two were intended to be ‘update’ or ‘archive’ posts, which generally provide information about an idol’s life and career (Malik and Haidar 2023, 741). These posts are accessible to the public and invite detection by people outside the stan community. Accounts like @PopCrave have accumulated millions of followers simply by sharing updates about pop culture.

Table 2: AAVE usage on Barbz Stan Twitter

Feature	Example	Count
Lexical <i>e.g., Chi-, or Chile (child)</i>	@[barb777]: Hold on, some of you were born after 2000?!?? Chi- this definitely my last era on stan twitter...👀 (#193)	36
Syntactical <i>e.g., Demonstrative them</i>	@minajtrollz: Spiraling on social media because botched face [<i>i.e., Cardi B</i>] so badly wants a response from Nicki and my sis is completely paying her dust.. them predictions [<i>Billboard chart predictions</i>] have come and she’s not going Top 10 after all the multiple versions and radio payola [...] (#263)	45
Phonological <i>e.g., R-lessness</i>	@onikascrown: If red Ruby [<i>a Pink Friday 2 single</i>] not in your top Apple replay or Spotify wrapped yo bussy stink and u eat nails for breakfast (#168)	13

The use of AAVE on stan Twitter was heavily connected to posts that were designed to have a defined audience; I catalogued 25 update posts, and the two update tweets using AAVE broke the stylistic norm of accessible posts aimed at the general public. In one such overlap, @minajtrollz updates on Nicki Minaj’s recent accomplishments, concluding their list with “ohhh we eating good!” (#17). Despite being embedded in a public update, their use of “we” implies a

defined in-group as the intended audience for this post, not a broad public. The other post by @ONIKASTHONG proclaims, “Streets saying Nicki dropping something at midnight” (#194). This post is updating on a rumoured surprise release at midnight. Even though it is public, because it discusses an unconfirmed midnight release, this post is likely targeting Barbz, stans who are devoted enough to stay up until midnight monitoring Spotify, Apple Music, and social media for signs of a release. And, indeed, there was no release at midnight that night. The update posts that used AAVE provided information to an in-group of stans, rather than accessible updates which would appeal to everyone.

While ‘the updater’ is a defined role in stan communities (Malik and Haidar 2023), anyone can post update tweets. Neither @ONIKASTHONG nor @minajtrollz are strictly update accounts. A more normative example of updates comes from @1nickiminajfan_, who enregistered AAVE in one non-update post, while two others were Standard English updates concerned with promoting Nicki Minaj. Their single post that used AAVE was not an update: they say, “YOUR FAVS COULD NEVA!!” (#152), in reference to Nicki Minaj’s consistent successes. Here, @1nickiminajfan_ employs AAVE in their denunciation of Nicki Minaj’s opps, whom they perceive as not being in Nicki’s echelon. Meanwhile, the other tweets (#151, #149) used Standard English in their efforts of promotion and updating on newly announced performances—these posts were clear and specific, often providing links for fans to materially support Nicki. Code-switching between public and personal addresses has been observed by other researchers in in-person interest groups, as well (De Fina 2007), where important information was spoken in Standard English, while personal discourse incorporated Italian words and phrases. Instead of vaguely implying the tweet’s subject as in #152, @1nickiminajfan_’s promotional tweets provided all relevant

information for even a local to understand and most importantly, act on the tweet by making a purchase.

The use of AAVE in update tweets reinforces my argument that the intelligibility of language on the internet is known and strategically employed to define audiences. Eckert's third wave of variation, alongside Agha's remarks on characterological enregisterment, connect language to the individual's movement within the social landscape. When users post updates aimed at the general public, they tend to use Standard English and include ample and reliable detail, positioning themselves at the centre of the social landscape. @lnickiminajfan_ tags relevant accounts and includes photos in their updates to make their posts easier to understand. However, when stans want to limit their audience, sharing information that is only relevant to stans, they break the rules of updating and vary their English from Standard. In employing AAVE, stans intentionally place themselves in the social margin, hiding their community from others.

