

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

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## ABSTRACT

While there is a wealth of sociolinguistic research on subculture and a rapidly growing field of digital ethnography, little research has been conducted on subcultural language use online. Superfan groups, or stans, form speech communities on Twitter/X and present as a closed group despite remaining public. Through digital ethnographic observation of nonstandard English use on Twitter, I argue that Barbz, or Nicki Minaj stans, discourage their posts from spreading to the general public. Working with the algorithm's composition of social media feeds, Barbz use language to conceal themselves while remaining discoverable. Individuals use language variation and encoding to interact directly with the algorithm, strategically hiding their conversations from the public. By way of sociolinguistic theories including variance and enregisterment, I situate this study in relation to fandom studies, cultural capital, and structural theories of internet. This netnography takes a multimodal approach to social media, showing that Barbz strategically open their community at specific times and in specific ways that are advantageous to them. On Twitter, Barbz 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 structural affordance.

**Keywords:** fandom, algorithms, memes, social media, sociolinguistics

## “What’s Wig?”

A flushed young man is about to audition before three famous singers with the power to give him stardom (American Idol 2018). After introducing himself, he mutters, “Wig, okay.” Katy Perry, one of the judges, responds, “Wig- did you just say wig? I know, wig, I feel that already.” Her fellow judges look around the room, confused. “Wig? What’s wig?” they ask. Katy cuts them off. “It’s not your language; it’s just for us.” *Wig* comes from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a cropped form of ‘wig flew’ or ‘wig snatched,’ expressions of shock, excitement, or praise (Know Your Meme 2018). The term is commonly used in fandom communities on stan Twitter. This viral interaction demonstrates the power of language to define a group by limiting the intelligibility of their communication. Despite being a nationally televised interaction, these two were able to have a private conversation.

‘Stan’ is 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, which tells the story of an obsessed fan named Stan whose desire to connect with Eminem drives him to violence (Crow 2019). The word ‘stan’ was defined as both noun and verb to describe obsessive devotion in 2008 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In exploring stan Twitter, I ask, what is the role of language in online stan communities? More specifically, I seek to describe the practice that lies at this intersection of social media, fandom, and language, drawing on discourse analysis to interrogate the communication that takes place beyond human-to-human semantics.

Academic depictions of fandom tend to characterize fans as obsessive, although many self-identify as fans while remaining decidedly

casual (Sandvoss 2003). Such casual fans still form community — Sandvoss (2003) highlights the European football fan — without the fanatical tendencies of popular culture stans. The multiplicity of fan practices leads some researchers to differentiate “fan” from “fandom” (Jenkins 2006; Abd-Rahim 2019). However, this distinction falsely implies that community does not form among casual fans. ‘Fandom’ also describes a community without specifying their investment. Crow (2019, 8) typologized ‘stans’ as individuals with a social investment in a person or group “to the point of obsession,” resolving both of the above tensions. I distinguish stans to resist conflating generic casual fans with stans; both fans and stans use language to define themselves and their roles in a community and to perform authenticity (Crow 2019; Malik and Haidar 2023). Researchers who have examined these internal structures of fan communities have paid scant attention to how the fan community interacts with the rest of the social network site (SNS).

Through this digital linguistic ethnography of a single stan group, I argue that language like ‘wig’ proliferates on Twitter due to its reliance on the algorithm to assemble customized feeds through establishing perceived interests and social networks. By turning my gaze toward the algorithm, I highlight a layer of social mediation necessary for understanding the sociolinguistic landscape that facilitates interactions like American Idol’s viral *wig* moment. Understanding this dimension of digital life is vital to ensuring positive future relations with technology.

## A ‘LIT’ REVIEW

Sociolinguistics is concerned with speech content alongside the context in which language is used. In ‘speech communities,’ whose speech acts are unique roughly according to the limits of their social group, speech acts are contextually dynamic, leading to inconsistent norms between groups (Gumperz 1968). Over time, this organic diversity becomes codified, leading to identifiable linguistic variance between groups. These changes in the use of language allow for

*enregisterment*, the strategic use of specific speech patterns to signal physical or social characteristics for a contextual advantage (Agha 2003). Agha's (2003) work aligns with Penelope Eckert's (2012) three waves of sociolinguistic variation studies: The first wave intended to identify variation, while second wave ethnographic studies examined variation as indexical of social identity. These paradigms are giving way to the third wave, which focuses on how individuals navigate social landscapes using language variance. In this paper, my focus is on nonstandard language variation, so I have chosen to use the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to mean broad nonstandard language used by Black Americans (Winford 2015). However, in this distinction, I recognize that the term itself is under question: Sharese King (2020) notes that 'AAVE' inaccurately defines the group of speakers, their relationship to English, and the classed status of the speech.

