

John Max Byrne

Professor Luckett

Celebrity Culture

Swift v. XCX: The Puppeteering of Fandoms in Celebrity Culture

Like the music industry, tennis requires a level of choreography and skill that forces the players to scrutinize every move their opponent makes. During these moments of pure sport, the ruthless fans of each player hold their breath—waiting for the ball and racket to make contact. It's in these moments of silence that somehow feel the loudest, like the roar of a fanbase screaming the name of their beloved popstar as they take the stage with a mic in hand. Whether the mic is decked with pink sequins or neon green, the players stand ready and poised to launch.

On one side of the net, we have Taylor Swift—undeniably one of the most prevalent singer/songwriters that has catapulted to stardom ever since she picked up an acoustic guitar during her early childhood years. Capturing the hearts of millions of people around the globe, she consistently pushes out music around both fictional narratives as well as loftier themes of love, friendship, and belonging (or the lack thereof). It's rather impossible to move through popular culture and not come face to face with her flowing locks of blonde hair, heart hands, and her relentless army of “Swifties” behind her.

On the other side, we have Charlotte Emma Aitchison (known professionally as Charli XCX), another singer/songwriter known for her electropop music style and her subsequent party aesthetic that notably lit up during the 2024 release of her sixth studio album, *Brat*. XCX's music contains rather explicit themes of sex, partying, and drugs. Regardless, XCX certainly found her

niche audience during underground rave performances, dubbing her loyal fanbase her “Angels.” Given the stark contrast between their music and resulting fanbases, it’s rather shocking that both Swift and XCX had a working relationship prior to their celebrity feud.

In an era of constant social media communication and hyper-visibility, a celebrity’s authenticity has become the means through which they can seize the public’s consciousness—even if those means to do so are rather controversial. It’s becoming increasingly difficult (if not downright impossible) for fans to make unfiltered claims about a celebrity’s authenticity without being clouded by glitter bombs or cocaine puffs from an opposing fanbase. From Taylor Swift’s restrained means of communication to Charli XCX’s unfiltered interaction style, to what extent can a celebrity be “authentic” and how does this perception vary between Swifties and Angels?

Turning back the clocks, the worlds of Swift and XCX initially met in 2015 when a budding friendship blossomed between the two stars. At the time, they had made various public appearances together such as Swift inviting XCX onstage during her *1989 World Tour* to sing her first Top 10 single “Boom Clap.”¹ From there, their worlds became even more intertwined when XCX went on tour with Swift—becoming an opener for her *Reputation Stadium Tour* alongside Camila Cabello. Despite their differing music styles, both took a liking with the other, possibly from sharing the same experience of being a female popstar in a patriarchal music industry.

Yet, a storm started to brew when, in a *Pitchfork* interview, XCX pointedly described her experience of performing in front of Swift’s fans as “getting up on stage and waving to 5-year-olds.”² Even though XCX immediately attempted to mitigate the ensuing drama by

¹ Vivinetto, G. (2025, October 9). Taylor Swift and Charli XCX's friendship timeline. *Today*. <https://www.today.com/popculture/music/taylor-swift-charli-xcx-friendship-timeline-rcna236707>.

² Finger, B. (2019, August 6). Charli XCX interview. *Pitchfork*. <https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/charli-xcx-interview/>

tweeting that her words were taken out of context, the damage had already been done.³ After the close of Swift's tour, the two celebrities seemed to have part ways. Whether their subsequent distance was the result of this controversy or just simply pursuing different career paths, their public personas started to drift in opposite directions. Later in 2022, their paths collided once again when both celebrities allegedly dated members of the pop band *The 1975* simultaneously. Swift controversially dated lead singer Matt Healy whereas XCX took a liking to drummer George Daniel (who she later married in July 2025).⁴

From then on, all seemed relatively quiet on the court between the two singers until Charli XCX released her sixth studio album *Brat* (2024) which features the song "Sympathy is a knife." On the track, she vulnerably expresses her own self-doubts and insecurities which juxtaposes the album (and song's) loud and bold production. She sings that she "doesn't wanna share the space" and that "this one girl taps [her] insecurities." Letting her guard down, she goes on to express that she "couldn't even be her if [she] tried" and that she "don't wanna see her backstage at [her] boyfriend's show."⁵ Although Swift is never explicitly named, both Swifties and Angels alike immediately linked the two artists together—primarily given the relationships with both Matt Healy and George Daniel respectively. Even though both fandoms agreed that Swift seems to be the "her" in question, the similarities end there. The Swifties interpreted these lyrics as a power lob against their icon whereas the Angels felt that XCX was simply being self-reflective and honest about her recent experiences around megastar Swift.