4.2. NICKI MINAJ ATE ONCE AGAIN: BALLROOM LANGUAGE AND SENTIMENT

Ballroom language was similarly used to marginalize (in the sense of hooks 1990) non-public discussions on Twitter. I identified 29 tweets that used ballroom language (10%). The most common uses of ballroom language came through the words *eat/ate/fed* and *gag*, with eleven and thirteen occurrences, respectively. *To eat* is used to describe an impressive accomplishment (Davis 2021b). For example, when @barbiecharts says that “nicki minaj ate once again i'm sorry 🥹” (#89), attaching a photo of the *Pink Friday 2* album art, they mean that Nicki looks great in the photo. On the other hand, *to gag* means to be extremely impressed (Davis 2021c). Think of someone who is speechless, mouth and eyes wide, as if they are gagging. When @ONIKASTHONG says, “The features on PF2 must be gag worthy because every single from

the album so far has been solo” (#95.5), they are implying that Nicki wants her listeners to be shocked at the calibre of her collaborations on *Pink Friday 2*.

While seven of the 29 ballroom tweets were aggressive—used for criticizing Nicki, censoring other Twitter users, or hating opps—over three-quarters of these posts, even some that were critical, used ballroom language as a way to uplift and express positive sentiment. Only two out of these seven posts actually used ballroom language in the expression of said negative sentiment. Both tweets used the same word to express negative attitudes: *chop*. This word emerges from the practice of walking balls, in which judges score contestants on a scale from one to ten; a chop from any judge disqualifies a contestant from walking (i.e., competing) in the next round of a category (Davis 2021a). A user saying that the *Pink Friday 2* track “Pink Birthday” is a *chop* (#265) is expressing that the song did not meet their expectations and cannot compete with the other songs on the album. Where AAVE was mainly used to define and limit audience, ballroom language was used to express sentiment, overwhelmingly privileging positivity. This may be an effect of the ballroom scene itself, which is focussed deeply on the successes, community, and positions denied to Black and Latin queer people and trans women (Molé 2021, 177; Skinner 2021).

Stans divide themselves from the general public in order to keep their conversations private. A similar instance of language variating as a protection measure was described in Johnson et al. (2006), where a major role of marijuana argot was to protect the group from encroachment by and confusion with other groups by defining it as a separate, cohesive entity. The employment of ballroom language to express positive sentiment contraindicates that language variates from standard English as a means to conceal criticism from the general public.

What reasons would the Barbz have to hide their praise of Nicki? The portrait of the narcissistic fan is a useful tool to unpack this exclusive in-group dynamic. Along the lines of Bourdieu, stans are engaged in a process of self-definition through the rejection of another. By defining themselves in opposition to non-stan others, Barbz become exceptional for their connection to celebrity, and exclude others to maintain their status. This border is already maintained through discourses about authenticity: true Barbz are discouraged from engaging with fake Barbz (#229). Language is commonly used to assess authenticity (Peeters et al. 2021; McCulloch 2019), and this explains the encoding phenomena discussed above.

In hiding their extreme devotion stans are protecting both themselves and Nicki Minaj from *memetic violence*, which severs the individual's control over their online presentation. Limiting their discussions to a specific audience helps Barbz to avoid placing their idol on the “technological auction block” (Halliday 2018, 69) of viral memetic violence. In memetic violence, the image of the meme supplants the whole person, or in this case, community (Halliday 2018, 71). Barbz conceal their fanaticism in an effort to prevent the locals from intruding on their devotion, misinterpreting it as deviant. In tandem with the assertion that fandom is a narcissistic endeavour in which the individual's identity is projected onto their idol, such drastic measures to protect Nicki Minaj are reframed as self-protection and preservation of the community. They are protecting themselves from more than just outsiders—other stans also present a threat to the community. For Nicki to be ridiculed is for the Barbz to be humiliated. I expand more on the explicit and active exclusion of non-Barb stans in §4.4.