Observing *enregisterment* of AAVE by gay men on Twitter, Ilbury (2020) observes that AAVE is often adopted to present a 'Sassy Queen' persona. Such strategic performances take advantage of pre-existing essentialized traits associated with Black American speech communities (which diverge from the Standard English commonly found in formalized education and writing) by implicating them into the speaker's contingent identity and altering the speaker's social position. Characterological *enregisterment* embodies the capability of language to construct a dynamic and adaptable identity, but a broader political analysis may find this strategy a form of digital blackface (Ilbury 2020, 261 n6). Indeed, the register of speech of interest in this project, sometimes known as 'stan Twitter speak' or 'internet slang,' has its roots in AAVE and language used by Black and Latin gay men and trans women in the underground ballroom scene of the '80s (Chery 2022; Davis 2021). It is not possible or productive to define this 'internet slang' as a de-racialized conglomeration of AAVE and ballroom language. Rather, it is the social landscape itself that gives rise to these variations on Twitter, and the social landscape that is the focus of this study.

Linguistic self-definition of groups often takes place through code-switching, the

insertion of one linguistic system into another. Observations of an Italian-American cultural group where Italian code-switching was common showed that the intelligibility of language when speaking to a general audience is often known and considered (De Fina 2007). This principle has also been shown to intentionally exclude individuals or declare authenticity. One study of cannabis users in New York City found that code-switching with slang was instrumental in protecting information from outsider encroachment, offering authenticity and identity separate from other similar communities (Johnson et al. 2006). These studies all demonstrate that subculture-specific language is particularly vital to the self-definition of social groups such as stans.

Rampton's (2005) landmark study on the cross-cultural codeswitching of British youth presents these practices as polyphonic sites of co-creation, acts of solidarity rather than absorption or appropriation into the dominant culture. In a sense, this rings true, as I observed individuals comfortably presenting as white while enmeshing themselves in the linguistic and cultural landscape of Barb Twitter. But, even in this distinction, Barbz still fiercely policed the linguistic boundary of their community. As @SleezeMaraj says in an indirect tweet, "I really want them to stop stealing our lingo..." They clarify their specific issue over words like "gag," "catch it," and "lashings" through replies. However, @SleezeMaraj is making these comments not in a racial context, but rather in the context of inter-stan conflicts. It seems that the linguistic practices I describe here are not an *ethnolect* because they are not policed along the lines of race.

This is not open season, but rather a strategic and semi-permeable opening directed toward solidarity and cooperation in fan practices rather than racial or hierarchical dynamics as Rampton (2005) described. The common ground of stanhoo allows for language crossing to be a polyphonic discourse that preserves the original voice of the language, forestalling de-racialization or digital blackface. Barbz' policing of language seems to extend beyond a concern for culture wars and grows directly from the foundation and stability of their community, cautious that their words

are not hijacked by outsiders with opposing goals.

### Stans: The Apes of Genius?

Some of the first fandom studies arose as a response to Bourdieu's (1984) portrayal of mass or popular culture as less refined or complex than high culture. In *Distinction*, where he uncovered the vertical movement within and between classes, Bourdieu called the middle class "apes of genius," imitating the achievements of bourgeois cultural insiders (Kant, qtd. in Bourdieu 1984, 326). Fiske (1992) argues that this delineation is reductive and portrays the middle class as repressed and dominated, lacking desire and creativity. From this perspective, fandom studies work toward the redistribution of cultural agency among the masses.

For example, perceived cultural outsiders wearing a classic band t-shirt, like Nirvana, are often asked by insiders to name five songs to assess their fandom, because a 'fake fan' might use economic capital for access to the band's fandom without cultural experience to back it up. This experience is also often gendered, as men assume that young women buy band tees from chain retail stores because they want to seem cultured, not because they are authentic fans. By melding middle-class habitus with the high-class field, such a "heterodoxy experienced as if it were orthodoxy" only serves to betray the *petit bourgeoisie's* marked otherness (Bourdieu 1984, 323). Yet, grasping after cultural capital is not a completely pointless endeavour. Many fans influence culture in a big way from their supposedly subordinate positions.

