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Solian, Savanna

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**MUSIC, ONLINE COMMUNITY, AND PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS:
LIZZO AS A CASE STUDY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in
MUSIC
with an emphasis in CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES

by
Savanna Solian

August 2026

The dissertation of Savanna Solian is approved:

Associate Professor Nicol Hammond

Assistant Professor Matthew Schumaker

Distinguished Professor Eric Porter

Associate Professor Nick Mitchell

Donald Smith, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract:

Music, Online Community, and Parasocial Relationships: Lizzo as a Case Study

Solian

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider an alternative methodological framework for studying popular music and musicians particularly within historically marginalized groups. I explore the parasocial relationships between online fan audiences and musicians with Lizzo the artist as a case study. I chose Lizzo as a case study because of her platform online, where she communicates with fans to shape her musical culture and the art she produces. Moreover, Lizzo was faced with online “cancel-culture” due to sexual assault allegations that are complicated through her background as a marginalized woman of color. Through the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok, this dissertation examines how online communities are mediated through an appreciation of Lizzo’s music. I also consider the implication of technology and a lack of shared geographical location, to question the imagined community’s authenticity for fans. I investigate negative responses to Lizzo both before and after the public allegations made in the lawsuit against her and examine the relationship of this negativity of bias to race, gender, and body.

Using an interdisciplinary approach in popular music studies, cultural studies, and fan studies, I analyze intersecting background factors on this cultural formation

including race, gender, and body-positivity representation. While there is no specific framework that fits this research, I was able to utilize a blend of work provided by Angela McRobbie, Patricia Hill Collins, sometimes in parallel with Judith Butler and Jessica Mason, and Stacy Wolf for my analysis. I collected data from online comment sections in the above-mentioned social media platforms, using the top three most popular comments from each post starting December 1st, 2022, and ending November 30th, 2023. I also collected data in this time frame from fan interactions directly with the artist Lizzo as well as posts made by the artist herself which had moments of virality. I found that fans had varying relationships with the star, changing based on insider knowledge, online participation, and reactions to the sexual assault allegations. Using intertextual analysis, I found that fans created an online culture unique to the Lizzo fandom which included reflection and connection, in music, memes, and art. Moreover, I determined that the Lizzo fandom functions asynchronously and is affected by a historical legacy of violence against marginalized groups.

The implications of this research in the cross-cultural musicological field, and beyond, provide advancement in the understanding of non-traditional archival material that can be used for cultural studies. Rather than universalizing claims, I concentrated on individual reactions to the music and culture by Lizzo. My work supports existing research on the centering of marginalized groups by addressing a Black, plus sized, and body positive musician traversing the popular music space. My

research indicates the future importance of continuing to study individualized approaches to popular music and the communities created around the music by its dedicated fans. I focus on fans in this music and culture while they traverse relationships with a star that they may or may not have connection to and look toward research which directs attention to cultural development across the boundaries of time and space.

Dedication

To my dissertation committee, thank you for your countless hours of work, your commitment, and your passion. Nick, for your last-minute support, and showing me the kind of teacher I want to be someday. Eric, for always making time in your busy schedule to honor commitments to students and providing invaluable advice. Matt for your positivity and interest in my research which is always so encouraging. Nicol, for being the most dedicated advisor, confidant, and friend for seven years while I got through this work.

To my best friends in the entire world, I am forever grateful for your support. Judy, for having something positive to say, and being there when I need someone to talk to, always. Lilli for listening and understanding, unlike any friend I know, no matter where we are in the world. Yessi, for showing up literally, and figuratively, every single day, no matter the circumstances of our lives. To many more years of friendship.

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Introduction

Thesis and Justification

In this dissertation I examine the role of social media in shaping musician and fan relationships through a digital and ethnographic case study of the musician Lizzo. Using data from social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit, my project develops an interdisciplinary methodological framework that contributes to popular music studies, cultural studies, and fan studies, where I focus on historically marginalized groups, including Black audiences and women. I use Lizzo as a case study because of her numerous interactions with her fandom on social media, which allow her to intentionally craft an online persona. These interactions produce unintended consequences, such as the formation of perceived online friendships between Lizzo and her audience, as well as community among fans themselves. Within these virtual communities, fans in Lizzo's audience can develop a strong sense of closeness toward both the artist and one another. They communicate in comment sections about Lizzo's music, personal life details, performances, food choices, fashion, post captions, and even her use of emojis. By foregrounding non-linear temporal analysis and intersectional social dynamics I uncover complexities of research on historically marginalized communities of fans in newly developing digital communities. This dissertation demonstrates how fans feel particularly connected to Lizzo and how this closeness and ongoing communication can influence changes in

her music while also shaping interpretations of her art. I use online communities as dynamic cultural sites because through these places the use of linear time is deconstructed and atemporality becomes centered as a tool for building connection beyond the structure of a straight timeline. Consequently, cultural identity is constructed differently through time and space online which allows for a unique understanding around community for participants.

Traditional popular music scholarship can privilege mainstream or dominant perspectives leading to marginalization of “other-ed” music. By foregrounding Lizzo in this dissertation I demonstrate how her music and social media presence functions as a site of intersectional representation and can foster empowerment while challenging dominant narratives.

I have also chosen Lizzo as a case study because her relationship with her fans can feel like it is based in reality. For example, fans might feel they are her friend or know Lizzo in a meaningful way. The relationship fans create with Lizzo can feel genuine, even though I acknowledge that social media is always mediated by what is posted and the context around those posts. For fans, Lizzo demonstrates her legitimate life through social media. While fans may not know her directly, they can become privy to some of the intimate details of her world.

From person to person, a tangible relationship with Lizzo changes, based on cultural values and characteristics centered in majority or minority groups. Consequently, I explore what may cause feelings of both construed relationship and authentic relationship to Lizzo for fans, through star to audience relationships with

the musician. Furthermore, I consider the effects of cultural, political, and societal influences on Lizzo, in her fandom online, and in the physical world. I then explore the consequences of those factors on her music.

A highlight for Lizzo's online fandom is her body positivity platform. On social media Lizzo represents herself through multiple marginally oppressed groups, including being a plus sized and Black, woman. The idea of body positivity draws in many of her followers and is represented in her music. In Hailey Nicole Otis' article "Lizzo's Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze," they use Lizzo as an example to explain the "body positivity" movement and show how Lizzo's social media is utilized as a tool for "decolonial interruption."¹ Otis posits that Lizzo's body positivity platform is about visibility, particularly of intersectional identities, not just appearance.² Rather than showing Lizzo's online presence as personal marketing, I use Otis' work to illustrate how this digital representation relates to a larger cultural movement. Otis also examines the historical context of anti-Blackness and anti-fatness, which I examine as historical context around the importance of the representation of Lizzo's identity.³ Through my tracing of these historical connections related to Lizzo's background, I argue that Lizzo's music and online presence resist dominant standards. In turn, this provides an explanation for why Lizzo's audience might find empowerment by following her online as she challenges normative beauty

¹ Hailey Nicole Otis, "Lizzo's Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 111 no. 1 (2025): 2.

² Ibid, 3.

³ Ibid, 4.

standards. I use the historical frame provided by Otis, to provide background for why Lizzo's different representations of marginalized backgrounds are important for her audience.

Lizzo's body positivity online complements the persona she produces. I use Otis' work to show how the body positivity movement is at its core more radical than aesthetic standards. Lizzo represents herself through an online persona which centers fat, Black, marginalized bodies, producing visibility apart from mere representation. Moreover, Otis' work shows that the body positivity platform is political and cannot be neutral.⁴ Consequently, I believe Lizzo's online posts do political work, rather than only market Lizzo's music. Lizzo also magnifies her focus toward body positivity through the way she represents herself in her photos. These photos show evidence that Lizzo is engaging in a critique of the dominant standards. I further use Otis' writing to show how Lizzo's online persona is complimentary to her politics. I moreover examine how her online representation through posts imply Otis' idea of "radical potential" through specific captions and responses by Lizzo and her fans.

Leading with the example of Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, Otis (drawing on an expansive body of literature including [Crais & Scully: 2009, Ashley: 2021, and Schmahmann: 2025]) explains the relationship between historical perspectives on black women's bodies, and the contemporary treatment of Lizzo and her body. Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman was taken to London from South Africa for public display. Her body was used to contrast European and African bodies as a form of entertainment.

⁴ Ibid, 9.

Otis provides the historical grounding, “Even after her death, many of her body parts... continued to be exhibited as part of a museum display in Paris...” demonstrating a connection to why Lizzo’s body might still be scrutinized today. The supposed differences between European and African bodies were shown in mainstream museums until relatively recently. Also, Otis shows that the treatment of Lizzo today, based on her identity, may connect to colonial ideologies.⁵ I use her work to show how Eurocentric characteristics are reflected in standards today and also to bridge the past and present. Criticism of Lizzo is not “random” but rather informed by a structurally built legacy of violence. Lizzo is an example of how some audience members as well as critics continue to create negative narratives around Black women.

Even intended empowerment in music, can marginalize Black women’s femininity, while trying to be celebratory. Otis shows how a ““thin, “little, “skinny, “teeny,” or “snatched” waist is a common rhetorical move among women hip-hop artists,” but it can further marginalize fat women.⁶ These lyrics are meant to be positive but reinforce colonial beauty standards. However, Lizzo is an artist who contrasts these ideas, by representing fat, Black women positively. Extending her platform beyond social media, Lizzo also represents body-positivity in her music. Otis shows that Lizzo asserts autonomy for marginalized groups by representing these identities in her music.⁷ I use this work to

⁵ Otis, “Lizzo’s Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze,” 10.

⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁷ Otis, “Lizzo’s Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze,” 8.

show that Lizzo uses her music to destabilize the idea that Black, fat, bodies should not be represented positively.

Defining community can be difficult, particularly when there is no physical space shared by participants. I use summaries of frameworks provided by Andy Bennett on the identity of community and music in his chapter, to examine communities that are music based but may not have a specific geographical location. Rather than a geographical community Bennett's work provides a lens for how people connect ideologically and symbolically. First, I examine the analysis of Simon Frith's "aesthetic communities" within this chapter to support my argument that physical space is not necessary to understand a community. Here Bennett examines how Frith defines aesthetic communities as not geographically centralized, but rather by shared "political and cultural values," and uses rock culture to allow for a sense of collective experience, in turn creating the idea of commonality among fans.⁸ Then, Bennett further examines community in music with work by author George H. Lewis. Lewis develops the idea of "taste cultures" which proposes that shared musical preferences for an artist or genre create affective bonds, not limited by geography.⁹ I use the vocabulary presented in this work to explain the bonds created in this type of a community. Moreover, Bennett argues that the internet provides a space for academics to engage with music in new ways around "music, self, and community." He argues recent scholarship has benefited from the internet's facilitation of participatory fan engagement with art and artists, especially in music.¹⁰ Consequently, I use this lens to

⁸ Bennett, "Identity: Music, Community, and Self," 147.

⁹ Ibid, 148.

¹⁰ Bennett, "Identity: Music, Community, and Self," 149.

examine how the internet is a tool of these new spaces around music and community formation.

Through the lenses of Frith's "aesthetic communities," and Lewis' "taste cultures", then, the community in my study coalesces around Lizzo's music and an interest in online Black musical style. I emphasize the importance of asynchronous engagement rather than a focus on geographic locations that can specifically be defined for the Lizzo fandom. The work in my dissertation analyzes how similar interests in musical taste online, can bring marginalized groups together to form a type of community. In my work I analyze the current effects of historical popular music formations in Lizzo's community and musical production. Moreover, I consider the effects of history on body positivity and Lizzo's online platform. I analyze Black authenticity, non-linear time, essentialisms, and the parallels to marginalized communities overall in this dissertation. Finally, I analyze how Lizzo's audience has formed a relationship with the star, either in reality or imagined, and the way this is affected by historical and political pasts.

Introduction to Lizzo as a Musician

Lizzo was born Melissa Vivian Jefferson, in Detroit Michigan, in 1988. She is a multi-instrumentalist, and her music is categorized under genres such as hip-hop, R&B, soul, and pop on streaming platforms like Pandora, Spotify, and YouTube. Lizzo is known for her vocals, and she is also a classically trained flute player. She often records her flute playing onto her soundtracks, and performs flute live in

concert and on television. Her music focuses on themes of body positivity and advocacy for self-love. Moreover, her music reflects themes of Black community and femininity.

Lizzo's musical career, officially, began in 2013. However, she did not become very famous until 2019. Lizzo has released four studio albums, including "Lizzobangers," "Big Grrrl Small World," "Cuz I Love You," and "Special." Subsequently, Lizzo has won four Grammy awards. These awards are for "Best Urban Contemporary Album" (2019), "Best Traditional R&B Performance" (2020), "Best Pop Solo Performance" (2020), and "Record of the Year" (2020). She has collaborated with famous artists, including Ariana Grande, Missy Elliot, Cardi B, and SZA.

Lizzo did not become famous at the beginning of her career. Although some of her most popular songs were released years before they became sensations, virality boosted her stardom. With the Netflix release of "Someone Great" in 2019 starring the actress Gina Rodriguez, Lizzo's song "Truth Hurts" began gaining traction as the actress sang along to a sound bite of Lizzo's song in a scene in the movie. Her acclaim began to skyrocket just a year after the major popularity of the social media platform TikTok took off. Soon after, Lizzo's now-famous lyric "I'm 100% that bitch" became a viral TikTok audio and propelled her career forward. TikTok had just reached its own popularity peak in 2018 and had an estimated 653.5 million users by

2019.¹¹ The song was number one on the Billboard charts for seven non-consecutive weeks, and as new niches of TikTok picked up the audio, the song would propel “Truth Hurts” back to number one again and again.¹²

As her popularity grew more, new listeners learned of her body positivity platform, where Lizzo championed self-love and encouraged different minority groups to achieve their dreams. The platform helped grow her fan base as she released re-recorded music with other megastars. Soon, fans also learned of her skills at the flute, which further solidified their enjoyment of her as an artist because she was even more unique than previously realized.

In October of 2023, Lizzo was accused of sexual harassment by backup dancers and then sued. Before the situation, Lizzo’s fans had created fan pages dedicated to highlighting her body positivity and praising her gender and race politics. However, due to allegations against Lizzo by the three backup dancers, including Arianna Davis, Crystal Williams, and an unidentified plaintiff, fan pages were paused, taken down, or no longer applauded the star. Lizzo, who had posts specifically dedicated to her just hours before, had fans posting on their platforms saying that, at this time, they and their page could not support her actions.

¹¹ “How Many People Use TikTok (Users Statistics 2025), Demand Sage, Accessed August 8th, 2025 <https://www.demandsage.com/tiktok-user-statistics/>.

¹² “Lizzo’s ‘Truth Hurts’ Tops 100 Tops Hot 100 For 7th Week, Tying for Longest Reign Ever For a Rap Song By a Female Artist, Billboard Pro, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/lizzo-truth-hurts-number-one-seventh-week-hot-100/#:~:text=Lizzo%20scores%20a%20historic,the%20Hot%20100%20dated%20Sept.>

Emojis

Emojis are an online language tool I explain in this dissertation fans use to communicate more nuanced meaning than language alone. They are a language in themselves, and used in a vernacular by those participating in the Lizzo fandom, which can communicate more than words. In this dissertation I identify 102 emojis utilized by audience members in the Lizzo fandom. Rather than giving 102 explanations, I group according to emoji themes. The use of emojis is common on social media platforms particularly in comment sections. A. AbuSa'aleek argues, "internet chat has developed new conventions that are particular for this means of communication, such as a system of using acronyms, abbreviations and icons; hence, the internet chat builds on the conventions of speech."¹³ The vernacular of emojis develops with the online community. Moreover, As AbuSa'aleek has posited, "the Internet encourages the formation of 'discourse communities' in the social networks."¹⁴ In this work I explain how Lizzo's community uses emojis and how these depictions are context and culturally dependent.

Frameworks

The earliest work on parasocial relationships, according to A. AbuSa'aleek, focused on the relationship between T.V. and radio stars and their audiences.¹⁵ The

¹³ A. AbuSa'aleek, "Linguistic Dimensions of Initialisms in Electronic Communication," *Studies in Literature and Language* 6 no. 3 (2013): 3.

¹⁴ A. AbuSa'aleek, "Linguistic Dimensions of Initialisms in Electronic Communication," *Studies in Literature and Language* 6 no. 3 (2013), 4.

¹⁵ Donald Horton and Richard R. Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes* 19, no. 3. (November 8th, 2016): 215-229.

research was concerned with the projection of a television character to the viewer and the influence of this on the audience. They defined the character portrayed by an actor or radio/show host as a persona, something that the viewer had to participate with/in actively for the parasocial relationship to occur. Crafting this persona reveals personal information to the fan, like things they would know about friends in their real lives. However, the fan, having no actual contact with the persona, would not have control over the relationship. Without having contact, there was not a genuine friendship or connection created, though it felt that way. The one-way relationship, mediated through a crafted characterization and technological advancement, created what was known as a parasocial relationship.

Today, fans continue to connect with characterized groups or people through social media. A crafted persona can feel even more personal when not built around T.V. and radio shows. Social media relationships are built around facts from the person's real life. Fans indicate online that they think they know the persona, personally, because they have seen their homes and diets, virtually met their partners, children, and extended family (including pets). Moreover, they have continuously followed shows and musical performances, for longer periods of time than one T.V. episode might air. Through conversations, social media likes, and re-posts, audience members have further developed this closeness towards these personas, however temporary. There can never truly be a balance of power, however, the relationships continue through these interactions. Also, I note, the fan cannot control what the

persona shows online. They only participate in the relationship as much as they are allowed by the persona.

March H. Greenberg argues in, “The Sociology of Fandom,” that fans use creativity around the culture in a fandom with an outpouring of art but are often dismissed as unserious.¹⁶ Drawing on Henry Jenkins, Greenberg identifies as an, “acafan,” and considers himself both an academic and a fan as well. I use Greenberg’s work to analyze the inspiration for art around Lizzo for her fans. Jenkins defined an “acafan” as “an academic who studies and writes about fan culture and is him- or herself also a fan.”¹⁷ Greenberg says that with the digital age, access to art for a fandom has grown exponentially. Moreover, availability to artists has increased with meet ups both online and in person.¹⁸ Consequently, Greenberg, again drawing on Jenkins, argues that in some ways, once an artist, or musician puts their work out into the world, they belong to their fandom.¹⁹ I use Greenberg’s work to consider how the art around Lizzo develops her online community and relationship with her audience. I then use this lens to show that fans are able to use this online discovery of their art for beneficial gain, but also to show their love of Lizzo, as described by Greenberg.²⁰

Because my work is unique, no specific theoretical framework exists to produce research results. Instead, the theoretical frameworks for this dissertation come from multiple works produced by authors: Patricia Hill Collins, sometimes in

¹⁶ Marc H. Greenberg, “The Sociology of Fandom,” in *Fandom and the Law: A Guide to Fan Fiction, Art & Cosplay*, (ProQuest E Book2022), 3.

¹⁷ Greenberg, “The Sociology of Fandom,” 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid, 10.

²⁰ Ibid, 11.

tandem with Judith Butler or Jessica Mason, Angela McRobbie, and Stacy Wolf. First, in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes about studying Black women using a both/and continuous framework. Next, Angela McRobbie has written four essays focused on feminism and media. Last, in her book, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Stacy Wolf has included a chapter that studies girls as fans using the musical *Wicked* as a case study. My work uses the frameworks these researchers have provided in combination. However, it expands the work, focusing on social media platforms from the internet and a musical artist.

Patricia Hill Collins' standpoint theory says that people with intersectional backgrounds not only have to understand hegemonic point of view but the points of view of their own groups, leading to more nuanced knowledge, and ways of knowing. As is the case in the US society today white, straight, men are those with cultural power. Consequently, they are also the narrators and scribes of heteronormative history. To survive in this society, those with non-normative standpoints not only need to understand hegemonic history and power, but the history in context of their own groups in relation to the hegemony.

People with diverse intersectional backgrounds bring complexity to this analysis. They provide narratives beyond those written by those in power. Individual voices provide standpoints shaped from those specific cultures. While each standpoint may not be generalizable, the validity of each voice does not become less important. Each standpoint provides nuance and addresses voices that have been otherwise

excluded from history making. Engaging with individualized voices is vital for understanding marginalized community values and participation.

In writing this dissertation, I acknowledge my positionality in the Lizzo audience, and among broader social structures. I have some privileges including, an undergraduate education in a highly ranked institution, participation in the graduate program in another highly ranked institution, consistent access to high-speed Internet, and mostly uncensored Internet in my nation. I am also a woman of color in academia, within the music program, studying popular music, using online ethnography for data collection, so I also face oppressive factors.

For the sake of transparency, I acknowledge that while I am a woman of color, my experiences are not representative of all women in this category. I am also not a Black woman, and my background does not fully encompass the individual experiences that occur with intersecting identities of others. I do not think it is my place to speak for any group as a whole, but rather use the privilege I do have to uphold voices that would otherwise be excluded. I come into contact with and enjoy participating with many kinds of people in this community online and in society overall. I enjoy the sharing of culture and I think I can use my privilege to share it.

As directly stated by Hill Collins, “Taken together, Black women's participation in constructing African-American culture in all-Black settings and the distinctive perspectives gained from the outsider-within placement in domestic work provide material backdrop for unique Black women standpoint.”²¹ Additionally Hill

²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Routledge, 1990): 15.

Collins explains standpoints as "The reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persist[s]," and as such, the viewpoint from the margins is plainly different from the center.²² Though Black women in the U.S. may have different intersectional backgrounds, facing similar violence and injustice allows for a shared Black women's standpoint. The framework of both/and rather than a dichotomous study allows for the standpoint to be expansive rather than restrictive in this study.

Due to relatively anonymous profiles on the Internet, I cannot say with certainty that the data gathered in my dissertation come from any specific group of people. However, popular music is a marginalized area of study. This is due to its general associations with people of color at its origin. Moreover, the people who make up comment sections belong to a minority as well, in that they listen to this popular music, and also go online to write about it and converse around it. Furthermore, Lizzo herself belongs to marginalized groups including being a plus size, Black, woman. In an example given by Hill Collins "not only does this passage [about white women in relation to men in patriarchal society] speak to the power of the dominant group to suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups, but it illustrates how being an outsider – within locations can foster new angles of vision on oppression."²³ I contend that the data gathered in this dissertation has been gathered from public sites, and is accessible to anyone who looks for it. It is made available by the authors of these comments, and thus fair to use in analysis.

²² Ibid, 3.

²³ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 16.

Hill Collins further argues, “Just as theories, epistemologies, and facts produced by any group of individuals represent the standpoint and interest of the creators; the very definition of who is legitimated to do intellectual work is not only politically contested but is changing. (Mannheim 1936); Gramsci 1971).”²⁴ The points made by Hill Collins here are important for my dissertation because the data collected is made by non-academics in a nontraditional setting. However the conversations and music are necessary to learn more about this online culture. There are not intended to be universal claims drawn in conclusion with the data collected from this dissertation; rather I hope to highlight ideas from groups that are not studied as legitimate. Hill-Collins argues “assuming new angles of vision on which U.S. Black women are, in fact, intellectuals, and on their seeming dedication to contributing to Black feminist thought raises new questions about the production of this oppositional knowledge.”²⁵ All of these usually non-centered groups of people have knowledge we can learn from.

She also argues, “Because group standpoints are situated in, reflect, and help shape unjust power relations, standpoints are not static.”²⁶ Of course, ideas that seem generalizable to the group do not necessarily mean individuals will agree. Nevertheless, the dissenting opinions are also important standpoints and understanding the culture around Lizzo's online community. For example, Hill Collins points out “an essentialist understanding of Black women’s standpoint suppresses

²⁴ Ibid, 21.

²⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 21.

²⁶ Ibid, 33. This is Hill Collins, quoting herself from 1998, pages 201-28.

differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity.”²⁷ My work, again, is not to show a universal understanding but rather center voices that are often and otherwise marginalized in academic research. Hill Collins further says “Many Black woman blues singers have long sung about taken- for-granted situations that affect U.S. Black women. Throughout their music they not only depict Black women's realities, but they also aim to shape them.”²⁸ My work shows that Lizzo’s music also depicts the situations in her community online.

Importantly stated by Hill Collins, “An oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult.”²⁹ Furthermore, “groups unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their ability to make their standpoint known to themselves and others.”³⁰ With this work I do not intend to use my privilege as a graduate student in an institution to speak for online groups but rather to answer questions about the specific online community, around Lizzo, and to center the standpoint of different users and Lizzo herself in academia, despite the marginalization of these groups in general societal instances. Understanding a general history around popular music and how it has then affected these groups is vital towards my research. I use this work to focus ideas on those audiences and the standpoints they provide.

²⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 37.

²⁸ Ibid, 45.

²⁹ Ibid, 51.

³⁰ Ibid, 52.

Rather than reinscribe the oft-implemented Cartesian dualisms of us/them, mind/body, and inside/outsider framework used in the study of major groups, my work uses the both/and continuous framework Patricia Hill Collins has developed. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins describes how "Black women remained in outsider-within locations, [and described] individuals whose marginality provided a distinctive angle of vision on these intellectual political entities."³¹ Studying Lizzo and her fans requires a non-normative-centered framework, as described by Hill Collins. In her work, she says, "Black women's participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture, foster distinctively, Black, and women-centered worldviews."³²

Furthermore, Hill Collins develops the lens of intersectionality to help analyze multiple aspects of peoples' backgrounds when studying marginalized groups. Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw. The term was introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, in the article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." In Crenshaw's article she says, she will "center Black women in this analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences."³³ Hill Collins describes this lens as "refer[ing] to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for

³¹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 17.

³² Ibid, 14.

³³ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1 no. 8, (1989): 139.

example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation." As such, she points out "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice."³⁴

In tandem with the ideas put forth on intersectionality by Hill Collins, I work with the lens of disidentification, by Jose Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz says, "Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to as a monocausal paradigm that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa."³⁵ Moreover, Muñoz argues, "They also strategize survival and imagine assertions of self in a cultural sphere that is structured to deny visibility to such bodies."³⁶

Hill Collins also provides a framework of controlling images that she describes as "maintaining images of the U.S. Black women as the Other [which] provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression."³⁷ The purpose of controlling images is to make inequitable intersectional factors seem common and ordinary in society.³⁸ Hill Collins states, "because oppositional binaries rarely represent different but equal relationships, they are inherently unstable. Tension may be temporarily relieved by subordinating one-half of the binary to the other."³⁹ In

³⁴ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," 24.

³⁵ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and Performance of Politics*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 8.

³⁶ Ibid, 55

³⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 9.

³⁸ Ibid, 91.

³⁹ Ibid, 93.

the case of Lizzo, the musician does not fit the symbol of what a controlling image should represent in society's view, as in her social media posts. Hill Collins' work on controlling images provides a framework for considering the tension created by Lizzo's social media posts, which metaphorically tip the instability over.

Hill Collins says, "dealing with prevailing standards of beauty-particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture- is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women."⁴⁰ Hill Collins' specific example can be further analyzed with Lizzo as a case study because she faces criticism with the images she posts (as an African American woman). In part, this criticism is due to her body features. Furthermore, in the interest of controlling images, "because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape."⁴¹ The unavoidable images are rampant on social media. Criticism for controlling images cannot be escaped by those who post them and do not fit the normative image standard, such as Lizzo.

Last, Hill Collins argues, "many of the controlling images applied to African-American women are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of [their] behavior that threaten existing power arrangements."⁴² The outline here allows for a framework to analyze further how the posts made by Lizzo are threatening to those who claim to dislike her and continuously comment negatively about her. As Hill Collins argues, "redefining beauty requires learning to see African-American women

⁴⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 115.

⁴¹ Ibid, 116.

⁴² Ibid, 149.

who have Black African features as being capable of beauty."⁴³ Hill Collins provides a framework to help study how Lizzo creates a progressive space through her music, which can help destabilize the current normative standards. She suggests, "alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge, and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true, can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth."⁴⁴ Using Hill Collins frameworks as an alternative way to study Lizzo's music and its effect on her fans, this dissertation challenges the normative frameworks for studying marginalized groups. It also considers non-centered opinions as just as important.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, is a book which provides a foundation for studying gender theory. I use Patricia Hill Collins' "both/and" framework with Butler's work on gender as a lens, to question the binaristic idea of "guilty" or "innocent" toward Lizzo in relation to her body, race, and sex. Butler argues, sex is political and there is no way to separate sex from gender.⁴⁵ Furthermore, I think Butler's work points to the inability to separate race from these categories as well. While Butler does not believe in a dichotomous relationship between sex and gender, I add race along the spectrum. Butler's book points out that the foundation of thinking on gender and sex is veiled in violence.⁴⁶ I use Butler's work in conjunction with Hill Collins' to consider how the legacy of violence against racialized bodies with the complications of race and sex as important to analyze in relation to Lizzo and her

⁴³ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 219.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 343-4.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Routledge, 1990), 154.

⁴⁶ Ibid, viii.

audience. In my opinion, using Butler's work, is against essentializing women and a practice toward more individualistic approaches over a range of womanhood."⁴⁷ My work on Lizzo with this frame in mind is to circumvent essentialisms where possible.

Moreover, an intertextual understanding is necessary to appreciate some of the memes that are posted around the Lizzo comment sections. The term intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva, in her book *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. She created the term intertextuality through research developed by Mikhail Bakhtin.⁴⁸ Kristeva said Bakhtin, "was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of text with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure."⁴⁹ Kristeva works to explain how texts can be influenced by one another and how this has been developed over different community and background understandings. Furthermore, she says, "Bakhtin's term *dialogism* as a semiotic complex thus implies the double, language, and another logic."⁵⁰

With the development of intertextuality in mind through Bakhtin and to Kristeva, Jessica Mason puts the term to work in her book, *Intertextuality in Practice*. She posits "Intertextuality is to do with the links and connections between texts; the term itself can be broken down to the state of being 'between, among, amid, in between, in the midst' (OED 208) of texts."⁵¹ Connections between background

⁴⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 19.

⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, (Columbia University Press, 1980), 88.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 89.

⁵⁰ Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 98.

⁵¹ Jessica Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice*, (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), 2.

information of texts like memes and online viral moments, bring together a community of understanding for those who comment on Lizzo's social media pages. Each text must be discerned individually and then the texts together can be understood. Mason posits, "if readers do not make a link then it does not exist within the experience of that text and plays no role in their reading."⁵² To understand the links between texts like comments, tweets, memes, and more, one must have a mastery of the community's cultural knowledge.

Angela McRobbie has written four essays in *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance*. McRobbie's writings consider visual media through a framework of feminist representation in broader society. McRobbie allows for a framework that studies how stereotypes created in larger socio-political contexts control women's creation, reception, and understanding in visual media and, thus, society as a whole.

In her essays, McRobbie says, "I propose 'visual media' as a regulatory space for the formulation and working through of many of these ideas" about feminism in society today.⁵³ Though she uses examples such as 'fe-mail' and 'movies' representing women in media for her explanation, her work provides a space to build on as my exploration of social media platforms today about feminism continues. Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit are platforms that further govern women in the current society because they are only accessible to specific groups. Furthermore, McRobbie states, "it is here that the benchmarks and boundaries of female success are

⁵² Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice*, 3.

⁵³ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, (Polity Press, 2020), 16.

established.”⁵⁴ Moreover, with social media platforms allowing for different forms of anonymity, those who hold these opinions can directly interact with and call out and bully those not meeting this symbolic successful goal post. While in McRobbie's work, stereotypes are reinforced through visual media, in this work, shaming due to those supposed characteristics is taken a step further through direct contact. Also, the racism, sexism, and homophobia that was happening behind closed doors due to albeit a slight fear of loss of employment and social repercussions is now visible because there is a sense of removal added by the internet.

The example of the film *Revolutionary Road* given by McRobbie has a "narrative [that] bolsters a linear model of progress along with the idea of personal or individual liberation."⁵⁵ Social media does not allow for a linear progress narrative either. There is the return of blatant racism toward minority groups of people and a less micro-aggressive approach. Social media's return to forthright racism runs parallel to another non-linear model of history repeating itself, Lizzo's disco revival. Not only does Lizzo cover disco hits like "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees and reclaim a Black musical practice from white artists, but she claims that she is bringing back Disco.

McRobbie further states that women today are "subjected to the normalizing horizon of beauty culture that brings working-class women somehow within reach of

⁵⁴ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 20.

middle-class aspiration, sexual attractiveness, and hence social acceptability."⁵⁶ In this sense, Lizzo cannot ever meet the beauty culture standard but contrastingly does meet the unique standard of wealth and fame, making her an interesting case. Because of her body positivity and self-love platform, where she refuses to conform to normative body standards, Lizzo faces social backlash. She is also a Black woman who faces racism and a multitude of negative responses to her as a racialized body. However, Lizzo, as a famous musician, has access to resources beyond working and middle-class women. Lizzo is college-educated and classically trained in a Western tradition of flute playing. While, of course, she faces adversity due to intersectional factors, she also has privileges that must be acknowledged.

McRobbie argues there is a "more branded and personalized feminism that has surfaced in recent years and that comes immediately to be attached to certain names and careers."⁵⁷ Building on this, with the rise of social media, artists who do not take a political stance or do not support, for example, a feminist cause, are criticized. Fans take to platforms like Twitter or Instagram to comment and respond to artists, asking why they have not commented on current political hot topics.

Though Lizzo faces incredible bullying, she is not the only musician who sees negativity on social media. For example, artists like Selena Gomez and Billie Eilish face criticism online, not usually for their music, but for their appearance, relationship choices, and political views. Selena Gomez faces scrutiny for her appearance and food choices after going public with her ongoing battle with the autoimmune disorder

⁵⁶ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 22. Here McRobbie is quoting herself from 2008.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 35.

Lupus. Her kidneys failed due to the disease, and her similarly famous friend Francia Raisa donated a kidney to save her life. Afterward, the public was very harsh toward Gomez and analyzed her relationship with Raisa, or lack thereof. Gomez faces criticism for allegedly drinking alcohol as fans do not want to support someone who they feel they knew but has now changed. Also, regardless of this contradictory information, they believe she is no longer friends with Raisa, so they do not want to support someone who is not friends with someone who would save their life. Billie Eilish is also criticized online for her appearance and sexuality. As a younger celebrity, Eilish dressed less normatively, and fans seemed to identify with her look. However, now that Eilish has decided, she enjoys characteristically normative clothes rather than those she previously wore. Her clothing choices have caused her to face much backlash for being "un-authentic" and "selling out." Furthermore, she recently came out as queer, stating it was ridiculous that fans and the media did not already know and that she was not keeping this a secret. Her statement was met with both celebration and backlash because fans felt entitled to know this part of her private life, as they felt they had a relationship with her.

Moreover, McRobbie argues that the idea of "'perfect - imperfect - resilience' (p-i-r) - prompts actions that [address] the challenge posed by a new age of feminism."⁵⁸ She says, "feminism can now be accommodated and recognized as socially relevant, and in this, respect it comes forward as a force that will occasion new modes of governmentality." Lizzo is an example of perfect-imperfect-resilience

⁵⁸ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 42.

because rather than conform to the would-be normative characteristics of a middle-class woman given her resources, she purposely is non-normative. She takes characteristics from stereotypes of feminist working and middle-class groups to project her kind of femininity. Artists like Lizzo use their platform to create a new governmentality that McRobbie refers to, because she uses her platform, in the case of Lizzo's 2.2 million followers, to discuss and reject normative ideals of femininity imposed by society.

McRobbie also introduced the idea of the perfect concerning feminism, saying, "The function of the perfect is to encourage women to succeed meritocratically while simultaneously introducing heightened competition, constantly redifferentiating and establishing division, resulting in a feminism that is infinitely divided and gradated..."⁵⁹ Unfortunately, in Lizzo's situation, her lack of subscription to the decision of feminist ideals means she encounters criticism beyond the lawsuit allegations brought against her. While she has reached the level of success McRobbie points to, she encourages other women to be who they are and does not disparage their situation. Instead, Lizzo points out the political and social factors that affect women of varying groups. Lizzo's music encourages listeners to love themselves as they are, and she does not tell women they must meet the standards of feminism or society to be worthy or accepted.

As McRobbie says, "Employment for women becomes a defining mark of status and identity."⁶⁰ Rather than a career being something women do to make a

⁵⁹ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 76.

living or a piece of their life, employment becomes all-consuming. In the case of a musician like Lizzo, there is no division between her work and home life to her fans. In some ways, her music communicates an expression of Lizzo that connects to fans. Even though societal expectations influence this divide, it is essential to recognize that fans do not always consciously see the distinction between art and artists, women and society, and Lizzo from her music. Thus, it is a shock when her actions allegedly do not align with the ideals she portrays.

Stacy Wolf's book, *Changed for Good, A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, contains a chapter titled "'It's All About Popular': Wicked Divas and Internet Fan Girls," providing a framework for studying reception theory in social media through the lens of fan communications. She lays out this framework, particularly for undervalued online fans. In her work, "by taking girls seriously as participants in culture, [Wolf] aim[s] to revalue their fandom."⁶¹ This framework is expandable to analyze the reception of other marginalized groups. Wolf says, "the media representation of girls as poor judges of culture, especially popular music, goes back at least to the mid-20th century when middle-class youth as a generation emerged as an identifiable audience segment with disposable income that producers could target." Similarly, Black, cultural music has been taken as unserious, and viewed as less than in relation to Western, white, music. Moreover, Wolf states, "in all these characterizations of girl fans, they are portrayed as cultural dupes, their taste, fickle, easy, and indiscriminating, and their presence and loyalty, ultimately irrelevant."⁶²

⁶¹ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 222.

⁶² Ibid, 221.

Again, with this in mind, this framework can be expanded for studying Black cultural music. Wolf's framework is moldable to my study because of its parallels to marginalized groups of all kinds throughout history.

Wolf further argues, "girls, self-assessments, touch on issues of appearance, preferences, relationships, and how they see themselves in the world," expanding on how girls as fans are much more complex than critics describe.⁶³ Wolf says, "because Glinda might not be taken seriously, many of the girls who claim to be like her also explain her character more complexly."⁶⁴ Similarly, those who enjoy Lizzo's music may identify more complexity and connections to culture and historical background lost to those dismissing her music. Concerning *Wicked*, Wolf points out, "they [girl fans] value, the diva who, like them, grows and changes, and they appreciate the actor who can represent that change realistically and convincingly," and "these young fans, use the diva to navigate daily life, to understand themselves better, and to feel confident in themselves."⁶⁵ Likewise, fans value Lizzo because they can identify with her. Wolf's framework initiates a deeper analysis of the reception theory of Lizzo fans.

Wolf highlights how, "fan sites become spaces that encourage such outpourings of adoration," she sees for the musical *Wicked*.⁶⁶ Similarly, social media comment sections have evolved to discuss the likes and dislikes of a musical artist. Though "*Wicked* validates girl fans' attachments to women performers as a legible,

⁶³ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 229.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 228.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 226-7.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 230.

emotional and social force," Wolf argues, "*Wicked* fans value their own categories of cultural capital which excludes pop music and pop divas."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, popular music and its musicians have fans and followers with their own criteria for belonging. Wolf's reception framework facilitates my research on these groups, interactions, and online culture. She argues, "by creating an intense relationship with the divas in the performance and with their peers, girls and their responses to and uses of *Wicked* offer hope for the energetic continuation of musical theater in U.S. culture."⁶⁸ The social relationships formed online and in support of Lizzo also form production in Black women's popular music in U.S. society.

Literature Review

The literature on women's culture, music, and specifically Black women, in these contexts is plentiful. Even though no authors have done the specific work as a case study and online audience, there is much to draw from as I consider the research questions in my dissertation. This section of my dissertation is an overview of scholarly work about studying marginalized groups and the socio-political implications in research for these groups.

This literature review is broken down into smaller subsections. My sections include first, studies on Black women and then the way binary thinking and Cartesian dualism link to these marginalized groups. Then, Black studies in general as an

⁶⁷ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 231-32.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 236.

overarching theme, but also as Black studies links to the historical influence of Black music and Black popular music. Finally, I review studies on morality and cancel-culture as they relate to parasocial relationships with artists and art, specifically in music.

Black Women Studies and Binary Thinking

Daphne Brooks' Black, feminist, studies in relation to music, provide a methodological foundation for my dissertation by legitimizing nontraditional archives. I use Brooks' framework to justify my methodology of the centering of Black women's intellectual, affective, and sonic labor. Her work allows me to analyze Lizzo's digital presence in the broader history of Black cultural sound. In her book *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, where she "attempt[s] to score an accompaniment to the 'secret history' of Black women's sounds as well as the intellectual labor that engages their sounds, that which amounts to, in [her] opinion, a grossly unacknowledged revolution in culture and the making of modernity."⁶⁹ This 'secret history' frames online comment sections as ongoing, and often unrecognized, alternative archival sources. In my dissertation I use Brooks' frameworks to investigate the histories created with the online archive.

I build on Brooks' analysis of alternative archives and extend her logic into digital environments. I fill the gaps in alternative archives by collecting data from social media comments and posts on TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, and Twitter. Brooks

⁶⁹ Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, (Harvard University Press, 2021), 7.

helps me to give voice to those outside of the academy by finding and writing about these documents. This allows me to treat communication with Lizzo and her audience, as an ongoing participatory archive that demonstrates fan interpretation and cultural communication, unique to the digital experience.

Specifically, Brooks' analysis of rock criticism and Black women's exclusion from the genre provides a historical lens for interpreting Lizzo's reception by her audience. Moreover, I use Brooks' critique of mass media as a framework for analyzing how power, visibility, and cultural value are produced through media discourse. The politics around mass media influence what music is lasting and is vital to research, regardless of whether it is stored in hegemonic archives. Those who wrote the media, decided what music was most popular, according to history. Lizzo's artistry is affected by the history of rock n' roll, Black legacies, and Black community. I use Brooks' work to propose that the commodification of rock music produced a power imbalance which pushed out Black women from the genre.⁷⁰ This historical framework provides important context, in this case study about Lizzo, because the legacies of power imbalance in rock criticism continue to affect her work and its reception by her fandom. Drawing on Brooks' alternative archival lens, this dissertation treats fan conversations as historically meaningful records. I documented fan interactions as part of my online ethnographic methodology and treated these exchanges as archival records. Though I did not assume that one conversation online

⁷⁰ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 162.

was more important than another, this dissertation adds data about marginalized music to the archive using non-traditional material.

Finally, I use Brooks' work as a critical lens for centering Black audiences as active producers of musical meaning rather than passive consumers. Using Brooks' work, I analyze fans as active participants in meaning making around Lizzo. This work helps provide background to Black women in rock and roll and the exclusion these communities have faced in writing popular histories. I use the analysis of Phyllis Garland by Brooks as a lens to study Black musicians exemplified through writing by Garland where I consider the audience's perspective toward marginalized musicians. Brooks says, "For Garland, questions of institutional control and gross racial inequities in cultural arts journalism have everything to do with not only who generates the narrative about Black music and how the broader story of that complicated and wondrous music- with all its promise and beauty and purpose- ultimately gets told but also who stands to profit from the telling."⁷¹ Through this work I explore who tells stories about Lizzo and how this relates to profit for her music, economically but also culturally.

This dissertation extends Brooks' concept of the alternative archive using fans as sources of cultural knowledge. I add to Brooks' work and use alternative archives to think about the different ways fans are legitimate cultural participants and to help center the audience in Lizzo's fandom. I use Brooks' work here to complicate the

⁷¹ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 165.

kinds of background information that the community brings to online culture and parasocial relationships around Lizzo.

I apply Angela Davis's critical frameworks to examine Lizzo's social media posts in relation to race, gender, and sexuality. I examine, through an analysis of Black women's blues music, how artistic expression online resists Western heteronormative and racial binaries. In her book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis uses blues music by Black women blues singers to differentiate "European-derived American popular culture" and "post slavery African-American cultural expression."⁷² I explore the binary of the West/rest Davis employs at the beginning of her book in relation to blues music for its practitioners to extend to popular music and its audience. In this work, Lizzo and her audience are positioned as the "rest" in relation to hetero-normative popular music discourse. Within this binary, the hetero-normative white male is positioned as the Western ideal subject and all people who do not fit this category are "others." I draw on Davis' discussion on how Black women utilized expression of sexuality in the blues to challenge traditional Western ideas to emphasize the importance of Lizzo's representation of sexual freedom.⁷³ Davis's work helps me here to interpret the posts, lyrics, and comments related to sexual identity and representation highlighted by Lizzo and her audience.

⁷²Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (Pantheon Books, 1998), 9.

⁷³ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 127.

I engage Davis's both/and continuous framework rather than a binary model in my dissertation because it helps me to avoid reinscribing a hegemonic framework. Rather than using a both/and framework which reinscribes traditional stereotypical characteristics of music and body I consider the continuous influences of these factors. Also, Davis's work on the socio-political positioning of Black women's blues expression provides a lens which illuminates, for me, the ways Lizzo negotiates and transforms normative cultural assumptions in her music and social media. Davis discusses the influences of European culture and its music on the blues but also says that "failing to detect the complexities of the blues form and blues themes, some early white observers tended to consider this music "low," childish, irrational, and bizarre." In this quote she refers to a piece written in 1925 titled *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* by Dorothy Scarborough. Lizzo's music also comes into contact with European culture because most popular music is white and hetero-normative. Davis' ideas help me to consider how Black women's music is influenced by socio-political factors beyond their control and desire. I extend this research to explain how Lizzo subverts dominant ideas by creating music and posting images that do not fit the normative standards.