4.3. WHAT HAPPENS IN GAG CITY...

In the weeks leading up to *Pink Friday 2*'s release, Barbz were dismayed. With no lead singles released for over 2 months before the album, no tracklist, and no music videos in sight, the album was well known among the Barbz, but the general public was far less conscious. Without the sheer numbers of locals who are not devoted to Nicki Minaj, the album had little chance of charting well on the Billboard Music Charts, let alone breaking music records. These metrics are crucial in the eyes of many stans, who compare Nicki's impressive numbers to those of opps like Cardi B (e.g., #174). To break into the mainstream, many stan groups across the internet transmit crucial information to the general public by placing themselves on the Trending page of their chosen SNS (see Yin and Xie 2021 and #215, #265).¹⁴ With origins that I am unable to pinpoint, Barbz began spreading word of "Gag City," a utopian world illustrated by glossy pink AI-generated cityscapes to promote *Pink Friday 2* public Twitter.



Figure 3: "And if a few engines blow out of a plane or the train falls of the track we always got the old fashioned way. We are getting to Gag City one way or another!!!!" (@[J_PF2], #224)

¹⁴ The example in Yin & Xie's paper is more precise and organized than any norms I encountered on Twitter. Weibo fans get posts to trend by specifically using the format "#Super Topic + emoticon + #relevant hashtag + 15 characters + @celebrity" to efficiently attribute the most traffic to a celebrity (Yin and Xie 2021, 15).

One significant facet of the conversation around Gag City was regarding ownership. Who can talk about Gag City, who ‘created’ it, and when should it be invoked? Some Barbz were vocal about their ownership over Gag City. When @highendhomo posted a photo of Addison Rae (a pop artist who launched her career as a dancer on TikTok) captioned, “She’s taking us to gag city” (#212), user @oncemisty responded hotly, “See how they slowly take away our lingo and make it seem like a common usage? Y’all need to leave us alone actually.” (#213). This extreme comment did not come unprompted: Cardi B stans claimed that Gag City was a phrase introduced by BardiGang (#241)¹⁵ but was subsequently proven wrong by a community note¹⁶ which provided a 2013 tweet in which MTV quoted Nicki Minaj using the term (#244). While Gag City was significantly more open than the other Barb conversations I came across in my research, it was still governed by strict rules. The Barbz claim ownership of and protect their idol through encoding their conversations, a vital part of stanhood on Twitter. Over 44 days of data collection, the Gag City meme arose for only the last eight days yet accounted for fifteen of the tweets collected overall, a comparable rate of occurrence over time to AAVE. Gag City monopolized my feed over these days and was an important part of the way I experienced Barbz on stan Twitter in the leadup to *Pink Friday 2*.

The overwhelming use of Standard English in Gag City posts signals that this meme was intended to reach general public audiences. There were only two Gag City posts that employed AAVE, and none used ballroom language. While discussion around the memes did include

¹⁵ #213 was posted on December 4, while #241 is a screenshot of a post from December 6. #213 is not in direct response to #241 but is rather a response to the discussions which led to comments like #241 which were not collected.

¹⁶ “Fact Checks” were removed from Twitter in 2022 and replaced by “Community Notes,” which strive for the same goal with less oversight. They are crowdsourced for consensus a la Wikipedia, rather than provided by an independent fact-checking organization such as Associated Press (Lorenz, Oremus, and Merrill 2022; Mantas 2021).

mentions of stan groups, only one post directly referenced “Barbz” (#226). This ‘tag yourself’ style post outlined Gag City neighbourhoods and their residents. Alongside the above discussion, these qualities suggest that the definition of an audience impacted the variation of language. When they wanted public discussion, Barbz avoided encoding their content. Further, when users began discussing the use of Gag City by opps—specifically BardiGang, Cardi B’s stans—they used subtweeting¹⁷ (#219) to vary their language. These deviations fit into the model of language use that I have outlined, effectively hiding these conversations from the locals engaging with the now-trending topic of Gag City.

The spread of Gag City was celebrated by Barbz as a testament to the disproportionately large impact of their community. As @minajtrollz remarked, “#GagCity is trending #1, album drops in less than 48 hours, no leaks, no PR stunts, major platforms promoting Gag City, other fanbases already trying to replicate 😊 I’m loving the energy!” (#238). In fact, many brands did hop on the train to Gag City and promoted the album, including BIC pens, Sour Patch Kids, Auntie Anne’s pretzels, Chili’s Grill and Bar, Bing, and Nutter Butter.