In response to the ensuing drama, XCX took to social media once again to clarify that there are no diss tracks on the *Brat* album. Not only that, but she echoes the underlying

³ Charli XCX [@charli_xcx]. (2019, August 6). Just to clarify [Tweet]. X. https://x.com/charli_xcx/status/1158832179398533120

⁴ Sharf, Z. (2025, October 3). Taylor Swift and Charli XCX feud timeline. *Variety*.

<https://variety.com/2025/music/news/taylor-swift-charli-xcx-feud-actually-romantic-timeline-showgirl-1236538041/>

⁵ Charli XCX. (2024). Sympathy is a knife [Song]. On *Brat*. Atlantic Records.

commentary made on “Sympathy is a knife” that female artists are constantly being “pitted against [each other] but also expected to be best friends with every single person” they meet.⁶ The jarring contrast between what Charli XCX meant and how it was received (by both Swifties and Angels) speaks volumes about how vigilant music fandoms are—protecting their beloved idol from any scrutiny at all costs. However, the rumored subtext of the track went beyond the Swifties and even caught Taylor Swift off-guard, causing her to miss her mark as the ball whizzed past her.

Fast-forward to 2025 with the release of Swift’s twelfth studio album *The Life of a Showgirl*—a soft pop-rock album addressing themes of what it feels like to be a megastar consistently in the limelight. The album comes after the close of her record-breaking *Eras Tour* with majority of the tracks serving as reflections of her time on the road. Notably, Swift includes “Actually Romantic,” a slower song about a woman (rumored to be Charli XCX) who hates Swift so much that she actually finds it romantic how much time they spend thinking about her. Right off the bat, Swift supposedly jabs at XCX by accusing her of calling Swift “‘Boring Barbie’ when the coke’s got [her] brave” and how she wrote “a song saying it makes [her] sick to see” Swift’s face.⁷ This shift in tone is significantly more intense than XCX’s more ambiguous approach. Even still, XCX’s track could be interpreted in a variety of different ways, yet Swift’s direct mention of “coke” immediately points fingers at XCX.

Through all the noise, it’s worth asking whether the conflict is being derived from the players on the court, or if it’s actually coming from the stands all around them. Scholars Melissa A. Click and Rebecca Tukachinsky Forster would argue it’s the latter: fanbases develop a collective set of norms about how their idol is supposed to behave. When another, perhaps rival,

⁶ Charli XCX [@charlixcx]. (2024, May 29). Brat psa! [TikTok video]. TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/@charlixcx/video/7374500871511526688>.

⁷ Swift, T. (2025). Actually romantic [Song]. On *The Life of a Showgirl*. Republic Records.

celebrity doesn't behave in an expected manner, the resulting dislike is better understood as genuine outrage. Consequently, this "dislike often surfaces moral judgments" and makes every minute detail feel that much more like a personal attack.⁸ Given the astounding allegiance both fanbases have towards their idols, they have individually shaped into moral communities that possess conflicting definitions of what a female celebrity is supposed to look like. These self-righteous standards are what allow for celebrity feuds to have more credibility than merely being trashy gossip—elevating celebrity drama to a cultural conversation.

From the fans' point of view, it's hard to think of two female popstars that have more juxtaposed aesthetics, self-presentation tactics, and communication styles than Swift and XCX. The Swifties—arguably the most vicious, yet loyal fandom of the 21st century—spans globally as Taylor Swift transcends international borders to touch the lives of millions of people around the world. It's no question that Swift (compared to XCX) possesses an insurmountable influence that slowly grew with each passing studio album. The scale of her fanbase is the cause to which their undying loyalty is the effect, valuing Swift's well-being and storytelling above virtually everything else. This dedication too doesn't go unnoticed with Swift constantly pushing out content (albums, tours, movies, etc.) at an increasingly successive rate that keeps her fans repeatedly coming back for more. Yet, Swift's authenticity is meticulously constructed through curated vulnerability. From hiding hints to what might come next in her content known as "Easter eggs" to utilizing songwriting as a form of confession, Swift has mastered a restrained form of communication that allows for her parasocial relationship with her fans to feel intimate without ever being truly exposed. In turn, this intentional moderation is read as a form of artistry that feels honorable to the Swifties, even if it feels heavily filtered to others.