Last, I employ Davis's research, to examine how she positions the blues as a medium through which Black women expressed gendered and cultural consciousness, related to how I analyze how Lizzo's music engages with audience, sexuality, and the ongoing impact of historical oppression. Davis's work uniquely shows that cultural consciousness and gender are important to analyze around Black musical practice,

and create a more nuanced understanding of Lizzo's music, body, and health. Lizzo's music shows that the legacy of oppression and societal other-ing that occurred for Black people and specifically Black women filters through into experiences happening today.

Also, I use Eric Porter's framework which highlights racialized musical hierarchies to interpret Lizzo's navigation of race and gender in popular music today. Porter argues that jazz and classical music have historically been racialized into separate spheres of Black and white artistic achievement, something that causes dissonance in the evaluation of historically marginalized groups' art. Building on this concept of racialized othering, I argue that reactions to Lizzo's work come from evaluations steeped in the privileging of white characteristics. Moreover, Lizzo's music disrupts the "high" and "low" art binary, which I analyze through Porter's examination of W.E.B. Du Bois' work and discussion of Duke Ellington. I extend Porter's analysis of the commercialization of Black music in relation to Du Bois, by applying it to Lizzo's sound as I situate Lizzo's work in my contemporary analysis. Porter's framework reveals, through Du Bois, that there was not a loss of authenticity by amalgamating elements of culture, but rather, authenticity is lost in the white appropriation of Black music to use for commercialization.⁷⁴ With these ideas in mind, I argue that there is a continuous influence of racialized and gendered ideas on music, particularly around Lizzo.

⁷⁴ Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 39.

I use Staci Zavattaro's work to analyze how Lizzo's online presence reframes fatness as visible, and also challenges good/bad dichotomies, in relation to her body. In "Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity," Zavattaro argues that social media representation of fat bodies can create more positive connections.⁷⁵ I use this lens to show how Lizzo unsettles the normative ideas of society because she is showing a happy, full life, as a fat person, and is disruptive to the dominant narrative.⁷⁶ Zavattaro also argues that body positivity platforms are working to destabilize the stigmatization of the word "fat" as they pursue acceptance. Using Zavattaro's work, I extend these ideas to Lizzo's body positivity platform for my study and I explain that Lizzo confronts the negativity in the word fat. This allows me to argue how Lizzo's use of the word in her lyrics destabilizes normative ideals.

Black Studies

First, I use Lawrence Levine's integral intervention in Black studies as a framework to argue Lizzo's social media and music presence should be read as ongoing Black community and cultural production, rather than an isolated contemporary event. In his book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Lawrence Levine argues, "Scholars must be receptive to the possibility that for Africans, as for other people, the journey to the New World did not inexorably sever all associations with the Old World; that with Africans...aspects of the traditional cultures and world view they

⁷⁵ Staci M. Zavattaro "Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity," *Public Integrity* 23, no. 3 (2021), 282.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 290.

came with may have continued to exist not as mere vestiges but as dynamic, living, creative parts of group life in the United States."⁷⁷ I use these 'dynamic' concepts to interpret Lizzo's engagement with things like social media, politics, and music as contemporary examples of Black communal knowledge production. Furthermore, Levine posits that "Black slaves engaged in widespread music exchanges and cross-culturation with the whites among whom they lived, yet throughout the centuries of slavery and long after emancipation their song style...remained closer to the musical styles and performances of West Africa and the Afro-American music of the West Indies and South America than to the musical style of Western Europe."⁷⁸ Levine's work allows me to position Lizzo's music within this long history of cross-cultural exchange.

Then, I use Levine's scholarship to argue that Lizzo's music and community prioritize the collective experience rather than hegemonic ideals. Levine argues, "the ways in which the slaves expressed their new religion, important elements of their shared African heritage remained alive not just as quaint cultural vestiges but as vitally creative elements of slave culture."⁷⁹ I demonstrate, likewise, that Lizzo's music blurs the line between what hegemonic groups consider important. Consequently, using Levine's analysis of linguistics I examine Lizzo's use of vernacular language, as a mode of community formation and rejection of the normative. I extend his work on language to evaluate how language is used as a

⁷⁷ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, (Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

⁷⁸ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 52.

community-building tool within online fan spaces. I argue that linguistic strategies, based in the historical context provided by Levine, reinforce shared culture among Lizzo's audience.

Paul Gilroy's framework allows me to engage with an analysis of Lizzo both as she is celebrated and constrained in popular music. I use Gilroy's critique of modernity to examine how hegemonic power structures determine which histories are preserved or erased. Drawing on Gilroy's analysis of Du Bois' double consciousness, I argue Lizzo navigates competing expectations in her music, complicated by race and gender, while never satisfying hetero-normative standards. I employ Gilroy's theory of double consciousness as a framework for understanding why Lizzo's music resists these normative standards. Gilroy posits that De Bois' "double consciousness, emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing." These modes of thinking include, race, nationality, which "derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not-yet-citizens find themselves," and is related to the diaspora.⁸⁰ I use the theory of double consciousness in this work to examine how Lizzo is never seen as enough for any of the communities she inhabits.

Next, I build on Gilroy's analysis when I examine how authenticity and community are produced within Lizzo's online fan spaces. I use Gilroy's examination of Black musical performance to help me analyze Lizzo's music and lyrics through a lens of authenticity. Gilroy describes language as social communication when he says, "music, the grudging gift that supposedly compensates slaves not only for their

⁸⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Harvard University Press, 1993), 127.

exile from the ambiguous legacies of practical reason but for their complete exclusion from modern political society, has been refined and developed so that it provides and enhanced mode of communication beyond the pretty power of words- spoken or written."⁸¹ I extend this to an analysis of Lizzo's music. She uses lyrics to tell a story, literally, but also communicate to her audience how she is feeling and how she feels toward them. I use Gilroy's work to examine the reactions to these lyrics, in finding authenticity for Lizzo fans, with these examples in mind. With Gilroy's work as a basis, I consider Black cultural expression both for the artist and the audience.

Using Matthew D. Morrison's theory of Blacksound, I argue that Lizzo's music is evaluated by her audience through preexisting racialized expectations. This framework allows me to examine how historical racial violence continues to shape perceptions of Black musical sound in contemporary culture. In Morrison's article, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," he coined the term Blacksound, coming from the idea of blackface and how sound created and produced by Black communities is still influenced by Black minstrelsy today. I use the idea of Blacksound to consider the larger impact of historical violence toward Black people, and consequently their music, in relation to Lizzo and her community. Morrison argues that Blacksound is built into the way society understands and racializes popular music.⁸² Moreover, I employ Blacksound to discredit the binary thinking of black/white and the way the characteristics of good/bad music are

⁸¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 76.

⁸² Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of American Musicology Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 782.

reproduced onto this binary.⁸³ By using Morrison's work I extend his arguments of Black minstrelsy to understand the dominant ideas around a racist popular music sound in contemporary culture around Lizzo.

Building on Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele's scholarship, I analyze Lizzo's use of social media to cultivate joy, community, and fan engagement, regardless of mainstream expectations. Lu and Steele, write in their article, "Joy is Resistance: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," that participation in culture as an academic is important for research. As an academic who routinely monitors the Lizzo fandom online, I consider the work done by these authors seriously. By evaluating the social media sites Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and Instagram I use this work to analyze how Lizzo's online community can understand reactions to her music through her engagement. Moreover, I consider how Lizzo brings joy to her community. I use their work by Lu and Steele to consider how Lizzo uses her posts for her own community and is not concerned with the privileged group's reactions to her online presence.

Drawing on Jafari Allen's concepts of nonlinear temporality, I argue that Lizzo's online fandom operates outside of chronological time. Allen's framework informs my approach to analysis for how minority groups navigate cultural participation on their own temporal rhythms rather than through dominant time structures. Allen argues in, *There is a Disco Ball Between Us*, that chronological time is a concept created by dominant groups. Rather than functioning along a sequential

⁸³ Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 783.

order, time for Black groups can function asynchronously. I extend Allen's disco ball metaphor, which he describes as the refractions in the light showing a spectrum of colors and reflections which better represent time for these communities, to social media. Allen's work helps me to show it is unnecessary to follow temporality in "straight time" to participate in the Lizzo online fandom.

Morality and Cancel Culture

I use Erich Hatala Matthes' framework to analyze how Lizzo's fans negotiate a moral judgement of the art she produces as opposed to Lizzo as an artist through an analysis of Matthes' art versus artist debate. In *Drawing the Line: What to do With the Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies*, Erich Hatala Matthes' argues for a more complex approach to separating art and artist. His argument about the relationship to artistic value and the relationship to inherent determination, or lack thereof, of artist morality, allows me to examine why some fans choose to disengage with Lizzo's fandom, and some continue to participate. Matthes argues it is difficult to decide whether or not to ignore the work of the artist for an immoral act or to ignore the behavior and focus solely on their art. He asks, "Do the moral lives of artists affect the aesthetic quality of their work?" and then uses philosophical frameworks to analyze the relationship between the morality of the producer of art and the art itself.⁸⁴ The distinct Matthes provides between art and artist allows me to

⁸⁴ Erich, Hatala Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to do With the Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 3.

examine and interpret fan evaluations of Lizzo's character beyond her musical production.

While Matthes writes that race and gender complicate moral evaluations of art and artists, his framework leaves a gap in the nuance for how Black women musicians are disproportionately subjected to moral scrutiny. In this dissertation I begin with Matthes' ideas and use Lizzo as a case study to explore the gap of the relationship to intersectional background and reactions to allegations. Matthes says, "While we might judge that the creation of an artwork has a bad outcome and hold the artist morally responsible (say, a movie or novel that intentionally incites violence), that's different from saying that the artwork itself is morally bad."⁸⁵ Later in his work, Matthes does point to how race and gender make these issues more complex. However, there is a gap here in elaborating on how Black women are disproportionately more likely to be victimized in general and to be treated as though their music is "bad." Consequently, I address this gap in the literature by doing further examination.

I also employ Matthes' analysis of "cancel culture" to examine how allegations are judged disproportionately in Lizzo's case. I extend Matthes' scholarship to evaluate how disproportionate cancellation operates for marginalized artists. While Matthes does acknowledge race and gender I focus specifically on a gap in literature for a Black women artist disproportionately 'canceled' in popular media. Matthes defines those canceled as "those who shall not be listened

⁸⁵ Hatala Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to do With the Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies*, 9.

to/watched/read/etc. because of their immoral behavior, as if the media conglomerate of morality pulled their content."⁸⁶ He goes on to question the basis of these cancellations and thinks the context is vital because moral transgressions are not always proportional nor equally comparable. I build upon this work by analyzing the effects of the internet and considering how with this technology, the disparities in intersectional oppressions can be intensified.

I utilize Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist ear to interpret fan reactions to Lizzo as meaningful rather than easily dismissed. Moreover, I use this concept as a lens to examine forms of complaint that demand contextual listening rather than dismissal. In her book *Complaint!* Sarah Ahmed writes the "Introduction: Hearing Complaint," where she argues that to understand something as a complaint is to be dismissive.⁸⁷ Moreover, building on Ahmed's complaint theory, I analyze how whiteness and heteropatriarchal characteristics shape which voices are heard in the Lizzo comment sections. Ahmed claims that we only hear ideas that are white and normative, invalidating those which come from other groups and do not meet heteropatriarchal standards.⁸⁸ I use this work to analyze the pushback in the allegations and how it has been consequential for both Lizzo's career and also for those who posed the complaint against her. Ahmed's approach allows me to analyze how fans articulate their disagreement and disappointment with Lizzo in these digital spaces.

⁸⁶ Hatala Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to do With the Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies*, 77.

⁸⁷ Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: Hearing Complaint," in *Complaint!*, Duke University Press (2021), 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 24.

Drawing on Amia Srinivasan's feminist analysis of power and consent, I further examine the relationship between Lizzo and her backup dancers. I apply this framework to examine how fans understand the balance of power between Lizzo and her backup dancers, particularly around consent. Then, I use this lens to analyze how audiences interpret allegations arising from the power imbalance. In Amia Srinivasan's, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, she says "Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view. It is a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? It answers what we do not know; let us try and see."⁸⁹ I use this to analyze the balance between infantilizing grown women's choice to attend an outing and their ability to deny someone with power.

Jill Fredenburg's analysis of coded language on social media provides a framework for examining how Lizzo's fans use shared knowledge and language to navigate cancel culture online. Her article, "'Camping' or Abortion? Polyvariance and Coded Language on Social Media," follows the unfolding of concealed language around abortion topics on the internet. Her article shows how online communities use coded language to communicate material that can be sensitive. This framework is helpful in analyzing how "cancel culture" can be examined in Lizzo's fandom. Cancel culture might be framed as taking a moral high ground for those trying to oppose certain individuals, but this framework offers a more critical lens. I analyze how

⁸⁹ Ahmed, "Introduction: Hearing Complaint," 8.

Lizzo's community uses coded language, through Fredenburg's work, in their use of things like emojis, coded terms, and shared references, to consider how they engage during controversy around the artist.

I use the work by Heather Hensman Kettrey, Alyssa J. Davis, and Jessica Liberman in their article "'Consent is F#@king Required': Hashtag Feminism Surrounding Sexual Consent in a Culture of Post Feminist Contradictions," to examine gender norms and consent in Lizzo's fan community. Applying this framework, I consider how fans evaluate power imbalance between Lizzo and her backup dancers and examine gender, power, and celebrity as influences to the audience. I extend this work to examine how fans do not believe consent was obtained by Lizzo toward her backup dancers because they did not have the power to say no. Then, I apply these frameworks to Lizzo as a star with power and the nuance to why fans are consequently uncomfortable with these allegations being unaddressed.

Also, by applying AbdouMaliq Simone's lens on Black cultural endurance and resistance I investigate how power structures influence relationships between Lizzo and her fans. In Simone's book *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South (After the Postcolonial)*, he argues, "Black people did not go through all they went through just in order to be integrated into the terms of an American society that did everything possible to keep them out."⁹⁰ I build on the importance of race in this research as I analyze societal pressures placed upon Black communities to

⁹⁰ AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 6.

integrate rather than be allowed to express their own cultures with Lizzo's audience. I evaluate Lizzo and her followers and consider the consequences of racism and the hegemonic power raised by Simone.

Moreover, I use Simone's analysis of embodied practices and community to understand how Lizzo's fandom negotiates unspoken norms and shared cultural knowledge online. Simone offers examples of dancing in Black communities when he states, "In their dancing around and with each other, they destabilize and articulate, enfold and detach."⁹¹ Through embodiment in dance, a cultural understanding occurs. I use this framework to examine the communicative value of working together in the cultural context of Lizzo's music. Then, I explore how Lizzo's community understands unspoken values and deeper context without explanation. Simone's work on shared cultural understanding provides a foundation for analyzing how Lizzo's fandom forms connections across digital spaces which transcend geographic boundaries.

I utilize Vanessa Angelica Villarreal's framework on community formation through music and pop culture to analyze how Lizzo connects with fans across online platforms and how these inform their shared understanding and cultural knowledge. In Vanessa Angelica Villarreal's book *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders* she provides a lens for minority community formation through music, cancel-culture, and shared experiences. I use this work to expand on how Lizzo can connect with fans over an online platform and through shared community understanding.

⁹¹ Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*, 17.

I use Villarreal's framework on resisting imposed histories to inform my analysis on how Lizzo's online fandom comes to understand their own music and politics. Villarreal posits, "For the working class, women, people of color– the intended recipient of carefully curated histories– to refuse a narrative and crowdsource a new one is a radical act. Remembering against the accepted account is a radical act."⁹² I extend the idea of writing one's own history to social media in this case study as I analyze how Lizzo's audience shares in the creation of the music and politics around her music. I argue with this framework that the online space allows for history to be written by those who have actually participated in and have a deeper cultural understanding of the Lizzo fandom, rather than that written by those who hold dominant power.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is organized into five chapters which examine Lizzo's online fandom, cultural and musical production, community formation, and identity representation in digital spaces. Each chapter is interrelated and each builds on one another, showing how different methodological and theoretical foundations can be used to study popular music in a new way to analyze language, temporality, conflict, and representation in the Lizzo fandom. The following provides a brief summary of each chapter and its primary arguments.

⁹² Vanessa Angelica Villarreal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, (Tiny Reparations Books, 2024), 12.

Chapter one of my dissertation focuses on an introduction to social media platforms, methodology, and research questions. This chapter explores my use of online communities and parasocial relationships to Lizzo. I use lenses which center Black women and communities created by Daphne Brooks to help understand the relationship of history to Black women as musicians. Next, I explore intersectional backgrounds through Patricia Hill Collins work to investigate how multiple factors play into the reactions to Lizzo and her fandom. I also analyze gender and performance through Judith Butler's theory and consider how this is important for representation in music for Lizzo's fans. Finally, I use Hellekson and Busse's theory on affirmative and transformative fans, to investigate Lizzo's fandom and the community they have built around the star. I then explain my methodology and use of online ethnography and alternative digital archives. In this method, I act as a participant-observer in my data collection. Furthermore, in this methodology I consider how fans use the online space as a documentation tool, which often provides anonymity. In my methodology section, I give specific examples of how I utilize the social media platforms Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and TikTok. Following my methodology section I pose research questions around marginalized groups online, Lizzo's fan community, parasocial relationships with Lizzo, and the ability to separate art and artist in the digital age. Through chapter one of my dissertation, I conclude the fandom created around Lizzo online, provides an inclusive, fan welcoming place, where interactions mold Lizzo's music through shared culture, online relationships, and ultimately a globally situated community.

My second chapter analyzes Lizzo's fandom's use of the acronym IYKYK, if you know you know. IYKYK is an acronym which alludes to the background and "between the lines" knowledge that is central to understanding the deeper cultural meaning online. I begin the chapter by outlining theoretical frameworks including work by Angela McRobbie, Stacy Wolf, Patricia Hill Collins, Stuart Hall and Daphne Brooks. I use this work to analyze how digital platforms function as alternative archives with contributions by fans who participate in the online community. Through these frameworks I examine how cultural knowledge is built through participation in Lizzo's online fandom and how this requires a shared understanding. Next, I situate IYKYK within coded communication online, by using an example of online communication which was censored after the decision by the Supreme Court to repeal *Roe v. Wade*. I show how online users bypass censorship and signal understanding in this example, and then apply this framework to Lizzo's fandom. In this chapter, I include examples where meaning is conveyed through implications, shared references, and context-dependent discourse. I explain the use of emojis as language and illustrate how their meaning shifts based on context and shared knowledge. Then, I explain the concept of "talking to the void" which creates interaction among those online but is not necessarily directed at Lizzo. I examine how this relates to digital community building and draw on Saiyida Hartman to show how this environment offers visibility to marginalized groups outside of dominant power structures. I also provide examples of collective cultural recognition around Lizzo's performance. I also use work by Lu and Steele as a frame to show how coded language, including

emojis and hashtags, operate in other digital communities and apply this to the Lizzo fandom. Last, I consider how fans show support for Lizzo, including celebrating interacting with her online. I show how she connects to different marginalized groups and how fans might feel connected to her personally through this fostered sense of intimacy. This chapter argues IYKYK is a way for the Lizzo fandom to share meaning and navigate digital space. Through this use of language fans build relationships with one another and Lizzo and contribute to an evolving and unique online archive.

The third chapter of my dissertation focuses on the functionality of anachronistic time around Lizzo's online community. Lizzo's fandom has access to experiences on her online platform in a non-chronological order, creating an anachronistic culture. I first use work by Stacy Wolf to argue that fans construct shared meaning through their communication online. Then I explain my use of Jose Esteban Muñoz's "disidentification," in resisting normative ideological time in favor of asynchronous resistance. I also use Jafari Allen's "Disco Ball Metaphor," work by Matthew D. Morrison on "Blacksound," and work by Saiyida Hartman on imagined community, to examine how social media is fragmented, non-linear, and participatory beyond physical spaces. I then explain how disidentification affects Black artists like Lizzo, online. Afterword, I give specific examples from my data, like Lizzo's interaction with fans after her remix with SZA titled "Special." I then discuss atemporality in musical communities while examining the intersections of disco, Lizzo's music, and K-Pop's Global Fandom for the band Twice. In this chapter I

examine Lizzo's songs "2 Be Loved (Am I Ready)" and "About Damn Time," to show how Lizzo's music is also anachronistic. After, I explain atemporal intertextual connections through meme culture with specific examples like the Elmo and Rocco meme, YouTuber Colleen Ballinger's "apology" song, and Lizzo's connection to the Barbie movie. Following these examples, I consider Lizzo's availability worldwide and the connections for her fanbase, including access to her concerts in recording in relation to non-synchronous time. Thereafter I consider fan reactions to her performance and community building as well as parallels to Lizzo's own starstruck enjoyment of Beyoncé the musician. Lastly, I give examples of social media sites like TikTok, Twitter, and HBOMax, where fans stream live events, and are able to interact with Lizzo in a pseudo-live participation thanks to technology today. This chapter concludes that Lizzo's fandom challenges normative time through Black musical community and fosters a space of inclusive, non-conforming, communication, particularly through the use of today's social media platforms and streaming technology.

My fourth chapter examines how Lizzo's online community is participatory and has been shaped by controversies which lead to emotional connection, cultural engagement, and political discourse. I use frameworks by Patricia Hill Collins, Judith Butler, and Maureen Mahon to show how fans engage an intersectional understanding of identity, genre, and Lizzo's activism. The first half of this chapter focuses on fan interactions across social media platforms and how Lizzo's music creates personal and affective responses. I also examine how these reactions create a supportive

environment online which is encouraging and welcoming to new members. I draw on work by Stacy Wolf and examine how Lizzo's audience admires her music and identifies with her messaging in her platform. For example, due to Lizzo's platform as a relatable and empowering Black woman, fans were polarized on whether to continue to support her career and music with sexual assault accusations against her. The second half of this chapter examines discourse around Lizzo politically, socially, and through the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and power. I examine how Lizzo's music, like her song, "Like a Girl" reclaims language for empowerment and autonomy. Subsequently, I investigate fatphobia and racism in harassment toward Lizzo and her resistance to heteronormative beauty standards. I explore legitimacy and authenticity in Lizzo's music while compared to standards created in Western musical spaces. Furthermore, I consider how racial and gender stereotypes surface in reactions to Lizzo's success. Moreover, I analyze how these ideas play into Reddit reactions and parallel legal and moral debates about Lizzo's character. Then, I investigate the power imbalance created by Lizzo as someone with social and economic power as opposed to her backup dancers who were developing their careers. Further, I use work by Srinivasan to explore the feminist discourse around Lizzo by holding women in power accountable. Afterwards, I examine the relationship between Lizzo and her fans, considering how there is communication between the star and commenters, creating a (sometimes) false sense of connection. I also examine how fans link her social media posts to feminist and racial politics. This chapter concludes that though Lizzo uses her platform to support marginalized

groups' rights, allegations that her actions did not align with her persona, led to strong tensions in her fandom as to whether she authentically represents herself, and consequently leads to critiques of race, gender, body, and power dynamics, of the social media figure.

My fifth chapter focuses on online fan community, representation, and relationships from audience to performer and vice versa. I drew on work by Angela McRobbie and Daphne Brooks to center Lizzo. Then, I use work by Stacey Wolf in parallel to consider how online fan engagement is often delegitimized. However, through these lenses, I show online research is a valid place for cultural study. I situate this chapter in the broader historical context of racialized and gendered representation by using methods by Saidiya Hartman, Riche Richardson, Cienna Davis, and Elena Herrera Quintana. I consider the broader context of marginalized groups' histories in body, race, and community through data analyzed through these lenses. Afterward, I analyze Lizzo's fan interaction as well as fan response to her art and music. I also explore the implications for fans and their idol, Lizzo, as a plus-sized Black woman, and whether this is challenging dominant narratives through online platforms. By interacting online, the Lizzo fandom creates an archive on TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram which holds shared understandings. I provide an example with Lizzo's 2021 song "Rumors" as a response to online scrutiny, engaging fans through these shared experiences. Then using Zarah Caldwell's and Daphne Brooks' work on Black female cool and alternative archival practices I examine how Lizzo's fan community acts as an evolving archive of resistance and belonging.

Afterward, I explore relationships with fans and Lizzo and show their emotional investment with the star. I use Erich Matthes research to explain how these investments crack under the pressure of moral dissonance, but also why many fans choose to maintain loyalty, valuing Lizzo's authenticity. I then, again, use Patricia Hill Collins work, to explain fans as "situated knowers" with insider knowledge of Lizzo's digital vernacular and cultural context. I use examples from Twitter, where fans celebrate recognition from Lizzo. I also draw from Vanessa Angelica Villarreal to explain how music and performance are seen as mediums of collective memory particularly for marginalized groups. Thereafter, I explain terms of endearment and parasocial relationships through language in Lizzo's fandom. Moreover, I investigate the negativity and criticism Lizzo faced in her fan comment sections even before the 2023 lawsuit. I use Erich Matthes' work to explore fans' struggle to reconcile their admiration of Lizzo with potential wrongdoing in the allegations made against her. I show that Lizzo's online messaging made lawsuit allegations especially difficult for fans, who were split between defending her and criticizing "cancel culture." I use Rebecca Sheehan's work next to examine fans' investment in Lizzo, her platform, and her music, due to shared oppressive factors. I also show fans expression of connections through their own art made in relation to the Lizzo fandom. This chapter concludes that online fan relationships with Lizzo and her fandom functions as a digital archive that challenge normative standards around race, body, and representation, while simultaneously navigating the challenges of authenticity and loyalty in a parasocial relationship that is in some ways, imagined. Together, the

chapters in this dissertation show an analysis of an online digital archive, unique to the participatory community and shaped through intersectional identity, cultural knowledge, and the relationships between Lizzo and her fandom.

Chapter 1: Social Online Communities

Methodology

The primary aim of my research is to contribute a new methodological approach to the study of popular music as an interdisciplinary field particularly with cultural studies and fan studies. Consequently, a clear understanding of my methodology is vital for understanding the analysis that follows in my dissertation. The data examined in my dissertation is drawn from online ethnographic research on the social media platforms, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit. These areas of research benefit from more sustained and nuanced analytical frameworks that center marginalized groups, especially women in Black communities. Furthermore, I focus on non-linear time as I analyze the relationships built in online fan communities and the nuance of intersectional background factors.

The fans studied in this dissertation are not defined by a singular, universal categorization or essentialized characteristics. The groups are anyone with access to Lizzo's fan accounts, official accounts, and who comment on her social media platforms. What is important about these fans is, as an audience for popular music and specifically a Black, woman, musician, these fans are marginalized. Not only in the academic archive but as everyday fans of music.

Studying popular music from the perspective of online fans might not feel high stakes, from the point of view of serious academics. However, ignorance on the individual level of perspective in academia leads to a gap in the literature for fans

who introduce an important perspective as people who communicate globally online, discuss music in non-linear time, and who utilize this music for more high stakes environments than the act of listening itself. The users who I study in my work, comment and follow Lizzo, and are online are fans who create a cultural community around the music she has produced. They know how to spread information online despite filters, blocks and factors that may stump non- participants, who would not be constantly traversing these spaces. As such, it is important to learn their point of view about Lizzo's music. I follow the shapes and contours of the communications between online fan audiences around Lizzo, her posts, and the consequences of these individually because this is consequential to the lives of these community members. By traversing these online platforms and learning how these fans communicate with one another I am able to shed light on the kinds of conversations that are held in relation to the music, but also what this means for the greater socio-political implication of the musical impact Lizzo could have, and that which the fans who listen to her might have on each other and on the world around them.

To decide which comments I would use in my work, I coded the comments to find the most common topics. First, I wrote down and anonymized all of these comments ensuring I would not know which platform or account they came from. I then grouped comments by positive and negative by the month they were posted. I moved those positive or negative comments into themes like comments based on body positivity, those based on Lizzo's lawsuit, those based on communication with Lizzo herself, and those based on communication with other fans, next. Inclusion

criteria to my dissertation based on first fitting into one of these themes and then the comment having the full contextual information available. This meant the post and other comments could be used to explain the context for that specific comment. My exclusion criteria included comments which were one word or had no context for example. If I could not explain the context around the comment, it was excluded.

To study these social media platforms, I drew on fan studies, where culture and media come together. Fan studies emerged from research on audience and genre writing known as fanfiction. Fanfiction is writing about a certain show or movie by fans themselves and can be about fictional storylines, different romantic pairings, alternate endings and so forth written by fans imagining different scenarios to show that they enjoy the original text. These ideas are outlined in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, a collection of essays on studying fans edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. In this work they argue, “Fan fiction studies provides a useful, accessible, and student – friendly site of interrogation for many concerns about producer– consumer relations and resistance, individual and community identity, performativity and online construction of personas, and audience responses and media transformations.” While fan fiction studies is where fan studies began, it has evolved over the last forty years to include multidisciplinary approaches. For example, in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* the authors cite scholars using disciplines in history, feminist studies, literary theory, and sociology to study fans and fandom. The material used ranges from *Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle,

romantic myth in the TV show “Star Trek,” to different fanzines.⁹³ The types of research done on fans has thus developed in parallel. The stake of ignorance means losing the standpoints of those who understand more than just that which is defined by those in power. It means that those who come from marginalized groups do not get to have a say in history, still. Rather than ignoring the comments made by fans online as non-serious or less important than academic critique, I have looked at them as pieces that inform the Lizzo fandom and culturally signify the community which is being built.

The fans I am studying are creating somewhat fictitious relationships with Lizzo. They do not have “real” friendships with Lizzo; however they do communicate with her in some capacities online. These relationships cannot always exist in the way a day-to-day friendship can, because fans are not communicating back and forth with Lizzo. However, by using the ideas in fan fiction studies, I am able to more deeply analyze the connections between Lizzo, her audience, and the multitudes of media used to create the culture around her online.

Hellekson and Busse outline two kinds of fans in their work including the affirmative fan, who is more passive, and the transformative fan, who is more active. They say,

“Transformative fans, however [as opposed to affirmative fans], take a creative step to make the world and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take.”

⁹³ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, “Introduction: Why a Fan Studies Reader Now?” in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 2.

In the case of my research, the audience is taking a transformative fan approach because they are participants in the culture and community online through comments, likes, and music making. While they are not necessarily transforming a piece of fiction, they do transform music and different aspects of the posts produced by Lizzo. They also produce their own art in relation to what Lizzo posts and produces herself.

Hellekson and Busse point out that “transformative fans are always strongly invested,” evident in Lizzo’s audience through different experiences outlined in this work.⁹⁴ Her fans demonstrate that it is important to them to engage with the star and also other audience members. This experience is partially due to the availability of discussion online. A global connection has been made possible with the advent of Internet access. As stated by Hellekson and Busse, “No longer did fans have to learn about fandom through personal engagement with other fans [such as meeting in person]; the Internet handed it to them, and they could engage alone or with a group.”⁹⁵ Particularly in the Lizzo fandom, technology has allowed for transformative fans to become even more enmeshed in the active audience.

Fan studies is an important methodology in my work because beyond the artist, fans are integral to the making of art, music, and culture. Hellekson and Busse say, “Engaged viewers are now actively invited and courted by producers, including even the previously marginalized fans.”⁹⁶ These ideas help me to probe more deeply into the levels of inclusion due to the intersectional backgrounds of Lizzo’s followers.

⁹⁴ Hellekson and Busse, “Introduction: Why a Fan Studies Reader Now?” 3-4.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 16.

Moreover, “Associated with this is the way fan cultures have moved from being a tolerated or ignored unruly fan response to an important and sought-after audience of engaged leaders.”⁹⁷ Lizzo’s audience is integral to the community around her music. As stated by Hellekson and Busse, “We look here at fanfiction as historically situated in the last forty years, tending to respond to a specific form of media text, and encompassing a specific amateur infrastructure for its creation, distribution, and reception.” The development of the infrastructure over time has allowed for the creation of large communities that reach global contexts.

Fan studies is also integral in my research on Lizzo’s fans online, because the method is an interdisciplinary and flexible approach for studying audiences in different spaces. Hellekson and Busse said, “The earlier works in the academic literature in the field of fan studies date only from the mid – 1980s... [and this academic discipline] adapted ideas from various other disciplines, particularly audience and cultural studies.”⁹⁸ As I began researching connections between Lizzo and her audience I needed a less rigid structure to understand the nuance between her star to audience relationship and vice versa. The authors of this piece explain that fan studies is a discipline which “brings together various stands of media studies (particularly media and film), cultural studies, and literary theory, drawing from ethnography, the social sciences, the languages, communication studies, Internet/Web 2.0 studies, and the humanities,” which I need in the methodology of my work.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Hellekson and Busse, “Introduction: Why a Fan Studies Reader Now?” 15.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 4.

Because I have established the use of online spaces in ethnographic work for this dissertation, I ground this work through methods in Black studies by Daphne Brooks and Saidiya Hartman. Connecting archives and ethnography is important to my work. These authors provide methodological examples for writing around missing archives and forgotten memory. Marginalized subjects face gaps because the standard archive is written and kept by those in power. For example, where there may be written records of powerful groups in people's history there may only be short snippets or inferred histories for those oppressed. Often these histories are pieced together by footnotes, asides, and oral accounts. Thus, to learn about historical and sociocultural effects of the past to the present for minority groups ethnography is needed to tell individual stories, explore memory as archive, and figure out how communities today are influenced by the past. It is of vital importance to hear individualized approaches in a community because the privileged experience has already been written into history.

My online ethnography is explored through the lens of an alternative archive, proposed by Daphne Brooks. She says in *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*,

“[T]his book takes seriously the notion of the archive—both the documentary record preserved by institutional power brokers and the faded pages we might imagine stored in an elderly sister's trunk—as a crucial, culture-making entity that Black women musicians and critics have had to negotiate in relation to their own artistic ambitions and to the problem of Black historical memory more broadly. Black women artists have played crucial roles *as* archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in *for* and *as* the memory of a people.”¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 4.

While with this dissertation I acknowledge that the Internet itself is an institutional power, I also recognize that the spaces created through social media platforms allow for commentary and critique in a different type of documentation for those participating in the community. An alternative archive is created with online comment sections because institutional powers cannot control the culture making done by those on social media.

In Brooks examination of Jackie Kay's biography about Bessie Smith's life she says "the work of Jackie Kay exists in a larger Black feminist movement in which bold and exhilarating experimental new work... the conditional explorations of elusive histories that remain outside of our direct grasp that may yet still be conjured and examined through creative meditations."¹⁰¹ A level of speculation is introduced in my research, to help in comprehending the online community surrounding Lizzo, and the different texts that make up this understanding across multiple platforms. Brooks says the work in her analysis here is to "illuminate the powerful new strategies by which Black women artists are disturbing the historical record in order to reclaim the past denied to them by critics and institutions that have historically cared little for them."¹⁰² This dissertation further attempts to reclaim present archival records while using Lizzo's work and online community as the artist herself attempts to resist these negative critics and institutions against her.

¹⁰¹ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 314.

¹⁰² Ibid, 315.

As Brooks invites readers to use their imagination to fill archival gaps she speculates on the novel *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. She says, this “endeavor is one that involves a kind of digging, drawing out from the music the forgotten tales of the people who produced and were mutually constituted by the music itself.”¹⁰³ My writing imagines that one can draw from Lizzo's music and comment sections, details about the active state of community and culture surrounding her. This music then is a sociohistorical archival place documented by Lizzo's online community of fans. Eventually, Brooks asks questions of her 90-year-old mother and uses her mother's experiences with music and society to fill her imaginative gaps about the history she is studying.¹⁰⁴ In Brooks methodological fashion, this work will use comments from across social media platforms to analyze the experience had by listeners of Lizzo's music. In doing so, first-hand experience from both Lizzo as the artist, and commenters as her audience, will be considered. By allowing for speculative imagination in archival loss, Brooks' ideas on constructing and consequently analyzing popular musicians and their audience will be used for this dissertation's method.

Furthermore, I use archival techniques by Saidiya Hartman in her book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, as a lens for studying community memory. She argues “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days for the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued

¹⁰³ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 329.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 332.

by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched many centuries ago.”¹⁰⁵ The state of Black social, political, cultural, and musical life, faces influence that is continuous and persistent, starting from the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in the US. Importantly, Hartman's work shows that there are gaps in the archival memory. For example, in writing about the conditions of the lives of enslaved people. She explores multiple reasons that lead to those gaps.

Hartman said of her grandparents in the US “They parceled time, lopping off the past as if it were an extra appendage, as if they could dispose of the feelings connecting them to the world before this one and banish the dream they had always imagined as the route back.”¹⁰⁶ These memories are so painful that sharing them freely and repetitively as “stories” as opposed to reality is often impossible, mentally and physically. These people were and are already carrying the burden of being stolen, traumatized, and imposed upon. I acknowledge the archival loss for marginalized groups can also be a means of survival. Hartman said, “I was determined to fill in the blank spaces of the historical record and represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering, but how does one write a story about an encounter with nothing?”¹⁰⁷ Through my work I hope I can provide some data to the archive about marginalized peoples through individual stories.

Hartman argues, “The archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kind of stories that can be told about the person's catalog, embalmed, and sealed away

¹⁰⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 16.

in box piles and folios.”¹⁰⁸ My goal in this work is not to talk about the past but to take archival material as a living document and use the ethnographic work of comment section conversations to try to understand the online community as a dynamic archive. Hartman posits, “the housekeeper at the Marcus Garvey Guest House,” told her that, “How big a stranger’s eyes, they cannot see.”¹⁰⁹ The archive created for and by those in power is not applicable in the study of marginalized groups. It is necessary to understand these groups from the inside to learn about them.

Hartman argues, “Wastee is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large, that is, history as the tale of great men, empire, and nation.” She believes waste is a product outside of the confines of those who write history, because it cannot be left out. Waste is already ignored and deemed unimportant. Unfortunately, when she visited a dungeon that had once held enslaved people captive, she recognized the only thing left of these people and their stories was waste which now doubled as the floor.¹¹⁰ She said, “the museum was as bereft as the underground.”¹¹¹ This space did not hold an archive of answers and stories about people who faced enslavement and torture at the hands of others. Hartman said, “There was no record left behind by the captives who entered and exited the underground. Not a single account.”¹¹² The writing and history around this place centered on the capturers. The archive does not show the events of the lives of those enslaved. Hartman brings a spotlight to these points of view, by

¹⁰⁸ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, , 17.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 115.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 116.

¹¹² Ibid, 121.

piecing together their stories through cracks in historical writing. I utilize her methodology for archival writing as I consider marginalized groups in Lizzo's audience.

Building on the principles in the methods provided by Brooks and Hartman for my dissertation, I further specify lenses from which to study Black women as musicians. While continuing to think about fans and archives, I use research lenses from scholars in *Beyoncé in the World*, to explore similarities for Black women as popular musicians in online spaces from Beyoncé to Lizzo. I draw from chapters by the editors, Christina Baade and Kristin McGee, as well as authors Marquita Smith, Brendan Shaw, Riché Richardson, Cienna Davis, and Rebecca J. Sheehan. While this work is not a replica of my own, there are similarities which help me to advance my research. I use the work here to show how the online fan community is viewed as a space where music, identity, and activism intersect. I explore the implications for fans and their idol, Lizzo, as a plus-sized Black woman, and whether this is challenging dominant narratives through online platforms.

This book provides multiple approaches to analyze Lizzo as a popular musician and her impact on her audience. For example, the authors discuss the destabilization of normative characterizations by Beyoncé through her performance and social media presence, and allow me to make analogous connections to Lizzo.¹¹³ Moreover, the authors provide examples of historical legacies of colorism and

¹¹³ Kristin A. McGee and Christina Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, (Wesleyan University Press, 2021), 97.

essentialist qualities that still affect Black communities, including individuals like Lizzo, today.¹¹⁴ The authors also provide a lens for examining other-ed musicians in relation to appropriation and authenticity, ideas which help to develop my work as I analyze the Lizzo community.¹¹⁵ I use the material in *Beyoncé in the World* to examine the political implications of Lizzo's audience comparable to Beyoncé, and to consider how her music is oppositional to white heteronormative characteristics.

My research includes data from verified accounts created for Lizzo and fan accounts. With these many social media platforms, a massive amount of data is available. To narrow down the analysis for this dissertation, the data collected started in November 2022 and ended in December 2023. In many cases, I completed a collection of the top three post comments, for each post, to ensure fairness towards the post and combat bias.

On Instagram, Lizzo's official account is @Lizzobeeating. I collected data from every post on this account starting in December 2022 and ending in November 2023. This account has limited its comments, which means there are filters for what can be posted under the comment section now. It is not public information which keywords have been filtered out. Regardless, this likely skews the comment section of this official Instagram account towards a more positive outlook on Lizzo. Usually, accounts limit their comments in an attempt to moderate criticism. To get as broad of

¹¹⁴ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 70.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 20.

a comment pool as possible, I have compiled the top three comments for every post made in this timeframe.

I also was able to gather data from one of Lizzo's official fan accounts. The comments on this account are not limited. This account has fewer followers than the official account, so there are not as many comments on each post. Similar to the official Lizzo account data collection, I attempted to take the top three comments from each post from December 2022 through November 2023. There were not always three comments due to the smaller audience of this account.

As previously mentioned, Lizzo also has an official Twitter account, now known as X. I collected every tweet from Lizzo beginning in December 2022 and ending in November 2023. Some of these tweets overlap with posts on other social media platforms. This collection also includes interactions with fans because some tweets on the official account directly communicate with her audience. I also collected tweets in response to Lizzo from November 2022 through December 2023 on all posts, and from the posts where Lizzo communicates with fans. The first three replies to all posts were collected.

Also, I collected data from TikTok and collected all TikTok posts by Lizzo from November 2022 to December 2023. As with the other social media platforms, the top three comments from each post have also been collected.

Reddit has a subreddit specifically designated to discuss Lizzo. For the purposes of my work, I collected data from Reddit in the same timeframe from December 2022 to November 2023. These posts do not always have three comments because of the popularity of the subreddit and its smaller following. In this case, I decided to try to use as many comments as possible.

I used an intersectional lens to analyze my data. Patricia Hill Collins says, “intersectionality is an analytic tool” and I utilize the concept in my work to analyze the overlapping background in groups that affect peoples’ identities and consequently creates layers of oppression.¹¹⁶ Intersectionality helps to consider how power relations in society are influential both to individual and group belonging. In her beginning example, she says, “an intersectional analysis of capitalism and nationalism sheds light on structural power relations,” and for my work, I decided to use intersectionality as a tool that would consider the multiple layers of background, for both fans and Lizzo.¹¹⁷

Moreover, Hill Collins says, “given the growth of mass media and digital media, it is important to ask what cultural messages concerning race, gender, class, sexuality, and similar categories are being broadcast to this vast global audience.”¹¹⁸ Consequently, in this work, I consider these categories but also ask what messages are being broadcasted by the audience. Hill Collins further explains the idea of the interpersonal domain of power. She defines this as, “how individuals experience the

¹¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins and Serma Blige, *Intersectionality*, (Oxford, England: Polity Press, 2020), 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

convergence of structural, cultural and disciplinary power.”¹¹⁹ In the interpersonal domain of power, broad power relations come together and affect the individual on a personal level. While intersectionality can be used to study groups of people it is also important for studying individualized experiences. Hill Collins says, “intersectionality brings a framework of intersecting social inequalities to economic inequality as the measure of global social inequality.”¹²⁰ She also uses the term relationality which she describes as “embrac[ing] a both/and analytical framework that shifts focus from seeing categories as oppositional, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examining their interconnections.”¹²¹

Hill Collins says, “today, digital and social media constitute one of the most vibrant scenes of intersectionality, in which a new generation of activists, artists, and scholars debate its intellectual and political significance.” The discussion sections of social media platforms bring together people of multifaceted backgrounds with a plethora of ideas. Also, according to Hill Collins, “by transforming the practices and blurring the boundary between producer and consumer, the rise of digital and open media has opened up new spaces for public engagement.”¹²² The ability to communicate has also opened up between producer and consumer online, creating a more symbiotic relationship between immediate change in produced art by an artist as well.

¹¹⁹ Hill Collins and Blige, *Intersectionality*, 15.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 19.

¹²¹ Ibid, 33.

¹²² Ibid, 127.

All of Lizzo's social media pages contain critical comments. Some are seemingly directed towards her character and some question her actions. Although I cannot presume to know the intentions behind these comments definitely, I explore cultural, political, and social factors which may influence these online opinions. Furthermore, I examine corollary relationships between influxes of critical comments towards Lizzo and changes made to her music.

Online fans, comment sections, and social media platforms are a kind of archive that looks after the history and community created around Lizzo, her audience, and the kind of music she is producing. Lizzo posted a Tweet in January of 2023 that stated “We need to talk about the epidemic of believing any and everything ya’ll read online...” This Tweet seems to foreshadow the lawsuit filed against her in August of that same year. The top response to the Tweet is “me eating up misinformation willingly all 2023.” The comment is coupled with a photo of a child eating a meal with their mouth full and a fork poised in the air.



Figure 1.1 [Lizzo posts Twitter & a meme Response.]

In the same day she retweeted a post which stated: “She didn’t say this- she said she isn’t making music for black OR white people- she’s making what she wants and if people don’t like it, she has learned not to care. After being criticized by both Black people for not being “Black enough” and whites for being “too urban.” While it is unclear what the original user is referencing, the message is important. In the retweet Lizzo said, “Thank you- people are working over time not to like me. Frankly, if some information taken WAY out of context on the internet is enough for someone to not like me then they didn’t want to like me in the first place- and I’m ok with that.”