Memes are one way that fans pick up content as their own, independently from high-brow culture's impositions. A meme is something that is not only popular, but replicable, "remade and recombined" according to a textual or visual format (McCulloch 2019, 240). Again, we see that in the necessarily imperfect replication of memes, variations are stabilized and incorporated into the speech community. This mutation produces a dense cultural network dividing the 'memers' from the 'normies' (McCulloch 2019). The in-group's

separation from the masses is prized and prioritized as a marker of status, while outsiders are excluded (Bourdieu 1984). For example, Peeters et al. (2021) attribute the subcultural linguistic variation on 4chan (a forum site where users are anonymous and unidentifiable) to this self-definition through the rejection of others. In the online sphere, memes can be interpreted as an encoded communication of belonging, a repatriation of cultural agency and capital.

Fandoms have become increasingly extreme in their consumption and production on SNS as digital life has complexified. Fans on Weibo developed specific norms of speech in order to take advantage of algorithmic preferences and push certain topics to the Trending page (Yin and Xie 2021). Crucially, this demonstrates that a certain type of fan can be identified solely by the way they speak, and that speech has the power to concretely impact the online social landscape. In this alteration, Weibo fans are creating an exclusionary, classed dynamic. Similarly, the Barbz' employment of linguistic strategies such as memes, AAVE, and ballroom language is a linguistic exercise of cultural capital. In closing their community, Barbz unite language, culture, and power.

### Dawn of the Planet of the Stans

Stans have fluid roles and a wide range of practices. For the purposes of this study, I understand a stan as 'a fan whose love for their idol is so intense that they do not want to be casual and seek closed communities of like-minded devotees.' In a sense, stanhood is more about being in the community of stans than any one specific practice. So, while some may self-identify as fans, not stans, I choose to include them in my stan analysis because of their entanglement in the stan community and their clear removal from casual fandom. Fandom and stanhood overlap; there is no way to confirm the nature of an individual's relationship to their fan-object without asking them, and this is not always practical on SNS (Duffett 2013). However, many stan accounts are explicit about their fandom, with their profile signalling the fan-object as eclipsing or equal to their personal identity.



Take, for example, one Nicki Minaj stan account, @ONIKASTHONG. They were described by another user as “head barb,” but their bio describes them as a “fan account.” Their profile is full of signals to Nicki Minaj: the profile and header photos are her face, their username is her legal name, Onika, and their bio link leads to a Nicki Minaj website. However, @ONIKASTHONG identifies as a fan and uses, presumably, their own first name, Tyler, as an identifier rather than another sign of the idol. They have not socially dissolved themselves into Nicki Minaj, and yet their identity is fused with her. Given that @ONIKASTHONG has combined their own identity with their love for Nicki Minaj, I place them within my definition of stanhood rather than general fandom. They do not present their Barb life as separate from their personal life in any meaningful way.

The nature of the online space itself fosters the separation of stan groups. danah boyd sees SNS as characterized by affordances, which describe the capacity of structure to reshape publics through impositions and opportunities for users, while also spurring new practices to circumvent them (boyd 2011). 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 single profile and feed (Marwick and boyd 2011). If anyone can see your posts, you must prepare yourself for any scenario. A user calling Taylor Swift an eco-terrorist or a capitalistic white-feminist cannot speak exclusively to those critical of Taylor Swift; they must contend with the fact that their critical 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 affordances of publicity, 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,” and communities are buffered from outside perception or understanding (Abidin 2021, 4). In these scenarios, collapsed context does not pose a challenge; it is used as “weaponized context” where information is moved and meaning

perverted with ease (Abidin 2021, 3). For instance, mother is no longer a familial identifier, but rather becomes a way to describe respect and admiration beyond blood ties (Davis 2021). A study of online subculture on 4chan found that volatile and unstable language similarly became weaponized, leveraged to form exclusive in-group dynamics (Peeters et al. 2021). Refracted publics are only enhanced by the introduction of algorithmically curated feeds. By becoming discoverable and weaponizing context, refracted publics like the Barbz edit their audience without becoming unilaterally closed.