¹⁷ A subtweet is a post which references or responds to another tweet by implication, without directly incorporating the other user’s post in the thread (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Many stans subtweeted by inserting “#that fandom” (#128) or “#her” (#115) rather than risking the algorithm interpreting their mentions as interest, thereby opening private Barb conversations to the opps—or worse, helping opps to trend. Still more stans used insulting nicknames to subtweet such as “MegaHoe” for Megan Thee Stallion (#177) or “BIGhive” for the Beyhive, Beyoncé’s fandom (93).



Figure 4: @NutterButter, "SUPER FREAKY NUTTER LOADING....." (Thread under #239)

Many Barbz also brought companies into Gag City without corporate collaboration, reinforcing an in-group dynamic in the very act of opening the community. For example, @MinajPlaylist shared a photo they generated of the Billboard music chart's headquarters in Gag City (#255). However, when Billboard penalized Nicki Minaj for incentivizing the Barbz to buy multiple copies of *Pink Friday 2* as part of a contest, @PINKBAWBIE constructed a narrative to exile the offending figure from the city. Finally, @camaronomaron showed a photo of Billboard's new offices in Dud City, presumably a slum near Gag City. Despite signalling discontent with the "corporate giants and machines that went against [Nicki]" (Minaj, Drake, and Lil Wayne 2021),¹⁸

¹⁸ Between 2017 and 2019, Nicki Minaj was the subject of what the Barbz call a "hate train," a systematic campaign to impinge on Nicki's market dominance. As the preeminent female rapper, Nicki Minaj needed to be taken out of the rap game entirely in order for another talent to challenge her legacy. Some female rappers were allegedly offered six-figure rewards to diss Nicki Minaj in songs (NO GHOSTWRITER 2020). Remy Ma's unreleased diss track, "shETHER", summarizes some of the general criticisms of Nicki Minaj (Genius 2017).

these sentiments were not expressed using standard English, instead materializing through symbolic representation.



Left to right: *Figure 5: ".@billboard is now open at Gag City..." (#255); Figure 6: "BYE BITCH" (#256); Figure 7 "drone footage by gag city pd shows billboard has just popped up in dud city!" (#258)*

This reference to Nicki's history with the music industry plays on internal processes of semiosis (Fiske 1992), privileging Barbz with orthodox knowledge (Bourdieu 1984, 323). Gag City gives insight to their communication through images and memes. The memeification of language serves in part to provide dense networks of reproducible references that are incomprehensible to outsiders (McCulloch 2019, 244), creating a classed division in which a community's boundaries are policed through proper cultural engagement. Yet memes are also a powerful tool of community on the internet, playing on the electrifying feeling of being in on the joke (McCulloch 2019, 258). Where Gag City invites outsiders to be in on the joke it maintains that stan Twitter memes are used to encode messages, especially in moments like the Billboard interaction where publicity is under negotiation. The spread of this trend further demonstrates the conditions that encourage Barbz to make their language accessible to a broader audience. Barbz exclude, but they also strategically include others in order to be faithful to Nicki Minaj.

4.4. HELP PUT THESE PEOPLE IN THE ALGORITHM!

On December 3, towards the start of the Gag City trend, @sleezeSTAN directly addressed the relationship between Barbz and the algorithm twice. These tweets explicitly referred to the algorithm as a tool to keep Barbz' conversations closed and maintain the strength and unity of the community on an algorithm driven SNS. The first tweet was a long-form callout to Barbz who were interacting with hate posts leading up the album's release. @sleezeSTAN cautions Barbz against various forms of interaction that do not align with the Barbz' mission including, "beware of accounts using nickis name while using duds¹⁹ names to put them in the algorithm [...] beware of fake barbz" (#229). The premise of this caution is that Barbz may be inadvertently supporting other artists through their engagement with other non-Barb users.