Figure 1.2 [Lizzo screen shots a response to a tweet & makes a response.]

Lizzo’s Tweet was ironically indicative of the viral complaints that would soon take the Internet by storm. While all of the context around the lawsuit is unavailable, it is true that multiple aspects of Lizzo’s background make the reaction to the allegations complex for her audience. However, with the access to the archive of posts both from the star and her fans, an analysis can be pieced together.

My first example of the way social media communities function differently than in person communities can be found on the platform TikTok. A lot of the posts

that occur on TikTok and the communication in the comment sections, do happen around the same time (although it is unnecessary). Nevertheless, people do not know where other posters are located geographically. While the original post may be tagged with a geolocation of the person creating the TikTok video, people in the comments do not tag their location. In an in-person community meeting, those seeing one another would likely be from an area nearby. Consequently, in person meetings and the development of community is often restricted by geography. Locality limitations are not the case with social media communities because these are not a factor that play into the way people can communicate with one another online.

Moreover, for example, the social media platforms Twitter and Instagram provide places for community archives not limited to the confines of geographical meeting. Twitter and Instagram provide a place online for people to store video clips, communications, and memories around the Lizzo fandom. These platforms provide a backlog of events that have occurred not just online but also in person, but they are easily cross referenced by one another. Consequently, anybody with access to these social media platforms, has access to these records, anywhere. Social media communities differ from in person communities because by documenting the community, the community is formed. As people communicate with one another online, they develop the community around Lizzo and one another.

Social media platforms and in person meetings demonstrate different kinds of community building, culture, and social development. Online platforms create a

different way for people to come together and interact, even while there are some similarities such as common interests and a general understanding of similar language.

Online, people are able to interact with one another at different times. They do not have to necessarily meet at an agreed upon hour because somebody can write a post, and then somebody else can respond simultaneously or even years later. This means that the community can be built by an original poster and a commenter, and the relationship can be one-sided because the commenter may say something to the original poster that that original person will never see. However, since others might interact around the original post, and perhaps with one another in those comments, then even though the original post may be chronologically old, because of the way the community can interact on social media it does not have to be created simultaneously like in person communities.

I use social media communities rather than in person communities because they offer a unique opportunity to analyze conversations from the point of view of underrepresented audiences. Fans across the world engage with one another online, and through this work I am able to consider how this participation affects music. I have been able to study online comments as a non-reactive observer, rather than using my own preconceived notions for analysis on the online Lizzo community. Not influencing the online conversations with information about my study, has helped me avoid behavioral changes in the comment sections. I have also found that this work is

impactful because it provides individualized accounts of the community around Lizzo through featured comments from the online platforms. These fans discuss what is important to them and in my work, I share these comments and make connections as to how they have been influential in the community.

In this dissertation I use these methodologies to emphasize the implications for exploring digital spaces with non-linear digital ethnography in regard to musical communities. I use social media communities rather than in person communities because they offer a unique opportunity to analyze conversations from the point of view of underrepresented audiences. Not influencing the online conversations with information about my study, has helped me avoid behavioral changes in the comment sections. I have also found that this work is impactful because it provides individualized accounts of the community around Lizzo through featured comments from the online platforms. These fans discuss what is important to them and in my work, I share these comments and make connections as to how they have been influential in the community.

My contribution to the field of popular music studies is a method of participant observation fieldwork which can be conducted outside of normative time. While previous media studies work has been conducted online (such as Stacey Wolf's work on the musical *Wicked*) the piece which is unique in my dissertation is the asynchronous experience of the online community around Lizzo. The internet allows for community building beyond the confines of chronological time. The virtual fan

community experience does not have the constraint of time zones and manipulates the live experience.

Moreover, the demographic of participants in this study is not identifiable by simple categories like age, but rather encompasses the swath of people who are interested in Lizzo online. This is important because Lizzo herself is a marginalized person, coming from an intersectional background which includes being a Black, plus sized woman. While the demographic background of her online followers might be unclear, they can all be categorized as people who care about the interests of at least one woman from this multifaceted and in many cases, multi-marginalized group.

How the Social Media Platforms Work...

Urban Dictionary

First, I use Urban Dictionary throughout my work to explain colloquial terms used on social media. This is an online website which allows users to submit definitions of cultural vernacular. The website was created in 1999 and it uses a voter system to indicate accuracy of definitions. However, sometimes users are known to vote for a ludicrous definition to a term as a joke against non-frequent Urban Dictionary users, so it occasionally contains inaccuracy. The way Urban Dictionary is interpreted by online users is community driven. As outlined by Levine Black communities use linguistics for sharing in group culture. My work examines Black community around music and how it does not follow the blueprint set forth by European standards. Levine suggests that language was essential and "there were

several other grammatical differences between slave speech and what linguists have called Standard English." I take up this framework with Urban Dictionary, as a resource for understanding evolving linguistics in the online community around Lizzo.

Urban Dictionary might be seen as unreliable because of the humor its users utilize against those who do not frequent the site. However, contextual clues and images in posts as well as cultural knowledge allow for easily decoding whether the definition on the website is being used widely or the post has been edited with jest.

Some ways to identify whether an Urban Dictionary definition is accurate are to check:

1. Is the statement meant to be upsetting?
2. Is the information hateful or including hate speech?
3. Is the definition attacking¹²³

Using these criteria, and frequenting social media, it becomes clear quickly which Urban Dictionary definitions are meant to be jokes. These are easily decoded such as sarcasm in everyday vernacular for example. Those who are online often, such as fans in the Lizzo audience, would be able to traverse this website and analyze the legitimacy in definitions efficiently.

¹²³ "Dealing with Trolling: Update for 2023," MIT Social Media Hub, accessed October, 27th, 2025. <https://socialmediahub.mit.edu/blog/dealing-trolling-update-2023>

Instagram

Instagram, like the other social media platforms in this dissertation, can be understood as part of an alternative archive. This particular site has around 2 billion global users. The United States has 158.5 million users, and the U.S. age demographic ranges from adults aged 18-24 years old.¹²⁴ Following Daphne Brooks' framework, Instagram functions as a non-traditional site of fan engagement and critique for the Lizzo audience. She highlights the work of Phyl Garland, who was a music critic from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s for *Ebony* magazine.¹²⁵ Garland's work used the listening practices of Black audiences to foreground her reviews, establishing her own standards for rock n' roll evaluation. This contrasted with the norms and characteristics of white male musicians who were dominant performers during these decades. In my work, I highlight instead the writing of fan audience members and the work of a Black musician in tandem, through Instagram.

Instagram has a "verified" account for Lizzo, meaning that the platform has authenticated the account and it belongs to the person claiming the profile. There are two options to become "verified" on Instagram, including paying for a service to be "meta verified," or a verification that takes multiple steps, including an application. Lizzo's account has been verified via the latter process. Her account will remain the unique profile for her posts because of this more arduous verification procedure.

¹²⁴ Instagram Statistics: Key Demographic and User Numbers," Backlinko, accessed September 20th, 2025.

<https://backlinko.com/instagram-users#:~:text=Average%20Age%20of%20an%20Instagram%20User&text=71%25%20of%20people%20aged%2018,65%2B%20have%20active%20Instagram%20accounts>

¹²⁵ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 71.

However, there are multiple pages created by fans specifically dedicated to discussing and posting about Lizzo. Moreover, many fans discuss Lizzo in the comment section of her specific account.

This research will focus on three accounts, from Instagram, that post about Lizzo. Lizzo's official account is searchable under the handle @Lizzobeeating, and she has approximately 12.6M followers at the time of my dissertation research.¹²⁶ The fan account @Lizzolover has 4,302 followers and claims to have been founded in 2017, making this the earliest of the Lizzo fan pages. The account @Lizzoupdates on Instagram has 14.8 thousand followers, the largest Lizzo dedicated fan account. These accounts have been chosen because there is interaction between the artist herself, Lizzo's original fans, and an account with the most followers compared to other fan pages.

Importantly, only some Lizzo followers are necessarily her fans. It is crucial to understand that Instagram is a place where people can post anonymously. In many instances, people do not share their real identities. They may, for example, use profile pictures that are not of themselves, or use coded names. There are people in the comment sections online, who dislike Lizzo and purposely write negativity. Because this is an open forum, there are a myriad of reasons people who dislike Lizzo might follow her to post that they do not like her. These reasons can range from looking for attention to blatant racism.

¹²⁶ Instagram, 2023, Nov 7th.

Fan-run accounts from early in Lizzo's career were likely created for her audience to have spaces for specifically positive opinions of Lizzo. Those who dislike Lizzo seem to enjoy the anonymity provided by the massive following on Lizzo's verified account. Posting negative comments on a fan-run account with a smaller audience, might lead to more backlash for the negative poster.

Following the allegations against Lizzo fan pages became unusually inundated with negative comments. These comments were not necessarily related to Lizzo's music. However, they especially called attention to the lawsuit against Lizzo. Eventually these comments led to disparaging Lizzo's body, making racist remarks, and telling the account owners that they should reconsider even keeping their Instagram accounts running.

Reddit

Reddit is a platform that allows for more anonymity than other social media. Most people on Reddit do not use their name and do not upload personal information. Moreover, Reddit has a unique blog-like post and response page feature; these are known as a "sub – Reddit." The sub-Reddit pages hold discussions for different topics.

There is a sub-Reddit specifically about Lizzo, which has much more discussion between users than other social media platforms. At the time of this writing, the sub-Reddit dedicated to Lizzo, r/Lizzo, has approximately 7,400 members. Another feature of Reddit is the platform shows how many people within a

sub-Reddit are currently online. At any given time, r/Lizzo will have seven to ten people engaging with these posts.

Another interesting piece of this social media platform is the ability of moderators, or those who run the sub-Reddit, to pin specific posts at the top of a sub-Reddit. The Reddit moderators act as administrative keepers of each sub-Reddit, similar to those who own fan-run pages on other platforms. When pinning a post, moderators have specifically chosen those posts to show at the top of a sub-Reddit for those viewing the page to see first. Importantly, in the r/Lizzo sub-Reddit, there are two pinned posts about the lawsuit and allegations against Lizzo.

Twitter

Twitter no longer exists in the same iteration I used when gathering data for my dissertation. Changes in the social media platform have come with a rebrand to the name X after the site was purchased by Elon Musk. It was a social media platform where people created both personal and dedicated fan accounts. When gathering data for my research, Twitter was a space where people could share opinions and was a platform sometimes used to "gather" online. The platform facilitated political conversations both in groups and individually. In some ways Twitter promoted "group think" because people would come together and create a consensus about things they read there. For example, in a viral moment, users began unfollowing famous celebrities to reflect outrage with capitalism. The goal was to make famous follower counts lower, thus decreasing the number of views they received on the platform. In

doing so, these people would decrease the amount of income celebrities would receive. As such, they created a group political action that lessened the income of celebrities through a “group think” promoted on Twitter. Online users were able to use online communities and social media to come together to create a political action. Viral controversies and ideas that I evaluate on Twitter can be understood through a race and modernity framework provided by Gilroy. He contends that by evaluating art created by enslaved people through the lens of modernity, “cultural activists even now engage in “rescuing critiques” of the present by both mobilising memories of the past and inventing an imaginary past-ness that can fuel their utopian hopes.”¹²⁷ This dissertation uses Gilroy's work not only for analysis but as a reminder that several factors influence history. Tensions in modernity become apparent with the examination of Lizzo’s audience I do on Twitter.

Something that made Twitter unique was the ability to make topics go viral. Users were able to communicate with one another and there was a lack of censorship that created a different community communication style. There was a “trending page” dedicated to topics followed by the personal user and also a “trending page” dedicated to topics discussed worldwide. Following Lizzo's lawsuit, she was number one on the world trending page, and many people were talking about her and her actions. This included talking with their personal followers and those in the general Twitter community.

¹²⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Harvard University Press, 1993), 57.

Twitter also created the ability to have an almost real-time discussion about the unfolding events of the lawsuit and allegations. Moreover, it allowed space to hear from key players in the event themselves. Then, others could catch up with the topic as Tweets were available to read later. Many people were waiting to hear what Lizzo would say about these allegations and also voiced their disappointment with the famous music star.

Fans were under the impression that Lizzo was a person dedicated to body positivity and who was always kind. Many of Lizzo's tweets are related to body positivity and self-love. She posts about her outfits, clothes, her makeup looks, and the styles she wears for her red carpet-events. Lizzo is unique because the captions she chooses when making these tweets are always positive toward herself. She applauds her appearance, her music, her body, and acknowledges her fans. Moreover, she posts about how important, unique, and beautiful she is and shows how she thinks the same about her fans. These allegations shattered the illusion created of Lizzo for fans.

Twitter has been a place where Lizzo could interact with fans through "quote" tweeting. Quote-Tweeting is when one account posts and another (separate) account responds to that tweet by blurbing their response in the text above the previous text. In this way, users can see the original "idea" and then "respond" rather than just posting a comment that may lose its original context. Sometimes, fans tweet content about Lizzo, assuming she would not see these posts due to the volume of followers

Lizzo's account has obtained (2.2 million). On occasion, though, Lizzo would either go on an individual response "spree" or respond to tweets around a particular theme. These sprees meant increasing fan odds of interacting with Lizzo and increasing interaction in general with the Lizzo Twitter account. When an account responds to another account in this way, all of the followers of both accounts can see this interaction. Thus, Lizzo's account grew because fans wanted to talk to Lizzo and see themselves on her social media platform. In these quote tweets, Lizzo would tell fans that she cares about them, compliment them, and sometimes even follow them back. Following them back meant exciting prospects for fans looking forward to future interaction with their idol.

Lizzo faces so much bullying online that she posts sparingly on Twitter, now known as X. Despite her positive posts and outlook Lizzo has been attacked on social media repeatedly. Many people online do not like how she looks, that she goes against the norm, and that her music is different from mainstream artists today. Even before the lawsuit against Lizzo, she was treated poorly by those on the internet who were disinterested in someone defying the status quo. Moreover, after the lawsuit against Lizzo went viral, even some fans of Lizzo began to turn their opinions in opposition. The death of their idolization occurred for them. Someone who fans thought was supportive had allegedly been acting in a way that showed she was neither empathetic nor sympathetic.

TikTok

TikTok has a broader demographic than other platforms discussed in my work. According to a third-party data collection site, around 17% of users are 12-17 years old, 30% are 18-24 years old and 25.2% are 25-34 years old.¹²⁸ Due to the TikTok algorithm there is an illusion on TikTok that people have the same worldviews as the user. For example, different TikTok's focus on likes for on the left end of the political spectrum, people with different abilities, different socioeconomic status, or race and community connections. Depending on the videos users like and dislike, the algorithm will show users videos they would enjoy. The analysis I do in this work is an extension of the framework provided by Allen in atemporality. I use Allen's work to explain how time may function online on social media platforms. Lizzo's comment sections reflect different interactions in a non-chronological order with different posts triggering different memories and emotional responses. Knowing how fans universally understand Lizzo is impossible for this situation because there is no step-by-step way to enjoy her music and the culture around it. TikTok allows for a challenge to non-chronological community formation.

On a niche part of the platform, there are users who do not create TikTok videos without subtitles. This began as an attempt to create a more inclusive environment for those with hearing disabilities on the platform. In some ways, the algorithm creates a false narrative because your feed is entirely biased by the TikTok

¹²⁸ "TikTok User Age Gender and Demographics," Exploding Topics, Accessed September 30th, 2025., <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>.

algorithm. There are also negative examples. Some people have a TikTok algorithm that only shows them racist and hegemonic videos with extremist political views because these are the videos with which they interact. It may seem to those on TikTok that everyone agrees with them, but it is essential to keep in mind that TikTok is an online platform that shows users what they want to see.

TikTok is the social media platform that has the most communication between Lizzo, herself, and fans. However, this depends on the algorithmic presumption that the user will like these videos. If the TikTok user follows Lizzo on other platforms or buys merchandise related to her music, consequently, they will be pushed videos made by Lizzo onto their personal pages. TikTok is unique, while other platforms may offer targeted advertisements based on these search factors their personal pages are only composed of who they follow. TikTok allows users to communicate with and interact with others who are also interested in the same topics. People joke that those with common interests are on the “same side” of TikTok, meaning they have seen similar videos and are part of similar communities. Even if users do not necessarily follow Lizzo on TikTok, they may still see her videos and have interaction with others who are following her.

On TikTok, there are multiple forms of communication. One option is a comment section similar to other social media platforms, where accounts can tag one another. In this way, fans can comment on any public account. The user can see this comment and choose if they want to respond. Lizzo sometimes has moderators in

these comment sections on her videos and filters for specific words. Filters are necessary on her page, because the comments can become derogatory and bullying toward Lizzo. Negative comments are deleted by moderators, and the accounts are sometimes blocked and reported. TikTok has rules about unacceptable behaviors on their platform stating this includes, “Content that is derogatory, inflammatory, or demeaning, that is distasteful, disrespectful, or profane, that contains coarse language or insulting actions and that exploits sensitive events or topics, such as disasters, or attacks.” TikTok also has a policy on harassment where they say, “We do not allow language or behavior that harasses, humiliates, threatens, or doxes anyone.”¹²⁹ If comments or users are found to be participating in these behaviors they face consequences.

Another way to communicate on TikTok is “stitching” a video. Stitching is where one creator makes a video, and then a second creator can respond to that video by cutting in and overlaying their commentary. Another way of stitching a video is muting the original video audio and responding with a parallel video with their own audio. Lizzo is known to stitch videos that have gone viral from other creators. She is also a creator whose videos are stitched often and goes viral on TikTok herself. Users must allow others to see their videos in order to share whatever content they have stitched from Lizzo’s account. According to TikTok, “That person's privacy settings

¹²⁹ “Innapropriate or Unsuitable Content,” TikTok Business Help Center, Accessed December 20th, 2024, <https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/discrimination-harassment-bullying#:~:text=Offensive%20content,-Discrimination&text=We%20do%20not%20allow%20hateful,or%20promotion%20of%20hateful%20i> deologies..

will determine who can watch, comment on, download, or interact with the stitched video.” Moreover, “If you allow others to stitch with your videos but then change your settings to limit who can use your videos or delete your video, any existing stitches that have already been made will remain on TikTok.”¹³⁰ So, regardless of privacy settings Lizzo changed after the lawsuit alleged against her, she still had many videos that had been stitched and would remain on TikTok unless the person who made them took them down.

One-way users go viral on TikTok is to create a soundbite with different visual representations. Those on TikTok hear this sound repeatedly, understand the cultural implications, and have insight or knowledge about what the sound means. They may have yet to learn where the sound originated, but they will copy other videos in similar formats, create jokes, or continue the trend with that same sound. In the case of Lizzo, sometimes soundbites from her popular songs will go viral on TikTok because either the musician herself or other popular creators may, for example, make a choreographed dance that matches her song. The popular and non-popular creators will learn this dance and post it with this audio, allowing the algorithm to take their videos and show them to those who are part of the community and understand the inside cultural nuance of this TikTok sound. It is also important to note that sometimes Lizzo herself will create a dance or popular audio that then becomes viral on TikTok. Her fans will stitch these videos or use her audio to make their own.

People may participate in creating videos around this music or ideas that Lizzo or her

¹³⁰“Stitch,” TikTok, Accessed December 20th, 2024, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/creating-videos/stitch> accessed december 20th.

fans started without knowing where the original audio began. They may never learn where the idea originated. It can be the case that an audio file goes viral, but people begin using this sound without thinking about the origin. In this way, they still understand the cultural nuance of TikTok because they understand the context around the sound and the videos being made, but not necessarily the original context from which it started.

Using Emojis Online

Understanding emojis and their usage is necessary for traversing the online Lizzo fandom and comment sections. In their journal article, “‘Joy is Resistance:’ Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online,” Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele investigate social media use for Black people and how this can be a tool to reclaim power. In this study they evaluate Black joy as a resistance approach. The authors explain how oral tradition became important resistance strategies through song, storytelling, and signifying in Black communities, and then they connect these ideas to social media use today. I argue that emojis themselves can be another form of language and resistance. While emojis can mimic more standard languages, some fans reappropriate them and change their meanings in ways that function as a form of resistance. Moreover, they reappropriate the originally intended use of the emoji for communication.

I use work by Lu and Steele to give foundational context as to how oppressed communities were able to reshape power dynamics through music as language. They

give background context for how emojis are used specifically in an online context around Black culture, and I further this work in upcoming chapters. According to the authors, the music in enslaved communities functioned as a form of resistance that seemed compliant. Consequently, I use work presented by Lu and Steele to show that this community's music has developed in ways that resist oppression and turn the dominant language against the oppressor.¹³¹ These strategies are advantageous in the refusal to accept oppressive forces but also in challenging false dominant narratives.

I argue that Black oral traditions have adapted for digital platforms, where users still manage to use cultural language (emojis) and music as a form of resistance. Lu and Steele argue that each social media platform must be examined because technology shapes how this communication continues. I use their work as a lens to examine how the online culture of different platforms changes cultural communication. In their article they connect Twitter and Vine. While my dissertation will explain Twitter in more depth, Vine is different from the social media platforms I have utilized for data. Vine was a social media platform for users to post short videos and clips. However, users only had six seconds to record their videos and they could not upload previously recorded content. All videos had to be recorded and edited from within the app. Creativity was stretched with how many jokes could be fit into a short video and what editing skills could complement these snippets. Lu and Steele connect modern digital rhetorical practice to the history of Black oral and aural

¹³¹Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, "Joy is Resistance: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," *Information, Communication, and Society* 22 no. 6 (2019): 825.

traditions.¹³² I use this work to analyze how online communication, which might be overlooked by dominant groups, is actually important to study as cultural expression.

Jennifer Daniel is the woman who decides what emojis are used, and introduced more inclusive emojis in 2021.¹³³ Daniel is the leader of the Unicode Consortium which is a non-profit organization that works with global “standards, data, and software development.” The Unicode Organization works to ensure standardization for language representation on all software and services.¹³⁴ Moreover, as of September 10th, 2024, Unicode had developed 154,998 characters representing multiple languages and including modern and historic languages.¹³⁵ Daniel is responsible for the release of gender inclusive emojis and is the Expressions Creative Director for both the Apple and Android corporations.¹³⁶ She has given many interviews explaining her emoji choices and explaining her design process.

Daniel says, “When emoji first came around, we had the misconception that they were ruining language...It works with how you already communicate. It evolves as you evolve.”¹³⁷ All of the emojis in the Lizzo comment sections gathered in this

¹³² Lu and Steele, “Joy is Resistance: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online,” 826.

¹³³ “The Woman Who Will Get to Decide What Emoji We Get To Use,” MIT Technology Review, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/05/11/1024802/jennifer-daniel-unicode-the-woman-who-will-decide-emoji/>.

¹³⁴ “About the Unicode Consortium,” Unicode, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://home.unicode.org/about-unicode/>.

¹³⁵ “Unicode 16.0.0,” Unicode, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.unicode.org/versions/Unicode16.0.0/>.

¹³⁶ “Exclusive: Google Releases 53 Gender Fluid Emoji,” Fast Company, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90343461/google-releases-gender-fluid-emoji>.

¹³⁷ “The Woman Who Will Get to Decide What Emoji We Get To Use,” MIT Technology Review, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/05/11/1024802/jennifer-daniel-unicode-the-woman-who-will-decide-emoji/>.

dissertation are depicted pictorially in the appendix section. The themes in the emoji section include different colored hearts with extra characteristics, emotional face emojis, people and their expression emojis, animal emojis, flag emojis, hand emojis, music emojis, and miscellaneous. Keeping in mind that many (or all) emojis can be used to construct a comment, this section is meant to help decipher different meanings.

There are many different heart emojis of different colors and with varying characteristics. For example, some are pink with sparkles or have wings (appendix 65 and 66). Users may choose to comment with a certain heart color on Lizzo's posts because they wish to match the heart to her outfit, for example. The color may also coordinate with the post itself, like blue heart emojis when Lizzo paid homage to the painting "Blue Monday." In this case, those who recognized the painting made the connection to blue heart emojis, and this was communicated pictorially without having to be explained with dialogue. Moreover, the black heart emoji could be aesthetically chosen, perhaps to match Lizzo's outfit in a comment, but it is also possible it is a political choice. Depending on the context, a black heart emoji may be related to the community belonging one feels about Lizzo's music as rock n' roll or her posts about Black life in the U.S. The pictorial descriptions of black hearts in the comment sections of Lizzo's fandom can be interpreted in different ways based on context.

The next themed group of emojis is emotional face emojis. Some examples of these emojis include unimpressed expressions like the meh face (appendix 53) or the

heart eyes emoji (appendix 42). These kinds of emojis can portray a broad range of emotions. The cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, says, “Visual signs and images, even when they bare close resemblance to the things which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted.”¹³⁸ Even though these emojis might look like an expression and we believe we understand them, they can have different meanings in these contexts and should be interpreted accordingly. With this in mind, one emoji with the same expression can have multiple meanings depending on context. For example, the sideways crying laughing emoji (appendix 81) can indicate something is funny. However, in context, it can also mean the user finds something ludicrous or is making a sarcastic comment. The post and text around an emoji need to be analyzed to understand these meanings. Moreover, the skull face emoji might seem straightforward. In other spaces, it indicates warning or death, and in this case, it might seem to indicate at first being scared of those who do not frequent Lizzo's online fandom spaces. However, a skull emoji indicates in shorthand, "I am dying" or "I am dying of laughter." Thus, the skull emoji equals a laughing or humorous face in the comment sections of Lizzo's fandom.

People and their expression emojis can be indicative of multiple genders and races depending on which is employed. The dancing man emoji (appendix 27) is available in many colors/races, and there is also a dancing woman emoji. The "neutral race" emoji is yellow and is supposed to be generic, but it is consequently used as a white representing emoji. A hand-raised emoji person (appendix 39) can also be

¹³⁸ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, (The Open University, 1997), 19.

depicted with different genders and races. The comments around Lizzo, though, only seem to use the women raising hands emoji, specifically. It is as though her fan base understands that while there are multiple options for different gender emojis, they accept that Lizzo is a woman. These fans are using emojis as gender affirming language toward Lizzo. In other comments, they pick the appropriately gender affirming emoji where applicable and do their best to represent the person for whom they are talking about's identity with their emoji choice. Similarly, if they comment on an LGBTQ+ facing post made by Lizzo, they often use the correct emoji to represent each person. Lizzo's audience is accepting and a space for different kinds of members to join the community. However, in my data, the human emojis are the least popular form of emoji communication in the Lizzo comment sections.

Emojis that indicate animals are found in many comments surrounding Lizzo. Most of the emojis that depict larger animals relate to Lizzo's body type or have racist connotations that relate to Lizzo as a Black woman. These are mostly negative in connotation. However, the unicorn emoji is one positively connotated animal utilized in the Lizzo comment sections (appendix 97). This emoji represents unique and magical ideas, and when commented by Lizzo's audience, it is often accompanied by positivity. They believe she is doing unique work and producing music that is unique. The unicorn emoji is also associated with the idea of Black girl or Black woman magic in the context of Lizzo's fandom and her comment sections. Alternatively, the snake emoji (appendix 84) is the opposite meaning of this unicorn in many ways, indicating commenters' distrust and dislike of whatever they are discussing. It is

associated with betrayal and indicates how fans may distrust Lizzo. Also, they may be commenting on how they distrust the situation around Lizzo and think Lizzo should take their advice. Another animal used is the pig emoji (appendix 63), metaphorically representing Lizzo as a pig overeating and used as an insult. Commenters who use this emoji compare her to a stereotypical animal that overeats or eats anything. Many of the large animal emojis are used in this way.

Different flag emojis are also prevalent in comments toward Lizzo. One of these is the rainbow flag emoji (appendix 72), which supports LGBTQ+ people and groups. This flag is often used as a representation of the commenter's support of this group and as an appreciation of Lizzo using her platform to support these marginalized people. Similarly, some comments use the transgender representation flag (appendix 96). These flags are continuously used as comments in the context of groups that Lizzo supports. They can come with dialogue but often are comments by themselves. Another flag shown in the comments is the racing flag (appendix 70). It is not representative of a group that Lizzo supports but rather a flag that had to do with an outfit Lizzo chose to wear and post. These non-group-related flags have to do with the content of Lizzo's posts and do not necessarily represent anything more deeply before Lizzo's fandom used them.

There are also many hand emojis in Lizzo's comment sections. A popular hand emoji is the painting nails hand (appendix 60). This hand can be representative of fashion or literal nail color. Moreover, the deeper subtext to the painting nails emoji is a subtle agreement or platitude of emphasis. Another emphasis emoji is the

clapping hands (appendix 19). These indicate applause and can also convey emphasis like exclamation points at the end of sentences. Interestingly, the waving hand emoji (appendix 100) also has these multi-meanings. Of course, usually waving can indicate hello and goodbye, but in this case, waving can mean asking followers to discontinue their following or an acceptance of their following.

Unsurprisingly, music emojis are also in the comment sections surrounding Lizzo. Literal music notes can be found foremostly (appendix 2 and 30). A guitar emoji is also utilized (appendix 37). These happen to be used literally and are related to music comments and posts about music that Lizzo makes herself.

The last theme for emojis in this dissertation is miscellaneous. These include the fire emoji (appendix 33), the French fries emoji (appendix 35), and even the sparkle emoji (appendix 85). The fire emoji conveys agreement in the context of the comment section. It can be used to show one likes something or is attracted to a person. The French fry's emoji is meant to insult Lizzo as it insinuates that she only eats junk food and consequently is overweight, which is associated with negativity. Other foods are used this way, but some, like the peach emoji (appendix 62), represent a reference to a body part like the bottom. Contextually, the peach emoji is usually positive, but this does not mean it can never be used negatively. The sparkle emoji is usually used to accentuate text or other emojis. It can indicate sarcasm as well.

Of course, some websites help define emojis. These are general uses for those mostly commonly shared among audiences online. However, sometimes they are used

uniquely by a community, and belonging to that culture makes the "emoji vernacular" easier to understand.

Questions to Answer

My dissertation is guided by a set of questions which explore how online fan communities engage with popular music. Specifically, I analyze how Lizzo's online audience navigates meaning, social and cultural dynamics, and interacts with one another and the musician herself.

The first question I ask in my dissertation is how can alternative methodological frameworks, integrating interdisciplinary methods, be used to study popular musicians and their online communities? With this question I particularly emphasize the importance of intersectional backgrounds, a historical legacy of marginalization, and non-normative narratives when analyzing this question. (Ch. 2)

Next, I ask what background is needed to participate in Lizzo's online community and how does one come to obtain this knowledge? Participating in a global online community still means knowing similar information as fellow community members. To gain this information one cannot simply "know" without actively joining in with how others are communicating around Lizzo's music. My work examines what cultural currency is necessary to keep up with Lizzo's online social media community. I question what specific knowledge is needed to understand the participatory piece of the online Lizzo community. (Ch. 2)

Another question I ask in this dissertation is whether time can function differently in marginalized groups created around music, online? I pose the question, whether time can function anachronistically online? I analyze how community online does not have to follow “straight” time but can and will continuously be influenced by past musical, political, and social connections still occurring today. (Ch. 3)

I also question how social media platforms like Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram mediate fan communities, and how the lack of geographical location affects imagined communities? I consider how these relationships can be maintained globally while including Lizzo and examine how online communication occurs from the audience to the star. I also question how authenticity is affected by controversy. (Ch. 4)

Next, I question para-social relationships with musicians in online spaces, and ask why audience members have imagined relationships with Lizzo? Secondary to this question, I ask what happens when these relationships do not occur in a way community members expect? Social relationships between audience and Lizzo seem to be prevalent for many of these followers. Yet, with the controversy around Lizzo, many community members had to face the death of the image of Lizzo they thought they knew. I explore how Lizzo’s communication with fans and their communication with one another, shapes the culture, music, and identity around the community. (Ch. 4 & 5)

Lastly, I ask, how can fans separate art from artist when so much knowledge about musicians is available with online accessibility? Can fans separate art from

artist when they know so much about the musician and have also participated in the production of the music they listen to through these relationships? Moreover, is it valuable to these fans to separate the art from the artist or due to the relationship with musicians do they not want this kind of separation? (Ch. 5)

Together these questions guide my investigation into how Lizzo's fandom operates as a participatory community. I consider how fans navigate the intersections of race, gender, politics, parasocial relationships, and controversies, which shape the community and culture around the Lizzo audience. In answering these questions, I provide insight into an alternative methodological approach to studying popular musicians and marginalized groups in online spaces.

Chapter 2: IYKYK

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic TikTok became very popular. Personally, I thought the trend was silly, I did not want to watch 30 second clips on an app that was a rip off of other popular apps which had not survived. However, the longer the world stayed closed, the more bored I became indoors. Friends began sending TikTok's over and I could not watch them without downloading the app. Moreover, they would joke via text and in online posts and I had no idea what they were talking about. It turned out that using TikTok myself became a way to stay connected during the pandemic.

Now, regarding social media participation, I am what online communities call a "lurker," or a silent participant. I am usually up to date with online viral posts and the use of different social media platforms, though I remain mostly silent online, save for a few Reddit forums. I actively follow Lizzo and some of her fan pages on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit. Being chronically online, I see posts from fans daily, applauding Lizzo for her music and criticizing her, too. As with an in-person community, sometimes "listening" helps me gain insight.

When Lizzo's song "About Damn Time" became very popular on TikTok, the soundbite during the lyrics

"In a minute/
I'm a need a/
sentimental man or woman/
to pump me up"

was in nearly every video on my "for you page." I had never heard the song, nor did I know the rest of the lyrics; I was only privy to this 30-second or so audio clip.

However, because users from all over had learned the accompanying dance to the snippet of the song, it was being used over and over. I even saw Lizzo herself release a TikTok video dancing and wearing a sparkly, skin-tight bodysuit, which soon began popping up for me all over social media.

While I did not make a video dancing, I did catch myself singing the snippet of “About Damn Time” because it became an earworm. Even my siblings (who are eight and 10 years younger than me, respectively) would be doing mundane tasks, and I would catch them humming or singing this Lizzo tune, causing all of us to erupt in chorus and leave our mother wondering when we all started listening to the same music. Since she was not on the social media platform like us, she had no idea what we were singing about. It was also fun to have insider knowledge with my brothers, who are much younger than me and always seem to speak a different generation's vernacular.

Lizzo's interaction with fans and willingness to participate in this fun around her music drew me and (I can only imagine) others into her following. Catchy lyrics and an understanding of the online community make Lizzo a unique artist because she creates connections with her audience by participating in musical trends and viral online moments. Capitalizing on other social media platforms has led to the spread of the popularity of Lizzo's music and the community formed around listening and participating with her online. In this chapter I examine emoji use, fan interaction, and audience discussion to understand the relationship development between Lizzo's

audience and the star. I consider how relationships between fans and the internet develop and an understanding of music and community are conceptualized online.

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the acronym IYKYK, if you know you know using work by Angela McRobbie, Stacy Wolf, Patricia Hill Collins, AbuSa'leek, Jill Frendenberg, Daphne Brooks, and Stuart Hall. I analyze how IYKYK works as a tool for fostering belonging, navigating community, and sustaining shared knowledge. I situate IYKYK within frameworks of media representation, gendered and racialized critiques, alternative archive, and cultural production, all around the Lizzo fandom. I also evaluate how IYKYK is a signal of insider participation and allows for navigation beyond censorship through coded communication. I give examples of communication with Lizzo, emoji usage as language, and examples of broader implications of the acronym for the Lizzo audience. I argue that IYKYK offers a shared cultural literacy for participants and allows for shared community identity in digital platforms around Lizzo. To explain how IYKYK operates in practice, I also outline the conceptual frameworks that shape its meaning within digital culture and in the Lizzo audience.

IYKYK, indicates group membership, cultural participation, and a bypassing of censorship online. While outsiders can use the IYKYK acronym, the context within the community is what is vital. IYKYK is especially visible in humorous moments between Lizzo and her fans, where the joke relies on cultural knowledge.

An example I use in this chapter is Lizzo sharing with her audience that she believes she has seen a UFO outside her home. Fans joke with her that she should go inside, because there is a joke online that Black communities will not die in horror films. This shows the race representation and humor in her fandom.

Also, beyond humorous connections and community building, IYKYK is a tool in political activism and a way to avoid censorship. I show how Lizzo's fandom has a shared background knowledge pertaining to the star and her music, a cultural literacy of the online space, and access to insider participation and information as a follower of hers online. I use the IYKYK acronym to show how online spaces give accessibility to Lizzo's audience.

Context & Online Community, Participate in IYKYK

Having situated IYKYK at a more individual level, I now examine the practice in a broader theory of digital community and cultural production. I use a multitude of frameworks in this chapter to examine how marginalized groups navigate digital spaces. My frameworks come together to help me analyze the importance of background information to understanding Lizzo's online community. I explore this community on social media implementing McRobbie's' political exploration of women in magazine media, Wolf's analysis of gendered critiques in the *Wicked* fandom, and Hill-Collin's examination of the historical context of Black women's treatment in U.S. society.

IYKYK (if you know you know) in some ways functions as a marker of identity for belonging in the online space of Lizzo's community. Fans of Lizzo can

indicate that they belong to the community that surrounds Lizzo by participating with the IYKYK acronym. I examine community belonging through indicators of online membership and shorthand described by A. AbuSa'leek.¹³⁹ I then apply this to Lizzo's fandom by analyzing how there are not only acronyms that one "must know" but also memes and other discourse and references. Membership in Lizzo's fandom depends on an underlying grasp of concepts for and by participation. Fans must be cognizant of shorthand and online cultural background to joke and play along with other community members, as with any cultural participation.

Through her work with alternative archives, Daphne Brooks says to understand the ways Black women have contributed to culture, particularly through music, we must consider who gets to create culture, and put aside racial and gender bias that might influence critique of artists.¹⁴⁰ Focusing on the alternative archive of having insider knowledge as a community member and a deeper understanding through keeping up with community, is important for this chapter. Race and gender intersect to oppress archival materials which are kept in dominant structures. As such, I attempt to cross the boundaries that create hierarchies between critics and artists because both must have this insider knowledge to understand the inner workings of these communities. Also, I acknowledge that to participate in these comment sections online, means to participate in this Lizzo community. Thus, those who are participating, are creating culture, regardless of their background, and this means that part of the hierarchy is broken down through anonymity and accessibility.

¹³⁹ AbuSa'aleek, "Linguistic Dimensions of Initialisms in Electronic Communication," 1.

¹⁴⁰ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 5.

I also unite Stuart Hall's work with Daphne Brooks' in this chapter specifically, because he focuses on how cultural meaning is created and she focuses on describing cultural meaning through items collected by those participating. While their work is similar in nature, the point of Hall's work is to elaborate on the complexities of culture and the meaning to members. Brooks' works however, shows how archival work done by those partaking in community allows for continuation of the culture and partaking in establishing connections through time and space. Hall directly says, "Culture is about 'shared meanings.'"¹⁴¹ I consider how Hall uses his work to help to further analyze culture which I have gathered. Then, I use Brooks frameworks to examine how social media comments can be used to help describe and analyze the assembly of a community in this online place. Without insider understanding of the shared meanings, deeper contextual knowledge is not possible within the Lizzo fandom.

I apply Hall's work to analyze culture based on shared communication and interpretation. He shows that shared culture is based on similar interpretive understandings and recognizable expressions.¹⁴² For this case study, I assume that those in the Lizzo fandom online roughly understand the same cultural phenomena and participate in the making of those new ideas together. They use a similar language, interpret Lizzo's content similarly, and have a similar understanding of the fandom's specific jokes. While Lizzo's community is not bound to a specific geographical location, it is shared through digital platforms and a shared media

¹⁴¹ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, 1.

¹⁴² Ibid, 2.

consumption that is interactive. Furthermore, those who participate in the culture around Lizzo, and her fandom may believe certain emojis or gifs mean one thing and a different fandom may use them differently. It is important to understand the context around this specific culture to further analyze the conversations and relationships being built.

The significance of the acronym IYKYK can also be due to bypassing filters on specific social media words and phrases that different platforms online have censored. IYKYK can replace words or phrases, meaning if you know, you know and can fill in the blank. On the other hand, those who do not know or do not have the background and cultural context will have difficulty traversing the Lizzo fandom online. Parts of the inclusion of this community become lost without knowing the background context that allows one to compare texts and to understand insider jokes and vernacular.

When discussing innuendo or mature content, online users might post IYKYK, signifying an inability to post what they meant lest their comment be taken down or banned. Users can read between the lines by keeping up with social and political events discussed within the Lizzo fandom, for example, and then will be able to fill in this knowledge. Imagine you find a video Lizzo posted on TikTok. Scroll through the comments here. IYKYK is commented repeatedly with different emojis, and you begin to understand what “it” is. Everybody knows and feels included in the joke and the community.

While exploring how the Lizzo fandom utilized the IYKYK code, I learned that this audience is not the only online community to utilize the acronym for the sake of bypassing censorship or even the only one acknowledging their understanding of cultural aspects online. I investigate further how “camping” is used as a metaphor in Jill Frendenberg’s article. This is an example of coded communication for those in the know online and allows those within the community to “fill in the blank” as to what is being discussed without flagging online censorship algorithms. Many online communities use coded language to signal belonging and communicate discretely. In Frendenberg’s article, following the overturn of Roe versus Wade in the Supreme Court, she gives evidence to support that online users are using coded language to avoid surveillance. I argue that this information is known in the background of this online discussion space, making it function just like an in-person community. In the Frendenberg article case, the topic is accessibility to health care for women after the Supreme Court allowed states to individually decide whether abortion and its surrounding needs were legal. Those communicating online used “camping” as a metaphor for those willing and able, in states with accessible health care, to help those coming from health care non-accessible states. As stated by Frendenberg, “to those in the know, “camping-friendly states” was coded language referring to states supporting of abortion rights.”¹⁴³ Her camping metaphor supports my argument that IYKYK only works for insiders to a community when there is this background shared information. Similarly, to the Lizzo fandom, by keeping up with political and social

¹⁴³ Frendenberg, ““Camping” or Abortion? Polyvariance and Coded Language on Social Media,” 2254.

topics in this community, those who were participating knew what camping meant. The Lizzo fandom culture can be better appreciated through knowledge communicated in comment sections. IYKYK, and can belong, and there is also space to learn how to participate in the community surrounding Lizzo.

In a Twitter response to Lizzo, in a Tweet where she posted about meeting a young girl on stage at her concert, one person said, “Dr. Maya Angelou is proud of both of them #iykyk #fuckmodesty.” Author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, poet, Civil Rights activist, and scholar, Angelou is a Black woman with extraordinary credentials for Black community building and women’s rights.¹⁴⁴ In saying that she would be proud of Lizzo, this fan is making the connection between the author’s and musician’s activism for women’s rights, through different artistic mediums. Using the IYKYK acronym implies that those in the online community who follow Lizzo and care about Black rights will know who Angelou is without expectation.

Emojis in Use, IYKYK

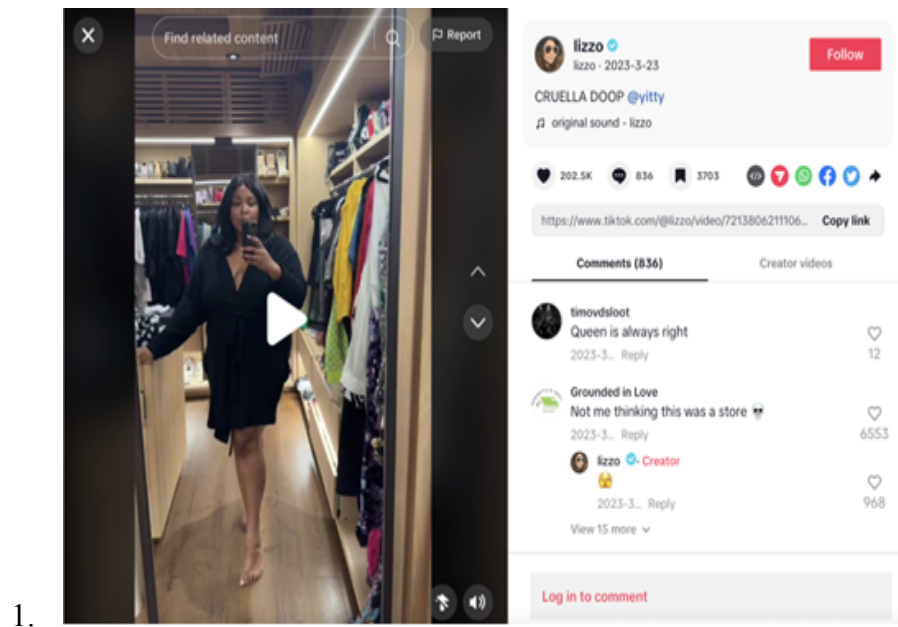
Coded and cultural literacy is clearly shown in emoji use, which is context dependent and widely used in the Lizzo fandom. Angela McRobbie’s framework can be used to understand the IYKYK online acronym because she discusses how the sharing of details can influence the type of information gained from the audience. She posits that magazines designed for women were the first place for colonial education

¹⁴⁴ Maya Angelou, *National Women’s History Museum*, accessed 12/1/25, https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/maya-angelou?vt-k=123&campaign=445&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=21320263088&gbraid=0AAAAA9wP6xgMOMK1arW11cMH1YBjClyME&gclid=CjwKCAiAlrXJBhBAEiwA-5pgwvPaDbCbNm8y0RjObKIp4wlcnPamnTeZquinJ9Oj4XZJgRVN1uZfNRoCDdIQAvD_BwE

for white women in particular to learn about dressing, grooming, and dating, which has developed into present day knowledge on things like TV shows. Now these ideas have bled into the social media pages of women who discuss these topics online. However, McRobbie points out that these types of magazine articles were divisive in that they did not account for “demarcating and policing the boundaries of class and ethnicity, censoring inappropriate knowledges and removing unsuitable material from the gaze of the white middle-class readership.”¹⁴⁵ I use this work to reinforce my argument that media spaces have historically not only been spaces to share knowledge but to show they control *who* is gaining the knowledge and *what* it is about. The knowledge gained from these articles, as with the knowledge gained from online posts, is only obtainable through being “in the know,” understanding cultural nuance, and participation in a community where one can gain insider knowledge. Those from historically marginalized backgrounds for example, had different knowledge, which was centered in their lives and communities, consequently, the IYKYK behind magazine articles, and even in the Lizzo fandom for different groups is interpreted differently.