### Ready Player One: Making Kin with the Algorithm

Given their differences in field from other traditional social sciences, media studies and digital ethnography 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 see the algorithm’s influence. Boucher (2022) argues that this algorithm curation 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). Without sampling data from a static field, such as replies to a post (Malik and Haidar 2023; Marwick and boyd 2011a), or an individual account (Chun 2017; Ilbury 2020), or through scraping large swaths of data from the code that lies behind the user interface (Kang et al. 2022), Boucher (2022) 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 in part due to discoverability (Abidin 2021). This algorithm-centred ethnographic observation highlights the growing ineffectiveness of traditional online research methods, which rely on searchability to retrieve data from underground communities. So, I entered into a collaboration with the algorithm to collect data.

The algorithm is not an impartial party; it enacts a vested interest in circulating and producing specific information and thus cannot

be treated as a non-actor (Maly 2022). In practice, algorithms are rarely independent actors but are overseen by human checks and balances, enmeshing them in a network of relations (Seaver 2018). Because Twitter feeds are assembled from posts that are datafied by the algorithm, everything a user sees is informed by the algorithm. Indeed, algorithmic anthropology is devoted to uncovering the complicated relationships between people and the algorithms they collaborate with as actors (Seaver 2018). Given the changeability and individuality of the algorithmic experience, my data are a result of my own position and interactions in the sociotechnical climate of my observation and should be taken as contextual, not universal.

To enter into a relationship is to prove both parties changed, especially in significant difference. Donna Haraway's (2016) influential "A Cyborg Manifesto" investigated challenges that technologically inflected life poses to the strict divisions of the modern world. Haraway (2016) claims that communication and information technologies are tools for recrafting our bodies, and that we who live in concert with technology, even in its legacy, are ourselves cyborgs, intricately bound up with technology in life itself. Later, she proposed the model of the companion species, whose very difference, rather than similarity, is mutually constitutive of each other, "'the relation' is the smallest possible unit of analysis," not the individual (Haraway 2016, 111). We cannot think of ourselves in isolation from the entities with whom we are enmeshed.

If cyborgs are companion species (Haraway 2016, 113), then through each iteration of the algorithm we are fundamentally changed ourselves. We do not make ourselves or our worlds alone; many Indigenous peoples have known this since time immemorial (Todd 2016; TallBear 2011). Perceiving the algorithm as kin is a turn toward the many Indigenous models of worlding that have existed for millennia, not a new paradigm of Western knowledge (Lewis et al. 2018). Embracing this paradigm of kinship is vital to the faithful analysis of the algorithm as an independent social actor.

## METHODS

For this study, I collected data from Nicki Minaj's Twitter stans, known as the Barbz, around the release of her fifth studio album, *Pink Friday 2*. The name *Barbz* is a shortening of *Barbie*, a significant symbol to Minaj's brand of femininity — she markets herself as a real-life Barbie. Minaj has a strong connection to both Black and queer communities, whose influence over online language is widely recognized (Davis 2021). She is also an ideal inflection point for this study because the Barbz are so extreme in their devotion. Nicki Minaj's husband, Kenneth Petty, is a registered sex offender. Minaj has rigorously defended him, and, in 2021, she was sued for the harassment and intimidation of Jennifer Hough, his accuser, although these charges were later dropped from the lawsuit (Burke and Dasrath 2022; Jacobs 2021). Yet, the Barbz stood by her, and, to this day, some choose to ignore and conceal these details rather than confront and address them. In 2024, a more public audience came into knowledge of these events when Megan Thee Stallion's single "HISS" referenced Megan's Law, which requires sex offenders to register publicly, a lyric thought by many to be directed at Minaj. When she was losing much of her public support, Barbz fiercely defended Minaj, demonstrating stanhood as a commitment that extends beyond fandom. This unflinching devotion sets stan communities apart from the mainstream and encourages them to construct semi-permeable boundaries between their own groups and the general public.

The digital participant observation that I conducted for this study took place on the platform known as Twitter/X — after buying the platform, Elon Musk renamed the platform to X, but users continue to recognize it as Twitter (CivicScience 2023). I began by creating a new Twitter account, following seven Nicki Minaj/stan-oriented accounts identified by my prior knowledge of the community. I catalogued data generally related to Nicki Minaj, with a preference for posts that expressed stanhood or made use of stan language. In this nascent stage, 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 interest were

identified by Twitter’s algorithm, my engagement became more specifically directed to stans and their language. 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, updates, and comedy posts.