⁸ Click, M. A., & Tukachinsky Forster, R. (2025). 'She really gets my blood boiling': moral judgements, dislike and celebrities. *Celebrity Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2540766>

In contrast, Charli XCX's Angels are a different kind of fandom yet share a lot of similar qualities. Like the Swifties, they are deeply loyal to XCX and identify with both her artistry and her individualism. When *Brat* struck the zeitgeist in 2024, the Angels wholeheartedly embraced the associated "brat" persona with its signature neon green color and "club rat" aesthetic. Her concerts (particularly those on her *Brat Tour*) are known to be these freeing, throw-your-head-back performances that imply a multitude of innuendos pointing towards drugs and alcohol—with the purpose of taking the edge off to dance the night away. Within her growing media presence, her album spread virally again when her song "Apple" became associated with a creator-generated TikTok dance. If anything, this particular era caused the Angels to explode in size—inviting casual listeners to identify with XCX's nonchalant attitude in addition to the dance pop musical style. From a communications perspective, XCX started to build a brand in which she was known for her unfiltered TikToks that possess an unapologetic personality that is perceived as genuine transparency. For her, there isn't so much as a curated performance, as there is expressing her original self. This unfiltered public image is a direct reflection of how the Angels behave collectively.

With all that said, both fandoms fervently believe their idol is the authentic one. The Swifties dislike XCX's messy aesthetic and the Angels disapprove of how calculated Swift is with her fans. Both fanbases believe the other artist is performing an unrealistic identity that goes against their established moral code. What's more is this paradox has crystallized before. Scholar Daisy Pignetti examined a similar dynamic through the Taylor Swift v. Kim Kardashian match which took place just a decade prior. Fans of one side regularly perceived the rival celebrity as artificial while turning their backs on the manufactured nature of their own player's identity. Critiquing Kim Kardashian, Pignetti points out that "there is an authenticity to [Kardashian's]

manufacturing that you just don't find with" Swift—a transferable dynamic almost analogous to the XCX v. Swift match.⁹ Although the context is different, the logic still fundamentally applies. Despite acknowledging how manufactured both sides are, both fandoms believe the other audience to be inherently wrong.

Points aside, the scoreboard doesn't prove which artist is the better player and the fans don't immediately regret cheering for the loser. Rather, authenticity within celebrity culture is a subjective argument that can easily be misconstrued by the other side. Perhaps one fandom views an artist's forehand as a strength while others might see it as the reason they lost the point. This subjective judgment will always be clouded by personal feelings of loyalty and affection that prevent fans from seeing the other side clearly. Whether you see glitter bombs or cocaine puffs depends entirely on which side of the net you're sitting on. One can argue a multitude of reasons for why Swift might be more authentic than XCX and vice versa—there is no objective standard against which celebrities can be measured. In their selection of self-presentation modes, they sign up for a plethora of opinions, some viewing their artistry as creatively original or downright disingenuous. These competing definitions of what it means to be inherently "authentic" extend the cultural conversation beyond what can be taken at face value between Swift and XCX. With that, the impossibility of answering that question will most likely perpetuate the feud for albums to come.

Even with the facts explicitly presented, it's still unpleasant to think about how we got here. Words were taken out of context, fanbases interpreted songs differently, and the artists went from having a genuine friendship to a broken relationship puppeteered by both the fans and media alike. Given where we started, it makes the resulting fracture feel that much more

⁹ Pignetti, D. (2022). Petty things and nemeses. *Celebrity Studies*, 13(1), 108–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2021.2017744>

revelatory about how our celebrity culture operates. There is no absolute definition for “authenticity”—just the ways in which it can be expressed and prescribed. Consequently, since fans see their identities accurately reflected in their idols (like Swift and XCX), they have to believe they are truly authentic or else their own identities get lost in the ambiguity of it all. If you can’t rely on the personality of your respective idol to curate an authentic identity, where does that then leave you?

Works Cited

- Charli XCX. (2024). *Sympathy is a knife* [Song]. On *Brat*. Atlantic Records.
- Charli XCX [@charli_xcx]. (2019, August 6). *Just to clarify* [Tweet]. X.
https://x.com/charli_xcx/status/1158832179398533120
- Charli XCX [@charlixcx]. (2024, May 29). *Brat psa!* [TikTok video]. TikTok.
<https://www.tiktok.com/@charlixcx/video/7374500871511526688>
- Click, M. A., & Tukachinsky Forster, R. (2025). 'She really gets my blood boiling': moral judgements, dislike and celebrities. *Celebrity Studies*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2540766>
- Finger, B. (2019, August 6). *Charli XCX interview*. Pitchfork.
<https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/charli-xcx-interview/>
- Pignetti, D. (2022). Petty things and nemeses. *Celebrity Studies*, 13(1), 108–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2021.2017744>
- Sharf, Z. (2025, October 3). *Taylor Swift and Charli XCX feud timeline*. Variety.
<https://variety.com/2025/music/news/taylor-swift-charli-xcx-feud-actually-romantic-timeline-showgirl-1236538041/>
- Swift, T. (2025). *Actually romantic* [Song]. On *The Life of a Showgirl*. Republic Records.
- Vivinetto, G. (2025, October 9). *Taylor Swift and Charli XCX's friendship timeline*. Today.
<https://www.today.com/popculture/music/taylor-swift-charli-xcx-friendship-timeline-rcna236707>