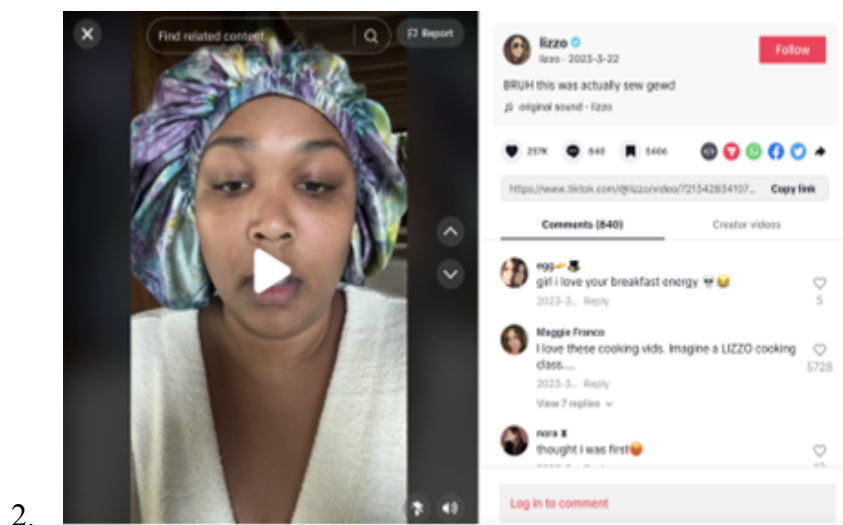
I have taken a sample of TikTok comments from Lizzo’s account to show the different subtleties in the way the same emoji can show different meanings. The following examples demonstrate how one emoji can have multiple meanings depending on shared, insider knowledge.

¹⁴⁵ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of ‘Resilience’: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 29.



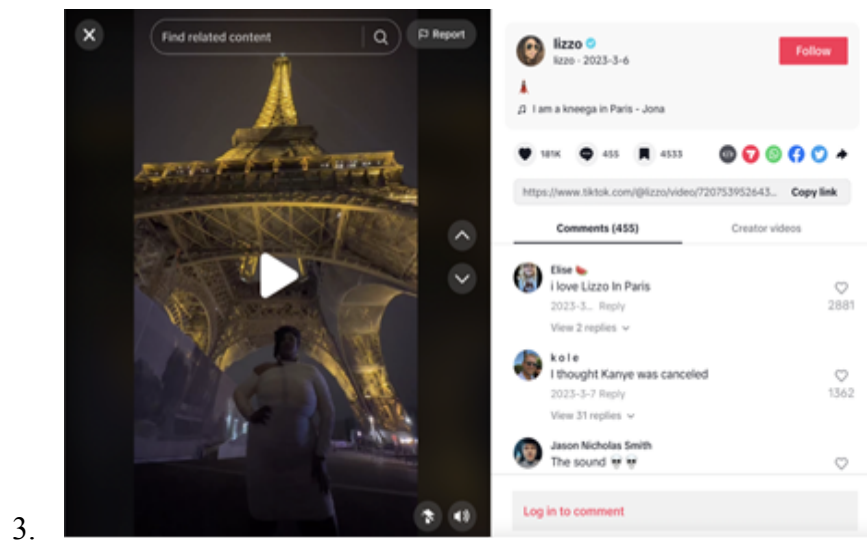
“Not me thinking this was a store [skull emoji]”

Figure 2.1 [Lizzo posts on TikTok, the reference is to the Disney movie 101 Dalmatians.]



“Girl I love your breakfast energy [skull emoji] [laughing face emoji]”

Figure 2.2 [Lizzo posts on TikTok, the reference is to her health-conscious breakfast choice.]



“The sound [skull emoji] x2”

Figure 2.3 [Lizzo posts on TikTok in Paris, the reference is to the audio bite.]

4.“The way I thought this was real [skull emoji]”

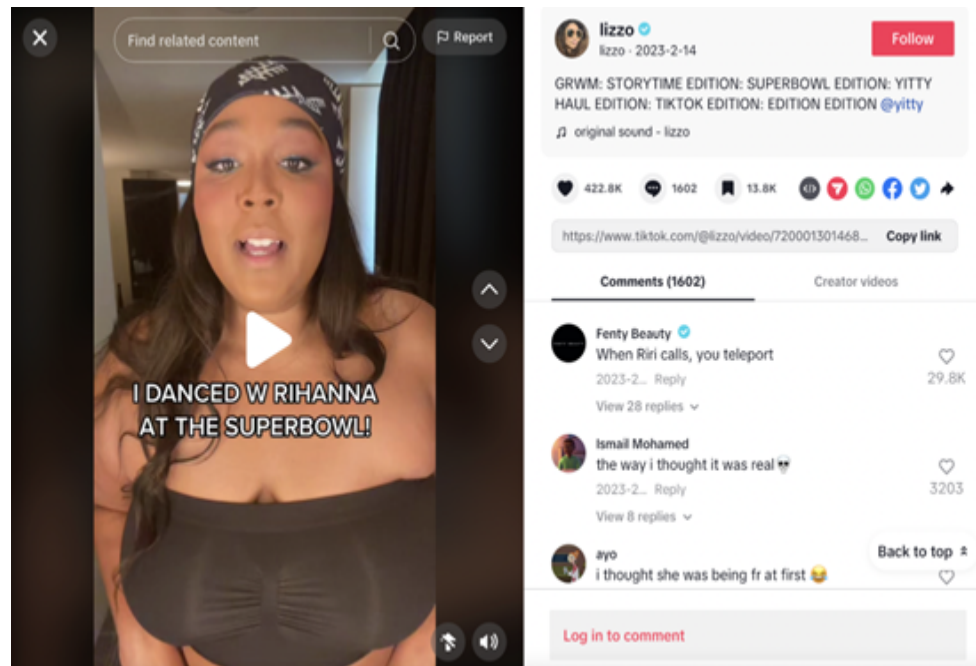


Figure 2.4 [Lizzo posts on TikTok, she communicates with fans like a phone call.]

5. “Imagine falling [skull emoji]”

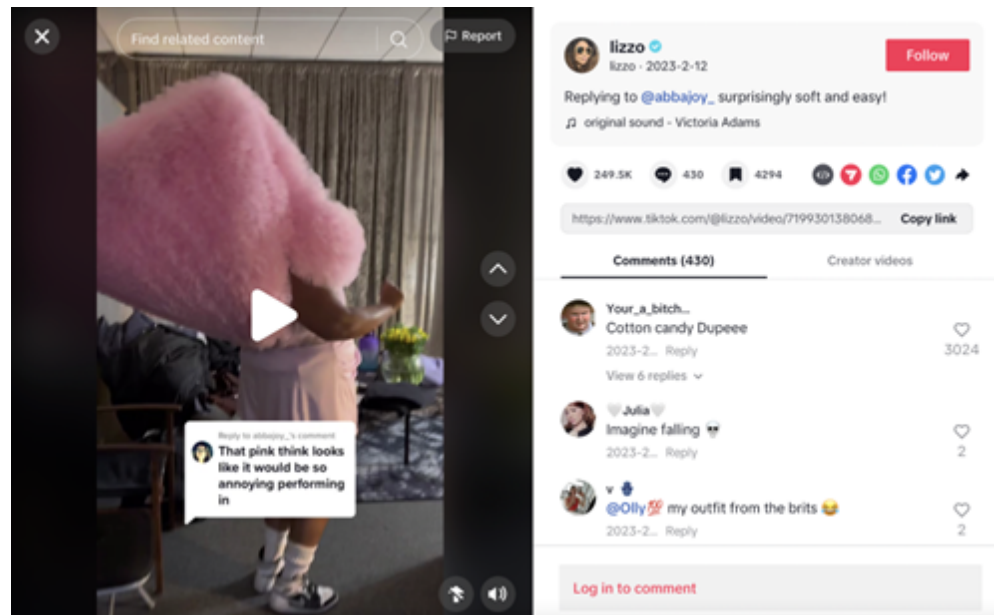
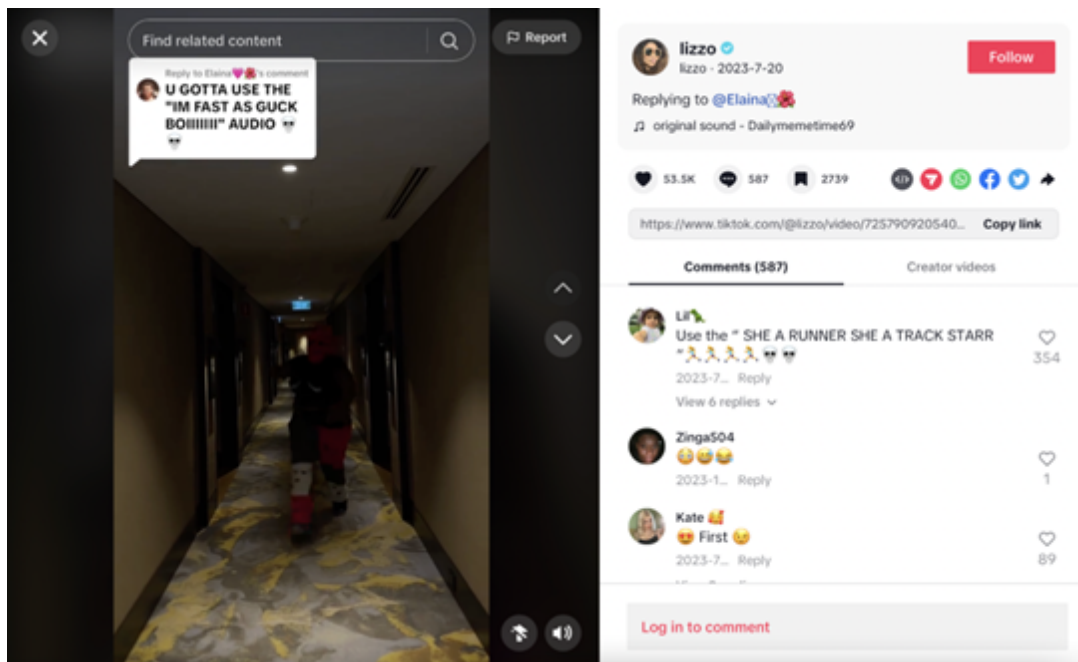


Figure 2.5 [Lizzo posts on TikTok and responds to a fan about fashion.]



6. “Use the “SHE A RUNNER SHE A TRACK STAR” [girl running emoji] 4x [skull emoji] 2x”

Figure 2.6 [Lizzo posts on TikTok in response to a fan with a viral audio.]

Depending on the context of the video posted and the comment, the skull emoji can have different meanings.

In example one, the post depicts Lizzo trying on outfits for her followers in her closet. However, the viewer is indicating that at first, they believed this was a store dressing room. The skull emoji is indicating that “the joke is on them” for misunderstanding. Similarly, in example four, Lizzo created a post jokingly stating she was a backup dancer for the Superbowl. However, the caption for the post

indicates that this was something she would like to do, not something that had occurred. A commenter said, “the way I thought this was real [skull emoji].” This comment indicates another way the skull represents how “joke is on” the user who has commented. Yet, in example two, the skull emoji is indicative of joy and humor. The user is pointing out that Lizzo is having a good time in her video where she shares what she is having for breakfast. The user is using the skull emoji to show happiness toward the video which this can indicate, they think is endearing. This is similar to example six where the commenter is giving Lizzo a suggestion to use the audio bite from the song “Track Star” by Mooski which had its moment of virality on TikTok. The user is indicating that this would make the video Lizzo has posted funnier and as a fan, it is humorous to see this post. Many of the posts around the “Track Star” audio bite were made in jest, and those who were following these TikTok’s knew the background to the comment.

Last, in example three, the comment is showing they have noticed details about Lizzo’s posts that others may have missed, or that they want to have a conversation about these details. In this post, Lizzo uses the audio bite from a Jay-Z and Kanye West song titled “Ni**as in Paris.” The audio has since been removed from TikTok. Regardless, the person who made the original comment found this to be of interest, and the skull emojis indicate they find Lizzo witty for thinking of using the song. Others also chimed in on whether they thought this was appropriate under this comment. In a similar way, example five is a comment under a video which shows Lizzo in an oversized costume that is made of fur and is twice her body size.

The comment “imagine she falls” is not necessarily wishful or bullying because the skull emoji indicates that they wonder what would happen or if it would be humorous.

Building on Hall’s argument, the same emoji is used in numerous ways in these examples to indicate that these people are engaging with Lizzo and one another in the online space. Context both for the posts and other online material is necessary to understand the subtleties in the skull emoji, and other emoji usage. These comments together show through this emoji that meaning does not come from the emoji itself but rather is constructed from context and shared cultural knowledge.

The shared understanding and literacy of IYKYK also shapes how fans relate to Lizzo, blurring the boundaries between star and audience. On a post made by Lizzo on Instagram she created a video of herself zooming in on her teeth. The teeth were all bedazzled in silver with her name “Lizzo” encrusted across her maxillary teeth in gold. The caption to this Instagram video reads “[bee emoji] Oh you mad...well there’s no remedy for that bitches [bee emoji].” According to other posts she made that day, Lizzo had been visiting Houston, Texas at the time. Indicative of poor Black communities in the rural south of the United States, “grills” came about due to an original lack of availability to dental care. A few fans noticed this connection, however some took issue with the caption. Some members of her audience seemed to think “being angry” was insinuating her audience was exasperated that Lizzo had not addressed rumors about the allegations. Presumably they thought she was suggesting they get over it as “there’s no remedy for that,” according to the star herself. The bee

emojis are likely indicative of annoyance. However, Lizzo was also in Houston to attend Beyoncé’s concert on her Renaissance Tour. Bees have become an emoji associated with Beyoncé and this information is only well communicated by those using online spaces.

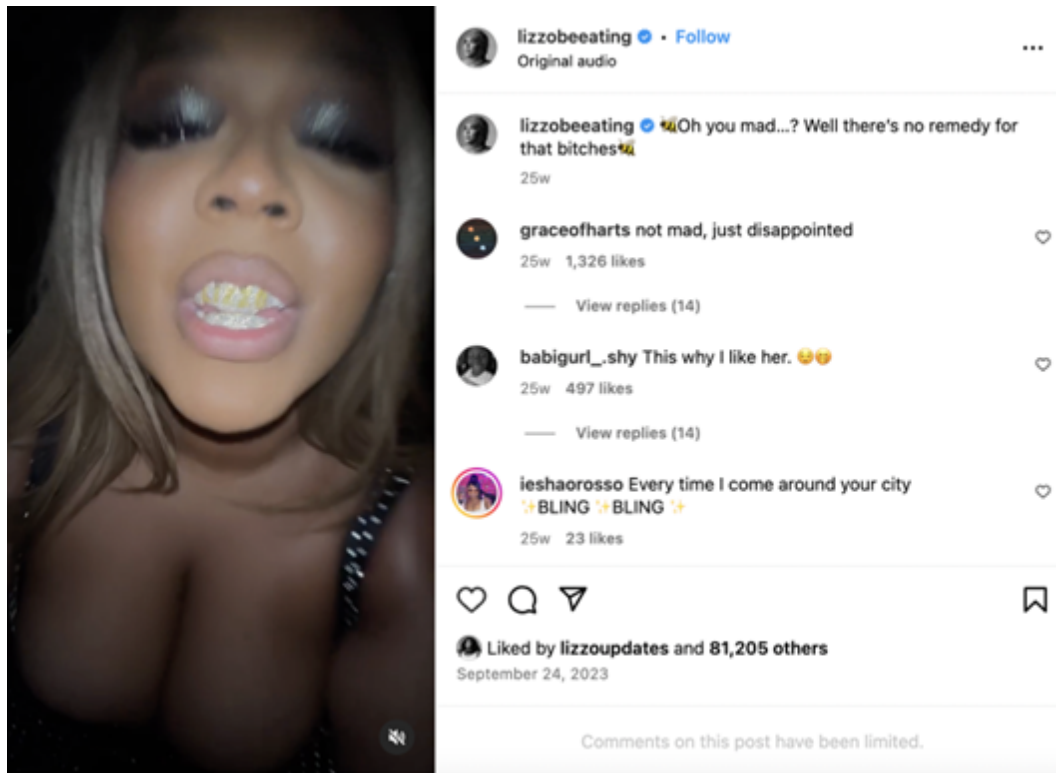


Figure 2.7 [Lizzo posts on Instagram, her caption may be a veiled reference to assault allegations.]

On TikTok Lizzo posted a video showing the food she ate in a day to her followers. She recorded herself in her kitchen wearing a robe and making food throughout the day. The caption for this post says, “What I eat in a day: i didn’t order pizza edition [sideways face laughing with tongue sticking out emoji].”



Figure 2.8 [Lizzo posts on TikTok & jokes with fans about her diet.]

Lizzo is joking with her followers in this post. They need to know background information to understand this is a joke. Because Lizzo is frequently bullied online for eating junk food, pizza is used as a critique of her body and diet. Lizzo is not known for constantly eating pizza, and in her posts showing her eating it is not one of her main staples in her diet. However, she is often bullied online and told she only eats junk food, pizza included, leading to her weight, size, and body shape. The sideways face laughing emoji is one way to indicate the sarcasm in this post. Her audiences take the context of Lizzo’s usual food posts, and an understanding of emoji use, to appreciate the nuance here. Moreover, a fan responded to her, “so not IV and bone broth? [Laughing face emoji] Love you!” The language in this comment indicates the user has seen online posts from health influencers drinking bone broth and supplementing their vitamins with at home intravenous liquids. This fan is making a reference to wellness influencer culture, recognizing the absurdity through emoji

language, and understanding Lizzo's joke rejecting food expectations. The laughing face emoji demonstrates that they find these posts ludicrous and consequently understand Lizzo as making relatable eating content with this TikTok.

Research like the work done by Lu and Steele provides a lens for the idea of IYKYK in my dissertation. They support my argument that online communities can communicate with shared codes and meanings. I use this work to show outsiders from this community might misinterpret these posts online. In other words, participation and communication within the community being studied is important for research. The authors point out that hashtags have been utilized by the Black community online to keep unsafe individuals out of their space, and to create a specific culture of certain people online.¹⁴⁶ The online community identifies itself (or prevents identification of itself) through the use of terms, hashtags, and the lack thereof of those symbols to create their online community. I identify insider understandings which are necessary to traverse these online communities. IYKYK and can navigate a more complex understanding of the community surrounding Lizzo.

¹⁴⁶ Lu & Steele, "Joy is Resistance: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," 827.



Figure 2.9 [Lizzo “quote Tweets” a fan and responds about her music.]

Social media around Lizzo also allows the creation of community through music. Along these lines, Lizzo used Twitter and her music as a place to spread joy. One person Tweeted “Listening to @sza’s song special & then @lizzo’s special right after is top tier. Ima get sad at first but in the end i feel like the bad bitch i am [hand covering mouth emoji].” The fan in this example shared the emotional experience and journey using emojis to emphasize their emotions and humor. This comment shows that songs by SZA and Lizzo can bring together the audience members' feelings and allow them to express themselves. They were able to tell Lizzo this reaction through the use of Twitter. The hand over the mouth emoji can demonstrate that they were laughing or hiding their laughter, at the joy the music brought them. Lizzo retweeted this with the response, “‘I wish I was special...’ [tears in eyes emoji] ‘in case nobody told you today... you’re special’ [tears in eyes smiling emoji] Both feelings valid & real.” In this case Lizzo tells this fan that she understands the emotions each song can

elicit, indicated with the emojis she chose, as crying through the first and crying tears of joy through the second. This Tweet shows how Lizzo's audience not only actively communicates emotions around her music online, but also uses social media specifically to share feelings of identity.

In their work, Lu and Steele indicate that online users are not concerned with the dominant group's use of social media. The authors argue, hashtags do not always mean engagement with dominant groups is a goal of the community. I use this work to emphasize that Lizzo's social media community functions without worrying about the dominant group's standards in body or musical characteristics. Lu and Steele demonstrate how users online can communicate while embedding cultural meaning.¹⁴⁷ I apply this to Lizzo's community as her social media comment section becomes a place for shared interpretation, not just posts at face value. As seen in Figure 2.9, Lizzo's interactions go two-ways, and she acknowledges fan emotions while also expressing nuance through emojis.

Lizzo's Fan Interactions, IYKYK

In the framework by Stacey Wolf, about fans of the musical *Wicked*, she analyzes how girls as fans, and marginalized groups, are devalued, and in parallel the object of their interest is seen as less valuable by critics. She posits that throughout history the worth of art has been gendered by media through the portrayal of girls as erratic and capricious fans rather than earnest cultural taste makers. Through her

¹⁴⁷Lu & Steele, "Joy is Resistance: Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," 832-33.

example, she highlights how even after the success of *Wicked*, the credibility for its success was given due to the producers' (men's) anticipation of girl's interest, and not the interest of the girl's themselves.¹⁴⁸ This framework lends to the analysis of Lizzo's fandom and her success because rather than attributing her accomplishments to heteronormative characteristics and through privileged groups standards, Wolf's framework allows for a centering of those with insider knowledge to Lizzo's community; my dissertation centers the fans themselves and their interactions with one another and Lizzo.

An interaction Lizzo has with fans on Twitter is when she retweets their posts. Retweets mean that her account shares what someone else posted, but with all of her followers. It also gives credit to the original author of a Tweet. Users who see the retweet can see who it came from. To be chosen by Lizzo for a retweet, is a form of cultural currency. Other fans become excited about this occurrence. For example, one person commented on a friend's retweet: "babe wake up Lizzo retweeted your Tweet [crying face emoji]." Notifications from Twitter can sometimes cause a user's phone to vibrate or ring. This user wanted to wake up their friend with notifications on their phone to ensure they knew about this exciting event. Their friend responded, "Oh mY GOD I AM SCREAAAAMING, WILL LIKELY NEVER RECOVER!" Both of these comments convey the impression of a big deal for Lizzo fans who want to be noticed by the musician online by having their tweet shared by her.

¹⁴⁸ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 221.



Figure 2.10 [Fans share excitement on Twitter about Lizzo responding to their post.]

On Twitter the achievement of a retweet by Lizzo will be celebrated by other fans. Whatever this fan has said must be understood by Lizzo and those in her audience reading the retweet. One user said, "YES MUVA [hearts around face emoji] [crying face emoji]." They were calling Lizzo mother as well as showing others this achievement. According to the Urban Dictionary, MUVA has two meanings. One is a British slang, a shorthand from the British accented "mother bitch" and this means "a person who is extremely cool, everyone is their bitch." The words here are not derogatory but mean the ultimate friend and someone seen as a leader. Also, according to Urban Dictionary, the other meaning is a "slang definition for mother." Mother is used as well by fans when referring to Lizzo. For the Grammys fans had much to say to Lizzo about her performance. One such example is "MOTHERIZZO ALWAYS SANGING DOWN" a compliment to her vocals. Calling somebody "mother" is also a positive term. Urban Dictionary describes mother as "a woman who is Iconic..." Thus, the idea of mother-IZZO is a play on this meaning. Lizzo as an iconic woman is one part of the meaning and Lizzo as a singer is the other.

Similarly, a user commented, “VOCALS CHEWED.” According to Urban Dictionary this refers to being under the influence of marijuana or being “high.” This user is creating a double entendre about this performance because they are saying she is a great vocalist but also, she sings in a large range.



Figure 2.11 [Artist SZA responds to Lizzo on Twitter about her music.]

Another user faced frustration because they had not seen a new Lizzo Instagram post despite following her. They said, "I'm about to put alerts on all your posts because I missed this one too! [one tear crying sad face emoji] 3x." Those who participate in the online community surrounding Lizzo do not want to miss her posts because they enjoy being on the inside of knowledge. To gain access to jokes and understand the culture of this online fandom, one has to either keep up or go back and read previous posts. In that realm, one user said

Yassss queen [red heart emoji] I love seeing how you've been working on yourself and I had to do a recap since I've last seen you in my feed and I couldn't be more proud!! [Praying emoji] [red heart emoji] [clapping emoji] You give me Hope in myself and my journey. Thank you [hands making heart emoji]. I. LOVE. YOU. WHOLEHEARTEDLY.



Figure 2.12 [Lizzo posts on TikTok and fans miss the post.]

To enjoy this community and participate, this fan simply had to "catch up" by looking at older posts. Regardless of real-time or delayed-time viewers, social media has allowed more fans to access the cultural currency of participation in the Lizzo fandom.

In a post on Instagram, Lizzo showed a blurry video of the sky with a purple streak, it was captioned,

Normally I don't post things like this- but I saw something strange in the sky and I needed a certified astronomer to tell me what this was THIS LIKE SOMEREALLIKE "NOPE" SHIT [ONE EYE COVERED SHOCKED EMOJI] [SHOCKED EMOJI] it was a light that broke off into separate lights once I started filming it! Then it turned into clouds [screaming shocked face] 2x.

This is an example of Lizzo participating in the online culture and it seems to invite fans to participate in the joke. In the top three comments a response was "YWTFGO." This is a variation on the IYKYK response, meaning,

“You-Know-What The-Fuck Get-Out” and is coded language for advising Lizzo not to take chances with this light outside but rather to get away from the source. The knowledge applied here is that fans believe Lizzo should not learn more about this unidentified object, but rather leave it alone. It also comes with racialized undertones because another IYKYK online cultural piece of knowledge is that those who are people of color would “not die in a horror movie” because they know when to leave things alone and not keep investigating, intuitively. Fans here understand the tone as humor and I argue only those who are familiar with the background of Lizzo’s fandom would fully understand all that is happening with this post and its responses, culturally.

Talking to the Void, Fan Interactions with One Another, IYKYK

In addition to their direct interaction with Lizzo, fans engage in communication called “talking to the void,” which is not intended for the star but for the broader audience. In 2014, the sub-Reddit r/screamingtothevoid, was published. This subreddit is a public platform in the top 13% largest of all sub-Reddits. Moderators say, “Ever feel the need to scream your guts out? This is the perfect place to do so. No need to add context if you don't want, be as incoherent as you like!”¹⁴⁹ This was the earliest space I found where people were using this concept in an online social community. Essentially, this is a place to post woes, thoughts, or ideas, without explanation or expectation of response. The idea of screaming into the void has

¹⁴⁹ “r/screamgintothevoid,” Reddit, Accessed August 20th, 2025, <https://www.reddit.com/r/screamintothevoid/?rdt=52268>.

become common vernacular among internet users. Screaming to the void is easily recognizable by those who are often online. Consequently, the idea has migrated to other social media platforms.

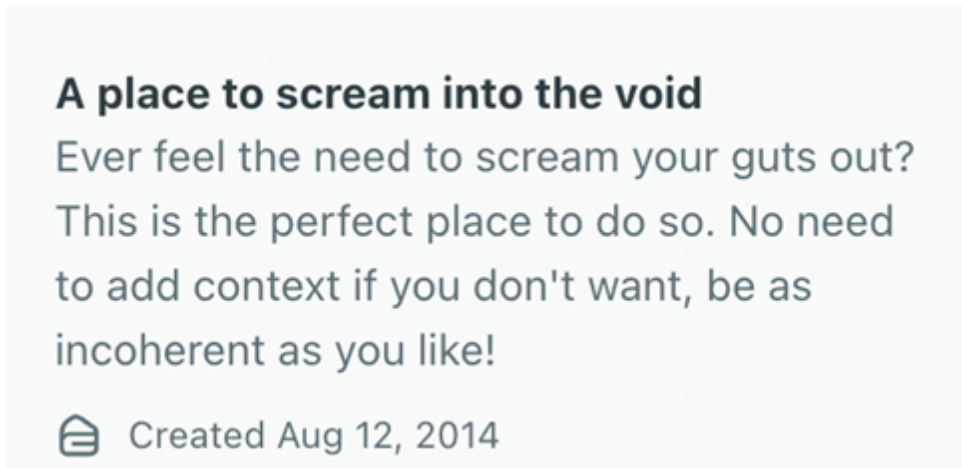
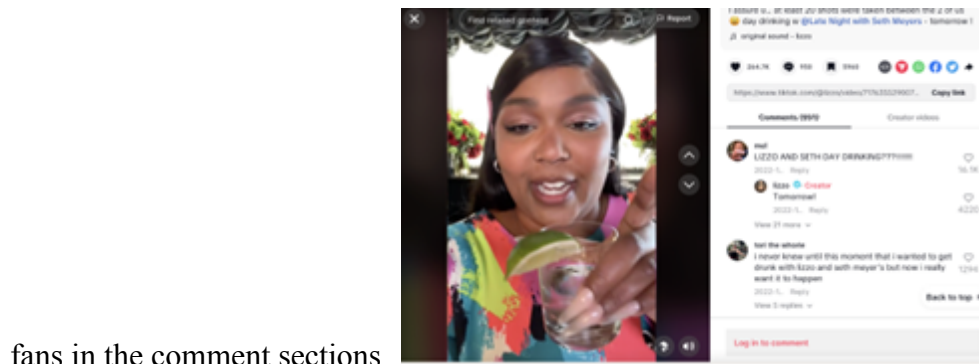


Figure 2.13 [Reddit rules on r/screamintothevoid.]

I created a category to document comments for my dissertation that I termed “talking to the void,” with the above concept in mind. Talking to the void, then, is not a unique idea however I am using the term in a unique sense. The users on social media platforms I utilize in this dissertation do not state they are talking to the void, but it is an unspoken concept for the Lizzo fandom. The idea of talking to the void means these kinds of comments are not particularly directed at anyone. They may reference the post or another online situation, but they do not specifically attempt to get Lizzo's attention. In this category, the users recognize that commenting on Lizzo's posts means Lizzo may see them, but it is unlikely. These comments are also inviting for anyone to respond to who has a common interest. These users comment on the

vast void that is the comment sections on Lizzo's social media, not necessarily expecting any sort of response.

When talking to the void, a level of insider knowledge is necessary to traverse the online platforms. For example, Lizzo posted some TikTok videos which had to do with a Christmas special she participated in with Seth Meyers on television. Seth Meyers is an American known for his late-night comedy show. Comments included, "I never knew until this moment that I wanted to get drunk with Lizzo and Seth Myers but now I really want it to happen," "NOW I WANT TO DRINK WITH Lizzo" and the comment "Sober Lizzo is British? [Laughing face emoji]," to which Lizzo herself replied "[thinking face emoji]." These appear online with an overwhelming number of likes. Each comment comes from another person who comes up with unique ideas around Lizzo, as her fan. As an audience member online, this creates a community by putting the idea in the comment section. These fans want to participate with Lizzo and her friends as they have seen on the TV special. The comments which are talking to the void do not necessarily mean that Lizzo will not see them. However, they seem to not expect her to read what they say and rather create a discourse with other users. These comments indicate to others in the community that although these users are not talking to Lizzo they do wish they could be friends or have a deeper relationship with the musician. With more comments and a better understanding of the Lizzo fandom, the fans connect with one another. Regardless of intention, these commenters must know beforehand that they are not intending the conversation to be with Lizzo herself, but rather be taken up by other



fans in the comment sections.

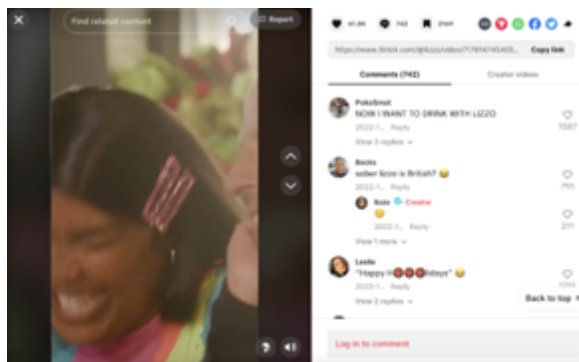


Figure 2.14 & 2.15 [Lizzo posts on TikTok, and fans respond to her appearance on Saturday Night Live.]

On the television show Saturday Night Live (SNL), Lizzo paid tribute to the art installation by Annie Lee called “Blue Monday.” For this tribute she dressed in a white nightgown and appeared in an all-blue room. She performed her song “Break Up Twice” on this set. According to the Chicago Sun-Times in an interview with Annie Lee's grandson “‘Blue Monday’ was the only artwork Lee deemed a self-portrait, Ilo [Lee’s grandson] said. On SNL, Lizzo sang a song about Black love, which gets to the heart of Lee's work, he said.” Furthermore, “‘Blue Monday’ resonates with Black women and families because of the palpable emotions in the

work Ilo said.” With this in mind many of Lizzo's Twitter followers were able to make the connection to the art piece and Lizzo's performance. However, not everybody so readily understood and were grateful to those who explained.

Blue Monday was trending on Twitter after Lizzo performed on SNL. This SNL performance did not come with an explanation as to the art Lizzo was referencing. Those who were watching either live or online had to have known about the art piece to know that Lizzo was trying to represent Lee’s work. That said, this brought discussion between those who watched the performance and wanted to understand what Lizzo was trying to show through her background and fashion.

A follower realized that not everyone understood the reference to Blue Monday, so they explained that Lizzo was representing an art piece that is commonly displayed in marginalized homes. They knew others may not have had this artwork in their homes, so they posted to the void for everyone to see its meaning.

The exchange went as follows:

Post: Explaining artwork reference.

Response 1: Thank you for sharing this. I wondered about her set and outfit.

Response 2: You're welcome. I have that painting on my wall, so I knew it right away.

These connections were only made possible through an understanding of background information. The void became a space to share and make a connection about marginalized artists for those who follow Lizzo and participate in her community.

Lizzo is like a Friend, IYKYK

Patricia Hill Collins' framework helps to examine the embedded racism in the responses to Lizzo as a Black woman online. Hill Collins points out that throughout history Black women have been ostracized and this has led to misinformed conceptions around their image in popular culture. Moreover, she contends that racism and sexism are so embedded in the U.S. society that they have become commonplace and taken for granted as conventional.¹⁵⁰ While those from privileged backgrounds may miss the stereotypical characteristics that are centered in those communities of power, those from historically marginalized communities do not. IYKYK is an acronym for those who understand this peripheral perspective. Hill Collins' framework helps me to explore the data I have collected by considering that this knowledge is not necessarily coming from a place of power. Comments with background knowledge you must know to understand can be found on Instagram, sometimes even directly addressing Lizzo. One fan proclaimed their loyalty to Lizzo despite the allegations made against her by her backup dancers. They said, "Love you, Lizzo, and I stand with you. I support you and can't fathom someone making accusations like this when you're such an inspiration to people. Men and women alike. You got this and got fans who love and support you!" This fan finds it ludicrous that although Lizzo has inspired them and many others with support from marginal groups, she has been accused of this egregious crime. There is a dissonance in the reality that Lizzo has been accused of this crime, but the fan

¹⁵⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment*, 8.

believes that Lizzo is uplifting and caring toward non-normative groups. To understand this comment's context, fans must follow posts about Lizzo. They understand both the positivity Lizzo claims to represent and that these allegations mean she cannot truly speak for this platform. It seems it is difficult for this fan to reconcile who they think Lizzo is and the character of these accusations. Thus, they comment that true fans will continue to support her and include themselves in this category.

Lizzo's persona is manipulated through her online social media platforms, and presumably by her managerial team, to produce a public figure that connects to fans who follow her online, in such a way that they struggle to see *any* negativity surrounding her personality. The crafting of personifications of a superstar who is politically aligned with fans, musically diverse, and fits into multiple communities creates a dissonance when the actions of that musician in reality do not line up with the persona. For example, the idea that Lizzo is a feminist, that is body and sex positive is crafted and portrayed online, yet her actions toward her backup dancers causes disharmony with fans' perception.

Another user on TikTok said, "LIZZO YOU USED MY SOUND OMGGG [one sweat emoji] [laughing face emoji] 2x." The use of all capital letters in this comment indicated emphasis, likely due to the excitement of the interaction with the famous musician. By "using their sound" this person meant they created a sound bite on TikTok and Lizzo used this audio to create her own video. This is not only exciting because this user is a fan of Lizzo, but also because she has so many TikTok

followers. By using a sound on her TikTok video Lizzo would have increased the visibility to their audio and given this user the opportunity for more TikTok users to find and use their audio. In turn, this could mean they gain followers themselves and were perhaps even able to have more of their videos seen from their personal profile. If this kind of visibility was a goal for this user, I draw the conclusion that they are likely grateful to Lizzo and perhaps feel an even greater kinship to her. Other users see this interaction and this acknowledgment can manifest in feeling like Lizzo is trying to help her fans succeed at their goals by using her platform to promote their smaller accounts. Thus, the relationship between Lizzo and her audience grows based on the use of an audio on social media and a comment made by one of her fans.

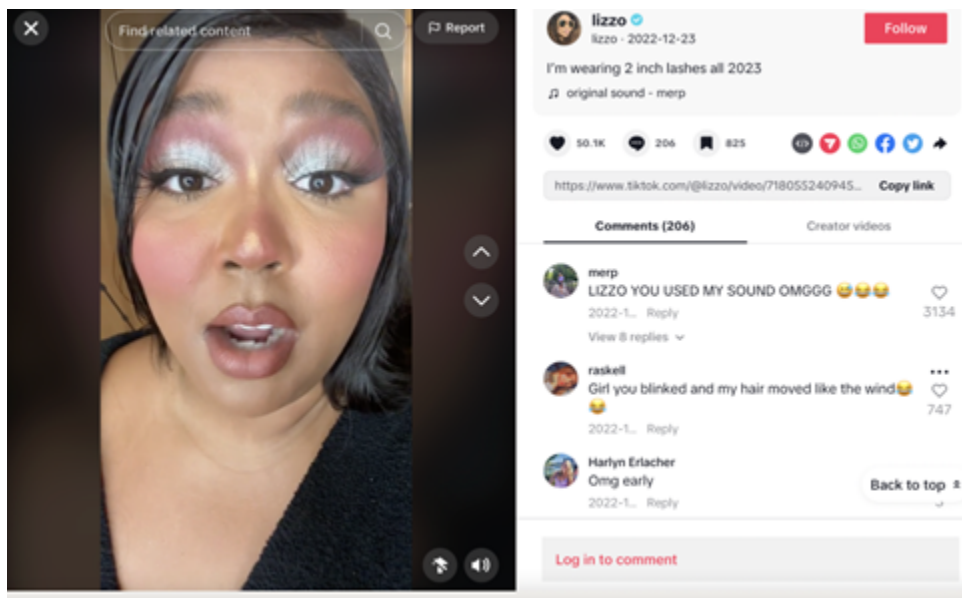


Figure 2.16 [Lizzo posts a TikTok using audio created by a fan.]

In each of the following cases IYKYK functions to include fans and reinforce shared participation in Lizzo's audience. Showing that fans know whether Lizzo participates in community with them, one user on TikTok said to Lizzo, "the fact that you are on TikTok as much as us, is why we love you Lizzo." Whether true or not, due to a plethora of posts, there is a link between the idea that Lizzo is often browsing TikTok, and thus an insider to the online community fans inhabit. Using popular audio bites and marketing videos based on current trends, she could keep up with the media her fans were engaging with. Furthermore, by engaging with fans on social media, Lizzo gives the impression she is available to converse and discuss personal issues and viral topics with fans. As such, her relationship with her audience is further strengthened by keeping informed of what is happening in the Lizzo fandom and the larger TikTok social media platform. This fan commenting "this is why we love you" perhaps cannot represent the whole community. However, it seems that most of her fandom has grown online through communication and a sharing of interactions from musician to audience and vice versa.

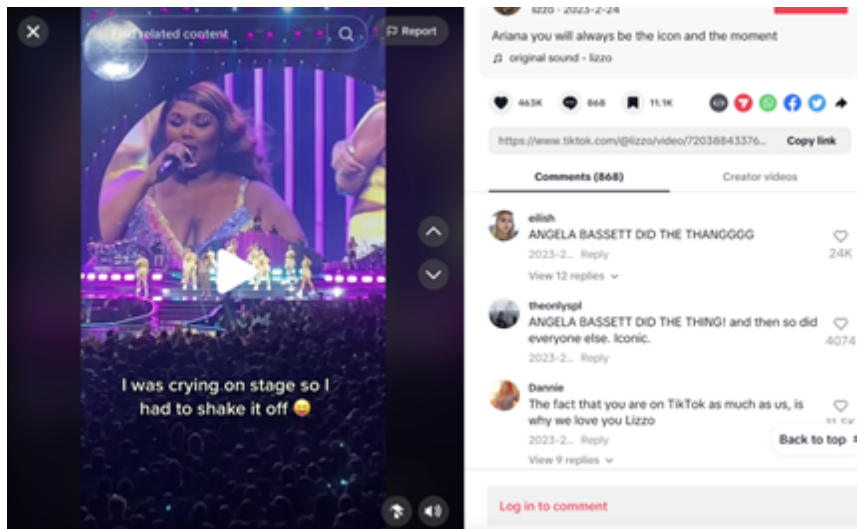


Figure 2.17 [Lizzo posts on TikTok & fans describe how this is relatable.]

One connection fans have made to Lizzo is her fashion choices, which may be culturally or socially related. The characteristics which make up a culture and understanding for a group are also true for those online. Stacey Wolf argues that even when mediated through technology or the stage, fans might see media figures as actual social companions or as having real relationships.¹⁵¹ Consequently, because of the belief in shared interest, I argue that fans form these emotional attachments. Fans relate to Lizzo as if she were a person that they interact with in everyday life. I reason that constant exposure to Lizzo creates this familiarity and closeness for her audience. However, Lizzo is not actually a friend; fans cannot truly know her based on what she posted online. Yet, connections like wearing similar clothing items or liking similar viral posts, make the friendship seem more visceral and real. Wolf argues that fansites are places where audiences share adoration, community, identity, and connect.¹⁵² I see

¹⁵¹ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of Broadway Musical*, 226.

¹⁵² Ibid, 229.

a parallel for the social media sites online in my work, where audiences share similar interests around and for Lizzo.



Figure 2.18 [Lizzo posts on TikTok, and fans relate to her fashion.]

Lizzo posted a picture of her sandals, which were a closed toe mesh with beading and an open back. These sandals are recognizable low-cost options for those from marginalized communities. They are often sold at discount shoe stores. They also seem to be popular among women of color in the US. Many fans reacted by saying that they and their relatives own some of these shoes. A fan commented “OMGGGG MY WHOLE FAMILY HAS THOSE SANDALS OMGGGG.” The capitals in emphasis for this comment shows the connection Lizzo made with a follower just by sharing her shoes. It seems it was exciting to this fan to share a socio-economically related recognizable clothing piece with somebody who they idolize. The fashion choices Lizzo made help build her community because they understand the background of the shoes.

Engagement with her fans online is another way Lizzo forms connections in a unique way. A TikTok user gave a personal anecdote with the user's relationship to Lizzo. They commented “you are such an amazing person and I don't know if you remember but you supported my business in 2021 when I was just starting out.” Anecdotes like these lead to comments applauding Lizzo for using her resources to help fans. Other responses also include asking Lizzo to help with their business as well. These interactions again lead to further engagement with Lizzo’s posts to her fans.

Other comments specifically directed at Lizzo on TikTok are, for example, about her concerts and music. One user said “Lizzo I went to your concert. It was the best time of my life.” Another said, “Lizzo, your outfit slays and you are also an amazing singer.” Fans of Lizzo are happy to tell her of their experience at her shows as well as what they think of her vocal ability. Then, other fans chime in with their experience at the shows as well. However, the intentions of these original comments are to interact with Lizzo herself. In some cases, Lizzo does respond leading to a frenzy of comments attempting to get her attention and response as well.

Another reason fans attempt to communicate with Lizzo is because they appreciate the work she does for LGBTQ+ groups. As Hill Collins argues, “Given the growth of mass media and digital media, it is important to ask what cultural messages concerning race, gender, class, sexuality, and similar other categories are being broadcast to this vast global audience.”¹⁵³ These comments include “as a tiny blue dot

¹⁵³ Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 10.

in a sea of red in a small town in Tennessee, thank you” and “as a non-binary person thank you so much for making gender affirming garments with Yitty I am so excited to own a Yitty binder [pansexual Pride flag emoji].” These comments were in response to Lizzo posting that her clothing brand Yitty would be releasing LGBTQ+ friendly clothing. At the time fans were quite excited to have garments specifically made for their gender affirmation. Lizzo’s brand Yitty said they would release binding and tucking garments which would contour the body for transgender and gender fluid people. According to CNN,

Yitty believes in radical self-love for people of all gender identities — including the trans, non-binary, gender-fluid and gender non-conforming communities that have been chronically underserved,” as the brand wrote in a press release. “It is Yitty’s mission to continue serving all bodies, which is why these core styles will always be available at Yitty.¹⁵⁴

The Yitty brand was created with the idea in mind that shapewear is often uncomfortable and focused on how Lizzo grew up having to choose from options which did not fit her larger body. Although fans greeted this idea of gender affirming shapewear with enthusiasm, the Yitty company does not seem to have released the line after all.¹⁵⁵ By celebrating the creation of this clothing line, the online community was reinforcing the idea that one of their values is to be accepting of all sexualities and genders. This meant that the community could be even more inclusive and representative of different groups of people.