While digital ethnography certainly diverges from the traditional model of the heroic ethnographer travelling to foreign shores, my ethnographic method is inspired by previous ethnographies, mainly Boucher (2022), but also Crow (2019). This methodology is based heavily on Blommaert and Dong’s (2020) assertion that digital ethnography must privilege participant observation as a partial and embodied mode of data collection, given that disengaged spectatorship is not possible in many online spaces. By immersing myself in the community and its context, both social and spatial, I gained a unique understanding of Barbz and their cultural practice by virtue of my interaction. I collected 279 tweets for analysis from November 2nd until December 16th, 2023, to coincide with the promotion and release of *Pink Friday 2*. This period encompassed both interest identification as well as the insider data collection. 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 introduced to me by the algorithm. Of these, I interacted with content 234 times (215 likes, 16 like and retweets, and two retweets). I collected 45 tweets without interaction to give context in the data document.

In early 2023, Twitter released some code aimed at explaining to users how their tweets are interpreted and promoted to other users. Every interaction has a value used to rank tweets and determine which are presented to a user and in what order. Table 1 describes the weights of various interactions on Twitter. For example, a post with 25 likes and three replies would have a value of 93.5. The same post using an unrecognized word would have a new weight of 0.935. However, the algorithm is

rough and dynamic, often updated without transparency (Alex 2023). I use this table as a guideline, not as gospel. This framework informs my strategic interactions on the platform, allowing me access to the content I seek.

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

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

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 have 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. 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.

## THE ALGORITHMIC COMMUNITY

Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, which takes discourse as entangled with power relations, algorithmic engagements are an extension of power structures among users (Maly 2022). By distinguishing themselves from public gazes into discoverable sects, Barbz leverage their social power through their

esoteric language as a strategy to negotiate their publicity. The Barbz become a refracted community by the 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 and influence the algorithm to control key factors like social borders. Thus, Barbz are not simply a digital community, but are an *algorithmic community*.

### Oh, We Eating Good: AAVE and Updates

In their employment of AAVE and ballroom language, Barbz signal their interiority while closing their community. My engagement with AAVE and ballroom language as a white researcher is informed by Eckert's (2012) three waves. Consistent with a third-wave study, I maintain that linguistic traits do not index groups of people, but rather, they describe how language is used in its social context. In total, I labelled 72 tweets as using AAVE (26%). Of these posts using AAVE, 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). Updates are intentionally accessible and invite detection by people outside the stan community. When users post updates aimed at the general public, they tend to use Standard English and include ample and reliable detail, positioning themselves to fit into a specific social landscape. 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. My observed use of AAVE on stan Twitter was heavily connected to posts that were designed to have a defined audience, as of the 25 catalogued update posts, only two broke the stylistic norm of accessible posts aimed at the general public, both of which used AAVE.

In one such overlap, @minajtrollz updates on Nicki Minaj's recent accomplishments, concluding their list with "ohhh we eating good!" While *eating* is ballroom language, *we eating* demonstrates an absent copula *are*, which is a feature of AAVE. Despite being embedded in a public update, @minajtrollz' 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." 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 that night. The update posts that used AAVE provided information to an in-group of stans, rather than accessible updates which appealed to the public.

While 'the updater' is a defined role in stan communities (Malik and Haidar 2023), anyone can post update tweets and neither @ONIKASTHONG nor @minajtrollz are strictly update accounts. A more normative example of updates comes from @1nickiminajfan\_ (Figure 1), who used AAVE in one non-update post while two other tweets used Standard English in their efforts of promotion and updating on newly announced performances. These posts were clear and specific, providing information for fans to materially support Nicki:

@1nickiminajfan\_: ALL IRRELEVANT MATTERS OFF THE TL [timeline]!!  
#PINKFRIDAY2 12/08/23 🎤 GET READY FOR #JINGLEBALL2023 🎄 Mon Chicago 12/04 AllStateArena Thursday Atl 12/14 StateFarmArena @poweratl

Similar patterns of code-switching between broadcast and private addresses have been observed in traditional interest groups like an ethnic Italian community, where important information was spoken in Standard English while personal discourse incorporated Italian words and phrases (De Fina 2007). Instead of vaguely implying the tweet's subject, as in the posts using AAVE, @1nickiminajfan\_'s promotional tweets provided all relevant information for anyone to understand and act by making a purchase. The use of AAVE in update tweets reinforces that the intelligibility of language on the internet is known and strategically employed to define audiences. In employing AAVE, stans intentionally place themselves in the digital and social margin, forcing others to decentre themselves in order to engage with Barb content.