@sleezeSTAN is advocating for further closure of the stan community because the proximity of Nicki's name to the name of so-called duds will result in the duds freeloading off Nicki's success and the Barbz' devotion. For example, when a Barb interacts with an account discussing the conflicting dates of Tate McRae and Nicki Minaj's album releases, they are inadvertently promoting Tate McRae's album, too. This risk incentivizes users to subtweet about the topic (#87) rather than mentioning the name outright.

¹⁹ A dud is not directly in opposition to Nicki Minaj but is still an unfavourable presence due to their mediocrity or implied opposition. For example, Cardi B is Nicki's opp, because they have direct conflict: Cardi threw a shoe at Nicki Minaj outside of a 2018 NYFW party (A. Williams 2018). Someone like Addison Rae is a dud—she is not going against Nicki or the Barbz. A Barb supporting Cardi B would be criticized or ostracized as unfaithful, while a supporter of Addison Rae would more likely be chastised.



Figure 8: "beware of accounts using nickis name..."

Similarly, people who post content that is not related to Nicki Minaj may be seen as “fake barbz” in their unfaithfulness to their idol. They also pose an entirely different issue of the algorithm altogether. Such “irrelevant matters” (@1nickiminajfan_, #151) are not simply a matter of unflinching allegiance to the idol, they have real implications on the Barbz’ community. The second tweet mentioning the algorithm was a subtweet in reaction to another user who was supportive of Nicki’s music competition:²⁰ “y’all help put these people in the algorithm” (@sleezeSTAN, #217) accompanied by a *SpongeBob* meme. Here, @sleezeSTAN is emphasizing the relational aspect of the algorithm, that someone can be “put in” to the algorithm by others. This folk theory is on the right path. Twitter’s algorithm assembles a feed of posts from a community of people who the user does not follow by determining shared interests and shared social circles

²⁰ I came to this conclusion from a reply under tweet #217 from @teen_wolvies (which was not collected during observation): “A bitch who ain’t never existed before a few minutes ago, like—— I’m finna go HULK SMASH on the barbz who seem to never use their fucking brains”. My best guess is that the person in reference is Tate McRae, a new artist who also released an album on December 8th. Many Barbz thought of this as disrespectful to Nicki, as @kiyaaminaj expresses, “I’m telling you. That other girl releasing her stank album on 12/8, we on her neck. Because girl... you had all year to announce... bitches wanna be relevant SO BAD” (#87).

(Tibo 2023). Thus, by engaging with inauthentic Barbz, language's power as a tool to define the limits of the Barb community through language is diluted. The Barbz' divergence from the topic of Nicki Minaj will lead to a weakening of the community itself.

Stan Twitter cannot accommodate diverse interests because of their reliance on the vacillating algorithm to stay hidden. The prioritization of content relating only to Nicki functions to communicate boundaries in a way that is intelligible to the algorithm. When users only post about and interact with content regarding Nicki Minaj, their feeds are less likely to contain content that is unrelated due to the algorithm's treatment of shared interests. Simultaneously, it is less likely for locals and opps to engage with these posts that do not interest them, which further signals to the algorithm that these social circles do not overlap. By policing language, Barbz consciously define the boundaries of their community.



Figure 9: "y'all help put these people in the algorithm."

5. Conclusion: A Question for the Culture

The overlapping sites of language, fandom, and internet show how the algorithm makes users subjects of a system while also allowing them opportunities to negotiate with the platform itself. Resting at this intersection is a debate about the restructuring power of the agent in a structured setting. Sociolinguists are concerned with the exercise of the self through language use, while also examining the structural forces that ask us to conform to these practices. The fandom field constructs these cultural norms while allowing individuals generative freedom within its bounds. Barbz come together in algorithmic community. Driven by and reliant on Twitter's algorithm, I watched the Barbz use language to enter a co-constitutive relationship with the platform itself. This algorithmic community allowed them to reshape the semi-permeable borders bounding their group.