¹⁵⁴ “Lizzo’s Brand Yitty Launches Gender-Affirming Shapewear,” CNN Style, Accessed August 20th, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/lizzo-yitty-gender-affirming-shapewear/index.html>.

¹⁵⁵ “Yitty,” Fabletics, Accessed August 20th, 2025, <https://yitty.fabletics.com>.

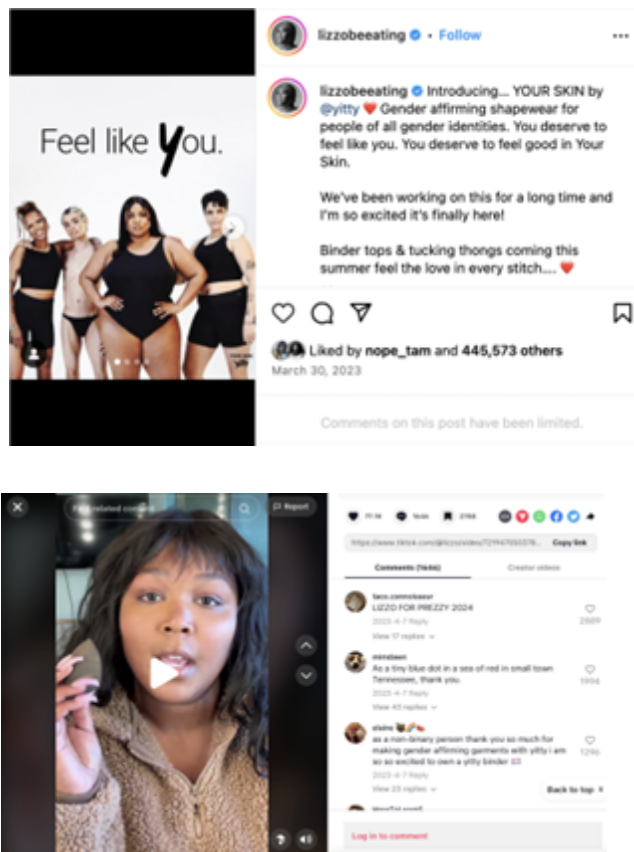


Figure 2.19 & 2.20 [Lizzo posts on TikTok sharing her plans to release gender affirming clothing.]

There are many comments talking to Lizzo like a friend on her official Instagram account. One common theme among these comments is the idea of telling her that she is inspirational and positive to a user's life. For example, one comment said “if only I had you at 18- the game has changed forever [star emoji] [Black heart emoji].”

According to Urban Dictionary the phrase “changing the game” means “Going above and beyond average. Getting things done in a new way. Exceeding expectations.” In explanation, this user is describing that Lizzo has changed music for them in an extraordinary way and it will no longer be the same for them. Moreover,

at 18 years old, being a crucial developmental time in many young people's lives the posters also wished, likely, that the community that had been built around Lizzo and her music was available to them when they were younger. Similarly, another user commented “tagging Lizzo you probably won't see my comment, but the energy and universe is unlimited [sparkle emoji]. I want to say THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart [Black heart emoji].” Though this person knows they will be unlikely to make contact with Lizzo, on the off chance that they do, they want her to know that they are grateful toward her.

Conclusion

I use methods by Angela McRobbie, Stacy Wolf, Patricia Hill Collins, Daphne Brooks, and Stuart Hall together in this chapter to argue that the acronym IYKYK functions as a tool for belonging, survival in the digital space, and for sustaining shared cultural meaning. McRobbie provides a method for understanding politics in media and how those representations are racialized and gender. Wolf gives examples of studying gendered critiques, specifically for fans of *Wicked*, and also in the relationship between audience and performers. Hill Collins outlines the historical treatment of Black women in the U.S. and how intersectional and structurally oppressive factors continue to influence these women today. Brooks shows that using an alternative archive can lead to a new or much different cultural production than that of the traditional history. Hall connects cultural and shared meaning for

community, despite space and place. By using this work, I have shown how IYKYK is a resource for the Lizzo fandom.

IYKYK, or if you know you know, indicates group membership, cultural participation, and a bypassing of censorship online. While outsiders can use the IYKYK acronym, the context within the community is what is vital. An example I use in this chapter is Lizzo sharing with her audience that she believes she has seen a UFO outside her home. Fans joke with her that she should go inside, because there is a joke online that Black communities will not die in horror films. This shows the race representation and humor in her fandom.

IYKYK is also a tool in political activism and a way to avoid censorship. I show how “camping” is used as a metaphor in Jill Frendenberg’s article, for abortion access, and safe spaces. This is an example of coded communication for those in the know online and allows those within the community to “fill in the blank” as to what is being discussed without flagging online censorship algorithms. In parallel, I show how Lizzo’s fandom has a shared background knowledge pertaining to the star and her music, a cultural literacy of the online space, and access to insider participation and information as a follower of hers online. I use the IYKYK acronym to show how online spaces give accessibility to Lizzo’s audience.

Chapter 3: Anachronistic Availability to Community around Music

As I began to research for this dissertation, I found that time online does not function as it does in the physical world. I began with trying to understand how others had reacted to Lizzo's response to the allegations made against her by her backup dancers. However, rather than interviewing fans at concerts, I opted to look at posts about her in various comment sections. I realized that I did not know *when* and *where* others had responded, and it did not matter. Time information is available online, sometimes down to the second, but real-time is not a factor that is necessarily needed by those who are commenting. Moreover, performances recorded and shared online can go viral at different instances for several reasons. While I was researching, media was available in different chronological order, and people commented about shows without sharing times and dates as the center of the conversation.

Although there may be holes and missing pieces in the online social media archive, researching Lizzo has been anachronistic because to participate in her community online, you need only *to* know background information, not *when to* know background information. In this way, I have learned from and participated in posts that have passed in a normative time sense. Online documents allow for a continuous and non-time-bound audience around Lizzo, which is unique to online social media communal relationships

I acknowledge there are barriers to accessing Lizzo's community online. Universal accessibility is not the claim of this section in this chapter. Factors such as insufficient Internet connectivity, scarcity of technological devices, and language

barriers create obstacles. Despite accessibility issues, Lizzo's community online is uniquely vast and welcoming. In this chapter I consider anachronistic time online, particularly through TikTok sounds, intertextuality, and consequently accessibility in Lizzo's fandom. I then analyze the influences for Lizzo's music of this anachronistic relationship to Lizzo for her audience.

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that meaning making for the Lizzo audience is created atemporally. To develop this argument, I use theoretical approaches from fan studies, queer studies, and Black studies. First, I analyze how fans validate each other online and construct shared experiences through engagement with Stacy Wolf's framework provided in her analysis of *Wicked*. I then extend her approach by analyzing social media platforms rather than discussion boards, particularly focusing on the relationship between art and artist. While Wolf establishes how fans construct communities, I expand this to investigate how fans negotiate power and ideology in these spaces. I further my analysis by using Jose Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. With disidentification I explore how fans negotiate dominant ideology particularly where multiple temporalities affect responses online. Moreover, I extend Muñoz's ideas on atemporality, to conceptualize an anachronistic atmosphere for social media. Furthermore, I engage work by Jafari Allen, his disco ball metaphor, and I extend my ideas on atemporal experience of time and memory online. I ground Muñoz and Allen's work in a historical examination of the racialization of sound

presented by Matthew D. Morrison. Following, I use Saiyida Hartman's work to navigate imagined communities in digital spaces examining those histories across time and space. In this chapter, I argue that making meaning online is nuanced and not restrained by time.

Chapter Methods/Frameworks

I employ the framework for studying fans online by Stacy Wolf in her work on the musical *Wicked* as I consider the data in this chapter. Wolf argues that fans of *Wicked* come together online to validate one another's enjoyment of the musical as well as to form community and attachment in the fandom. I use her work to show how fans build community online through a shared interpretation of experiences, but around Lizzo. She says gathering online is a space that is "public-private" because these fans post their thoughts and experiences but also their interpretations of *Wicked*, for other community members to see.¹⁵⁶ I use this to show how fans might gather to validate one another in their enjoyment and attachment to Lizzo as an artist. Wolf's work also establishes how fandom communities can function online.¹⁵⁷ The framework of "public-private" helps me to explain how the online fandom works structurally. I use Wolf's work to support my argument that Lizzo's fans validate one another's enjoyment in their comments and also form an emotional attachment to one another and Lizzo through the discourse they share online. Wolf's work provides the

¹⁵⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 234.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 237.

foundation for theory on online fandom behavior which I build on when examining Lizzo.

Also, this chapter examines anachronistic availability of community around Lizzo's music through the lens of *Disidentifications* by Jose Esteban Muñoz, as one example of a methodology that is useful toward non-chronological time. Early in his book Muñoz argues, "Disidentification is a third mode of dealing with dominant ideology...disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."¹⁵⁸ Fans navigate participating in Lizzo's audience, strategically, and in this disidentificatory way, negotiate their desire to support or defend her. As is the case post-allegations toward Lizzo, grief and the loss of an idol informs the community who surrounds her. However, since time is not functioning in straight time in this space, pre and post finding out about this lawsuit can occur for different audience members at any time. Muñoz outlines a similar scenario in the example of cinema he provides in his book. He says, "This layering of different gay spaces serves to show these different aspects of gay lives as always interlocking and informing each other."¹⁵⁹ Fans encounter Lizzo at different moments, so emotional responses to her controversies, both before and after, coexist. Muñoz shows there is no fixed timeline and provides a framework for the rejection of teleological time.¹⁶⁰ I use this to interpret the fandom experience around Lizzo and show that although there is a sense

¹⁵⁸ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 74.

of communal mourning when allegations are made against Lizzo, it occurs unevenly, because of the out of time reactions for fans.

In a broader sense of Lizzo's online social media platforms, there is also an anachronistic development of time. To understand the culture and context of her audience, it is not necessary to follow the path in a straight, chronological sense of her or her fandom's posting. However, through working outside of this straight timeline, this space provides a productive environment, in disidentifying as for or against the normative. The time here is rather working outside of these constructs to perform differently. Social media does not follow a chronological timeline, where things must happen in order. Because of the constant availability of others in Lizzo's community, videos and sound bites of performance, and the ability to catch up on the inner workings of knowledge, following Lizzo in "real" time is not necessary to participate.

In this chapter I also consider atemporality in relation to the history of race and popular music. I put work by Jafari Allen in communication with Muñoz's ideas that race, and performance are important surrounding resistance to dominant culture. His book *There is a Disco Ball Between Us*, is an imaginative retelling of Black radical intellectualism.¹⁶¹ Allen says, "The disco ball is not made of a single mirror, but numerous tiny mirrors. Each reflects and refracts light at different angles, showing different colors of the spectrum—seemingly in a different time too..."¹⁶² Similarly, social media creates fragmented and a multi-perspective fandom

¹⁶¹ Allen, *There's A Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*, 18.

¹⁶² Ibid, 1.

experience. Allen's work has been helpful in this section for highlighting the importance of archival accessibility to this Lizzo online community and its instantaneous communication, or lack thereof. Lizzo's fandom is made of multiple, individual, and not always, simultaneous experiences. These experiences are based on time, access, and position within the digital community.

There are different perspectives, different recordings, and different times for these recordings of Lizzo available for listeners and audience members, even though they may be watching today, tomorrow, or yesterday. There is also no way to know in what order these fans came to understand Lizzo's music, whether they listened to her albums in chronological release, or if they have had some other method for enjoying this work. Allen argues that non-normative expectations in temporality turn away from bourgeois temporality.¹⁶³ I use Allen's work to argue, social media listening practices are out of order and Lizzo's fandom engages outside of linear time. Social media is not easily understood by those who do not grasp background concepts, so in this way, it is a turn away from normative listening, toward something different.

Lizzo's music is also situated in history, though anachronistically, in this chapter. In Matthew D. Morrison's article for the *Journal of American Musicology* he proposes the idea of Blacksound, a framework built from the historical and political study of blackface and how this pertains to the musical elements in these performances and is still influential today. Morrison offers a framework for analyzing race in music, Blacksound, which influences culture and economy.¹⁶⁴ The purpose of

¹⁶³ Allen, *There's A Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 782.

Blacksound is to center racial analysis in music study in relation to the elements which make up this music. I use Morrison's work to examine judgements of Lizzo's music and the way these reactions are not neutral but influenced by a historical construction.¹⁶⁵ One way this is applicable to this research is anonymity online allowing for appropriation of Black culture, and an appropriation of an essentialized version of "Blackness" when convenient for online users. One comment made online is "White people want to be oppressed so bad," and there seems to be an attention seeking component that is desired without the generations of turmoil in trauma afforded to people of color. Rather than wanting to be oppressed, those in power or actually looking to demotivate and make unserious the problems and actions made relevant by people of color. I use Blacksound as a framework to understand the historical development of racial hierarchy in the politics and culture of popular music and how this affects Lizzo today. Considering Morris' Blacksound, to be successful in the US popular music market, musicians had to, and continue to, portray characteristics that allow for their popularity, if they want to make an income. I argue Lizzo is situated in a historical continuum that is cyclical and still important today.

Black artists, like Lizzo, can find agency through the use of disidentificatory practice. This practice is situated in anachronistic time because the influence of past racial violence (minstrelsy) continues to affect present strategies for performance within the dominant structure. Using Blacksound as an approach, I believe there is agency in performing a part to gain popularity. Accepting dominant standards can be

¹⁶⁵ Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 783.

a tool to take back power. Muñoz says, “Disidentification resists the interpolating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social.”¹⁶⁶ Blacksound frames an atemporal persistence of Black artists' choices which still structures music today. Today, Black artists like Lizzo, can perform with much more freedom than was afforded during the 1800s, however past racial logic coexists. The influence of minstrelsy performance that affects popular music today allows for a deeper understanding of what is culturally relevant for listeners and which music is exercising agency under a power system not built for people of color.

Last, I use work by Saidiya Hartman in this chapter to examine a community which is formed anachronistically. Analysis on imagined communities is important as a lens for considering atemporal community online. The fans around Lizzo’s audience online are not together in a physical space but they gather at different times. Hartman explains agency in imagination around community. She analyzes the experiences of those born in America to enslaved people who wish to return to Africa, a place they had never been. Hartman argues that the use of the imaginary was a tool for connecting to a less oppressive, accepting, and free homeland used by those who had been enslaved.¹⁶⁷ I argue, similar agency may be found in the imagined community of online Lizzo comment sections. Although no one is physically going *to* a comment section the imagined space gives the opportunity to come together through conversation about music. I acknowledge Lizzo's music and the problems her

¹⁶⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 97.

¹⁶⁷ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 97.

audience face, are not as serious as the plight of enslaved Black people in the US. However, I am not comparing those situations. I am rather offering the consideration of the lens of atemporality and community which is imagined. I consider that marginalized people today can find agency in an imagined community, where the boundaries of normative time and space can be superseded. Using new language and musical encoding allows music to bring together people who can imagine this is a space free of critique, because they find others there, who also enjoy listening to the same music. The online community might not provide a real space in the tangible, but using imagination provides the agency to talk about music Lizzo audience members love when they are not taken seriously in archive or by academics. Bringing these people together over time and space allows marginalized groups to form a community that would otherwise not be seen, and to store an archive that is more welcoming than one that houses academic data where only the privileged are allowed to enter and contribute.

Examples of Anachronistic Time in Lizzo's Community

TikTok Sounds & Community: No Time Restraints

Having established theoretical frameworks, I now turn to specific examples from Lizzo's online community to demonstrate anachronistic time online. Lizzo released her song "Special" in 2022. However, the song was reinvigorated with the 2023 remix featuring SZA. The virality of the sound bite featuring SZA allowed for a new following of the song and a non-linear representation of its popularity. Ways that

Lizzo connects with her fans is by participating in the online community, bringing this to her day-to-day life, and performing at her concerts. While her song “Special” was already popular, the remixed version gained new traction due to the online dance created to accompany the SZA vocal sound bite. Lizzo first posted herself doing a TikTok dance in a robe with an overlaid text stating “Learned a new TikTok Dance, It's Overrr for You B's,” at the beginning of March in 2023. The audio that plays in the background of this video is a version of her song “Special” that features the artist SZA. She gives credit to the creation of the dance to another user “senpaiblackfoot.” This person describes their entire TikTok as dedicated to creating dance tutorials.

It was later that month when Lizzo posted herself doing this same dance with that audio in front of the Mona Lisa painting at the Louvre, with the caption “Creative Embarrassment Therapy [sparkle emoji].” She overlaid this post with the text “Smile [tongue sticking out winking emoji] You’re in the Mona Lisa’s first TikTok.” After this she made a post where she is shown wearing a nude bodysuit with red bedazzling and performing on stage. In the video Lizzo is performing the TikTok dance that she learned online. In the video there is white text overlaid, which says “showing Milan the TikTok dance I just learned.” The caption for the video is “‘iTs jUsT HaNd GeStUrEs’ [sunglasses smiling face emoji].” In the background of this video the stage is lit for the concert and a large portion of the audience can be seen. Again, Lizzo made a post in front of the twinkling Eiffel Tower at dusk using this audio and doing this dance. She was visiting Paris and posted white text over the

video saying, “showed the Eiffel Tower the dance.” The caption reads, “Who should I show next?”

By clicking on the audio sound, TikTok shows how many users have created videos with this song. At the time of this dissertation there are 5,426 posts with the audio bite, many of which are doing the same dance as Lizzo. Personally, I saw the video of Lizzo dancing in front of the Eiffel Tower first. The time online does not function in a chronological order because videos can be pushed out to personal pages in a multitude of orders. There is no reason to go back and order these videos chronologically because once fans see them all they understand the background and can participate in the discourse. This example illustrates how time online is not chronological but disrupted by algorithms. Individual and atemporal experiences are created even if the encounters are with the same content. By taking part in an online trend with this dance, Lizzo not only promotes her song and collaboration with SZA but creates connections with her fans, and they discover her content, anachronistically.

Moreover, Jafari Allen’s disco ball metaphor is incredibly useful in the analysis of the understanding of this example around “Special.” I use this work to show that digital fandom is refractory across time and participation occurs in fragmented temporal encounters. Fans might not participate in nor experience the trend simultaneously because of the algorithmic variety of TikTok. Instead, they receive different fragments of the virality depending on their following and the videos they encounter. This means that Lizzo’s fandom operates atemporally rather than

synchronously online, as they receive dispersed moments of recognition of the viral song depending on their social media use.

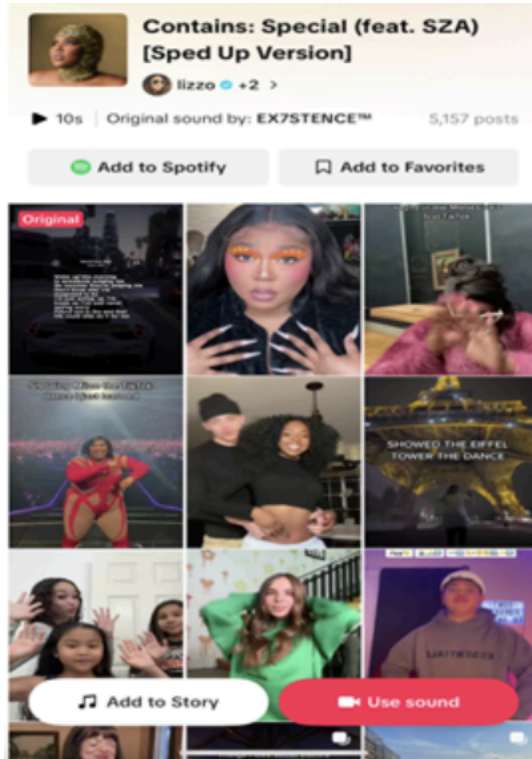


Figure 3.1 [TikTok search page for videos created with Lizzo’s *Special*.]

The anachronistic elements of Lizzo’s online audience become more pronounced when they interact with other fandoms. In March of 2023, Lizzo retweeted a post, from a fan account. It was made by an account called “Jeongyeong World,” and shows both a short video clip and photo. This account is a fan owned Twitter page, with 44.8 thousand followers. Its description states, “Content and updates dedicated to Twice’s lead vocalist,” and includes Jeongyeon’s name in Korean. Jeongyeon is the lead singer to the South Korean Pop (K-pop) band founded in 2015, who have performed at mega music festivals like Lalapalooza. The short

video clip is of Jeongyeon performing live and playing a green recorder into a microphone. Moreover, the still photo is a shot of her playing that recorder and looking into the distance. The caption to this tweet is “JEONGYEON SUDDENLY WHIPPING OUT A RECORDER DURING HER SOLO??? [crying emoji] I LOVE HER.” Lizzo’s retweet included the caption, “S/O to Juice being a cultural reset and ushering in THE modern disco pop era [tongue sticking out sideways emoji].” The top comments on this post are a gif of a Black woman raising her hand in agreement, someone saying, “PLEASE PERFORM WITH HER AT THE SOFI CONCERT! [Crying emoji],” and another user commenting,

Lizzo we need you to join her on stage when she comes to the states Jeongyeon is a very talented artist with a lot of passion and potential it would really be special to her, the whole group and the fandom to see two strong women Give it their all side to side [hearts around face emoji], [praying emoji], [pink hearts floating emoji].



Figure 3.2 [Lizzo shares a quote Tweet about her connection to modern disco.]

This multilayered fan and artist exchange shows the non-chronological interplay of music and fandom in the online community around Lizzo. Lizzo is referencing her song, “Juice” which was released in 2019. The K-pop band Twice, was formed in 2015. These tweets and conversations were happening in 2023. The disco era had peaked in the late 1970s. However, the influence of disco on Lizzo, who consequently began playing recorder and gaining popularity through social media platforms, led to influence on other bands and artists, creating this anachronistic conversation. Communication online around Lizzo (and in part *with* Lizzo) led to a space online influenced by musical culture and history, and continuously impacting musical outcomes.

In addition to atemporal social media interactions, Lizzo’s music itself participates in an anachronistic time structure. Released in 2022 on Lizzo’s album *Special*, “2 Be Loved (Am I Ready)” is a disco-influenced track that continues the album’s overarching exploration of self-worth, healing, and personal growth. While many songs on *Special* emphasize self-love and independence, this piece shifts its focus toward emotional vulnerability and the question of readiness for romantic connection. Lizzo frames love not as something to be passively received, but as an experience that requires self-awareness and emotional preparedness. However, what is interesting is her willingness to share this piece of her personal journey with her fans.

A strong influence of 1970s disco is evident throughout “2 Be Loved (Am I Ready),” both stylistically and musically. The song’s vocal delivery and melodic contours draw clear parallels to the work of disco-era artists such as Diana Ross. While the production incorporates contemporary pop elements, it is deliberately layered with popular 1970s disco characteristics, creating a dialogue between past and present musical styles. For example, in the use of classic disco instrumentation, including synthesizers, string textures, and steady drum accompaniment that evoke the dance music of the 1970s.

The song utilizes a fast danceable tempo, showing its disco influence as well. Syncopated rhythmic accents can be heard particularly in the bass line and in the synthesizer playing. However, there are some harmonic tensions which accompany lyrical questions like “Why do I feel like this?/ What's happened to me? oh, oh, oh.” The tension allows for a dissonance between the rest of the piece and the unsure nature of the questions. The verses follow a melodic motion that ascends in steps, which is contrasted by a more energetic and wider range chorus. Lizzo seems to indicate that the feelings portrayed in the lyrics and music of this piece show a personal side of herself to her listeners.

The piece might show her deeper connection to fans, because of the vulnerability she portrays through the music and lyrics. She sings,

How am I supposed to love somebody else (Shee, shee, shee) /
When I don't like myself? Like, ooh /
Guess I better learn to like this, ooh/ (True).
It might take my whole life just to do (Damn)

These are questions that seem to be indicative of conversations with close friends, not with audience members who she does not have a relationship with.

Melodically, the verses are characterized by an ascending motion, which creates an emotional buildup and anticipation. This is contrasted with the chorus, which expands into a wider vocal range emphasizing the emotional weight of Lizzo's lyrics and the question "Am I ready, to be loved?" Ultimately, "2 Be Loved (Am I Ready)" highlights Lizzo's disco era comeback, while crafting a song that creates communication personally with fans.

Lizzo's *About Damn Time* was also released in 2022 and is representative of her disco revival. The song was released after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns began to lift and shows Lizzo's attempt to bring positivity to her music after the global shut downs. In *About Damn Time* Lizzo sings themes of self-care and joy, much needed after illness had ravaged the world. Lizzo also uses this song as an opportunity. For example, she sings the lyrics "Is everybody back up in the building?/ It's been a minute, tell me how you're healing." These lyrics reference not only mental health representation but coming out of lockdown after the pandemic. Her lyrics are even more empowering when she sings,

It's bad bitch o'clock, yeah, it's thick:30/
I've been through a lot, but I'm still flirty (okay).

These lyrics are celebratory of both her body and motivational for listeners.

In *About Damn Time* Lizzo's style shows her disco and funk influences. She uses disco inspired rhythms throughout the song, but these are particularly relevant around the chorus. She also uses a four on the floor beat throughout *About Damn*

Time when the drums hit every beat, but accent beats two and four, to create a disco sound. Moreover, she utilizes a syncopated bass and guitar line, particularly before the first chorus, which enhances the disco groove as well. The song has percussive accents peppered throughout which emphasize both the music and lyrics. These accents particularly emphasize her phrase “About Damn Time” whenever she sings it in the piece.

Lizzo also uses melodic hooks which accompany her music that are catchy and repetitive. For example, she sings

Turn up the music, turn down the lights/
I've got a feeling I'm gon' be alright,

which is accompanied by the melody ascending and descending as Lizzo sings “turn up” and “turn down.” She also uses a subtle call and response when she sings

In a minute, I'ma need a sentimental/
Man or woman to pump me up.

She sings the first section, and her backup singers respond subtly with the response “man or woman to pump me up.” These melodic and vocal elements create a conversational and repetitive aspect to this song, which are also indicative of disco.

These elements come together to create a self-care anthem, with a definitive disco influence. Lizzo attempts to revive a Black cultural music with this dance track that affirms body positivity and motivates listeners to take care of their mental health. This track is influential to her audience, and she talks to them directly through her lyrics including

'Cause I'm about to get into my feelings/
How you feeling?

How you feel right now?

This song seems to indicate the relationship between Lizzo and her fans, as well as the broader Black musical community. The components in these examples do not only reference the past, but rewrite and rework its narratives, exemplifying the framework provided by Allen about atemporal cultural production. Also, using Morrison's concept of Blacksound, Lizzo's disco revival can be understood as participation in the historical lineage of racialized music. Her invocation of disco operates within a continuum of Black musical expression around disco that has been shaped by the demands of the normative popular music industry and recognizes a push against these norms.

Moreover, on TikTok, Lizzo posted a video with the caption "Premium Lizzolass content loading..." In this video, Lizzo is behind a circular glass window. Her background seems to be in the woods and forest, with a stone pathway and lush foliage. She wears a floor-length muted green, fitted jumpsuit, platinum white, blonde hair, and pointed elf ears. In the video, she plays the recorder. This TikTok references the Lord of the Rings franchise.

The following day, Lizzo posted a video with the same theme. She wore the same outfit but began walking through the forest in this video. She wore visible faux ears and long pale hair. The path she followed passed a cottage nestled into the forest and a wooden bench. In this video, Lizzo is playing the recorder on the bench. The viral TikTok sound, which says "she was a fairy," is utilized in this video. Also, she posted a video in the same theme with close-up footage of her makeup, with her

lipstick impression on her recorder. This video had the same background and used the "she was a fairy" TikTok sound. The "she was a fairy" TikTok sound originated from the Disney live-action movie Maleficent. The sound has been used both as a joke and for whimsical videos. It is often quoted so far from its original context that TikTok users do not know where it originated.

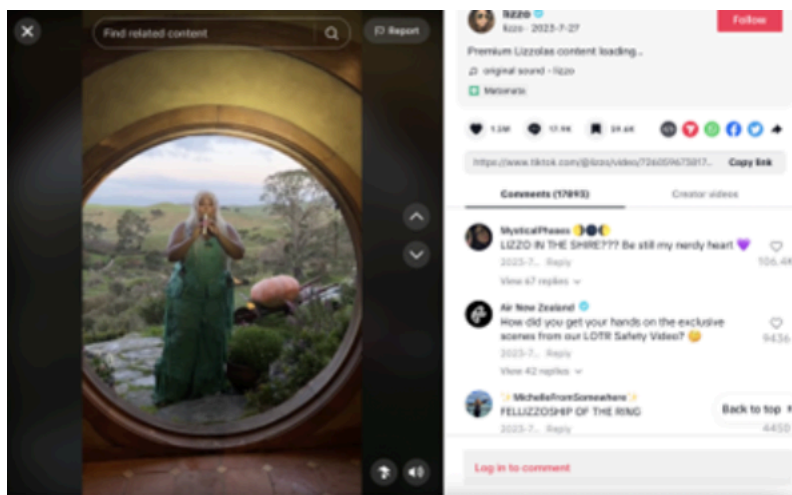


Figure 3.3 [Lizzo posts a TikTok connecting to other fandoms, including the Lord of the Rings.]

Using work by Allen I argue Lizzo evokes an atemporality through her music and posts.¹⁶⁸ She references disco but through a culturally reimagined past by including positivity for Black marginalized groups. She also covers disco hits and creates disco mixes of her albums. This all involves temporality beyond straight-time by the hegemony. This space of disco is one place where there are positive memories for Black marginalized groups in US history. Even though non-chronological might

¹⁶⁸ Allen, *There's A Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*, 5.

be difficult to reflect on from a heteronormative narrative, counter narratives show different aspects to marginalized people's posts. Posts on TikTok show that participation and meaning in Lizzo's fandom does not depend on temporal order but rather shared cultural understandings and engagement.

Intertextuality: Connections made Non-Chronologically

Intertextuality is another way I demonstrate the use of non-chronological interaction in Lizzo's fandom. I use frameworks provided by Patricia Hill Collins to examine intertextuality. Hill Collins argues that oppression, on a large scale, works against Black women as intellectuals, because it supports privileged, White, and male interests.¹⁶⁹ Considering how different texts, created by marginalized and Black women communicate with one another, consequently, is a task only possible through understanding these characteristics which are not centered in privilege. Hill Collins says, "For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity."¹⁷⁰ The author's work follows an intellectual line of thought which focuses on peripheral knowledge. Hill Collins contends that Black women define womanhood themselves in opposition to controlling images created against Black womanhood, and moreover, resist the

¹⁶⁹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 12.

discrimination these images underpin.¹⁷¹ As such, the texts can communicate with one another to tell different stories than that of elitist representations.

The following examples show how meaning emerges through intertextual examples which are not bound by time and place. An online meme in recent years has been about the disdain Elmo the Muppet from Sesame Street feels about his Muppet friend Zoe's Pet rock. In the first episode featuring Rocco, Elmo and his friend are having a cookie snack. Elmo wants to trade his cookie for an oatmeal raisin cookie, saying this is his favorite. However, the last oatmeal raisin cookie has been given to Rocco. Zoe will not let Elmo have the cookie because she says it belongs to Rocco. Elmo becomes upset because he says Rocco is just a rock and not real.¹⁷² In another episode Elmo is playing some sort of jumping game with a human friend. Zoe appears and asks if she and Rocco can play as well. Elmo becomes frustrated because again he exclaims, Rocco is not real. There are numerous episodes where Rocco is featured and Elmo becomes incensed at having to pretend the rock is a real friend, becoming a fun running bit for the internet to follow.

There are now compilations of videos where Elmo becomes more and more exasperated about humoring his friend over having to play with Rocco. Online users include sound and video modifications for added effects. According to the New York Times, Rocco has been a character or lack thereof since 2004, and this means there is 20 years of contentious relationship between the Muppet and the rock.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁷² "Elmo's Unhinged Rant About a Pet Rock Resonates with the Exasperated" New York Times, Accessed, August 8th, 2025
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/arts/television/elmo-pet-rock-rocco-feud.html#:~:text=Elmo%20wants%20the%20oatmeal%20raisin,rock%2C%20a%20pet%20named%20Rocco.>

Lizzo was a guest star on Sesame Street, where she played a "cookie flute" with the Muppet, Cookie Monster, and also met Elmo. Fans were quick to comment with jokes about Lizzo, Sesame Street, and the online memes about Rocco. One fan said, about Lizzo on Sesame Street, "Elmo saying 'Miss Lizzo' [tears in eyes emoji]," indicating how cute they thought it was for Lizzo to participate in the children's show. One fan said, "ASK ELMO ABOUT ROCCO," A joke about the aforementioned meme. The joke connects multiple texts, the comment section, the episode Lizzo has guest starred on, and Rocco and Elmo memes. They recognize that while Lizzo now has access to the Sesame Street characters due to guest starring, she can connect to Elmo and Rocco and add to the contention that seems to be brewing. Another person commented, "you officially made it in your career when you do something with Elmo." This fan points out to those who read Lizzo's comment sections that Sesame Street is a major television show. Others likely agree that this is a career-defining moment because Lizzo has become so recognizable that she was on a show that many people watch with their children.

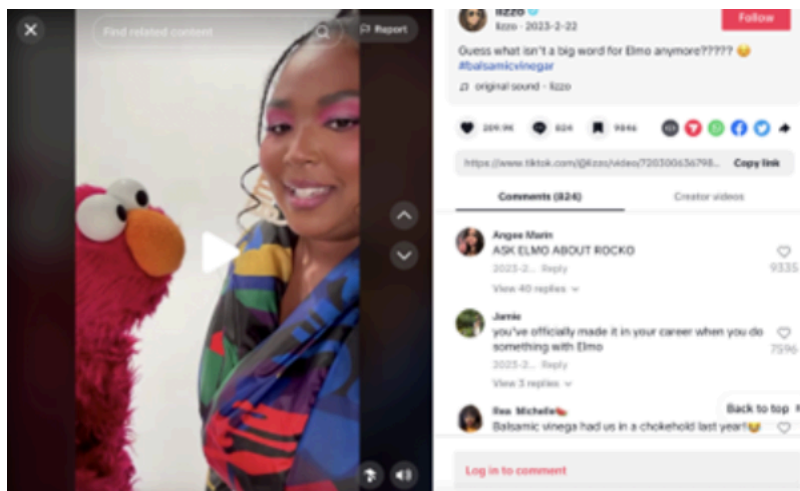


Figure 3.4 [Lizzo shares a TikTok video of her guest appearance on Sesame Street.]

Another example of intertextual connection is connecting other creators' videos, viral drama, and Lizzo's videos about products. One extremely popular TikTok user, Michaela, is known for her extreme accent and viral makeup reviews. She recently had a viral moment of negativity because she said she was using a certain mascara. However, when she posted the video, users could tell she had applied false eyelashes. Audience members felt it was disingenuous to say that the mascara was creating the look of false eyelashes because it was impossible. One comment to Lizzo on TikTok said, "thank you for showing products that were actually and clearly used! [Red heart emoji] 4x Not just untouched bottles." The idea that Lizzo shares with her followers products she enjoys leads to a sense of trust in the relationship. TikTok has many users who became popular for showing how they do their makeup or skincare routines, but the main source of income for those users usually becomes sponsorships. They make most of their money from saying they like a product and promoting it, and then that company pays them to make X amount of videos. If these users make a deal with a certain brand, they are supposed to disclose that their post is a paid promotion due to online regulations. However, enforcing these rules is difficult, and the laws are murky, so some users exploit loopholes and do not disclose to fans the products they promote for money. When fans realize influencer deception, it leads to backlash towards these users. Lizzo is seen in this video using, used, products; thus, fans assume she has tried them multiple times. Even if Lizzo made the post for payment, it brings a sense of trust that she is promoting a product she uses.

This fan seems to have connected different viral moments of TikTok users like Michaela, who lied about the product they were using, and other sponsored posters who do not disclose what has been sponsored to Lizzo's videos. Understanding the meaning behind this text is only possible because they know the background information connecting the other texts.

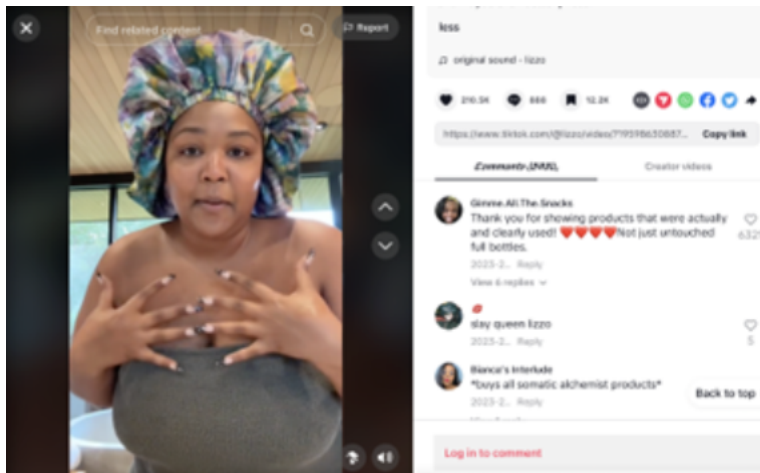


Figure 3.5 [Lizzo shares a TikTok promoting products she uses.]

Another intertextual reference is the apology video and musical piece released by YouTuber Colleen Ballinger. Colleen Ballinger went viral for her YouTube videos and Netflix Show featuring her alter ego, Miranda Sings. She has many subscribers and has been on multiple tours. Her Miranda Sings alter ego sings in musical theater style and wears red lipstick all over her face. Her character has been targeted toward young audiences, although Ballinger claims this was not her intention. Ballinger's character, Miranda Sings, does portray mature content with brash jokes and innuendos.

Other content creators have alleged that Ballinger groomed them as young children, asking them inappropriate questions and giving them adult details about her life in private messages. In response to the backlash from these allegations, Ballinger released a video on her YouTube channel singing a song titled "Toxic Gossip Train." The video went incredibly viral and has been named number one in worst YouTuber apologies repeatedly in compilations for its tone-deafness toward fans. The chorus to this piece goes:

all aboard the toxic gossip train
chugging down the tracks of misinformation
the toxic gossip train
you got a one-way ticket to the manipulation station

The irony is that the allegations against Colleen Ballinger were serious, but she responded with a song and playing ukulele rather than addressing her fans. Fans were not happy with the way she responded, pointing out that whether or not she was guilty, the allegations of grooming children are serious and should not have received blazé refute.

This song is relevant because fans connect Ballinger's inappropriate response to her allegations and Lizzo's lack of response to her own by associating the two in Lizzo's comment sections. Fans write comments like "TOXIC GOSSIP TRAIN-Lizzo (flute cover)," "better start playing Toxic Gossip train on that flute" and "Please collab with Colleen [thumbs up emoji]." An intertextual relationship exists between these fan comments, the YouTube video, and Lizzo's situation. Understanding background context is vital to appreciating the irony of these comments. Both women are musicians, though they specialize in different instruments. They both have

allegations made against them in positions of power and coming from fans. Similarly, their allegations went viral online and throughout their fandoms. Hence, fans create an intertextual relationship that invokes different perceptions of these stars, for the audience, based on information they know about these online communities. I examine these comments with Muñoz's framework of disidentifications. I believe that these communications are negotiations of fandom during controversy and under pressure. Fans reject the dominant cultural response to cancel Lizzo entirely, in favor of a humorous or ironic meme culture response. In doing so, fans are able to acknowledge the discomfort around their feelings for the situation Lizzo has created with her backup dancers and the larger implications for her audience, however they do not directly engage with cancellation and negativity.



Figure 3.6 [Fans comment on Lizzo's post about Colleen Ballinger.]

Another text Lizzo's fans referenced is the song Pink from the Barbie movie. This movie was released in the summer of 2023. It stars Margot Robbie (Barbie) and

Ryan Reynolds (Ken). Lizzo supplied the titular soundtrack song, Pink, for the movie. For the entire summer fans created viral memes and references to the movie, both before and after its release. As such, their popularity grew with widespread viewing.

Lizzo's "Pink" goes hand in hand with her disco and funk revival, but the song was written specifically for the Barbie Movie soundtrack. The song opens with lyrics like

When I wake up in my own pink world/
I get up outta bed and wave to my homegirls/
Hey Barbie (hey), she's so cool/
All dolled up, just playin' chess by the pool,

where Lizzo reconceptualizes things traditionally associated with femininity, "pink," "dolled up," "playin' chess by the pool," and associates these ideas with positivity through the lyrics

In pink, goes with everything/
Beautiful, from head to toe, I'm ready to go, you know, you know/
It's pink, good enough to drink/ (We like other colors, but) pink just looks so good on us.

The tone of Lizzo's lyrics in "Pink" are playful here while creating connections to powerful femininity in girlhood. Musically, the piece is in a major key, bright, and infused with an energetic tempo. The harmony in the main and backup vocals support the song's message and tone. The beat is emphasized through instrumentation like snare drum hits, clapping, an electric bass reemphasizing the drums, and the synthesizer emphasizing these beats as well. This is particularly relevant in the support of the repetitive lyrics "C'mon, we got important things to do/ It's her (ay), and her/ (ay), and me, and you," and relationship to these instruments. Lizzo connects

to her audience through this song because they associate her music with a popular culture movie and her body positivity platform. The Barbie Movie is an instance of a musical soundtrack connecting audience and artist.

Texts related to the Barbie movie and Lizzo are plentiful. Memes reference the music, fashion, specific scenes from the movie, and different parts of the script. One comment on Lizzo's Instagram page said, "looking like a Barbie [heart eye emoji 2x]." Background knowledge of the Barbie movie and Lizzo's involvement with the song Pink are required to understand the sub-context of this comment. Furthermore, the Barbie movie has themes of body positivity and women's empowerment, which are central to Lizzo's platform. By associating herself with the Barbie movie, Lizzo has furthered this platform. The comment can be further dissected when considering these factors as well.

Accessibility to Lizzo's Music: Non-Traditional Timelines

Accessibility to digital platforms further disrupts the traditional understanding of temporality. Due to the Internet and technological accessibility, it is possible to access Lizzo's music globally, in different time zones, at all times, and with relative ease. Returning to Muñoz and Hartman, this accessibility can be understood through both an atemporal and imaginative practice in communities. Muñoz says, "The queer trend that I am identifying is in many ways an effort to reclaim the past and put it in direct relationship with the present."¹⁷³ On social media, there is a backlogged archive

¹⁷³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 82.

of different performances, accessibility to biographical information, details about Lizzo's current life, and other contexts one might want to learn. Audience members can learn about other fans, upcoming concerts, and watch concerts that have already happened. Internet availability means that Lizzo's community is also accessible to those worldwide who want to connect and are interested in her music. Using the methodology in *Disidentifications*, "This task can be summed up as the (re)telling of elided histories they need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces."¹⁷⁴ In other words, Muñoz uses disidentification as a tool for filling in gaps of history that were left out due to dominant power structures. I use this framework to consider how the Lizzo comment sections retell stories and fill in gaps around the history made by Lizzo and her community.

I utilize ideas by Hartman to analyze accessibility in time. She says, "I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I am living in the future created by it." Time is cyclical, rather than linear, because of the lasting impacts of events that occurred in the past. Though Hartman is referring specifically to Black communities, I am referring to those communities formed online. These ideas can run parallel; Lizzo is a Black woman who is affected by the atrocities of then and now, and this influence remains in her community and her music. Furthermore, Hartman says, "The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and

¹⁷⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 57.

political status of the stories redound in the present.”¹⁷⁵ She points out that we cannot escape the violence of the past, today, because it is still a factor in everyday life.

On Reddit, temporality is discussed more specifically. Comments about Lizzo’s shows do not necessarily mean that users were physically present at the event. For example, fans may have watched a “live” recording of the show as it was performed, or a recording of the concert later. Daphne Brooks, argues “to be both record and recorder means not only to unsettle the terms by which we understand Man, it also signals the ways that Black women artists generate and store counterknowledges to those who deny their humanness altogether.”¹⁷⁶ Physical presence at Lizzo’s performance is not the only means of participation because technology today allows for anachronistic “liveness.” Brooks also argues for, “the idea of Black women musicians and entertainers as sociocultural intellectuals and as archives of cultural memory.”¹⁷⁷ In my interpretation, viewing Lizzo perform creates the cultural community, not the physical presence at the show during a specified time.

Concert discourse further complicates atemporality because “liveness” can be mediated through the use of the internet and online discussion. Many of the comments on Reddit are related to Lizzo concerts. Fans comment about watching Lizzo's concerts, discuss the music she played, consider the openers, and analyze what they thought of the show. Whether these users attended the concerts in person they have commentary on the show’s defining characteristics. Audience members

¹⁷⁵ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 133. These are Hartman’s italics.