Figure 1: "ALL IRRELEVANT MATTERS OFF THE TL"  
@1nickiminajfan\_

### Nicki Minaj Ate Once Again: Ballroom Language and Sentiment

Ballroom language was similarly used to decentre 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 2021). For example, when @barbiecharts (Figure 2) says that "nicki minaj ate once again i'm sorry" attaching a photo of *Pink Friday 2* promotional art, they mean that Nicki looks great in the photo. On the other hand, to *gag* means to be extremely impressed (Davis 2021). When @ONIKASTHONG says, "The features on PF2 must be gag worthy because every single from the album so far has been solo," 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, censuring other Twitter users, or hating on the opposition — over three-quarters of these posts, even some that were critical, used ballroom language as a way to express positive sentiment. Only two of these seven posts actually used ballroom language in order to express negative sentiment. Both tweets used



Figure 2: @barbiecharts, "nicki minaj ate once again im sorry 🥲"

the same word: *chop*. This word comes from the practice of walking in balls, where judges score contestants' performances; a chop from any judge disqualifies a contestant from walking (i.e. competing) in the next round of a category (Davis 2021). @MARAJTEAM\_, who says that the *Pink Friday 2* track "Pink Birthday" is a *chop*, is expressing that the song did not meet their expectations and cannot compete with the other songs on the album. This may be an effect of the ballroom scene itself, which is focused deeply on repairing the successes, community, and positions denied to Black and Latin queer people and trans women (Molé 2021; Skinner 2021).

Stans divide themselves from the general public in order to keep their conversations private. A similar instance of language variation as a protective 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 indicates that language varies from standard English only as a

means to conceal criticism from the general public. However, this does not explain the Barbz' decision to hide their praise of Nicki. The portrait of the narcissistic fan (McLuhan 1994; Sandvoss 2003) is a useful tool to unpack this exclusive in-group dynamic. Stans are engaged in a process of self-definition through the rejection of others. By defining themselves in opposition to non-stan others, Barbz become exceptional in their connection to celebrity, and exclude others to maintain this status. One ethnography of K-pop fandom showed this boundary to be similarly policed along lines of capital, rather than celebrity (Abd-Rahim 2019). For many, fan status is directly related to the economic capital used to support the idol's chart successes, a level of devotion to the ownership and consumption of the product that is not found among casual fans.

Other theories would argue that 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 (Halliday 2018). In memetic violence, the image of the meme supplants the whole person, or in this case, the community. Limiting their discussions to a specific audience helps Barbz to avoid placing their idol on this "technological auction block" (Halliday 2018, 69). Barbz also conceal their fanaticism in an effort to avoid being labelled deviant. For Nicki to be ridiculed is for the Barbz to be humiliated. In sum, the strange language used by stans online can be framed as algorithmic repositioning to protect and preserve their community's uniqueness without the risk of unwanted attention.

### What Happens in Gag City...: Memes and Community Belonging

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 casual fans and undevoted outsiders supporting Nicki Minaj, the album had little chance of performing well on the Billboard Music Charts, let alone breaking chart records. These metrics

are crucial in the eyes of many stans, who compare Nicki's impressive numbers to those of her enemies like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. 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. Barbz began joking about "Gag City," a utopian world illustrated by glossy pink AI-generated cityscapes to promote *Pink Friday 2* on public Twitter. The city itself is a fictional utopia, a mecca that Barbz would travel to when the album was released (Figure 3). This meme went viral and was trending number one on Twitter for a couple of days, with many Barbz seeing it as one of the main reasons that *Pink Friday 2* saw commercial success.