Language, fandom, and internet model structure/agency interplay. No single field is ever fully granted primacy. Exploring the role that language plays in online stan communities brings a fresh perspective to the existing body of research on both fandom and digital studies. This study explores an individual moment in time, using subjective participant observation. I maintain that this is not a weakness, but a strength. However, this is a theoretical assumption which can and should be interrogated by future researchers from a more objective standpoint. For example, a comparison between the data collected in participant observation could be supplemented by data collected through API scraping which is less subject to algorithmic interference. A quantitative analysis of the language used by Barbz could determine the prevalence of these strategies on Twitter. Another avenue for future exploration examining the position of a casual fan to understand the functionality of this algorithmic collaboration. Finally, there is a need to operationalize *stan* as a label in fandom and Internet studies in order to deepen our analyses of online dynamics and the negotiation of publicity.

Barbz come into community alongside the algorithm, not in spite of it or because of it. This continuous active negotiation with the platform is necessary for the community to stay together. By acknowledging the often-ignored role that the algorithm plays in online community, we are able to explain some of the perplexing behaviour that we observe online. The algorithm bridges the social structure of the Internet with the agency of the individual. The algorithm may seem like some incognizable other, but the reality is that we are already comfortably engaged in reciprocal relationships with it.

Resisting this co-constitutive relationship is an Edenic fantasy. Our increasing entanglement with technology seen through the algorithm's role in social life may be emblematic of a new and necessary understanding of the key players in social and cultural life and their roles in structure. By highlighting the role that the algorithm plays in the formation of online communities and working with, rather than against it to learn more about online world-making activities, we can approach a better model of online life and culture.

Following List

Table 3: Pre-Observation Following

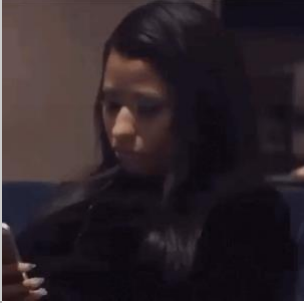


Username	Joined Twitter
@NICKIMINAJ	April 2009
@PopCrave	December 2015
@PopBase	June 2019
@HARDWHITE	November 2014
@nmcharts	April 2019
@OKINASTHONG	August 2020
@minajtrollz	June 2020




Table 4: Post-Observation Description

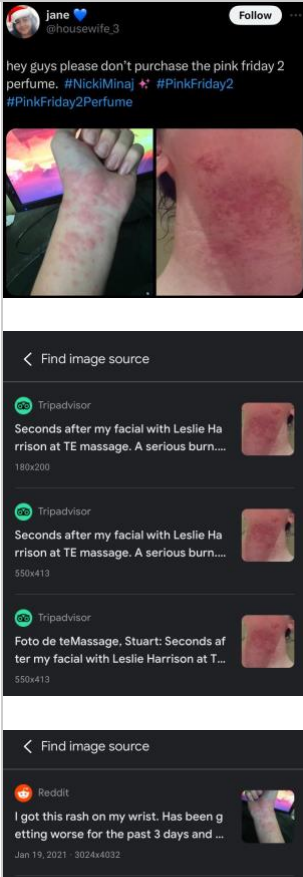


Username (Total number of tweets collected)	Followers (As of Jan 23, 2024)	Joined Twitter
@NICKIMINAJ (8)	28.1M	April 2009
@PopCrave (0)	1.6M	December 2015
@PopBase (1)	1.3M	June 2019
@HARDWHITE (4)	343.2K	November 2014
@nmcharts (0)	124K	April 2019
@OKINASTHONG (25)	17.2K	August 2020
@minajtrollz (12)	97.6K	June 2020
@1nickiminajfan_ (3)	20.8K	November 2015
@sleezyjamie (2)	63.1K	June 2021
@YSLONIKA (17)	92.7K	July 2022
@onikascrown (15)	44.2K	August 2016
@OPDrags (9)	10K	January 2021