¹⁷⁶ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 32.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 35.

also comment on aspects of the music and performance. Muñoz says, “Meanings are unpacked in an effort to dismantle dominant codes.”¹⁷⁸

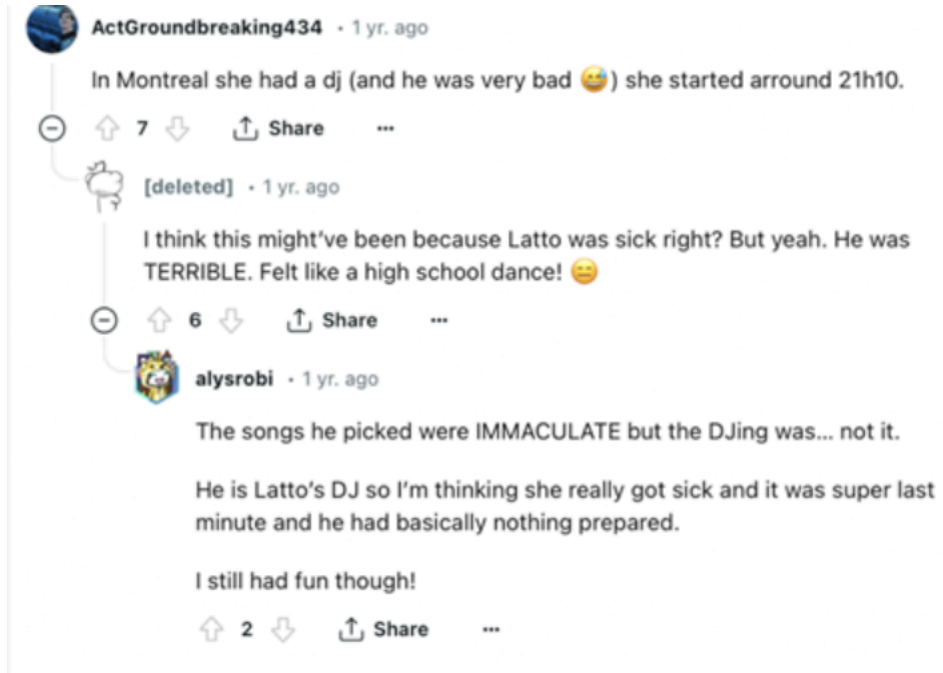


Figure 3.7 [Fans use Reddit to share their experience at Lizzo’s concert.]

After having to cancel show dates due to illness, Lizzo was able to reschedule some performances, and Reddit users commented on these new shows. Lizzo’s usual opening artist, Latto, could not come to these new dates. A user asked who the new opener would be since Latto could not come. A different user responded: “In Montreal she had a DJ (and he was very bad [one sweat on face emoji]) he started about 21 h 10.” While this comment is not lengthy, it provided a lot of information for others in her fandom. For example, they learned when the show would start, and who replaced Latto. Another audience member commented stating they were grateful for

¹⁷⁸ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 26.

this comment, because they could skip the opener in favor of other plans, and still see the performance by Lizzo. The communication and connection between the audience on Reddit made watching the performance by Lizzo a more enjoyable experience for those communicating on the social media platform. This reddit exchange reveals that fandom participation is not dependent on physical presence at a live performance. The sharing of knowledge like set-times, opening acts, and especially performance quality helps to collectively construct an experience of performance. The experience moves beyond physical location, and the audience creates a shared reality of what is live through conversation online.

Moreover, one person stated they did not like the performance of one of her songs in a comment. This caused them to face backlash from other users. They responded to accusations of picking apart Lizzo's show with: "That's such an interesting response. I thought the performance of one song wasn't as good as the others. But I thought the whole show was great. I wouldn't have thought I was nitpicking."

From opening sets to specific song performances, discussions have been held, and communication occurs around Lizzo.

These responses to Lizzo's shows are still valid regardless of how one views the performance. By using Muñoz methodology, I have learned, "Instead, the disidentificatory optic is turned to shadows and features within the text, where racialized presences can be liberated from the protective custody of the white literary

imagination.”¹⁷⁹ The fan who told the above commenter that they were nitpicking at Lizzo’s song did not clarify if they had attended this concert. Yet, many other fans agreed with their assessment. They were unhappy with how this person worded their criticism of Lizzo’s song. It does not matter for Lizzo’s fandom whether fans attended the show in person then, but how they respond and communicate about the music and Lizzo. So, “whiteness [or white musical characteristics and ideology] can, then, stand in for a fantasy of black bodies not being burdened and mastered by whiteness, a fantasy space where the artist asserts his own agency in the relations of power, he is imbricated in through his associations with the mainstream art world.”¹⁸⁰



¹⁷⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 29.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

Figure 3.8 [Fans use Reddit to disagree over a performance Lizzo gave.]

As a popular musician with multiple number one songs many of the conversations in Lizzo's comment sections include conversations about her music. Those who have been to her concerts discuss what they enjoyed about her performances especially at the show. One such comment said “if you can't see Lizzo perform in person. Let me tell you, the way her energy speaks to the crowd, I left her show feeling like her bff. Indescribable.” It is interesting that users are willing to share their experience because they were so positive at the performance. Even though they do not look down on other members of the Lizzo fandom who could not attend the performance in person, they believe that this was an experience that should be shared.

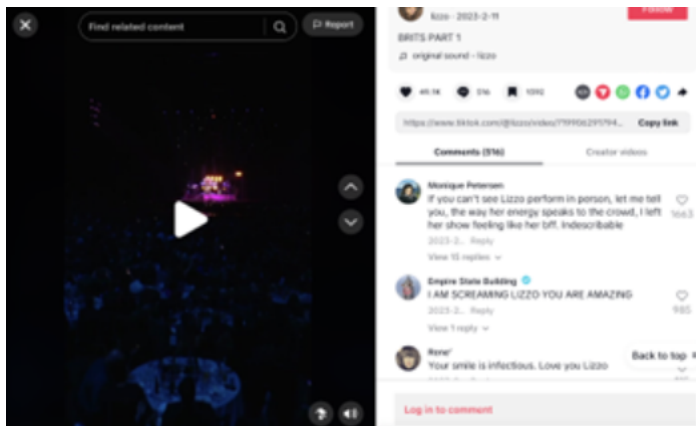


Figure 3.9 [Lizzo posts on TikTok and fans discuss attending the concert.]

Another user said, "Thank you so much for an amazing show! It [was] my first concert and I cried the whole time. I love you so much you're amazing!!! [Crying face emoji] [sparkle heart emoji]." This commenter had such a good experience at

Lizzo's concert, and they thanked her directly. Similarly, "I LOVED THE CONCERT LAST NIGHT I LOVE YOU SO MUCH I WANT TO MEET YOU ONE DAY Lizzo I LOVE YOU AND APPRECIATE YOU [heart with an arrow through it emoji] 2x" was also commented. It seems as though experiencing a Lizzo show has led to an influx of positive reactions from multiple users. Moreover, attending and watching performances by Lizzo has led to more connection with the star, as fans attempt to directly converse with her about shows they have attended. These posts were directed specifically to Lizzo because fans wanted to express their gratitude for a great performance and share the connection they felt and the relationship they had developed through seeing Lizzo perform her music. The exchanges here are demonstrative of Wolf's "public-private" framework in fandom where she examines how emotional attachment to stars can become community building for audiences. In this example, fans are not only explaining opinions of Lizzo's concerts but are publicly expressing their relationship with Lizzo and her other audience members. Then, other members of her fandom reinforce validity and importance for these responses to Lizzo's performance. I argue consequently, that these spaces are community building because of the collaboration of emotional affect found between fans in response to performance.

One post by Lizzo on TikTok showed her as a fan of the singer Beyoncé. She applauds her work and is excited to be in the same room with her. This post shows how Lizzo has been and continues to be a big follower and fan of Beyoncé despite not being friends or having a relationship. One fan commented, "I don't think Lizzo

realizes she is our Beyoncé," in this post. Fans recognize Lizzo's attachment to Beyoncé. They parallel this to their relationship with Lizzo herself. There is a level of awareness from fans that they are not friends with Lizzo. This dissertation does not mean to imply a state of delusion for those following artists in an online community. Those who follow Lizzo, however, put up for discussion the relationships they have with the artist whose work they enjoy and how this is similar to her own life. Their relationship with Lizzo does not mean they cannot be followers of other artists, only that fans are aware of the online community and how they follow an artist, but they can also be followers.

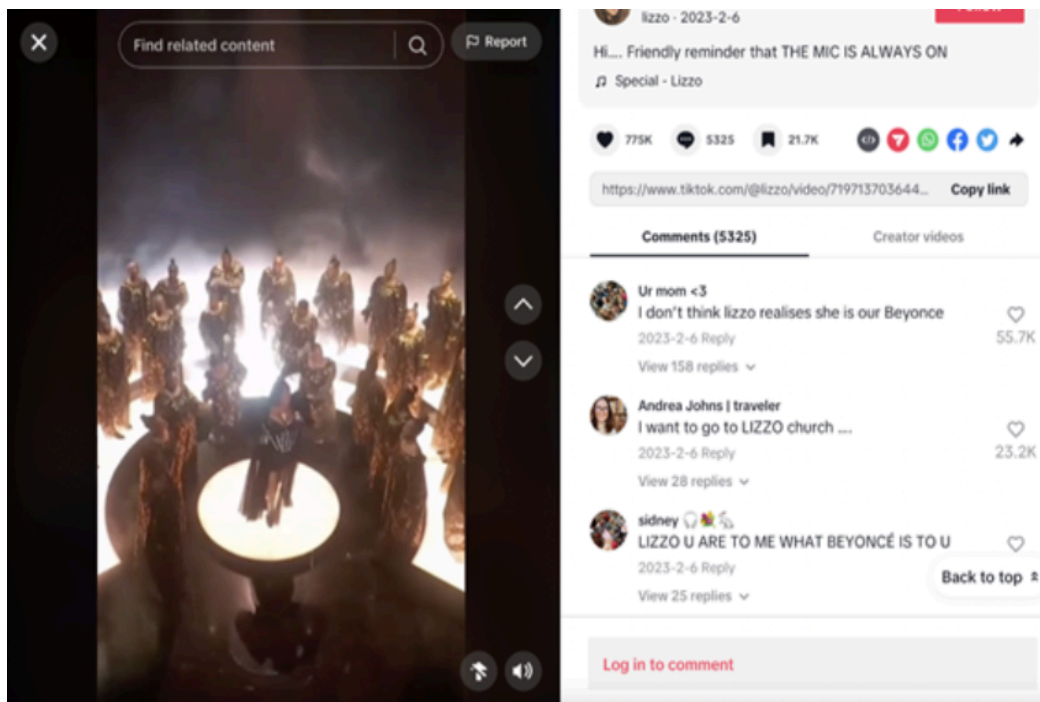


Figure 3.10 [Lizzo posts a TikTok and fans compare their fandom to hers.]

Twitter is also full of comments directed specifically towards Lizzo about her music. Fans discuss how her music made them feel in particular. Some of the comments about her music and performances include "loved your performance queen [blue heart emoji]," "OMG [shocked face emoji] [hands-on shocked face emoji]. You two were amazing last night," and "Yes Lizzo, thanks, about your music video, it's good... you have something special, [red heart emoji]." Due to the availability of television, streaming services, and social media, fans could have been part of an audience despite not physically attending a performance. Technology has afforded new accessibility to those wishing to participate in this community. There are now replays and recordings posted to various social media platforms, which help to include those who cannot make it to shows live. Online communication also brings more examination about specific performance moments for fans, which can be replayed.

Another comment on Lizzo's fan page discusses her documentary on HBO, the streaming service. This comment said, "just love you Lizzo. your documentary was amazing and such a breath of fresh air of truth." This fan also seems to enjoy the political ideology spread by Lizzo. There is an accessibility here as well, thanks to the availability of rewatching with streaming services. Anyone with a subscription to HBO can watch and rewatch the Lizzo performance. Then, they can discuss with others who also have access to this streaming documentary. Some clips of the documentary also made it to online social media platforms. Technology means that

access to the Internet makes parts of the Lizzo documentary available to any Lizzo online audience, anytime. Together these examples show that Lizzo's fandom does not operate in linear time in digital spaces.

Conclusion

In this chapter I utilize the methodological framework provided by Stacy Wolf in her analysis of the fans of the musical *Wicked*. As such I consider how Wolf's framework shows how fans validate each other's enjoyment, how they form attachments online, and how they form collective identities around art. I also used Wolf's work to analyze public posts which highlight personal experiences and how there can be community building through shared meaning. To study Lizzo's audience I evaluated different online platforms' engagement, accessibility, and the relationship between the art and artist.

Next, I use the lens of "disidentifications" created by Jose Esteban Muñoz to consider how fans work both "on and against" dominant ideology. In using Muñoz's work on Lizzo's fandom, I consider post-allegation grief and loss of an idol, a non-linear experience, and how the pre and post lawsuit can exist online concurrently in the digital space.

I argue in this chapter that social media is an atemporal space and there is no need for a "real time" following. Because of the way this space is documented, it functions as an alternative archive, keeping record of performances, sound bites, and commentary. All of this is beyond normative chronological expectations. I use work

by Jafari Allen to explain this both/and temporality which creates a non-linear fan experience. Allen proposes a Disco Ball Metaphor where light refracts across the disco ball in many areas, refracting light across time and space, and consequently refracting memories in the same way for those participating on the dance floor. I argue that social media provides a place for non-normative listening practice in line with Allen's metaphor, where a queering of temporality takes place.

Moreover, I use Morrison's Blacksound method, to explain how sound has been racialized over time. He analyzes the influence of minstrelsy on Black popular music, and I show how this circularity is still affecting Lizzo's music today. For example, I show the structural pressure in popular music to market performance, how Black artists negotiate dominant standards, and consider how they are still influenced by minstrelsy and structural racism. I also use the ideas of imagination and community building by Saidiya Hartman. Since there is no physically present community it is created out of imagination. However, the community is also formed across time because one does not have to be following in a specific time frame to understand the community. This makes the Lizzo comment section an alternative archive and non-chronological in its community building.

I come to the conclusion that Lizzo's fandom operates anachronistically and is influenced by racial structures and imagined community in this chapter. Participation in social media allows for a non-linear time and disidentificatory participation. There are also archival formations found outside of elite institutions in Lizzo's comment sections and a turn away from racialized systems.

Chapter 4: Gender, Genre Expectations, and Controversy

I first heard about the allegations against Lizzo by her backup dancers on Instagram. However, I did not understand the full story. I was following a few Instagram fan pages dedicated to sharing updates about Lizzo's fashion, big life events, and music (including accolades and new releases such as albums and singles.) On Instagram, a story function acts as a post but disappears after 24 hours. I often click through the stories half hazardingly to get the notification to go away. Yet, walls of text appeared in the stories on the Lizzo fan pages, so I stopped to read. These posts said that due to the allegations against Lizzo, the page owners were unsure if they could continue supporting her, and were removing their content, perhaps indefinitely. I had no idea what these allegations were. However, since these account owners were planning to deactivate (and some of the accounts were making advertisement revenue from their sheer number of followers), I knew they were serious. The page owners did not want their name associated with Lizzo until they learned more about the situation, even at the expense of losing income.

These posts led me to look up articles about the allegations against Lizzo. I then moved to Twitter to see what others were discussing and if any backup dancers had released their statements. Information online does not always follow the same path for everyone, but it brought many of us in Lizzo's audience to Twitter to discuss the situation.

I have learned much more about the situation now. In August of 2023, Lizzo faced a lawsuit that alleged her participation in heinous crimes against dancers who

worked for her. This dissertation is not an investigative piece on her innocence or guilt. However, my work aims to explore the influence of aforementioned factors on Lizzo, as a case in particular, and her community, which led to changes and conversations among those in this online culture. In this chapter I analyze the reactions to the allegations made against Lizzo and the changes in her relationship to her fans. I consider how the historical legacy of violence against Black communities affects Lizzo as an idolized musician. I then consider the social and political influences on Lizzo's music.

Introduction

This chapter takes controversies surrounding Lizzo as a starting point and uses fan expectations to examine authenticity and public scrutiny in her online community. Drawing on work from Patricia Hill Collins, Susan McClary, Judith Butler, Maureen Mahon, Angela McRobbie, Sara Ahmed, and Amia Srinivasan I examine how intersectionality, gender and race, and feminist debates are lenses which help to understand audience responses. This chapter focuses on the sexual assault allegations made against Lizzo as a heightened point of visibility and how discourse is shaped. I examine how Lizzo is scrutinized with fatphobia, racism, backhanded positivity, and the policing of food and health related to how fans negotiate their relationship within the community and musician.

In addition, this chapter examines how fans negotiate social media as a site of imagined community. Social media is a place where they engage with meaning

making, politics, and Lizzo's music and performances. I trace shifts in Lizzo's audience perspectives and interrogate issues of power and consent. Ultimately, I frame this chapter as a beginning point to understand how online audiences function and are shaped by dynamics like intersectionality and the complexities of online culture. To examine the tensions caused by controversy more closely, I turn to a set of theoretical frameworks which highlight how race, gender, and power shape Lizzo's image and her audience's responses to her.

Chapter Methods/Frameworks

The allegations made against Lizzo were a tipping point in her career. Consequently, I have chosen to examine public debates around her music and authenticity throughout this chapter. Intense scrutiny is faced by Black musicians, and particularly Black women, in popular music. I use Lizzo's controversies as an entry point to examine fan culture and the expectations fans place on her due to her perceived background and her online social media platforms. I argue that controversies around Lizzo reveal fan expectations as she faces pressures related to her intersectional background based on sex, race, gender, and class. I also contend that fandom responses reveal how her audience interprets her identity and authenticity as a musician.

I use Patricia Hill Collins' work as a tool to analyze how Lizzo is situated both within and outside popular music. I argue there is a link in the historical legacy of oppression in popular music and the binaristic thinking which prevails in the Western

practice of popular music culture. Patricia Hill Collins provides a framework for studying Cartesian Dualism for Black women in particular, with her work on an outsider-insider perspective. She argues that different hegemonic discourses push Black women's intellectual endeavors to the margins, preventing them from being fully accepted.¹⁸¹ Hill Collins argues that we should center analysis of extraordinary Black thinkers' work.¹⁸² Centering Lizzo's music allows for analysis from both an insider and outsider perspective. I use this framework to consider how Lizzo's fandom centers the artist rather than identifying whether she is a "good" or "bad" musician and/or person.

Moreover, in her work Susan McClary has argued that the Cartesian dualism of a mind/body split in relation to good/bad music creates a gendered disadvantage when making assumptions about popular music.¹⁸³ I use this analysis to support my argument on the pressures for specific interpretations based on intersectional background for Lizzo by her audience. This ideology of mind/body dichotomy, values cis-white-male presenting people as intelligent, and consequently as "authentic" fans. However, within that dichotomy, those who present for example, as a racialized body, as a woman, or as part of the LGBTQ+ community, are sometimes valued only for their representations of these ideologies.¹⁸⁴ In this argument the normative hetero-male body links with the mind. Furthermore, hegemonic groups become

¹⁸¹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment*, 17.

¹⁸² Ibid, 18.

¹⁸³ Susan McClary, "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, (University of Minnesota, 1991), 150.

¹⁸⁴ Susan McClary, "Introduction," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, (University of Minnesota, 1991), 16.

connected to what is considered good in society. Minority groups with non-normative bodies become grouped as bad. Consequently, Lizzo is linked to negativity and her gender, body, and race make her music vulnerable to interpretations by fans through these assumptions.

I also use Judith Butler's work in gender theory in this chapter as a lens for considering the links between Lizzo's body-positivity platform and the political powers which organize what is acceptable around race, body, and gender.¹⁸⁵ Lizzo expresses herself through her body-positive posts and her posts about what she eats. Because diet culture is the norm online through the same historical lineage explained above, people do not believe that somebody who is overweight should be posting any kind of food-positive content unless it is related to losing weight. As one example of the public scrutiny Lizzo faces, I examine Lizzo's food content. However, Lizzo does not refer to trying to lose weight; she posts about food she enjoys eating. As such, it seems people believe they are entitled to comment about the food she is eating and whether or not it is "healthy." Lizzo even posts vegan recipes that seem counter to her body type because society believes that stereotypical vegan body types are thin. Lizzo does not conform to a society that tries to force her to lose weight or make diet-centered food content, but posts about how she is happy with what she eats and is not focused on her body negatively. When Lizzo focuses on her body, it is always positive and about how she is happy with her looks. These frameworks become

¹⁸⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, xxv.

visible in fan discourse as they interpret Lizzo's body and health, but also her musical legitimacy.

Maureen Mahon's work on Black rock n' roll musicians applies to how popular music has been racialized and, in my work, how Lizzo has been affected by this historical experience. In her book *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, Maureen Mahon argued that the music industry has categorized Black music in ways that have become restrictive.¹⁸⁶ Genres of Black popular music have been renamed multiple times for marketing purposes including, race music, rhythm and blues, soul charts, black music, and back to R&B.¹⁸⁷ However, popular music has given limited credit to Black musicians and rock musicians. With the categorization and re-shaping of these categories, specific expectations were placed on Black musicians, by those in power. Mahon's analysis shows how these racialized genre boundaries shape artist categorization and I argue still affect contemporary artists like Lizzo today.

In Lizzo's song "Rumors" featuring the singer Cardi B, she sings the lyrics:

This shit from my soul, yeah/
Black people made rock n' roll, yeah/

The lyrics indicate Lizzo's relationship with music as a Black musician and her indication that she belongs in this community. Moreover, in an interview with Vanity Fair, Lizzo discusses how the artist Rosetta Thorpe was an important person in the development of rock n' roll.¹⁸⁸ Lizzo believes the music she creates is specifically for

¹⁸⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, xxv.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 278.

¹⁸⁸ "Lizzo Responds to Critics Claiming She 'Makes Music for White People,'" [Vibe.com](https://www.vibe.com/news/entertainment/lizzo-music-white-people-1234700926/), Accessed March 17th, 2026, <https://www.vibe.com/news/entertainment/lizzo-music-white-people-1234700926/>

“the most marginalized and neglected people in this country.” She also says she makes music from her “Black experience” in response to claims that her goal is to please white audiences. Lizzo goes on to point out that popular music “reaches a predominantly white crowd.”¹⁸⁹ I use Maureen Mahon's work to examine how “black cultural expression...reveals the ways marketing practices, popular culture images, and everyday discourses structure understanding of what constitutes appropriate blackness.”¹⁹⁰

In her writing Mahon quotes the Black Rock Coalition founder Greg Tate who describes the coalition as:

a way to air out certain gripes that people had about the “glass ceiling” in music for Black musicians. Particularly instrumentalists who really wanted to stretch out and were being told by, let’s say the “R&B” side of the industry, that “Black folks don’t wanna hear loud guitars” and feeling the response from the rock ‘n’ roll side was that [Black people] “can’t play rock ‘n’ roll.”¹⁹¹

The writing in Mahon’s book helps my analysis of Lizzo’s music because it examines genre politics and the reflection of the audience on musicians and their work. Lizzo’s music might be categorized one way because of the historical legacy of racism in America, but there is a larger historical context to follow around the tension in popular musical culture. Because the tensions are built into popular music history, they shape reception of race, gender, and authenticity. This chapter focuses on how Lizzo’s fandom negotiates the pressures of popular music expectations by centering the artist, her identity, and her music.

¹⁸⁹ “Lizzo Responds to Critics Claiming She ‘Makes Music for White People.’”

¹⁹⁰ Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, (Duke University Press, 2004): 9.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 1.

Cartesian Dualism, Body Positivity, Audience



Figure 4.1 [Negativity toward Lizzo, on Twitter, based on race.]

In Lizzo's comment section, a user says, "hopefully they make these decisions based on talent and not race" about Lizzo's musical award-winning. Moreover, another user says, "morbid obesity is far from 'perfect' and is nothing to celebrate or encourage." This comment demonstrates my use of Judith Butler's work as I analyze how bodies are regulated as both acceptable and non-acceptable. The user making the comment positions Lizzo's body specifically as socially illegitimate because of social implications around aesthetic thinness. To publicly affirm Lizzo, the user expects that she must conform to a body type she does not fit. These fans correlate Lizzo's body, race, and health to winning musical awards, but in the same way, attribute these qualities to what should make her music inherently bad. I kept these dualisms in mind as I continued to analyze the data I collected.

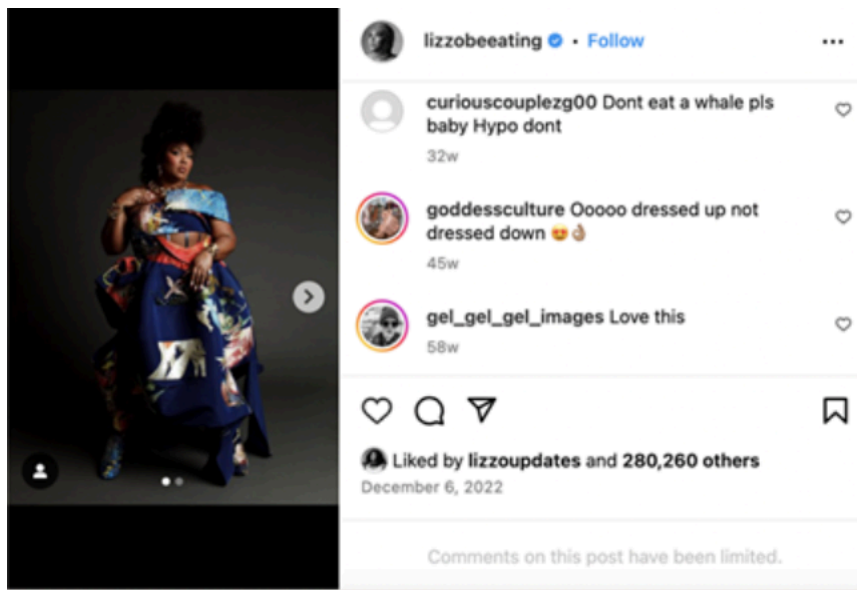


Figure 4.2 [Negativity toward Lizzo based on her body, on Instagram.]

Many critical Instagram comments surrounding Lizzo focus on her eating habits. Because Lizzo is a plus-size woman, she does not fit into the normative characteristics that are the standard image people expect to see online. Some of those comments surrounding her diet include, "don't eat a whale please baby hippo don't," and "Chorizzo." These comments insinuate that Lizzo overeats and looks like an encased sausage, chorizo. Considering standpoint theory, I wonder why online audiences comment on an essential stranger's diet. Lizzo's body is hyper visible online. Due to her online presence, people seem to somehow know how or what Lizzo is eating. Online, Lizzo is treated disproportionately poorly time and time again. It seems as though Lizzo bears a larger amount of negativity about her weight than others who post online. This negativity leads back to the dualism debate of good/bad being inherently linked to thin and fat bodies. Collins' insider-outsider

perspective is important for analysis here. Lizzo simultaneously holds the privileged position of celebrity while maintaining the outsider position of “other” socially. As such, commenting on her food choices means that those choices are inherently bad ones, rather than the idea of food as nourishment. Because Lizzo is a Black woman, she is targeted for her eating, seen as bad, and then her body is seen as bad. Lizzo's appearance links to her cultural background. Audience members commenting on her eating is likely a reflection of broader historical surveillance of Black women's bodies. Consequently, Lizzo's eating is not seen as nourishment but instead reflects moral judgments of her worth and legitimacy.

The criticism faced by Lizzo on Twitter seems to be more skewed toward comments about her body and a general distaste towards the things she posts about self-love and positivity. Some comment negatively, showing how they connect that Lizzo does not fit into an essentialized idea of a woman's appearance. One such comment about Lizzo at an award show stated, "The only reason you got these accolades was people felt sorry for you because you're obese. You are not well, the fat compacted around your heart must be hard on that muscle. I can't imagine how your heart must struggle to perform its function. Eat sensibly and exercise." This user had a lot to say about Lizzo's body and health. Moreover, the user believes there is a correlation between body and musical accolades.

The nonsensicality in the above user's argument is that this user believes that because Lizzo has a nonnormative body, she is more likely to win awards. This trope that someone or some group feels sorry for someone who does not fit in normative

standards, and thus that person is given awards, seems to be common online. Logically, a person who does not meet normative standards would have more difficulty winning an award. Since this above user cannot seem to make peace with the idea that Lizzo won an award show, is nonnormative, and can also be a good musician, they have to come up with some other reasoning to quiet the cognitive dissonance in their brain. The inability to reconcile success with Lizzo's non-normative body is representative of what McClary identifies as a gendered and racialized hierarchy in music. Because Lizzo does not embody normative standards, her awards are diminished as a consequence of pity. Lizzo's visibility as a Black, plus sized woman, disrupts assumptions about who should traverse popular music spaces successfully and who is permitted to represent authenticity and artistry.

Unfortunately, Lizzo has faced a lot of negativity about her weight despite her body positivity platform. Even though she has worked to ignore negativity, and her music points out that she does not appreciate nor acknowledge these comments as necessary, she still receives them. One comment made contextual reference to the fat phobia against Lizzo, the bullying and disrespect about Lizzo's weight, and the dancing she chooses to post online. This commenter tried to protect her and said, "but y'all would sit and watch cardi b or Megan do the exact same thing. y'all knew Lizzo twerks too and y'all still following smh." The other artists this comment references are of a more normative weight according to society's standards. Also, the comment uses the abbreviation "smh" which stands for shaking my head. This user is shaking their head, virtually, at those bullying Lizzo due to her body, despite actively

following her. They point out that people do not say these kinds of hateful things to women who fit into the normative societal standards.

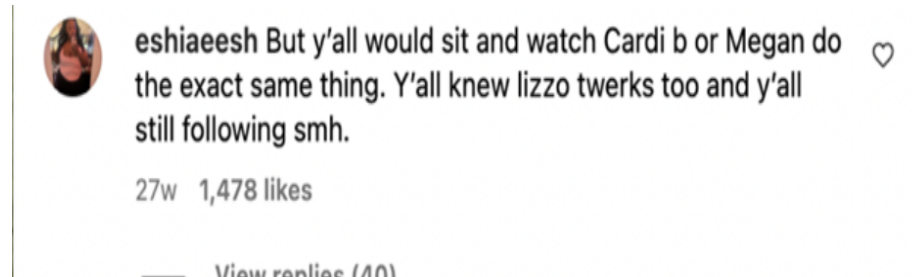


Figure 4.3 [Defense of Lizzo in comparison to other musicians with more normative body types.]

Another user had much to say about those negatively commenting on Lizzo's weight. They said,

Thank you! and those that throw in their two cents about how unhealthy you are because of Your weight. you don't know how healthy I am, baby. cholesterol on point, blood pressure is great, heart is perfect, lungs excellent etc. Stop and think before you judge someone based on their weight. that skinny person you are looking at could be suffering internally with their organs but because you see someone who is thin you think they're healthy. there are healthy overweight people and there are unhealthy overweight people. stop judging a book by its cover and stand in your lane. Worry about YOUR health.

Part of this platform has been to dismantle the ideology of the correlation between size and health. This person is frustrated with those who mock her body and do not know her health. They also do not consider this to be others' business as they make the point that their metrics, such as blood pressure and cholesterol levels, fall into the healthy range despite their non-normative weight. While the examples in this section do show judgment toward Lizzo, they also point to fans creating a space where meaning is collectively negotiated.

Negativity Before the Allegations

Before the sexual assault allegations against Lizzo, dynamics were already present which sharpened how fans interpreted her body, identity, and authenticity. However, the allegations against Lizzo marked a shift in the discourse and introduced more intense debates around power, consent, and accountability for her audience. Lizzo's music and social media platform is used as an example of assemblage in Hailey Nicol Otis' work. They say, "Lizzo interrupts this history of disconnection and disembodiment by bringing together—by assembling—the big butt with the fat, Black body through belfies [butt selfies], costumes, and dance moves."¹⁹² Rather than reinforcing the image that is "acceptable," Lizzo instead represents her body, and her race, online without caveat. Otis refers to this gaze as heteropatriarchal and describes it, "as a concept, [that] refuses the singularity and universality of the "male gaze" and, instead, recognizes that gazing practices are not only gendered, but also racialized and sexualized."¹⁹³ The intersectional groups which Lizzo belongs to all play parts in the way she is viewed, and this is recognized by the musician herself.

With the use of social media, the community that is created there, and the connections that are formed, Lizzo is able to reject the dominant ideology that her presence is not acceptable. Moreover, she shares the sentiment to her audience and creates a space online where they too can reject these dominant designs. Through her music videos, and music in general, Otis argues that "Lizzo's unapologetic fatness

¹⁹² Otis, "Lizzo's Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze," 11.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 13.

and Blackness already marks a rejection of the dominant gaze.”¹⁹⁴ Through her choices Lizzo rejects the ideas that oppress her by representing herself in the ways outlined by Otis. They also argue that online spaces can be freeing for engagement with fat activism and body positivity because this space allows people to share stories which are in contrast to the dominant ideology of anti-fat rhetoric. I agree with Otis here because due to the relative anonymity of the social media space, audience members can post more freely than in a space dominated by those in power. These community members can post what it is they want to say with less fear of retaliation because they may not use their real names, or they do not fear being located because they do not share this information online for others to see. In May of 2023 Lizzo made a longer than usual post on Twitter concerning her platform and body representation. She said in this Tweet,

I’ve always led with my TALENT...
But when I dropped Good as Hell feel good music was ‘corny’
When I dropped Juice disco pop wasn’t ‘for them’
When I was body positive in 2016 being body positive was “pandering”
Now everybody on that wave and I’m still shit on?! Man fuck y’all,”
“ALSO: to the people who haven’t had an original thought or fresh air in years...
BEING FAT ISN’T MY ‘BRAND’
BEING FAT IS WHAT MY BODY LOOKS THAT. THATS IT. THATS ALL.
My ‘brand’ is FEEL GOOD MUSIC.
My ‘brand’ is CHAMPIONING ALL PEOPLE.
My ‘brand’ is BLACK GIRL LIBERATION

Lizzo shows in this example that although there are presumptions about her due to her appearance, her ideas about her online platform and the fandom she is

¹⁹⁴ Otis, “Lizzo’s Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze,” 14.

creating are about music and community. As Otis argues, “Ultimately, Lizzo’s mainstream visibility via popular music amplifies the worldmaking potential of her body positive rhetoric by beginning to chip away at the dominant discourses that continue to harm and disparage fat bodies in the larger culture.”¹⁹⁵ I argue that Lizzo’s social media also provides a larger space for her audience to interact with these images and music in their own ways. Her social media allows fans to represent themselves in opposition to the dominant discourses without having to face such negative backlash and retribution.

Otis argues that decolonial work toward body positivity including moving dominant body standards from the center and creating visibility for fat people is necessary. In my opinion, Lizzo uses her social media platforms to do the decolonial work Otis deems necessary to shift dominant standards. Rather than theorizing toward decoloniality, Lizzo instead uses her own body to show a visual representation of the ways in which being Black, fat, and a woman should not be stigmatized. She makes positive representations of herself and her life, but also neutralizes the wording of fat and Black as she works toward this goal. Otis says, “Lizzo’s celebrity personal empowers fat, Black women through radically positive representation that refuses the terms of coloniality and racial capitalism.”¹⁹⁶ In many ways, my dissertation research and Otis’ paperwork together to show that Lizzo’s body positivity, decolonial mentality, and political activism go hand in hand with her music to intensify her audience's perception of what is a dominant colonial narrative and what can be done

¹⁹⁵ Otis, “Lizzo’s Intersectional Visibility Politics: Contesting Colonial Beauty Standards and Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze,” 16.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 17.

to change these power dynamics. In a Tweet from February 2023 Lizzo said “It’s wild how people will wish violence upon someone they don’t know, all because that person didn’t live up to their moral compass. The amount of casual death threats given out on these apps daily is very disturbing.” Although I cannot assume to know the amount of violence aimed at Lizzo on Twitter daily, there is likely correlation between the friction caused with rubbing against the proverbial “status quo” grain and the hatred spewed toward the artist online. The negativity aimed at Lizzo may be a sign that her work in this online space is actually resisting the normative.

In her article, “Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity,” Staci M. Zavattaro argues for primary source historical documentation through social media. The documentation is especially important for users with large accounts like Lizzo. She says, “the purpose of this [her] conceptual article is to examine the social justice ties between social media and fat bodies in society.” This piece is similar to the work done by Otis because it shows that social media used as a body positivity platform can be a tool to rewrite dominant narratives about fat, Black women.

An important argument made by Zavattaro is the body positivity shown by Lizzo online creates a counter narrative to what a fat, Black, woman's life should look like in today’s society. Zavattaro posits, “In a society that feeds on what they see in pop culture, social media are showing those who might be uncomfortable with fat bodies that people can live full, happy lives while not fitting in with a certain social

stereotype.”¹⁹⁷ Lizzo is an example of those who show their lives as positive despite an intersectional background of multiple oppressed groups. Rather than allowing these ideologies to overtake the representation of Lizzo’s life, she creates her own portrait of life in her body. Moreover, Zavattaro points out “in the age of body positivity and fat acceptance, advocates are trying to remove the stigma associated with the word,” fat itself.¹⁹⁸ Similarly, Lizzo utilizes lyrics in her music to show that while others may call her fat, with a negative connotation, she is in fact fat, and this is neutral to positive instead. By directly confronting standards set by hegemonic groups today, Lizzo creates a different story for herself.

Lizzo’s online platform is a disruptive space where a community is assembled. Zavattaro contends that those who are fat cannot participate in dominant society, which is reinforced through administrative campaigns like taxes on soda.¹⁹⁹ As seen in my research here, even archival materials by the government reinforce these ideas. Multiple links to the government and laws reinforce ideology about the way people should be according to dominant powers.

More negative critical comments about Lizzo and Instagram include "no self-esteem, and no self-respect. you don't fool some of us," damn near broke the stage,” and "body shaming is shit... but this is not healthy..." These comments seem to be talking to the broader audience on Instagram rather than being directed specifically toward Lizzo. These users seem to be trying to have discussions with other community members. They seem to believe they will find others here who feel

¹⁹⁷ Zavattaro “Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity,” 282.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 283.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 290.

similarly. The contradiction between fat shaming and health in this comment shows how these critiques often disguise themselves as concern. The rhetoric of health serves as a language tool which reinforces historically judgmental language, as argued by Ahmed, and broadly functions as a socially acceptable way to comment on Lizzo's body. These critical discussions are being held not with the intention of Lizzo responding but to get reactions from others reading Instagram comments and seeing Lizzo's posts. These users seem to believe that because Lizzo has posted on a public platform, it is appropriate to comment publicly about her body and what she has chosen to post online. With comments like "fat shaming is shit," it seems that this user does not believe it is appropriate to comment on others' bodies but then does so anyway due to their own reasoning about Lizzo's health.

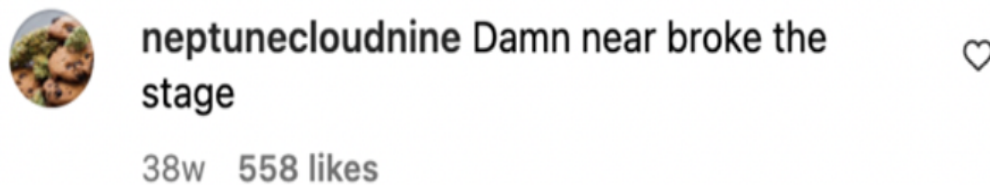


Figure 4.4 [Negativity toward Lizzo, on Instagram, toward her body.]

Some comments on Lizzo's TikTok page were related to body positivity. As mentioned, she has built her platform around the idea of self-acceptance. Though she does not fit a white heteronormative body standard, she posts that she is beautiful and thinks the same of her audience. In his work on double consciousness, Paul Gilroy

says, "It is part of my argument that this inside/outside relationship should be recognized as a more powerful, more complex, and more contested element in the historical, social, and cultural memory of our glorious nation that has previously been supposed."²⁰⁰ Gilroy has argued that the relationship between acceptance and rejection goes deeper than the surface. Lizzo's body positivity platform shows that on the surface she is projecting an idea of disagreeing with beauty standards and more deeply she is challenging a historical legacy of oppressive action toward Black women's bodies. Gilroy further posits "cultural activists even engage in 'rescuing critiques' of the present by both mobilizing memories of the past and inventing an imaginary past-ness that fuels their utopian hopes."²⁰¹ Rather than reinventing the way the past was seen for Black women, Lizzo actively works to acknowledge how women are viewed now.

Some more of the comments on Lizzo's TikTok about body positivity include:

Lizzo, you're so freaking gorgeous. [tears in eyes emoji] [hearts floating emoji], "Ma'am you are beyond pretty," and "You're so STUNNING [star eye emoji]." They also complimented her hair and makeup, including hair colors and cuts. Of course, Lizzo's appearance does not fit societal norms. Her audience enjoys her looks and compliments her regardless. By not following these norms, Lizzo presents a contrasting image from what her audience expects to see from celebrities online.

²⁰⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 11.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 57.

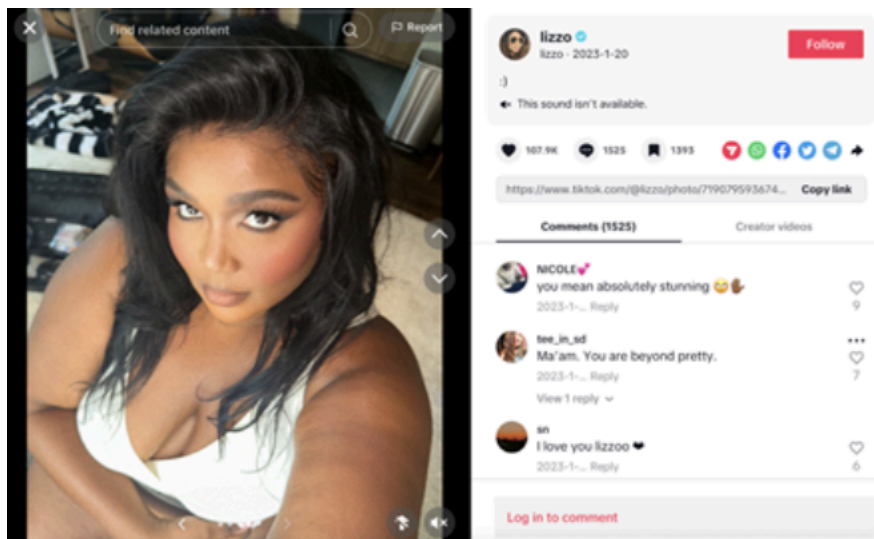


Figure 4.5 [Positivity shown toward Lizzo on TikTok.]

The Twitter comment section for Lizzo's official account also has many body-positive comments. Something unique in her comment section is the account "make it a quote, " which takes posts from people like Lizzo and adds them to a photo, then overlays them with text. In doing so, those who look up quotes may come upon these and use them for phone backgrounds, inspirational Twitter banners, or the like. Under one of Lizzo's Tweets "make it a quote" posted a photo of the Tweet which reads "you think I'm fat now? Just weight until the sheer velocity of the circumference of my ass crushes you through the phone bitch." Lizzo likely posted this to be snarky back toward those who were negative toward her about how she looks. However, the body positivity and confidence in the subtext of the Tweet shows that she is determined not to be pushed into conformity.



Figure 4.6 [Lizzo’s response to body shaming on Twitter.]

Also, there are many comments with positive intentions on Twitter, though they come off as backhanded. For example, "you not fat just thick and that ain't back fat [smiling with teeth emoji] [lifting weights emoji] [diamond emoji]." Although this user seems to be well-intentioned in their comment, the idea that fat has a negative connotation does not negate body positivity. Distinguishing between “fat” and “thick” reveals an anti-fat discourse even when the fan is trying to be supportive. While intended as praise, “fat” becomes an undesirable category replaced instead with “thick” or a more socially acceptable term. Ahmed’s work exemplifies how terminology and language carry historical significance as I interpret the discomfort around using the word “fat” for Lizzo’s fans. Fat, in Lizzo's posts, is associated with

positivity, so it does not come with societal connotation for the artist. However, using Ahmed I show how “fat” already disciplines bodies through speech.

Another user said, "I wish people would just focus on your natural beauty and talent instead of obsessing over inches [heart eye emoji] [upside down smile emoji]." While this comment holds the sentiment of Lizzo being both beautiful and talented, it is again negated due to her size. The user does not realize the bias in this comment. This user indicates that by ignoring Lizzo's weight, they are focusing on her talent. However, implicitly, this user is making a negative comment, because they claim they are ignoring her body to focus on her beauty and talent to shine, rather than being another part of Lizzo. Lastly, one user commented, "I don't call it fat I call it curvaceous I love you Lizzo [heart eyes emoji] 2x [fire emoji] 2x [lipstick emoji] [heart on fire emoji] 2x." They say they love her and follow up with many emojis demonstrating their feelings. This comment is supposed to be kind. Because being fat is associated with negativity, this user has chosen a synonym with “curvaceous” that has a more positive connotation. However, even though it seems this comment means to be body positive, it reinforces the negativity around being fat and. The subconscious desire to move away from the term fat, despite Lizzo herself reclaiming it, is one steeped in political and historical subtext. Likely, fans who love Lizzo, like these commenters mentioned, do not even realize that while they link their comment to something positive, they are reinforcing negativity created through a societal history.



Figure 4.7 [A fan's response to others body shaming Lizzo on Twitter.]

Moreover, some body positivity comments on Instagram about Lizzo show representation and feelings of being noticed by her audience members. For example, one user said, "Represent!!!! We need beautiful women like her!!! Who else is gonna do it??? Keep it up!! I'm feeling confident in my body!!! And i got great health too [heart around the face smiling emoji] 4x." This comment shows that by representing non-normative bodies on social media to her audience, Lizzo may be allowing those who do not fit into white normativity standards help them to see someone who looks like themselves. By publicly going against the norm, Lizzo shows her audience that they can accept themselves. This publicity builds community and culture around non-European standards and perhaps gives a place for expression through virtually formed community members to share. Lizzo, as a role model, has become central for this community to survive and revolve around.