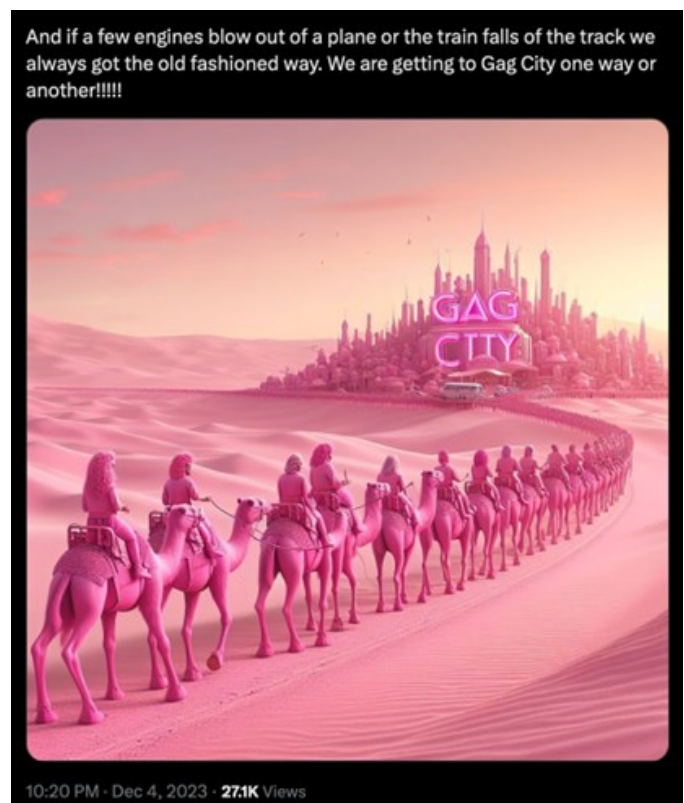


Figure 3: @[J\_PF2], "And if a few engines blow out of a plane or the train falls of the track we always got the old fashioned way. We are getting to Gag City one way or another!!!!!"

Pursuant to its virality, the ownership of Gag City was hotly debated throughout the stan community. 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. In response to a photo of rising pop star Addison Rae captioned, "She's taking us to gag city," @oncemisty responded, "See how they slowly take away our lingo and make



it seem like a common usage? Y'all need to leave us alone actually." This extreme comment did not come unprompted: some Cardi B stans believed that Gag City was a phrase introduced by their BardiGang. While the language of Gag City was significantly more open than the other Barb conversations I came across in my research, it was still fiercely protected as the language of an insider group.



Figure 4: @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."

Over 44 days of data collection, Gag City arose in only the final eight days, yet accounted for fifteen of the tweets collected overall and had a comparable rate of occurrence over time to AAVE. The meme became an important part of the way I experienced Barbz on stan Twitter in the leadup to *Pink Friday 2* and has since been adopted as a part of Nicki's brand.

Barbz used several linguistic strategies to send Gag City posts to the general public audience as a promotional tactic. Many posts used Gag City as a hashtag, directly signalling their intent to send the post to a broader audience. One user created an update thread to compile corporate brands' engagement with



Figure 4: @Envyonika's thread chronicling mainstream engagement with Gag City

the trend as seen in Figures 4 and 5, further emphasizing the mainstreaming of the trend. There were only two Gag City posts that employed AAVE, and none that used ballroom language (aside from *gag*, which was not essential to the meaning of the posts). While discussion around the memes did include mentions of stan groups, few directly mentioned Barbz. One 'tag yourself' style post outlined Gag City neighbourhoods and their residents, actively inviting people to declare themselves Barbz by using the language of Gag City. Alongside the above discussion of subculture and language, these qualities suggest that the definition of an audience impacts linguistic variance and that language is used agentively to augment this audience definition. When they want public discussion, Barbz avoid encoding their content. Further, when users began discussing the use of Gag City by opposing groups, they use subtweeting, an indirect reply that does not link or mention the original poster, to vary their language (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). This is clear in the earlier example from @SleezeMaraj about 'stealing our lingo.' These deviations fit into the



Figure 5: @Envyonika's thread chronicling mainstream engagement with Gag City

model of language use that I have outlined, effectively hiding these conversations from the outsiders 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 [...] major platforms promoting Gag City, other fanbases already trying to replicate 🤔 I’m loving the energy!” In fact, a number of brands hopped on the train to Gag City and promoted the album, including Nutter Butter, BIC pens, Chili’s Grill and Bar, and Bing (Figure 6).

Many Barbz also brought companies into Gag City themselves. For example,



Figure 6: @NutterButter, “SUPER FREAKY NUTTER LOADING.....”

@MinajPlaylist shared a photo (Figure 7) they generated using AI of the Billboard music chart’s headquarters in Gag City. 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 (Figure 8). Finally, @camaronomarion showed a photo of Billboard’s new offices in Dud City, presumably a slum near Gag City (Figure 8). This reference to Nicki’s career history privileges Barbz with orthodox cultural knowledge of music industry politics (Bourdieu 1984). Discontent with the “corporate giants and machines that went against [Nicki]” was not expressed using standard English, and instead was encoded through symbolism (Minaj, Drake, and Lil Wayne 2021).