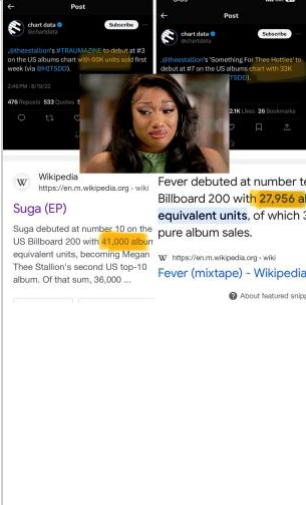
@rumor37 (6)	5,457	November 2011
@MAYAMINAJ (1)	10.7K	April 2021




Tweets Cited





Post #	Account	Tweet	Response/Thread	Media
3	ISenegalais	Deactivate the comment for me please	@HARDWHITE: “Happy Wedding anniversary to @NICKIMINAJ & Ken. 🎉”	 (GIF of Nicki looking at her phone deadpan)
17	minajtrollz	Vogue US cover, 73 questions, Barbie World rising on Billboard Hot 100 5 months after release, Nicki kept her word and been giving us something every Friday , Pink Friday 2 less than 30 days away ohhh we eating good!		 (Video of the person in red twerking in front of a studio audience)
87	kiyaaminaj	I’m telling you. That other girl releasing her stank album on 12/8, we on her neck. Because girl... you had all year to announce... btches wanna be relevant SO BAD	@onikascrown: “December 8th is for Nicki and Nicki only.”	 (GIF of Nicki giving side eye, confused/concerned)




89	barbiecharts	nicki minaj ate once again i'm sorry 🤔																							
93	YSLONIKA	BIGhive always worried about Nicki & the barbz when swifties has been mopping the Floor with them for the last 6 months		 <p>(Video of Beyoncé twerking)</p>																					
95.5	ONIKASTHONG	The features on PF2 must be gag worthy because every single from the album so far has been solo																							
115	Unapologetic_Z	They gagging meanwhile Cardi got more Billboard awards than #her in less time. Oh Nickel...		<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>Winner</th> <th>Nominees</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2018</td> <td>Cardi B^[1]</td> <td>Nicki Minaj Bhad Bhabie</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2019</td> <td>Cardi B^[2]</td> <td>Nicki Minaj City Girls</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2020</td> <td>Cardi B^[3]</td> <td>City Girls Megan Thee Stallion</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2021</td> <td>Megan Thee Stallion</td> <td>Cardi B Saweetie</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2022</td> <td>Megan Thee Stallion</td> <td>Cardi B Latto</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2023</td> <td>Nicki Minaj</td> <td>Doja Cat Ice Spice</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year	Winner	Nominees	2018	Cardi B ^[1]	Nicki Minaj Bhad Bhabie	2019	Cardi B ^[2]	Nicki Minaj City Girls	2020	Cardi B ^[3]	City Girls Megan Thee Stallion	2021	Megan Thee Stallion	Cardi B Saweetie	2022	Megan Thee Stallion	Cardi B Latto	2023	Nicki Minaj	Doja Cat Ice Spice
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2022	Megan Thee Stallion	Cardi B Latto																							
2023	Nicki Minaj	Doja Cat Ice Spice																							





<p>128</p>	<p>NylaLewinski</p>	<p>Why #that fanbase lying and saying that the Pink Friday 2 perfume is giving them rashes and making them itch? Literally found the images on Google in 5 seconds 🤪😭</p>	
<p>149</p>	<p>Inickiminajfan_</p>	<p>PINKFRIDAY2 WILL BE SAVING THE RAP INDUSTRY 🔥</p>	
<p>151</p>	<p>Inickiminajfan_</p>	<p>ALL IRRELEVANT MATTERS OFF THE TL!! #PINKFRIDAY2 12/08/23 🐱 GET READY FOR #JINGLEBALL2023 🌲 Mon Chicago 12/04 AllStateArena Thursday Atl 12/14 StateFarmArena @poweratl</p>	