Comments disparaging Lizzo before the lawsuit were degrading toward Lizzo's body. As stated by Kristin Denise Rowe, "Black women exist with a complex set of sociohistorical, structural, and affective body politics, particularly around concepts of beauty." She argues a prevalent standard is

good vs bad hair for Black women.²⁰² She explores the themes of good/bad hair in relation to Beyoncé and her “Becky with the good hair” lyric in her music. In my data, I have found that Lizzo faces similar polarizing opinions on whether she has a “good body” or “bad body.” There is a juxtaposition in the reactions to the posts made by Lizzo that center her body online, these can be seen falling into two extremes.

For example, in a post made by Lizzo on Instagram she is pictured on a boat relaxing in the sun with a drink. The post is captioned “Bitch. I want a margarita.” The post contains multiple images and video clips. In the first, she is lying on her stomach, wearing dark sunglasses, a pink bathing suit skirt cover, and a pink baseball cap which reads “RICH BITCH ON VACATION.” Next, a video clip plays of Lizzo sitting in a boat hot tub, sipping her drink. Then, there is a third photo of Lizzo smiling, showing her pink bikini top and skirt from the front of the boat. Another photo shows her long acrylic nails, perfectly ombre’d holding a cold can of coconut water. Finally, there is a video of her sipping her drink at another angle, in the boat hot tub, overlaid with a clip of the song “Rich Bitch on Vacation” by Shelby Swain, including the lyrics, “Bitch, I want a margarita.” The song was popularized by Lizzo through TikTok. The post does not hide Lizzo’s body but centers her outfit and even what she is drinking. Rather than covering up, Lizzo posts herself in the same poses as heteronormative characterized bodies might, including fully faced

²⁰² McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 341.

forward showing her whole body. The top comments on this post are “tagging Lizzo everything a queen should be,” and “this is foul.” The reactions to her body here are that she should continue to make these posts and she is “everything” as she is, and that this post is “foul” due to its content.

I have used examples found in the book *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, edited by Christina Baade and Kristin McGee, to consider how research done on another popular musician can provide a framework for studying the intersections of race, gender, sex, and so forth over these mediums. While Lizzo is producing music for communities who deeply connect to the lyrical content and artistic production, she becomes subject to critique to both intentionally and unintentionally racially charged remarks about her body, as an object of scrutiny, delineated over time.

Moreover,

In short, [the authors in *Beyoncé in the World*] view performances as staged and theatrically driven arrangements that reinsert the political and cultural hierarchies (high/low, center/margin, outside/within, North/South) within meaning-making processes through which heterogeneous places of identification and cultural negotiation are placed.²⁰³

In other words, performance is viewed through a normative lens.

In her chapter Rowe asks, “How can we locate Black women’s agency within these systems? And where is the radical potential in understanding Black women’s reframing, renegotiating, vulnerability within, and experiencing

²⁰³ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 197.

of Eurocentric standards of beauty—rather than rendering them objects, victims, symbols, or models within that space?”²⁰⁴ By acknowledging her own position as a plus sized woman yet positioning herself as a fashionable, positive, healthy persona Lizzo is critical of the hate comments and intentionally uses her platform to resist conforming to Eurocentric standards. In another post made by Lizzo before the August 2023 allegations, she is seen riding a jet ski in a pink bikini and lifejacket. She is smiling and seemingly having fun and riding the jet ski in circles in the ocean, while twerking. Twerking is defined on Urban Dictionary as “when someone bends over - arches their butt - and wiggles it - usually done to trap, techno, or rap music. This dance has exploded in popularity partially because of celebrities, it is now a global phenomenon.”²⁰⁵ The top comments on this post are “she be throwing all that [heart eye emoji] [red heart emoji] and iim trying to catch it [face palm emoji] [red heart emoji],” and “Omg obeeccccceeeee [face palm emoji].” Even though Lizzo is faced with hateful comments like the latter, she continues to post herself wearing what she likes, and doing things she enjoys. Despite the negative comments Lizzo also gets positive comments which show that she is desirable, perhaps inappropriate for a public platform, but showing that the resistance to normative standards is possible and accepted by fans.

²⁰⁴ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 352.

²⁰⁵ “Twerking,” Urban Dictionary, Accessed August 8th, 2025, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Twerking>.

Changes in Perception: Allegations against Lizzo & Musical Associations

Angela McRobbie provides a framework for studying feminism online with what she believes is feminism being mainstreamed.²⁰⁶ She uses the idea of the “perfect” as a standard which is unachievable for women and girls, but related to feminism, in that it is an unattainable standard, which brings women together.²⁰⁷ She argues that the idea of hardship for women becomes expected due to representation online and normalized in society, so popular cultural representations of successful women consequently show overcoming the hardships through normative standards of femininity.²⁰⁸ Lizzo as an idol breaks the idea of normative femininity because she is Black and plus sized. Regardless, she shows an overcoming and conquering of adversity because she cannot reach this perfect standard, and she is still representing success on her social media platforms. Through McRobbie’s framework I consider how perceptions of Lizzo have changed due to controversies like allegations against her by her backup dancers and consider why some fans continue to stand by her regardless of the lawsuit.

Many found an idol at best, or at the least, someone relatable in Lizzo as a Black, plus-sized woman because they interacted with her online and could listen to her music. The idea of relatability did not hold up with the revelation of the allegations against Lizzo by her backup dancers. Consequently, shown in specific comments throughout this chapter, some fans disregarded these allegations and did

²⁰⁶ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 42.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 45.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 46.

not believe anyone should question Lizzo's character. At the same time, some opted to believe the victims of the lawsuit and would no longer support Lizzo. The uncertainty made some fans question the authenticity of other fans in the Lizzo audience, as those who decided to stand by Lizzo thought they somehow *knew* her much better than those who took a step back from supporting her. Furthermore, this led me to question whether this kind of response would occur if the star did not have these different background layers.

To understand reactions to Lizzo's controversies I have situated them within the broader feminist dialogue about consent and online feminism. While traversing the online space, Lizzo and her fans come into contact with social media content which relates to consent culture. In their article "'Consent is F#@king Required': Hashtag Feminism Surrounding Sexual Consent in a Culture of Post Feminist Contradictions," Heather Hensman Kettrey, Alyssa J. Davis, and Jessica Liberman argue, "contemporary feminism is about making the invisible visible." Fans participate in a culture online which applauds consent and claims to represent victims. Also, fans show how they feel betrayed by Lizzo who disregarded consent and took advantage of her position of power against her backup dancers. The authors posit, "hashtag feminism may empower individuals who share their personal narratives while minimizing the structural causes of feminist issues."²⁰⁹ Unfortunately, these ideas may also make for confusing situations when a woman is the one perpetuating the issues.

²⁰⁹ Kettrey et al., "'Consent is F#@king Required': Hashtag Feminism Surrounding Sexual Consent in a Culture of Postfeminist Contradictions," 1.

Kettrey et al. argue, “despite raising awareness about sexual assault, hashtag feminism can reinforce the assumption that individual victims are responsible for enacting change.” I agree with the authors. Lizzo often attempts to use her platform to enact change in a greater capacity, but she must be held responsible for the choices she has made as an individual as well. A point made by Kettrey et al. is, on social media, “The idea that women have achieved a level of power that allows them to clearly and effectively oppose unwanted sexual contact is problematic in that it ignores gender inequality as a barrier to the effective negotiation of sexual consent.”²¹⁰ Moreover, it ignores other inequalities like power imbalance in the workforce mentioned previously. Many fans decided to hold Lizzo accountable for the accusations against her, in a public space online.

In her chapter “Introduction: Hearing Complaint,” in the aptly titled book *Complaint!*

Sara Ahmed argues, “To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone.”²¹¹ Ahmed’s lens for studying complaints helps to explore the allegations against Lizzo in a context which is framed through the lens described by the author as a “feminist ear.” She says, “To hear with a feminist ear is to hear who is not heard, how we are not heard.”²¹² In other words, by exploring the allegations made against Lizzo and the reactions which they cause, rather than being dismissive

²¹⁰ Kettrey et al., “‘Consent is F#@king Required’: Hashtag Feminism Surrounding Sexual Consent in a Culture of Postfeminist Contradictions,” 2.

²¹¹ Sara Ahmed, “Introduction: Hearing Complaint,” in *Complaint!*, Duke University Press (2021), 1.

²¹² Ibid, 4.

of the complainants in the case, my research will attempt to find links to what these comments say and how Lizzo's audience may be feeling.

Ahmed contends, "We learn how only some ideas are heard if they are deemed to come from the right people; right can be white," and this means that often those who are "other-ed" are dismissed because they are not listened to.²¹³ Rather than skirting around the edges of the allegations made toward Lizzo, my research confronts the emotions people had toward her as an artist when these complaints were reported and to further complicate this analysis due to race. Ahmed says, "*Complaining, complaint, complainer*: we can be weighed down by words as well as judgments."²¹⁴ The problems I consider in this work are compounded because not only are those alleging the complaints people of color, but the person being accused and holding power, is a person of color as well.

Moreover, Ahmed posits, "To share a story of complaint can be to make a connection. To share a story of complaint can be to add to a collection."²¹⁵ This chapter shows how complaints against Lizzo bring together her community in conversation and debate as to who should be held accountable. Moreover, I consider what allegations against Lizzo mean for those who enjoy her music. Even more, "Words can carry the weight of injustices; they can transmit a history."²¹⁶ By participating in this conversation these fans are further building community by allowing the writing of their history to be archived. As mentioned previously, Hill

²¹³ Ahmed, "Introduction: Hearing Complaint," 4.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 9.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 16.

Collins argues that rather than dichotomizing groups of people as white/Black, women/man, rich/poor, etc., this work will use her both/and framework, which attempts to create a more fluid understanding of groups. Her idea of standpoints is relevant in this chapter, as the persistent treatment of Lizzo as different due to being a Black woman shows. Unfolding against the backdrop of research by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, this chapter especially, explores data through a feminist lens. As argued by Butler, “Because “sex” is a political and cultural interpretation of the body, there is no sex/gender distinction along conventional lines; gender is built into sex, and sex proves to have been gender from the start.”²¹⁷ Butler also does not believe in a dichotomous relationship between sex and gender. I connect the two researchers' work in this dissertation.

Butler asserts, “*Gender Trouble* sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions.”²¹⁸ I consider the violent and harmful ideas perpetuated against women and complicates these ideas by considering stereotypes and the historical legacy of violence against Black people specifically. These are important in the representation of Lizzo and her audience, especially as I evaluated their feelings toward the allegations and lawsuit.

Also, as posited by Butler, “The contemporary feminist debates over essentialism raise the question of the universality of female identity and masculinist oppression in other ways.”²¹⁹ It is important in this work, to analyze individualized

²¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 154.

²¹⁸ Ibid, viii.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 19.

opinions from comments rather than universalizing ideas about responses to Lizzo. Furthermore, Butler says, “This [*Gender Trouble*] has seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural consideration in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all.”²²⁰ My dissertation and this chapter in particular work to ensure Lizzo and her audience are represented in both history and the academy.

Also, these theoretical discussions become relevant as fans interpret the allegations themselves online. For example, Reddit comments include criticism of Lizzo's character. The critical comments focus on details they disliked after attending Lizzo's concerts. Most of these comments are in direct communication with one another; they are not in direct response to posts made on Lizzo's official account.

One discussion went as follows:

"Super disappointing. I applaud the dancers who are speaking out. This whole situation is so... ugh. On the one hand, there are credible accusations that Lizzo acted super inappropriately and bullied her employees/coworkers and sexual situations. On the other hand, people are going to use this as an excuse to be nasty and fatphobic. Just ugh."

In response, another user said: "Being an asshole isn't a crime" to which a third user responded: "Making your employees eat a banana out of the vaginas of sex workers should probably be a crime, eh?"

Amia Srinivasan says, “The reality is that black girls and women, in the contemporary US and as compared with white women, are particularly susceptible to

²²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2.

certain forms of interpersonal violence.”²²¹ Even more, it is a reality that Black girls and women are given even less opportunity to explore arts and dance. According to “21 Dance Studio Stats” “Diversity across dancers and choreographers breaks out with 62% identifying as white (non-Hispanic), 11.3% white (Hispanic), 11.7% as Black, 6.11% as Asian, and 6% identifying with multiple races/ethnicities or other.”²²² While these women may have chosen to go to the strip club with Lizzo, their choices were limited in how they could react to Lizzo’s request, because the response could directly impact their career.

The discussion here on Reddit shows no consensus among Lizzo’s audience members regarding the response to her lawsuit. The first user’s comment is correct, in that these accusations have led to fatphobia and racism toward Lizzo. The second is also correct, being unkind to employees is unethical but not illegal. Also, while this is unethical, it does not affect Lizzo’s music. The final user is disgruntled with the actions they believe Lizzo has taken. Their criticism seems to be a more extreme response; however, it is justifiable, especially to others in the community, if the allegations are true. One point made by AbdoMaliqu Simone is, “Black people did not go through all they went through just in order to be integrated into the terms of an American society that did everything possible to keep them out.”²²³ Simone’s argument complicates the analysis around Lizzo. She does not conform to

²²¹ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 13.

²²² “Dance Studio Industry Stats for 2021,” Studio Director, Accessed August 9th, 2025, <https://www.thestudiodirector.com/blog/dance-studio-industry-stats/#:~:text=Diversity%20across%20dancers%20and%20choreographers,multiple%20races%20ethnicities%20or%20other.>

²²³ Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurances in an Urban South*, 6.

heteronormative standards and, regardless of allegations, fans can see that criticisms against her based on her background are wrong.

Srinivasan argues, “sexual self-objectification may mean one thing for a woman who, by virtue of her whiteness, already conforms to the paradigm of female beauty, but quite another thing for a black or brown woman, or a trans woman.” This may lead to the different responses which have occurred in Lizzo’s audiences after these allegations were made public. However, Srinivasan says, “This is not merely an epistemic claim: that a woman’s saying something about her own experience gives us strong, though perhaps not indefeasible, reason to think it true. It is also, or perhaps primarily, an ethical claim: a feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it presumes to liberate.”²²⁴

There are critical comments on Instagram about the lawsuit against Lizzo. These include "she's on her way to assault another," "I love how celebrities aren't commenting on her post because honey are the rumors true?" and "whatever they said she did, she did that shit... [side eye emoji]." Although these commenters only have information from those making the allegations, they have decided she is guilty. Furthermore, one user said,

Everyone here talking about how you body shamed someone, meanwhile I'm stuck on the part of the article that says your team member held a woman hostage at your behest so you could go through her phone. That's absolutely wild. I'm glad karma caught up with you. tyrants never last long.

²²⁴ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 82.

While the internet grants quick and easy access to information, it is also true that users may not have looked beyond one eye-catching article before forming an opinion on a serious topic such as this one. Regardless, Instagram users leave comments like "you look goofy now. it doesn't hit the same since you've been exposed, ma'am." While the allegations against Lizzo had not been settled in court, she had done something wrong in the eyes of many Instagram users on Lizzo's official account. Lizzo's fan account contains far less criticism of the musician. This dissertation only collected eight negative comments from the Lizzo fan page. Some include "she going to break the chair [chair emoji]," "stunning is right, I'm stunned that this poor oppressed person can get so big without money for food," and "it's so unhealthy to be that fat." Even on an account dedicated to Lizzo fandom, there's negativity, particularly about Lizzo's body. Those comments seem to be similar and negative without a constructive piece.



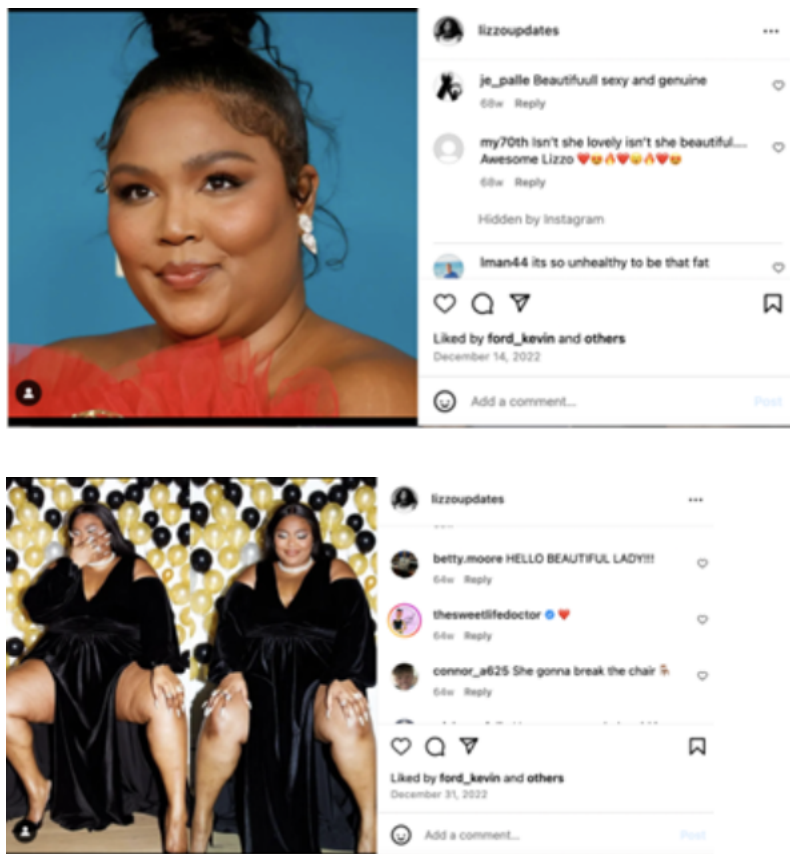


Figure 4.8, 4.9, & 4.10 [Body shaming toward Lizzo on Instagram in comments.]

Srinivasan argues there is a “deepening feminist anxiety about the ethics of sexual relationships inflected by large differentials of power. When the relatively powerless consent to sex with the powerful, is it consent worth the name?”²²⁵ She uses the example of teachers and students in this power dynamic, though I believe this framework parallels the dynamic between Lizzo and her backup dancers due to the nature of control over knowledge and career advancement in these scenarios.

²²⁵ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 127.

Srinivasan gives the example of a professor dating his student, who gives consent, without reservation. She questions if there is no problem with this situation and whether the problem really comes from lack of consent.²²⁶ There may not be fear in the situation around the teacher/student relationship nor may there have been fear in the relationship between Lizzo and her backup dancers, because the trust built between a superior and subordinate should be positive, in my opinion. However, when the person with more power can control the shape of the subordinate's future, there is too much at risk for proper consent to be possible, even if fear is not a determining factor. In the situation, nuance takes precedence. Perhaps Lizzo and her backup dancers have developed a friendship, but there is no way to balance the power because she controls their futures whether she recognizes this consciously or not.

From comments on TikTok, many users had much to say about Lizzo's lawsuit and the allegations made against her by her backup dancers. These backup dancers have alleged that Lizzo has forced them to do sexual acts, locked them in a rehearsal studio without breaks, and made negative comments about their physical appearances concerning their bodies. Relevant to this dissertation is the alleged forced sexual acts around bananas. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Lizzo has built a body positivity platform about her career and social media accounts.

Many critical comments on TikTok regarded Lizzo's backup dancers, the TikTok algorithm, and her silence on the topic. Comments include, "the algorithm knows what you did to your dancers," "Lizzo so we not going to talk about it...?" and "nah

²²⁶ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 128.

we need answers first." While many fans were hearing about lawsuit allegations from news sources and other social media accounts, Lizzo had not yet released a statement. As explained in my introduction, on TikTok, the algorithm shows the user videos from topics with which they interact the most. If users were watching videos about Lizzo or videos that tagged Lizzo, then it was likely that the TikTok algorithm showed them videos from her page. However, because she had not addressed these allegations on her page, fans expressed criticism. These comments are representative of a collapse of boundaries between Lizzo and her audience. Celebrity accountability seems like it becomes the responsibility of social media users when they demand for Lizzo to address the allegations made against her. Referencing the TikTok algorithm is also relevant because it is revealing of the symbiotic relationship for social media content, digital circulation, and controversy itself. Users online, encountering Lizzo and her controversy, seemed to have trouble divorcing her from the moral implications of the allegations made against her, despite the content of the videos she posted.

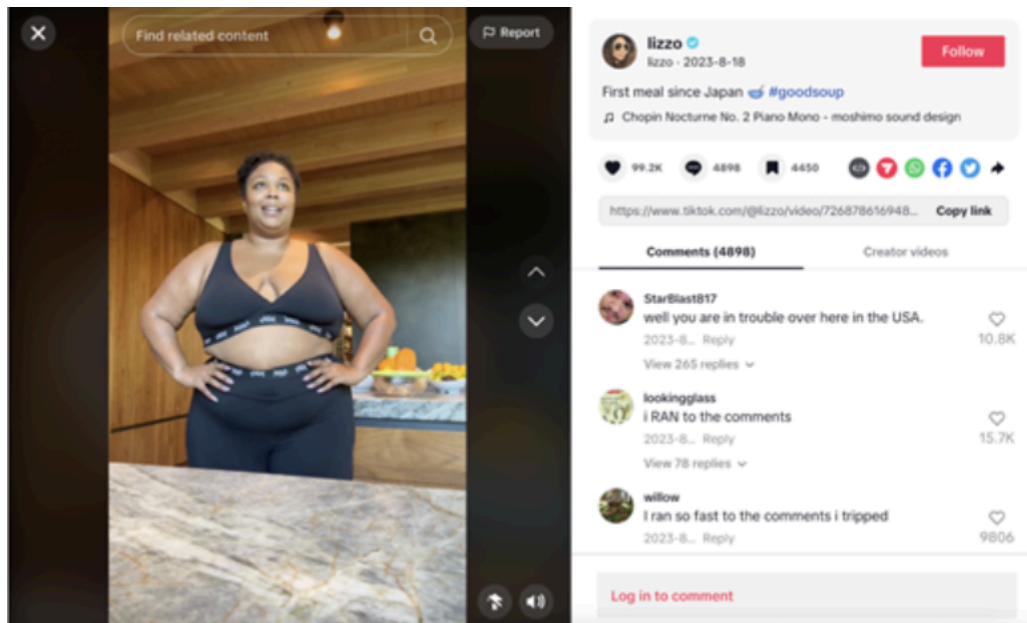


Figure 4.11 [Lizzo posts on TikTok and comments reference lawsuit.]

These comments led to questions about the relationship between Lizzo's audience and herself. Although the allegations against Lizzo are egregious, it is interesting that some of her audience feels they deserve explanations and information regarding her legal matters. There are also some comments from TikTok presuming her guilt. These include "PRIZZON," "Well you are in trouble over here in the USA," and "YOU ARE STILL IN TROUBLE WHAT." Although some comments are a play on words like the first in this list, the critical sentiment remains.

Furthermore, multiple comments reference the bananas and sexual assault allegations. These comments include "WHY BANANAS IS WHAT I'M CURIOUS ABOUT," "Not bananas girl," and "YOU MADE THEM PUT BANANAS WHERE?!" None of these videos reference the allegations or lawsuit, but critical

viewers did not want other content about other subjects to be posted without recognizing this situation first.

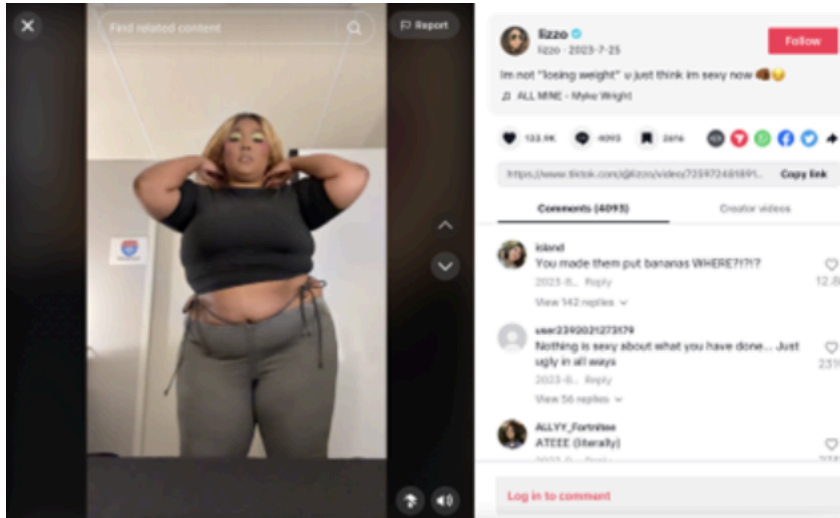


Figure 4.12 [Lizzo posts on TikTok and comments reference sexual assault allegations.]

Srinivasan acknowledges that some women who are feminists actually do have power, and that social media feminists have turned attention toward men who sexually abuse others.²²⁷ I believe it is also true of feminists who use social media as a platform to spread feminist messages and ideas, gaining a following based on shared politics, like Lizzo. The power gained on social media to influence the opinion of many in her audience meant that she should be particularly cognizant of the relationships she created with those she employed and the way she treated them. It was not possible to be friends in these scenarios because she controlled their futures. Consequently, whether the allegations were true is in some ways an unnecessary

²²⁷ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 149-50.

question, because finding out that Lizzo was not keeping boundaries created the rift in her audience and the reaction toward her platform and herself.

Music & Performance Comments from Community

Even with debates about morality and authenticity, Lizzo's music remains central to the culture and engagement around Lizzo's fandom, showing that despite controversy, there is still appreciation of her art. Lizzo's audience analyzes her music and performance both from live shows and in recorded, archived, settings. They communicate with one another, and Lizzo, on social media about different aspects they enjoyed and improvement they have seen. Fans also notice different instrumentation, pick out specific lyrical moments, and consider Lizzo's music in social context. The communication with Lizzo has led to relationships among fans, exchanges in culture, and community building. Maureen Mahon argues, "People who have been marginalized from institutional power frequently use popular culture forms and media technologies to make representations of their groups that counter negative images, the absence of images, and images produced by outsiders."²²⁸ As seen online Lizzo represents herself to her fans positively and with self-confidence in her music.

On TikTok, one user said, "her physical and vocal stamina never ceases to amaze me," "lyrical rapper [three eighth notes emoji]," and "so the recorder CAN SOUND NICE." Her followers enjoyed her singing and playing. One comment even said, "the amount of time and effort in her songs is unbelievable." Since these

²²⁸ Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, 38

comments are not directed at Lizzo specifically, they are for other commenters to see. These comments are also representative of her audience's values toward her musicianship and performance ability despite broader public comments reducing analysis to her body or race. Those who agree then "like" these comments, and they rise to the top of the TikTok comment section. Thus, the more general agreement or likes, the more likely other audience members will see the comment. Comments, like these examples, demonstrate that fans enjoy Lizzo's singing and playing and want to share in the conversation about this music.

Followers on Twitter also post about Lizzo's different performances, comparing her to other Black musical superstars. One comment said, "one of the best performers to come out of this new generation of music/perform[ers] Lizzo is dedicated to her craft." Although these comments do not specify which performers her followers compare her to, they connect her awards to how much effort she has put into her music. Shortly after her passing, Lizzo sang a tribute to the late Tina Turner. She sang the late musician's song, "Proud Mary," and was the first to pay a tribute to Turner after the announcement of her passing. Audience members applauded Lizzo for the tribute she pays to older artists like Tina Turner. She dressed as Turner for this tribute and performed her music. Rather than her audience viewing her as disconnected from earlier musical traditions, these comments show that they situate her within a lineage of Black women musicians. Mahon's work also becomes visible here because Lizzo's fans construct connections between Black musicians over generations rather than isolating genres and musicians to narrow definitions.



Figure 4.13 [Lizzo posts

on TikTok a snippet of her performance honoring Tina Turner.]

Moreover, at the Grammy's, Lizzo won "Record of the Year," the first Black woman to win this honor since Whitney Houston. One fan pointed out, "I love how you sang that "I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU" and Whitney [Houston] was the last Black woman to win that award." Fans seem to be well informed about the accolades of the musicians in the Black community. They seemed to relate the effort in music making to an honor deserved and were quick to point out this parallel. They even quoted her lyrics in her comments; one user said, "to be loved, to be loved, Oh What a Feeling to be loved." One of her TikTok posts which showed her performance honoring Whitney Houston held the comment, "Lizzo is out here supporting and hyping up women like Whitney Houston did, and that will give her legendary status one day [100 emoji]." Similarly, another user said, "Lizzo is deff a special one. I love how she is so sweet and supportive." These comments indicate users are interested in the Lizzo community, and star herself, because of her respect for Black women musicians around her.



Figure 4.14 & 4.15[Fans support Lizzo as she honors Whitney Houston's musical legacy.]

Another interesting comment left by a user claimed that "You have been all over the news in the UK for the last two days because of you; so many people want to start playing the flute you have encouraged a generation to play flute that's awesome [red heart emoji]."

This popular musician's influence on a generation of people learning to play a classically based instrument is important. Particularly because Lizzo is a popular musician who encourages the use of this instrument in non-traditional settings. Lizzo is a classically trained flute player but learned in her neighborhood, not in a conservatory setting. Lizzo counters heteronormative attitudes through her music and platform by weaving together classical and popular musical characteristics. I analyze Lizzo's flute playing through Hill-Collin's insider outsider framework because her musical visibility expands ideas of belonging in musical culture. Playing flute within

popular culture, Lizzo disrupts expectations of both race and gender. reFor example, in her popular song "About Damn Time," Lizzo plays flute. While the song is not written for a classical musical ensemble, Lizzo does play an instrument that is considered more traditional. Consequently, Lizzo's musical performance begins to demonstrate the both/and framework rather than dichotomize good/bad divisions of instrumentation and attributes. Another commenter said, "I live for your recorder performances!!!" which is often the gateway instrument to band instruments in the US. This comment shows Lizzo has inspired members of her audience to learn an instrument in a different genre than usual.



Figure 4.16 [A response to Lizzo's tweet claiming she is influencing youth in the UK to learn flute.]

Reddit had more conversational interactions between users concerning Lizzo's music and performances. A common reason to post by Reddit users was to give away or sell concert tickets they could no longer use. Rather than force other fans to pay resale fees, users wanted to recuperate the money they spent on tickets or give another fan a chance to enjoy the experience of a Lizzo concert for free.

One such thread of conversation went: "We have some as well to rehome [referring to concert tickets]- Golden Circle. Damn strikes." In response, another user said

"So annoying. I was upset that I couldn't go!" and lastly someone said, "My wife gave hers to a random person on Twitter. they won the jackpot, over 200 worth of tickets."

While fans acknowledge their frustration at missing concerts, they show kindness to others by allowing them to attend these concerts when they cannot. This online community facilitates these opportunities for giving and receiving. Also, they foster a culture of sharing one's fortune towards seeing a Lizzo show.

Another interesting use for the Reddit community is to ask questions about Lizzo's music and lyrics. Understanding references in her songs is vital for belonging in her fandom since acceptance can be contingent on the nuanced conversation. However, Reddit users seem to be willing to share their knowledge and have conversations with those wanting to gain this information as well. One conversation was based upon a user wanting to know about lyrics in the Lizzo song "The Sign." the lyrics are as follows:

Don't need that energy, bitch, I'm a Tesla
Hey, hey, F-O-B on the dresser

The original Reddit poster wanted to understand what this meant. The response was, "Cause she says, "don't need that energy, bitch I'm a Tesla. Ay, Ay, FOB on the dresser," so she's kind of mentioning how she drives a Tesla, and she likes clean energy, not bad energy. if that makes sense." In response, the original poster said, "I understand the Tesla part." So, in response, the other user said, "A FOB is the little Gadget that lets you unlock and start your car, so it goes with the

Tesla line." By explaining lyrics and allowing questions, new members are allowed into the community through the retrieval of nuanced information. This information becomes readily available with online communication.

Some Reddit users also debated Lizzo's concerts and her authenticity as a performer. They were able to post about attending a performance, and the discussion went as follows: "It was magical and amazing and I was beyond impressed!! I also teared up a few times. If her vibes are all for PR she's a real good actor because it seems authentic and real to me." Another user responded, "and honestly, [Lizzo's] PR/marketing is off the charts fantastic. I am in awe of her team's strategic work over the last few years. Don't care if some of those concert interactions are PR driven - she is still connecting and being a badass. She rules." Finally, in response to this, someone said, "this is the thing... an act can be both. She can be an awesome person who cares about her fans and also be aware that it will help her pr. doesn't have to be Black and white!"

This fan debate about authenticity shows fans engaging beyond superficial interaction with Lizzo's music and her persona. They both acknowledge she creates a character and is still a real person. However, they can find it difficult to differentiate which parts of Lizzo's performance are mediated by her marketing team and which are truly her personality and relationship to fans.

One fan on Reddit created a post showing she had brought her 11-year-old son to a Lizzo concert and included a photo that showed him enjoying himself. The users

were happy to see this child enjoying participation in their community. One user said, "that's amazing! Aww bless him, getting his groove on with Lizzo! So cute. I love this for him [heart eye emoji] and hope there's many more concerts to come. Best thing I've seen today [confetti popper emoji] [Black heart emoji]!"

Clearly this community member surrounding Lizzo was encouraging of even children participating in this culture. Another user said "what a wonderful experience! Thanks for sharing. Love seeing inclusive events like this so that everyone can participate and enjoy. He is probably still floating :)" It seems that the online culture surrounding Lizzo encourages new participants, and they become excited to share their space.

Also, users have commented on Lizzo's music and performance on Instagram. Her music seems to have connected with her community emotionally, as many comments have themes of sentimental response. One comment said, "when [I] first heard this song I [cried] and then I cry every time I hear it [red heart emoji] No one ever told me this." This comment is about Lizzo's song "Special," in which she sings lyrics telling the listener they are important, and she is glad they are in the world with her. Another comment said, "I get chills when I watch you perform! Truly magical the way you connect with people [red heart emoji]." Lizzo's audience relates with her music, causing these reactions. One comment said, "it was CRIMINAL you didn't headline. Smashed it babes you are a fucking queen xxx." These comments all have in common that users express strong emotions about the music and performances of

Lizzo herself. The community builds itself around her act of giving this art to her audience.

Lizzo's flute and recorder playing also inspires users of Instagram to react. One comment said, "As a former flute player you have no idea how much I admire you and look up to you. I got accepted to the University of Houston (not studying music) and I love that you went there as well." This connection to Lizzo has helped the student and led to interacting with Lizzo and her online community. Another comment said, "you make me want to get my flute back out!" showing how Lizzo is a role model and inspires those to continue their musical journey. Furthermore, many comments on Instagram focus on Lizzo's posts about playing the recorder. They said things like, "now, if my kid had sounded like that in her third-grade recorder practice..." "that is NOT how a recorder has EVER sounded in the entire history of the world. That is talent! [Clapping emoji] [fire emoji]" and "can't believe they made us learn hot cross buns in grade school when we could have been learning this [one sweat on forehead face emoji]," showing how members of Lizzo's audience are impressed with her recorder playing ability and find her unique.

The data from Lizzo's fan account about her music and performances focused on fans' love for her concerts. One said, "the concert was so good. I'm already looking forward to seeing you at the Antwerp's sports Palace on February 24th." Even though this is not an official account, this fan is commenting as though Lizzo may have seen, or will see, their words. Another fan wrote, "great concert!!! [Fire emoji] 3x," a more general approach to commenting that could complement Lizzo, but also leaves open

the option for discussion with other fans. One fan said, "every time, every performance, every[thing]... PURE WARM GOLD that feeds the soul. THANK YOU." This comment shows the fan's emotional connection to Lizzo's work. These comments share a sense of community as they discuss why they love Lizzo and what brought them to this page.

Many audience members also discussed Lizzo's United Kingdom leg of her European tour. One said, "Lizzo in the UK is the best thing ever," Showing they seem to expect other fans to agree and respond. Similarly, another fan said, "this is our official petition to make Lizzo a permanent UK news anchor [hands up emoji]." Fans were joking and enjoying Lizzo's UK performances, creating camaraderie in the online discussion space. Another user said, "Lizzo in her British cover era this is so fun LMAOOO." By performing in the UK, Lizzo brought together British fans in her online TikTok comment section. These posts allowed for insider information and shared experiences these groups could understand. These examples together show that musical and performance engagement allows for fans to remain connected even when broader tensions have not been resolved.

Lizzo's Musical Influence in Social Communication and Politics

Regardless of controversy, some fans still choose to identify with Lizzo positively. I use Stacey Wolf's framework to analyze performers as role models for the girls in the fandom to help consider Lizzo's role for her community.²²⁹ According

²²⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 232.

to Wolf, fans not only idolize the stars but identify with them as well.²³⁰ She argues that the girls not only enjoy the musical but use it as an influence in their life.²³¹ Similarly, those who participate in the Lizzo fandom, use her positivity posts, activism, and online community building as scripts for their lives.

Many comments on the Lizzo social media pages are dedicated to her, specifically. Instead of discourse toward other fans of Lizzo these comments are meant to be a discussion with Lizzo herself. Rather than a personal relations manager or marketing team, fans may get a response from her directly. This possibility leads to encouragement to post toward Lizzo, when making social media comments. These conversations also may allude to the idea that fans have a personal relationship with Lizzo. This relationship may or may not be reality. However, these conversations seem to convey feelings fans have towards Lizzo. As such, they are a rich place to explore the culture of the Lizzo fandom.

Lizzo's "Like a Girl," released on her 2022 album *Special*, functions as a reclamation of the phrase "like a girl," used to belittle actions associated with femininity. Rather than accepting this negative connotation, Lizzo reframes the phrase as a marker of strength, independence, and self-sufficiency. Through her lyrics, she directly challenges hetero-patriarchal traditional gender norms and expectations placed upon women. For instance, when she sings, "Buy my whip by myself/ pay my rent by myself," Lizzo emphasizes financial independence and autonomy. In these lyrics it seems she is asserting her ability to provide for herself without reliance on

²³⁰ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 231.

²³¹ Ibid, 232.

anyone else, including a male partner. By using the lyrics and music to flip the meaning of this phrase, Lizzo transforms “like a girl” into a declaration of empowerment.

Musically, the song uses rhythms that seem to be funk and dance influenced. “Like a Girl” has a strong groove and the rhythm is emphasized especially under Lizzo’s speech/rap like verses. Moreover, “Like a Girl” uses repetition in lyrics to reinforce her message “Like a girl (like a girl)/ Like a girl (like a girl).” She also sings emotional choruses in contrast to her speech/rap verses which make them passionate focuses in the song. The song provides a message that is emphasized by its music.

The percussion instrumentation in this piece works with the bass line to create a forward momentum underscoring the celebratory anthem of Lizzo’s message. Percussion is especially prominent in the chorus where strong downbeats accent her emotional lyrics. The song uses a strong beat and dance groove. The syncopated rhythms are also indicative of a funk influence which Lizzo highlights as important to her musical style. These can be heard most strongly in her verses where accenting off beats emphasizes this style. She also excludes harmonic tension in this song, trying to make the song positive all the way through and making a highly positive tone.

“Like a Girl” is a reclamation for feminist themes and a turn away from gender stereotypes for Lizzo’s audience. The musical intensity matches the message Lizzo is trying to portray for her audience. Through the lyrics in this song, Lizzo reclaims language used to diminish women. Butler’s work is relevant in my analysis because Lizzo destabilizes assumptions around femininity. The repetition of “like a

girl” in her lyrics functions as a rhetorical refusal of the negative associations with the phrase given throughout historically patriarchal culture.

Data from Lizzo's fan accounts includes fans attempting to talk with Lizzo. One comment related Lizzo's political directness to the women's rights movement in the 1970s. Mahon says, “Sometimes the sexism of rock ‘n’ roll seems too deeply entrenched for even the most radical women to effectively undermine it.”²³² A user said, "Amen in the 70s you are right to do your thing GOD BLESS YOU ABUNDANTLY TAKE THIS FROM THE AFRICAN MOM [red heart emoji] [green check mark emoji] [hands praying emoji]." This user's comment indicates they think Lizzo is continuing the political work done by women in the 1970s. The fan may encourage Lizzo to keep making politically related posts because they believe this is similar activist work. Also, the user claims to be an African mom who approves of Lizzo. Judith Butler argues that there is no universal idea that encompasses feminism because not all women are oppressed in the same ways, due to intersectional backgrounds that contribute to other parts of their identities.²³³ Support from other women who believe that the artist is doing good political work helps to bolster the idea, as pointed out by Butler, that Lizzo counters the overarching normative political oppressive nature in society. Even though a heteronormative culture still exists online Lizzo disrupts the socially normative.

Other comments were related to Lizzo honoring women activists of color at the People's Choice award. She brought each nominee on stage with her, stated each

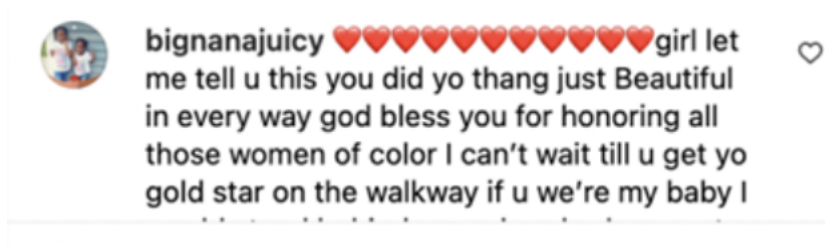
²³² Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, 326.

²³³ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 5.

of their names, and explained their backgrounds. These women run organizations that fight for progress in women's rights in the US. A commenter said,

[red heart emoji] 9x Girl let me tell you this you did your thing just beautiful in every way. God bless you for honoring all these women of color. I can't wait till you get your gold star on the walkway. If you were my baby I would stand behind you one hundred percent. DON'T EVER LET ANYONE CHANGE WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU represent AND WHERE YOU GO IN YO LIFE DO YOU TILL YOU CAN'T NO MORE. The sky has no limits for you baby 2023 belongs to you girl. Get a movie going, do more shows, and show the world who you are and where you are headed. Love you. Keep on keeping on. Goodnight gorgeous [fire emoji] 9x [red heart emoji] 2x [clapping emoji] 5x [one tear crying emoji] 2x.

Although this quote is lengthy, it shows multiple aspects of Lizzo's life that this user follows. They were impressed with the way Lizzo highlighted the work of each of the activists. Furthermore, they seem to indicate a desire for Lizzo to continue her career and become more famous. For example, they support her participation in other art-making activities, such as movies. They seem to express in this comment that they think Lizzo is a unique artist who should contribute more to the world.



those women of color I can't wait till u get yo
gold star on the walkway if u we're my baby I
would stand behind u one hundred percent
DONT EVER LET ANYONE CHANGE WHO
YOU ARE AND WHAT U Represent AND
WERE U GOING IN YO LIFE DO U till u can't
do no more the sky has known limits for u
baby 2023 belongs to you girl get a movie
going do more shows show the world who
you are and we're you are headed luv u keep
on keeping on good nite gorgeous🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥
🔥🔥🔥❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️🥹🥹

Figure 4.17 [A fan leaves a lengthy Instagram comment encouraging Lizzo.]

Moreover, Lizzo shares her own political ideology and seems to encourage her audience to discuss society and politics. Lizzo tweeted about her political frustrations and created a discourse with her fans. One fan said, "but the louder we younger people are, the more people who hear. the more people who hear and stand up and believe, the stronger we become to make changes." Lizzo made a quote tweet response saying, "which is why I said I appreciate the sentiment- because I believe, to a degree it's true! we can be better with time & shared experiences. Only thing we need to collectively realize is that the system is designed to indoctrinate new generations and has been fully functional since 1787."

By discussing politics, Lizzo invites those who follow her to share their views with the online community around her. One response to a political tweet by Lizzo said,

I 100% agree with you!! It's frustrating to see the same cycles happening over and over again, and to feel almost hopeless at times. I feel like a lot more people are starting to see the roots of the issue though. it's slow, but I do feel like more people are beginning to see it [praying hands emoji].

This open discussion about politics leads to shared conversations about the community's beliefs. Similarly, when opening a conversation about capitalism and allocating funds, Lizzo's followers had much to say. One user tweeted, "When it comes to business, sadly, we have to accept any 'good' they do is actually an unintended byproduct of their financial aims. They will act out of self- interest, and usually only ever do good on accident. But a win is a win."

Fans discuss their views on economic, political, and social ideas. This online environment allows a place to post these ideas and somewhere to look them up if one desires. Moreover, the shared ideals between Lizzo and fans may lead to a stronger bond and ideas of a relationship, just as it would when talking in person.



Figure 4.18 [A fan responds to Lizzo's tweet on politics.]

As in any shared community, politics is one important factor for discussion. Lizzo's political platform is supportive of many types of marginalized groups. She points out the oppressive legislature in different Twitter posts and offers to discuss it with fans in the comment section to learn more about the current political climate.

Lizzo is supportive of the LGBTQ+ community in her music as well. Two songs, "Like A Girl" and "Boys," are examples of how Lizzo supports these groups of people. The song, "Like A Girl" says,

So if you feel like a girl
Then you're real like a girl/
Do your thing
Run the whole damn world

Here, Lizzo is supportive of trans women's rights, pointing out that regardless of gender assigned at birth, she believes women are women. In the song "Boys," the lyrics say:

From the playboys
To the gay boys
Go and slay boys
You my fave boys

In this song, Lizzo discusses all kinds of men from different parts of the world with different appearances, but she does not forget to include men from LGBTQ+ groups.