This symbolic communication through images and memes serves in part to provide dense networks of reproducible references that are inaccessible to outsiders (McCulloch 2019). Memeified communication divides a public into classes, which are then 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). The Barbz do make their language accessible to a broader audience; they are not strictly closed. Where



Gag City invites outsiders to be in on the joke, it demonstrates that memes may be used to encode messages, especially if publicity is under negotiation. Barbz strategically exclude and include outsiders in order to best support Nicki Minaj. The meme insider and Barb social circles merged as Gag City made its way into the mainstream.



Figure 7: @MinajPlaylist, ".@billboard is now open at Gag City..."; Figure 8: @PINKBAWBIE, "BYE BITCH"; Figure 9: @camaronmarion, "drone footage by gag city pd shows billboard has just popped up in dud city!"

## Help Put These People in the Algorithm: Intentional Closure

On December 3, towards the start of the Gag City trend, @sleezeSTAN directly addressed the relationship between Barbz and the algorithm twice. These tweets present the algorithm as a tool to keep Barbz' conversations closed and maintain the strength and unity of the community. Their first tweet was a long-form callout to Barbz, who were interacting with hate posts leading up to the album's release. @sleezeSTAN cautioned the Barbz against various forms of interaction that do not align with the Barbz' mission including "accounts using nickis name while using duds names to put them in the algorithm." A dud is a detractor, often a rival artist who is believed to divert attention (and thereby success) from Nicki (figure 9). Barbz may be inadvertently supporting other artists through their engagement with other non-Barb users, even if their intent is to maintain their idol's dignity. This somewhat paranoid need for authenticity stems from an emic understanding that the Barbz are a fundamentally algorithmic community.

@sleezeSTAN is advocating for further closure of the stan community because the proximity of Nicki's name to the so-called duds will lead to 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. Some Barbz addressed @sleezeSTAN's concern by subtweeting about the topic rather than mentioning names.

Similarly, people who post content that is not related to Nicki Minaj may be seen as "fake barbz" in their unfaithfulness to her. These interlopers pose an entirely different issue with the algorithm altogether. Such "irrelevant matters," as quoted by @1nickiminajfan\_, are not simply a matter of unflinching allegiance to the idol—they have real implications for the Barbz' community. The second tweet mentioning the algorithm was a subtweet aimed at another user who was supportive of Nicki's music competition, "y'all help put these people in the algorithm," accompanied by a

SpongeBob meme (@sleezeSTAN). Here, @sleezeSTAN emphasizes the relational aspect of the algorithm, that someone can be “put in” the algorithm by others. They are on the right path: Twitter’s algorithm assembles a feed of posts from a community of people whom the user does not follow by determining shared interests and shared social circles (Tibo 2023). By engaging with inauthentic Barbz, the power of language as a tool to define the limits of the Barb community is diluted. Unchecked divergence from the topic of Nicki Minaj will lead to a weakening of the Barbz themselves.

Stans cannot accommodate diverse interests because of their reliance on the vacillating algorithm to stay hidden together. 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 perception of shared interests. By keeping their interactions limited to a single topic, it is less likely for Barbz that their posts appear on the feeds of general audiences and non-Barb stans, who will go on to not engage with these posts that do not interest them. Such complications all serve to tell the algorithm that these social circles do not overlap. By policing language at the foundation of their community, Barbz consciously define their own boundaries.

## CONCLUSION: A QUESTION FOR THE CULTURE

The overlapping sites of language, fandom, and the internet show how the algorithm treats users as subjects of a system while also allowing them opportunities to negotiate with the platform itself as agents. Resting at this intersection is a debate about the restructuring power of the agent in a structured setting. Barbz come together as an 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 of their group.

Language, fandom, and the internet model the interplay between structure and agency. 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. The algorithm-centred participant observation modelled in this study can and should be interrogated by future researchers from a more distanced standpoint. 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 linguistic variance strategies on Twitter. Other future explorations could adopt 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 mystical, incognizable Other, but the reality is that we are already comfortably engaged in reciprocal relationships with it. By understanding its centrality to the Barbz’ online community, the algorithm comes to light as an important social actor in all online relationships. However, many digital ethnographies ignore the algorithm in favour of a neat, direct yet ultimately inaccurate person-to-person model of mediated social life. Resisting this co-constitutive relationship is an Edenic fantasy. Our increasing entanglement with the algorithm is emblematic of a new and necessary cast of key players in social and cultural life. By highlighting the role that algorithms play in the formation of online

communities and working with, rather than against them to learn more about online world-making activities, researchers of digital social life can approach a better model of online life and culture.

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