152	Inickiminajfan_	YOUR FAVS COULD NEVA!!		
159	PINKTAPEBARBIE	okay he's still head barb 🤔🤔	@lurbrbie: "it's never that serious" [responding to @PINKTAPEBARBIE celebrating that @ONIKASTHONG followed them]	
168	onikascrown	If red Ruby not in your top Apple replay or Spotify wrapped yo bussy stink and u eat nails for breakfast		
174	minajtrollz	Your faves couldn't even sell 70K with a Grammy and rollout & y'all worried about Nicki first week sales? 🤡 They a little too brave for me they've been stalking Pink Friday 2 since it was announced. Barbz I hope y'all ready to embarrass these btches and break records!		
177	WriteARapSis	<p>This cry baby hoe 7 years into her career and will never touch 375k— no 106k cus you waiting on Nicki and not buying that depressing ass music</p> <p>She got on a track and said she wanted to dye, no one cared and she fell off billboard second week. The only THING being dragged is MegaHoe by every man she ever laid on that big ass back for and fucked</p>		

193	[barb777]	Hold on, some of you were born after 2000?!?? Chi- this definitely my last era on stan twitter....☹️		 <p>(GIF of Nene Leaks looking disgusted)</p>
194	ONIKASTHONG	Streets saying Nicki dropping something at midnight		 <p>(GIF of Wendy Williams blinking excitedly)</p>
212	highendhomo	She's taking us to gag city		
213	oncemisty	See how they slowly take away our lingo and make it seem like a common usage? Y'all need to leave us alone actually.		

215	Diamond_Minaj	Are we trending #DearOnika ????	
217	sleezeSTAN	y'all help put these people in the algorithm	
219	SleezeMaraj	I really want them to stop stealing our lingo ..	 <p data-bbox="1161 1270 1461 1409">(Person in the video putting down the hot comb looking exasperated)</p>
226	megnikas	<p>GAG CITY NEIGHBORHOODS 🍷 🍷 Gagburbs: Nicki, Update and chart pages Gagville (historic downtown) : Nicki Follow, Multiple Nicki Notices Gaglake houses: Cupcake Barbz Projects: Edgy barbz, hybrids Dudland: Nicki block gag prison: bacarbies which one do u live in?</p>	

		<p>beware of accounts that are sharing things that nicki asked us specifically not to do..</p> <p>beware of accounts using nickis name while using duds names to put them in the algorithm</p> <p>beware of pages that are pushing ideas that benefit no one but the duds</p>		
229	sleezeSTAN	beware of fake barbz		
238	minajtrollz	<p>#GagCity is trending #1, album drops in less than 48 hours, no leaks, no PR stunts, major platforms promoting Gag City, other fanbases already trying to replicate 😊 I'm loving the energy!</p>		 <p>(Two people shooting guns into the dark)</p>
239	Envyonika	<p>A thread of all the big brands and companies & celebrities that have tweeted about GAG CITY! 🐱🎀</p>		
241	[barbie9]	OMFG		<p>Gag city was first introduced to stan Twitter by BG but I'm not gonna wake that tea up</p> <p>📖 Readers added context</p> <p>This is false, "Gag City" was introduced to stan twitter by MTV in reference to Nicki Minaj back in 2013.</p> <p>x.com/mtv/status/385...</p> <p>Do you find this helpful? Rate it</p> <p>3:43 PM · 12/6/23 from Earth · 218K Views</p> <p>58 Reposts 118 Quotes 504 Likes 56 Bookmarks</p>

244	MTV	The commercial for @NICKIMINAJ 's new fragrance #Minajesty has dropped and it is, as promised, gag city. Check it: http://on.mtv.com/15JesNv		
255	MinajPlaylist	.@billboard is now open at Gag City #PinkFriday2		
256	PINKBAWBIE	BYE BITCH		
258	camaronomarion	drone footage by gag city pd shows billboard has just popped up in dud city!		
224	[J_PF2]	And if a few engines blow out of a plane or the train falls of the track we always got the old fashioned way. We are getting to Gag City one way or another!!!!		

263	minajtrollz	Ole girl and her entire team is spiraling all because Nick tweeted a meme..		 <p>(Ts Madison cry-laughing)</p>
265	MARAJTEAM_	This song is a CHOP	@[FRANKTHEBARB]: "22.6k [views on tiktok] for pink friday girls? what did i miss?"	

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