Lizzo's music and online presence show her interest in political activism and allow for open discussion with her audience to share their opinions. Fans can interact with her online and are aware of the groups and rights she supports.

Social media, particularly around Lizzo, forges relationships online that result in connections through complex understandings. As argued by Zavattaro, “With all the pressures in public and private spaces, is it no wonder people might seek solace in a digital world— where a screen, to some extent, protects the person from direct evil gazes and judgment.”²³⁴ I reason that this argument is expandable and it is not only solace sought online, but community. Zavattaro says, “While there is a risk for commodification and usurpation, there also is a chance to create a new narrative that embraces body positivity for all individuals no matter the size, color, race, creed, gender identity, and more.”²³⁵ Acceptance is important, no matter one’s background and, I believe that examining the complexities that the aforementioned identities provides, allows for a more intricate analysis.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argue controversy against Lizzo is an entry point for analysis of fan expectations, authenticity, and public scrutiny. I use frameworks by Patricia Hill Collins, Susan McClary, Judith Butler, Maureen Mahon, Angela McRobbie, Sara Ahmed, and Amia Srinivasan. I analyze the insider/outsider lens of intersectionality, mind/body dualism in music, body politics and gender norms, racialized genre in popular music, media and femininity, complaint and power, and consent around feminisms with these authors. I chose the sexual assault allegations against Lizzo as a pivotal moment because of the influx of reactions to her online when the allegations

²³⁴ Zavattaro “Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity,” 290.

²³⁵ Ibid, 292.

were made public. I argue in this chapter that her audience response reflects intersectional pressures of race, gender, body, and class and analysis cannot be separated from these societal influences.

Moreover, I analyze how body politics are central in digital scrutiny of Lizzo and examine fatphobia toward Lizzo through backhanded positivity and policing of food. I consider internalized bias and fan debates on Lizzo's authenticity as well as Lizzo's representation of marginalized groups. I also consider how social media creates imagined community and a space for fan representation and visibility. Then, I discuss pre and post allegation perspectives of Lizzo in her audience and the question of moral accountability from the audience to the star. I examine power imbalance and the complications of who is believed when intersectional background oppression plays a role in the accusation. Then, I analyze fans' interaction with song lyrics, music, and performance meaning as they relate to emotional connection with Lizzo and questions of her authenticity as a performer.

I consider how the online Lizzo community can be used as a collaborative space, and tool for political dialogue but also what this means when the center of the space, Lizzo, no longer represents the overall community. This chapter shows that controversy around Lizzo creates an opportunity to discuss how her audience is mediated by intersectionality, politics, and the online space.

Chapter 5: Fan Connections, Musical Changes, & Lizzo's Creative Influence

In reference to her music video for her song "Special," Lizzo made many promotional posts on Twitter at the beginning of February 2023. One which stood out- included two still photo captures from the "Special" music video, one 12 second video clip, and a 51 second voice recording. The first still shot is Lizzo dressed as her super hero alter ego - a waitress - in front of a diner from the music video named "About Dine Time." The second still shows action figures made to look like Super Lizzo. The 12 second clip includes a behind the scenes video of Lizzo dressed in her super hero attire. Someone off camera says, "Oh no, someone took my wallet." The video pans to Lizzo pretending to talk into her hand as though she is speaking into a cell phone saying "See, I told Captain America he needs to pay his damn child support- Lil' 'Merica hungry..." The off-screen character then says, "Are you Super Lizzo?" and then Lizzo breaks into laughter. In the 51 second voice recording Lizzo explains the meaning behind her post and music video for "Special." She says,

The music video starts off showing the super hero, the Black woman as super hero, and it's like America loves Black women as a super hero, but absolutely hates her as a human being. The glorious super hero, you see her, you know, life saver, press, everyone loves her. And then she takes off her costume as a Black woman. And just showing the juxtaposition of how she gets treated in the real world. The hope is that ya'll see me, who I am, and ya'll appreciate me, you know. And then it's like, at the end I hang up my Super Man outfit, I ain't saving the world no more, I'm saving myself. Okay.

Lizzo goes on to caption her post thanking fans for supporting her and allowing her to represent women who look like her. This chapter analyzes the

relationship between Lizzo and her audience especially through the intersectional lens of marginalized communities. I examine fan communication with Lizzo and the impact of the communication on music. Then, I also consider the particular history of backlash for historically marginalized groups of people as representation and identity are communicated online.

Concluding the data gathering portion of my dissertation was, in some ways, an unsatisfying endeavor. I limited myself to gathering data from December 18th, 2022, to November 1st, 2023 (one calendar year). I initially chose this period because Lizzo was extremely popular during this time frame, but then a large shift in audience responses happened when the allegations made by her backup dancers went viral in August of 2023. The music, performance, and relationship between Lizzo and her online audience is ever-changing, however, the data from this dissertation shows a major shift in the relationship between audience and performer.

Introduction

In this chapter, I draw on Angela McRobbie's framework to analyze Lizzo's online fan relationships and how her online persona interacts with broader cultural norms. I demonstrate how Lizzo's music, lyrics, and social media posts enact empowerment of femininity through non-traditional representation. I also examine how fan's responses to Lizzo's work are shaped by social expectations. I then build on Daphne Brook's work and center Lizzo as a Black woman in popular music. I highlight how her online persona is central to the foundation of her fan community

and how this shapes fan engagement. Then, I build on Stacy Wolf's work to explore how online communication reveals perceived intimacy with Lizzo. I draw on work by Saiyida Hartman, Rene Richardson, Cienna Davis, and Elena Herrera Quintana to examine pressures for Black women in popular music, particularly with the ways colorism, fatphobia, and even body representation are culturally constructed. I additionally use work by Rebecca J. Sheehan and Eric Porter to examine fan representation and connection online while considering how commodification of Black musicians continues to influence Lizzo today. This chapter emphasizes the significance of representation and identity to engagement with Lizzo and her audience while examining the online culture around the star.

Chapter Methods/Frameworks

I use Angela McRobbie's work in this chapter to analyze the relationship between media and popular culture for Lizzo's audience. Popular culture is readily available online, but it can also transmit manipulative messaging. I use McRobbie in this chapter to examine normative expectations around gender, race, and body politics in online spaces.²³⁶ These ideas provide a framework for understanding Lizzo's connections, or lack thereof in some cases, to fans online. By communicating through the lens of society today, Lizzo either meets normative expectations or disappoints the standards of these expectations. In turn, fans react based on whether they agree or disagree with privileged norms. I use McRobbie's framework in this chapter to

²³⁶ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*, 65.

consider fan relationships and reactions to Lizzo online, as she projects images and messages to her community through cultural norms set by the larger society. While McRobbie provided a framework to analyze femininity in media, I also required a framework to center Black women musicians within popular culture. Consequently, I moved to the foundation provided by Daphne Brooks.

In my work so far, I consider the implications of interacting with a famous musician online, considering that musician a friend, and consequently building a community around that musician. Daphne Brooks poses the question, “whether we might be able to imagine a pop (culture) life with Black women at its full-stop center rather than as the opening act, the accompanying act, or the afterthought?”²³⁷ Lizzo, in this case study, is at the center of the community; without her, there is nothing around which to build this culture. In my work, Lizzo is not the peripheral, she is the center of the community. My dissertation extends Brook’s work- because Lizzo is the center of the culture in this scenario. There is no Lizzo comment section without her. The community that shares its ideas and thoughts on her music online only exists because Lizzo is its starting point. This dissertation also draws data from anonymous sources, not because the research seeks to avoid participant bias necessarily, but because identifying subjects online is not quite possible. Rather than rejecting subjects for lack of background knowledge, this research sits in the uncomfortable, allowing for voices to shine through and represent many fans. Consequently, Brooks provides my

²³⁷ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 27

work with the foundation for centering Lizzo as the center of her digital community as culture and is formed.

Once I centered Lizzo in this cultural space, I turned to examining how this centrality is experienced and identified by fans. Stacey Wolf provides a framework in her book on *Wicked* the musical, about fans and online connections. I use Wolf's work here to show how fan discourse is meaningful cultural data. She shows how there has been a tendency to dismiss girl's fandom, but she sees it as productive.²³⁸ Wolf says, "By taking girls seriously as participants in culture, [she] aim[s] to value their fandom and to demonstrate pleasurable productiveness of queer divas on the Broadway musical stage."²³⁹ Wolf does this by using online discussion boards to outline the conversations held between fans of the musical and their in-depth details. Rather than discussion boards, I use Lizzo's comment sections. Taking Wolf's framework as a foundation, I use fans' words as discourse that reveals culture.

Building on Wolf's work I extended this framework from discussion boards to comment sections in my own work. I recognize, creating a relationship with Lizzo is possible due to participation with the artist herself online. Moreover, due to Lizzo's constant posting there is an illusion from a fan's point of view that they have unlimited access to the artist. Because of social media, one can always learn more about Lizzo and it seems like her audience always has access to converse with her. Online, there is always an availability of information, new facts to learn and share, and an archive of knowledge to draw from. However, it is also true that the

²³⁸ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 221.

²³⁹ Ibid, 222.

information the audience gains about Lizzo is curated. As mentioned, this information is not a representation of Lizzo as a person but rather Lizzo as a persona. However, it is important to take these fans seriously as participants in the creation of the community around Lizzo, regardless of how much they “really know” the artist.

While fan discourse reveals cultural meaning in online spaces today, I also situate this discourse within broader social power and historical struggles. Saidiya Hartman argues, “History is a battle royale, a contest between the powerful and the powerless in “what happened” as well as in the stories we tell about what happened- a fight to the death over the meaning of the past.”²⁴⁰ Through this power of storytelling, by those with non-hegemonic power, I have examined the narrative around Lizzo. Hartman also provides a lens to show the past continues influencing popular music through the data gathered from groups who are not hegemonic, in comment sections.

I focus this specific historical lens toward Black women in popular music. The power dynamics and structure outlined in Hartman’s work influence how Lizzo is represented and how audiences engage with her. Moreover, Lizzo's online platform, and the audience around her, disrupt dominant narratives. Riché Richardson’s chapter, in *Beyoncé in the World* he argues, ““Beyoncé’s breakthroughs at this level show Black women's capacity to interrupt and unsettle the prevailing, white-centered narratives of American identity.”²⁴¹ Similarly, Lizzo as a fat, Black woman unsettles the white-centered

²⁴⁰ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 192.

²⁴¹ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 97.

heteronormativity of American culture by representing herself as happy, positive, and successful in a musical space where she is traditionally other-ed. Within this book Cienna Davis also argues, "The roots of colorism in the African American community can be traced directly to slavery."²⁴² In a parallel argument, the roots of fat-phobia can also be traced back to slavery. Justifications by eugenic scientists were created to divide people racially, claiming Black people were supposedly animalistic and had no control of their eating habits, consequently creating fat body types and the association with fatness, blackness, and negativity. This lack of self-control was one of the justifications used by those who wanted to control and enslave others. By following the logic Davis has introduced the representation of the legacy in racism continues. However, with this background information in mind, Lizzo attempts to step outside of that social construct. Elena Herrera Quintana posits, "Feminist cultural researchers have to avoid reading Beyoncé's work as another pop music product, keeping in mind that her Black body has meanings rooted in slavery and in the successive representations of Black female bodies since then within the culture industry."²⁴³ This work was important for me to keep in mind as I analyze the data and research I have gathered in this work. Fans interpret Lizzo and her music through the histories outlined by Richardson, Davis, and Quintana, and these narratives are important.

²⁴² McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 70.

²⁴³ Ibid, 229.

Last, in the same book, Rebecca J. Sheehan considers how fans are vital to the creation of the community around Beyoncé. I use this work to examine how fans engage in Lizzo's audience. Sheehan argues that fans feel representation matters in the musician they follow. Similarly, fans feel representation is important in the Lizzo community. Sheehan says, "The fans' ability to embrace intersecting identities, the past and present, and individuality and community resists fragmentation in a dehumanizing world."²⁴⁴ Lizzo's fans also use their community to disseminate ideas about their personal communities. They can understand how others who support Lizzo feel about her music due to these intersecting backgrounds. Comment sections consequently become active sites of meaning making for the fans who follow Lizzo. Next, I move from theory to practice as I situate Lizzo's online presence within broader structures of power, representation, and audience engagement. Taken together, these frameworks allow me to analyze the cultural discourse online shaped through parasocial relationships with Lizzo and historical constructions of Black femininity.

Lizzo's Fan Interactions

Referring to the music video in the opening of this chapter, one fan was excited to share this post with their child. In response to this music video one user explained "my four-year old is obsessed with Lizzo, after watching this she said "Lizzo is a superhero!"²⁴⁴ This comment reveals how participants in her community

²⁴⁴ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 181.

bring what is online to in person lives. In response to this user, someone tweeted “that is so cute! I can't wait to show mine after her mini nap [tears in eyes happy crying emoji].” Lizzo's fan base is not only made up of online users. By showing younger fans the material posted by Lizzo, those online can allow others to participate in the online fandom culture with examples like these music videos. I read these examples through the work by Richardson and Quintana as they exemplify Black women’s visibility in popular culture. Cultural imagination even extends past the representation online when as popular culture, like in Lizzo’s example, disrupts dominant beauty standards.

In one case, Lizzo retweeted a tweet causing the user's friend to erupt in celebration. In a comment responding to Lizzo’s retweet the friends of the original user said, “Congrats on your Lizzo notice!!” The responses indicate how exciting it is for a mutual friend to achieve this recognition by the star. In response they said, “THANK YOU [crying face emoji]” This response shows how a fan might feel a deeply personal and emotionally significant reaction to Lizzo noticing them. The crying face emoji indicates how happy and exciting this response is for the fan. The fan may interpret this interaction as the validation of the connection between themselves and Lizzo but also the friend celebrates the response with them, creating a closer community bond between themselves and another Lizzo audience member.



Figure 5.1 [Fan's discuss Lizzo responding to their tweets.]

In a similar situation, someone received a retweet from Lizzo and responded in a comment saying, "I'M SHAKING." This demonstrates that the retweet was significant to the fan, causing a visceral reaction. This led to a response from their friend who was also excited. They said, "SHE LOVES YOU." This capitalization seems to express how significant it can be for Lizzo to interact with fans online because of the ways this builds community. This response from Lizzo helps to further the illusion of intimacy between the audience and star. Moreover, it represents a larger cultural representation within the Lizzo fandom as other fans recognize the interaction between a fan and Lizzo. Posts like these demonstrate Wolf's framework where emotional reactions from fans are meaningful in cultural production online, rather than entertainment or trivial posting. Social media posts and retweets create perceived intimacies between fans and the artist, which is demonstrated in these tweets. Lizzo's response is validating toward her fandom and its fans and further develops the community.



Figure 5.2 [Fans are excited for one another because Lizzo has responded to their friend.]

Online Popular Music Scene with Lizzo's & her Audience

Lizzo's social media presence creates an online culture which allows for participatory creative communities, creates fan connections with audience members and the star herself, and influences musical production. As Lizzo navigates a space created to alienate historically marginalized groups she allows for representation for her audience. Her online fandom has created an empowering and creative community which provides the space for feedback to the star and to one another. Representation of different marginalized groups occurs through the production of art, music, and communication, and is nuanced through intersectional layers.

Though Lizzo is not a jazz musician, the arguments made by Eric Porter in his book *What is this Thing Called Jazz?* help to further analyze the socio-historical context around Lizzo as a Black musician. Porter argues of jazz musicians, "The cultivation of originality and the embrace of art as an experience of one's emotional core

provided a means to power in a system that exploited black musicians and erased black genius. Black musicians knew they were producing a commodity.”²⁴⁵ Similarly, Lizzo is producing a commodified persona through videos and music online. Online, she is allowed to traverse spaces that were not created for her success. Furthermore, as Porter points out in jazz, “this masculinist ethos within the musician's community was also a product of the contradictory class politics of black music and the hybrid world musicians inhabited. It derived from the music's unsteady location at the margins of high art, folk expression, and the commodified mass culture as well as from the collision between working class and bourgeois orientations and African American and European American musical cultures.”²⁴⁶ Historically, Black musicians, and Black women in particular, had to struggle with acceptance, and this bleeds into the shadow banning of the internet today. These allegations were the first step toward no longer showing Lizzo’s content. TikTok quickly removed her access to her followers. One comment on TikTok said, "I love my body because of you." This comment implies that Lizzo's positivity towards non-normative body types allowed this fan to grow their self-confidence. It demonstrates that fans have developed more positive ideals through Lizzo’s representation of self-love and different body types. Using Sheehan’s work as a lens for analysis, as Lizzo’s audience uses community and online discussion as a place to negotiate self worth and belonging. Fans seem to associate Lizzo’s platform with confidence building and positivity. One TikTok comment said, "I LOVE YOU I HONESTLY DON'T BELIEVE THE RUMORS

²⁴⁵ Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 31.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 28.

NOR CARE," implying that due to the connection with Lizzo that has developed online this user trusts Lizzo over the allegations made against her. This comment is demonstrative of the depth of parasocial relationship that Lizzo has built with her audience. Fans seem to receive ongoing access to Lizzo's persona, even though it is likely curated, which can lead to a privileging of perceived personal familiarity rather than an examination of the controversy.

Parasocial Relationship to Lizzo and Community

Patterns of interaction between Lizzo and her community signal the formation of parasocial relationships. Although not all community members suggest they feel this way, the parasocial relationship built between Lizzo and her audience seems to have allowed for some good faith belief in her on a personal level for some fans. To further explore these connections to fans' feelings I use a lens by Villareal on popular culture. Villareal states, "When I talked to fellow migrants and first-generation friends, we all shared this common history: an excessive consumption of American pop culture and media as children." These minority communities place value in the interaction around popular culture such as the online Lizzo community. Villareal says, "It's more than just code-switching and double-consciousness— that's just the surface, interacting with the outside. Within, there is a deep split in consciousness, a rift between two identities, two lands growing ever apart as time goes on."²⁴⁷ These lands are literal and also metaphorical because popular culture has a physical and online

²⁴⁷ Villareal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 26-7.

local. Villareal considers "...a liminal site of fantasy, disobedience, rebellion, and provocation where [she] could fully express [her] most subversive, vulnerable, provocative, brave self," through popular cultural understanding.²⁴⁸ Others connected to Lizzo online by supporting her through illness. Lizzo posted on Instagram that she felt sick with flu-like symptoms. Comments soon came directed to her, with well wishes. For example, these included "feel better lovely queen" and "Lizzo feel better soon [red heart emoji] 2x [one tear crying emoji]." Even more, one user commented, tagging Lizzo and her clothing brand Yitty and saying, "Sending you love! And praying God's covering over you. [Red heart emoji]." The relationship between the artist and the audience is represented in Instagram followers' speedy recovery messages. They also share their spiritual and religious beliefs, which are personal.

In his chapter, "The Sociology of Fandom," Marc H. Greenberg argues that many fans are not taken seriously despite the output of material they create around their fandom. He says, "one doesn't have to look hard to find examples of derogatory treatment and ridiculing of fans."²⁴⁹ He uses work from Henry Jenkins, one of the earliest Fan Studies scholars to support his claims. Greenberg identifies with Jenkins' term, "acafan," defined as "an academic who studies and writes about fan culture and is him- or herself also a fan."²⁵⁰ I use Greenberg's chapter as a lens for understanding fan creativity and art about Lizzo. Because of connections they make to her work, and their understanding of the cultural currency and ability to increase monetary capital through the online space, fans try to connect with Lizzo in this way.

²⁴⁸ Villareal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 29.

²⁴⁹ Greenberg, "The Sociology of Fandom," 3.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 4.

Online Dialogue and Changes in Music

Beyond emotional connections, Lizzo's art and music is also affected by these relationships. Because she shares details online, Lizzo opens dialogue in her community and creates a space where fans can feel comfortable to give feedback on her life, share their own experiences, and comment on her music. Lizzo shares her meals in posts online and creates links to cultural connection through these posts. She posts about attempting different vegan recipes but puts effort into connecting with fans by trying their suggestions. One fan said, "Sometimes when I'm cooking my lil vegan meal I'm like 'Lizzo would like this,'" showing that the connection of food is apparent in this online culture. She calls her fruit and ice concoction vegan cereal and discusses the smoothies she makes. These kinds of recipes are even referenced in different lyrics as she dismisses the necessity for smoothie cleanses and diet culture.

Some tweets demonstrate a connection to Lizzo's music and performances. One tweet about Lizzo's music referenced the user's desire for another album. It said, "I miss you!! Drop the 4th album soon so we can see you again on tour, [hearts around face emoji]." This user seems to have a parasocial-type relationship with Lizzo around talking to her online and seeing her performances. They seem to convey that her audience views connecting to her online as an opportunity to encourage her to create new music. Also, they hope she will go on tour again so they can see her in person. Yet, fans know they will be able to see clips of her performances and concerts online. Because of technology, there is still an opportunity for connection to the background of those performances and music.

A person talking directly to Lizzo on Twitter saw Lizzo's influence on the younger generation of artists and listeners. The user commented, "see a lot of inspiration artwork of you from the youngins. Keep doing what you are doing girl, your positivity and your music is what we women need. even us grown folks! [Red heart emoji]"

This user posits that Lizzo is a good influence to many people. The idea of owning the artist through society becomes apparent as fans try to one up one another with how much they know about Lizzo. One fan questioned the authenticity of other fans and their knowledge of Lizzo. This user said, "I'm mad weak at the fact people are now realizing Lizzo's real name lol. Google is free. but I'm a real Lizzo fan so I been knew it." This fan wonders about the relationship others have with Lizzo by not knowing trivia about her life. They indicate that they feel fans are not true unless they know more details about Lizzo.



Figure 5.3 & 5.4 [Fans tweet about their relationship to Lizzo.]

Another comment on Twitter showed a fan relationship with Lizzo where they felt comfortable asking her for help. The comment said, "I love this hair Lizzo. Lizzo I need a job. I can send my resume for help with the job. I have a love for planning, marketing, and fashion. I'm even a great cook! Soul food. I have been struggling and I keep going for the better jobs to better my life. But no luck, please help."

Since Lizzo has helped small businesses and other fans, this request seems reasonable. This fan seems to want to work with Lizzo rather than requesting a donation. Another user asked instead, "could you please help me with my patio? A lot of celebrities just ignore. I really hope you won't be one of them. I'm a big fan from the uk!" They also included a link to their GoFundMe. A GoFundMe account accepts donations for a user and will direct funds accordingly. Lizzo's connections with her audience are shown in the way they share their financial situations with her, conveying a level of comfort in their relationship. Also, because she has helped other fans with their businesses or given donations, some audience members comment on posts that have nothing to do with offering money, with requests.

Greenberg argues that things like fan art are not just appreciation of art, but rather reactions which can lead to eventual change for artistic production and are even exploitable.²⁵¹ Fans demonstrate the feeling that they know Lizzo, and through her

²⁵¹ Greenberg, "The Sociology of Fandom," 11.

content a set of expectations are developed as explained by Greenberg. Those who create art help to develop the culture around Lizzo and develop her community.

By participating in the development of creativity around the online space, Lizzo and her fans create connections in the culture of her fandom. A symbiotic relationship of exposure in art and music can develop and association with Lizzo can make relationships feel stronger. In my opinion, this can open communication between Lizzo and her audience by showing that Lizzo is interested in the art that they produce.

In this dissertation, an example of ever-changing music is fans saying Lizzo's lyrics were "wrong" so many times she changed them. On TikTok, another soundbite that went viral from Lizzo's music is

feeling fussy
walkin' in my Balenci-ussies
Tryna bring back
The fabulous.

The lyrics reference Balenciaga, the brand now. It remains unclear what the original lyrics were; however, Lizzo made a TikTok post stating that if those were the lyrics her fans liked and heard, they were now the lyrics to her song. The lyrical change demonstrates that Lizzo was connected online and knew fans' musical preferences in her work. Then, rather than overreacting about the "correct" lyrics she had sung or complaining that fans did not understand her, she instead changed the lyrics to officially be what her audience wanted. She began singing these words live and had them written this way into the Spotify lyrics section. Having her music meet the preferences of her audience might seem trivial. Nevertheless, for online followers,

Lizzo seemed to illustrate attentiveness for what fans wanted and how they used her music (since they used this song to make a TikTok dance.) As such, these changes show her online relationship with her audience and the connections built.

Lizzo works to ignore negativity through specific lines in her music. In songs such as “Special,” Lizzo opens with the lyrics:

Woke up this morning to somebody in a video
Talking about something I posted in a video
If it wasn't me, then would you even get offended or
Is it just because I'm black and heavy?
Y'all don't hear me though

Similarly, in her song “Like a Girl,” she opens with the lyrics:

Woke up feelin' like I just might run for president
Even if there ain't no precedent
Switchin' up the messagin'
I'm about to add a little estrogen
Buy my whip by myself
Pay my rent by myself

I quote these lyrics to point out that Lizzo knows people are negative towards her but chooses to use her music to show that she will disregard negativity toward herself as a Black plus-sized person.

TikTok users have also had discussions about Lizzo's music. At one-point Lizzo released a song containing a slur toward the disabled. She claims she did not know this lyric was ableist. Her fans quickly started commenting on her posts to let her know, and she changed the lyrics. There was also a misheard lyric in one of her songs, and due to many fans singing the lyric incorrectly, she had the word changed officially. These cases have led to comments with different reactions. These include "whatever words you want queen content face with eyebrows emoji" and even

"CHANGE IT BACK BESTIE." The change in lyrics due to comments showcases the relationship between the audience and the star as online conversations changed Lizzo's music.

Lizzo keeps pace with online viral trends, popular music, and the online social environment. For example, when a political topic is trending, taking part in that conversation is pertinent. Rather than posting her usual content Lizzo follows the current conversation online. Ignorance to important topics online can make Lizzo's audience feel she is purposely unaware of their interests and inconsiderate of the groups affected. There is a connection between fan interest and whether the star herself is knowledgeable about these topics. Fans may feel closer to Lizzo because they see that she is keeping informed with the topics they care about online.

Representation and Relationships

Lizzo's interactions with her audience are tied to questions of identity and representation. She creates relationships with fans online through representation of different groups. One form of connection to Lizzo is fans' responses to her posts about her mental health struggles, including anxiety. Many Twitter comments supported her and expressed gratitude for the mental health representation Lizzo was sharing on such a large platform. One such comment said, "I'm with you. I feel the exact same way. wrapping you in love and hugs." Undoubtedly, warm messages like this can provide comfort for those feeling alone with mental health struggles. While Lizzo supports her audience, she is also supported. The online community that has

been built around Lizzo can help those with mental health problems see representation. Another user also commented, "it's so important to know feelings like this exist for people like you, because most people say nothing."

A theme for comments are those which include fans telling Lizzo to ignore anyone being negative toward her. For example, one comment said, "I love you [red heart emoji]. Don't listen to the haters, they are actually jealous." Urban Dictionary defines haters as "a word that [means] someone who would go to extreme lengths to showcase their disapproval of something. In recent times this meaning has changed to apply to anyone with a negative opinion."²⁵² This comment commends Lizzo and advises her not to listen to those who speak badly about her. Someone else commented, "Tell 'em gurl! TELL [clapping emoji] THEM [clapping emoji] [rainbow flag emoji]." This user advises not to ignore negative opinions but to confront those who have them. Both show they care what others say about Lizzo and want to offer her supportive advice as a friend might.

Another comment on Instagram was concerned with the treatment of Lizzo following the allegations against her and the lawsuit filed. Addressing Lizzo's other followers this user said, "People, remember that it's not in your place to judge since you weren't there to see what happened. just because you've heard one side of the story doesn't necessarily make it true." This follower reminds those who follow Lizzo not to be cruel in their comments, particularly without knowing the whole situation. Although this follower has not addressed Lizzo specifically, they want to create communication

²⁵² "Hater," Urban Dictionary, Accessed July, 11th 2024, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hater>.

among the community to resist cancel-culture without learning the facts surrounding the situation.

In, *Beyoncé in the World*, Brendan Shaw shows that Eurocentric, white characteristics are used as measures for popular cultural understandings of Black musical production. Audiences understand that negativity comes from an inability to measure up to these standards. Shaw says, "Unlike the mainstream Eurocentric utopian visions of popular culture, Black feminist imaginings of a different world are grounded in both present-day realities and absolute necessity for social change."²⁵³ While both Beyoncé and Lizzo present crafted personas to their audience, the use of this personification is a calculated choice, to traverse the popular music scene, in response to negativity.

Moreover, Shaw uses arguments made by Simon Frith to argue that musical performance constantly changes music, because viewing the body performing influences the way the audience understands. Shaw references Frith's use of body further, to point out that audience perceptions are manipulated based on appearance, movement, and social constructs expected from a particular type of body. Shaw goes on to posit that performance is a form of communication viewed through the lens of social expectations and community preferences. Nevertheless, audiences can misinterpret the intended message of the music, which might cause the negative comments.²⁵⁴ Shaw's

²⁵³ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 113.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 195.

argument has helped me to navigate the negative interpretations, and distasteful comments towards Lizzo. The connection between Lizzo's body, as a Black, plus sized woman, does not fit the heteronormative, hegemonic, characteristics expected in the popular music scene. Consequently, those comments may illustrate dissonance for the audience, as they do not see her body, performance, and music as lining up with their expectations. Shaw's framework helps me to further interpret reactions to Lizzo in the context of historical and gendered expectations around music and performance.

The editors point out, "A crucial theme running through [*Beyoncé in the World*] is that the performative is political."²⁵⁵ They go on to say that the authors in the book show how Beyonce is not necessarily enacting resistance, defined as political protest in their book, but is a musician who challenges and protests inequity due to power imbalances created in racist ideology.²⁵⁶ Comparably, Lizzo, as a fat-positive, queer ally, who supports political activism for marginalized groups, challenges normative ideals and uses her music as an act of resistance toward hetero-patriarchy.

Another fan said to Lizzo, "Lizzo you are truly amazing. I hope you keep shining and become an even bigger icon if that's even possible. Now loyal fans... How do we take ABC down because they on some bullshit [bicep emoji]."

²⁵⁵ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 235.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 236.

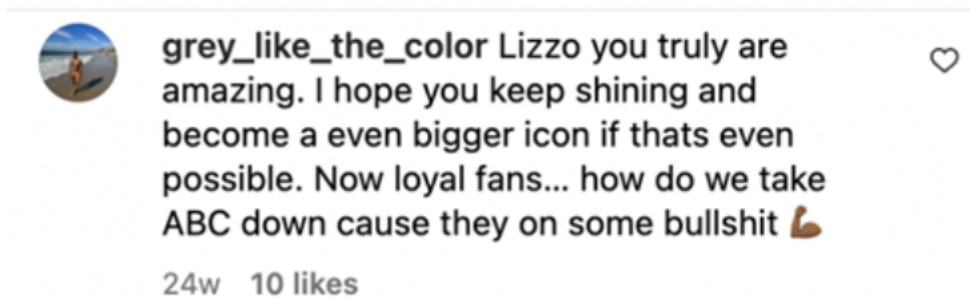


Figure 5.5 [A fan comments on their dislike for news outlets who report negatively on Lizzo.]

The communication between fans here about loyalty and their distrust of ABC shows a deeper look into how the online community works. Urban Dictionary defines "some bullshit" as "a response to an unfair or frustrating situation." This user called for fans to keep the ABC News Channel from reporting details on the lawsuit against Lizzo. They claim to be true Lizzo fans because they "know" her better and "know" she could not have truly done these things. Because some fans do not believe these allegations to be true, they make comments which show they are upset at the idea that it keeps being discussed. Fans seem to be leery toward situations for Lizzo where others believe she has done something wrong. As stated by Wolf, about *Wicked* fans, "Through their debate the girls built on each other's comments, cementing an intellectual ethical community."²⁵⁷ Similar loyalty occurs in the Lizzo audience, although this allegiance is to a person, not art.

One comment on Instagram showed disappointment in how other fans treated Lizzo online, particularly in comment sections. A user said, "I just want to say, 97%

²⁵⁷ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 225.

of the people commenting have no logic. If you read the room you know Lizzo is real. yet you follow what media and social media tell you. haven't you learned social media is flat out fake world? like get it together."

Of course, social media and the like have been constructed by those who want Lizzo to have a successful career. However, the idea that it is somehow possible to see through the construction is also an illusion. This person still only sees an online and projected image of the musician they follow. They believe they somehow know her authentic character while others do not. It is pure chance if the person is correct, and their assumptions around Lizzo's character differ from what another online follower assumes. They make an important point for responding to negativity with the comment, "haven't you learned social media is a flat-out fake world?"

Social media is a constructed world in some capacities. However, in reality, society and the world itself is constructed. Users believe they have a special connection to Lizzo for many reasons. The reality is that while each user is different, they all receive the same interaction from Lizzo on the stars' end. All of her audience has the same amount of ability to interact with her. This online availability means, in some ways, there is equitable access to Lizzo because everybody is allowed the same amount of interaction with her. However, fans' relationship with Lizzo is construed, because it is still individualized in how the fan interacts with Lizzo.

Connecting to fans online and through music is not as easy as it may seem. When Lizzo faced the lawsuit made against her by her backup dancers, she continued

to post her regular content, including music, fashion, and so forth. Fans began demanding that she would address the allegations and accused her of ignoring a serious topic. While some fans said they would save their judgment until after Lizzo's official statement, many were displeased with her lack of reaction to her online audience and made it clear.

Another comment on Instagram was concerned with the treatment of Lizzo following the allegations against her and the lawsuit filed. Addressing Lizzo's other followers this user said, "People, remember that it's not in your place to judge since you weren't there to see what happened. just because you've heard one side of the story doesn't necessarily make it true." This follower reminds those who follow Lizzo not to be cruel in their comments, particularly without knowing the whole situation. Although this follower has not addressed Lizzo specifically, they want to create communication among the community to resist cancel-culture without learning the facts surrounding the situation.

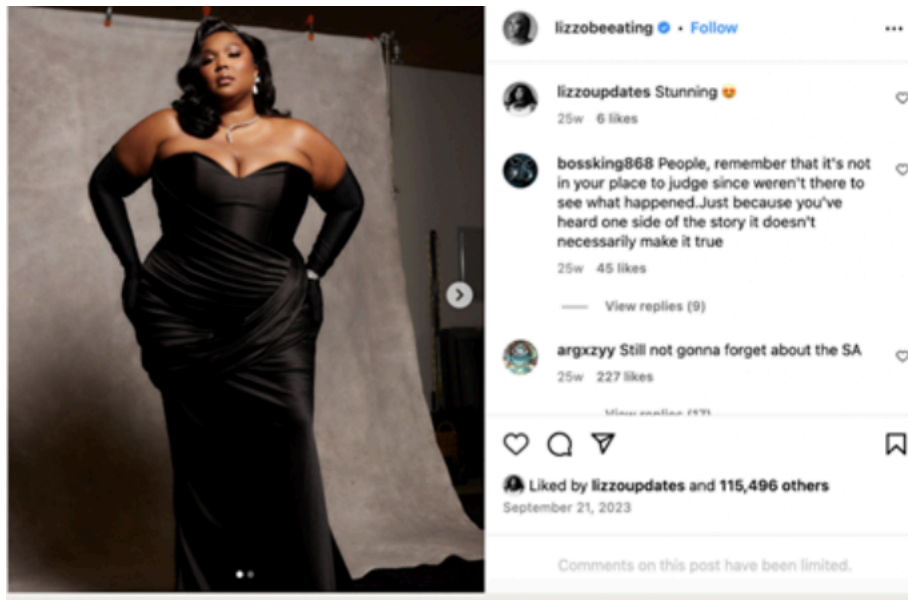


Figure 5.6 [Lizzo posts on Instagram and a fan comments to others not to judge her based on allegations.]

Analysis and further understanding of the comments to one another in the Lizzo comment section can be found through a lens provided by Birgitta J. Johnson. The author argues,

Responses on social media and in online communities often take place without the participation of the artists and individuals who have inspired all of the discussion... viewers who consume Beyoncé's original music and the covers of her music can continue the feedback loop of independent cultural production by creating their own responses.²⁵⁸

While Lizzo's fans may not necessarily communicate with her directly, as they communicate with one another, they continue to build a community around her work and produce new cultural data. Due to institutional biases,

²⁵⁸ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 147.

““Fans are marginalized and silenced outside social media and fan sites.”²⁵⁹

However, using these online spaces to communicate and create their own archive, fans gain agency in a space where they are not the dominant group.

Another comment about Lizzo's lawsuit addresses her followers and the internet. This user said,

The problem is y'all (the internet) became the police, the investigation team, the judge, the jury, and the damn prison guards. you take what you hear and run fast with it without facts, witnesses, and an understanding. if someone said it, the person did it, is how y'all roll! it's really innocent until guilty, not the other way around!

This comment points out that although allegations have arisen, many on the internet quickly cancel Lizzo despite not knowing all or even additional details. This user demonstrates that they feel that although they do not know if the allegations are true, they should not draw conclusions without more information.

Similarly, another user said, "y'all negative people be one of the first ones to comment. you must have your post notifications on." The "post notifications" part of this comment means that every time Lizzo makes a new Instagram post, there is a notification on the follower's phone. This notification can be either a vibration, sound, or both. This notification allows those users to be some of the first to see Lizzo's new post. The commenter here points out that these people are quick to comment negatively and are some of the top comments on Lizzo's posts. The user is arguing that perhaps those who want to post something hateful or negative are waiting to be notified about Lizzo's new post so they can say something mean. Whether it is true or

²⁵⁹ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 166.

not, the negativity found in Lizzo's comment section is often pointed out by those uncomfortable with people who do not like her infiltrating their community. They often argue in these comments that it is unnecessary to add dissenting opinions to Lizzo's online community when they can find other artists to support online and not interact with Lizzo or her audience. Villareal says, "A haunting is the earth in the act of remembering, a repeating record of the past that collapses time, shining its echoes into the present and future. To be haunted is to remember with the earth."²⁶⁰ The musical evocation of memory is similarly a haunting in memory reproduction.

Another person commenting on Lizzo's Instagram was lamenting about those who do not realize Lizzo's many qualities they find admirable. This person said to the void, "It makes me mad that not everyone realize how truly amazing of a person Lizzo is. She is the good in the world." They believe everyone should recognize Lizzo for the talents and kindness that they see. They make this post in order for others to read about the positivity they see in Lizzo. This comment alludes for others to check archived tweets and posts.

Similarly, another person responded to Lizzo's frustrations toward her treatment online. One user said, "they just mad they will never be as free as you are! people wish they can have your confidence and joy." This user indicates that they think the negativity toward Lizzo online is due to jealousy from commenters. It is necessary to realize that some fans are connecting oppressive background factors and intersectional layers when discussing the negativity

²⁶⁰ Villareal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 291.

Lizzo faces. Rebecca J. Sheehan argues that fans can understand Black oppressions because of their ability to use intersectional frameworks to analyze identity which overlaps and causes different oppressions. She gives examples like racism, sexism, homophobia, and sexuality. Moreover, for those fans, Beyonce is a musician who provides a model of resistance and allows her fandom to consider potential transformation of society.²⁶¹ By participating in a culture online which centers historically marginalized groups in the Lizzo comment sections on social media, fans find a space of resistance. Consequently, the connection from fans to Lizzo may feel deep and personal, because the topics they are discussing are so vital to their livelihood. Moreover, “People of color who are not part of the African diaspora also identify with Beyoncé. They see themselves as racial “others” and note the particular effect *Lemonade* has had on their greater racial pride.”²⁶² There are parallels in the way Lizzo’s fandom members from groups like other kinds of people of color, the LGBTQ+, fat positive groups, and so forth, connect with Lizzo, beyond her background as a Black woman.

When Lizzo did respond to the allegations, one fan was frustrated with the responses to Lizzo's statement. This user commented, "why would y'all come just to tweet that you're not reading the statement? just don't read it and shut up. [Roll eyes emoji]." Other fans had commented that the post was too long, and they were not

²⁶¹ McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 168.

²⁶² Ibid, 173.

going to read the text. However, this comment demonstrates the fan felt other users did not need to comment that they had seen Lizzo's post but were not going to read her statement. The user suggests no critique could or should happen by those without all the information.



Figure 5.7 [A fan tweets in response to Lizzo's statement on her lawsuit reprimanding others.]

Many of these comments in Lizzo's fan accounts on Instagram depict emojis rather than writing. Her community responds to the star by showing their reactions through emoji responses.

For example, many fans left multiple fire emojis. There is a website called Emojipedia that tries to explain the meaning behind emojis. Although there may be regional uses for the fire emoji online in different spaces, this emoji has a general meaning. Emojipedia says the fire emoji is "Commonly used for various metaphorical expressions related to fire, including the slang *hot* ("attractive") and *lit* ("excellent")."

Depending on the dialogue context, fans are using emojis in these comments in both ways. In response to a post about fashion, they may use the emoji as "fire hot" instead of a post about music or "fire excellent."

Fans also reply to Lizzo's fan page using many hearts and shocked face emojis. emoji-pedia defines the "smiling face with heart eyes" as meaning to "convey enthusiastic feelings of love, infatuation, and adoration, e.g. I love/ am in love with this person or thing." However, the shocked face or "astonished face" has an "appearance [that] historically differs greatly [across] platforms." Emojipedia says it "may convey a wide range of emotions including awe, amazement, or concern." Depending on the post in question, these are reasonable definitions to use to assume for users responding with these emojis. Fans do not necessarily need traditional English or other languages to express themselves toward Lizzo. They have these emojis that others in their community understand. Also, there is a shared understanding of these emoji responses as linking to feelings on a deeper level.

Fan Engagement in Culture

In addition to engaging with Lizzo's work, fans contribute to the culture around her. Fans can engage with Lizzo online to share what art they are working on and also because they feel comfortable to comment on Lizzo's community in ways which might help shape it. On the one hand, fans attempt to connect with Lizzo by sharing their art and creating work online which centers her images. On the other hand, fans might gain exposure by an account as large as Lizzo's reposting or sharing

their work. Greenberg states, “It is a disabling mistake for those who engage, in one way or another, with the fan community of content creators to fail to understand the deep levels of satisfaction these creators have in offering their work to their fan community.”²⁶³ Lizzo and fans seem to work together to showcase the talents they all have through this online medium. Regardless of the outcome, fans put their art online in an attempt to show Lizzo what her music and community mean to them.

Through her analysis of the fans of *Wicked* Wolf argues that regardless of sexual identity, the musical reinforces legitimization of relationships between fans and women performers. She says that fans of the musical are passionate about specific performers, referring to their idols on a first name basis, like friends.²⁶⁴ Similarly, fans in the Lizzo audience refer to her by her stage name, but also call her terms of endearment.

Hill Collins makes an argument to help understand why interacting with Lizzo is important. She says, “the music of working-class Black women blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s is often seen as one important site outside academia for this intellectual tradition.”²⁶⁵ Importantly, popular music singers and their audiences can provide sources of intellectual and cultural knowledge. She also posits that “Black women intellectuals best contribute to a black women's group standpoint by using their experiences as situated knowers.”²⁶⁶ Similarly, by participating online Lizzo

²⁶³ Greenberg, “The Sociology of Fandom,” 8.

²⁶⁴ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, 230.

²⁶⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 21. This is Hill Collins quoting Angela Davis from 1998.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 25.

audience members are situated to have inside knowledge in the Lizzo community. I argue that by participating in this online community one must not only understand the workings of the Internet and social media platforms, but also the way the Lizzo community uses insider vernacular.

Colloquial terms of endearment used towards Lizzo show the connection that her audience has to the star. The use of these terms links the idea that Lizzo is somebody they can look up to as a leader and speak to in such a way that she will understand vernacular slang. Online terms, perhaps not understood in a general day-to-day conversation, are characteristic of the online audience around Lizzo. Then, the use of intertextual connections and reshaping of these words allows for a deeper understanding that is only available through connections in the background gained by participating in this online community. Lizzo's audience can manipulate colloquial slang into play on words and so forth, and other fans can understand the inside jokes and double meanings, because they have a basic understanding of the language utilized online.

This research's significance is to explore the creation of community through and around a musician. Different intersectional analyses are necessary to understand the relationships that have formed. New languages and texts have developed, and unique spaces have been utilized to produce this online community. It has a special quality for each platform used. Villarreal argues, "When memory is recorded in writing, one person's account becomes documented history; when memory is embodied and shared through an oral tradition, it becomes collective memory." She

also argues that poetry is the tool of collective memory and is an embodied oral tradition which allows for archival record keeping.²⁶⁷ I believe that music is also a space which allows for the continuation of records when written documentation is written by and for those in power. The invocation of lyrics and actual musical production, either recorded or live, provides connection to memory that has been passed on for others within a community. This memory is brought forth each time the music is reproduced for the listener, and they connect it to this meaning.

One user on TikTok commented to Lizzo like she is their friend and seemed to believe she will respond to them at any moment. They said, "Lizzo bestie, you need to drop a Christmas song." With this comment, they imply that they feel a relationship with Lizzo and enjoy her music and singing, so they hope she will release Christmas-themed work. Colloquially, "bestie" is a term of endearment on social media. Urban Dictionary defines bestie as a "Term for best friend. One who is always by your side, who never ditches you, and who would take a bullet for you."²⁶⁸ Furthermore, it is not clear if this user means this term literally. Perhaps Lizzo is *their* best friend. However, more likely, this comment indicates they will always be there for the star and shows a heavily one-sided relationship. Regardless, those participating in online culture understand the vernacular of Lizzo as bestie for this audience member.

One kind of comment on Instagram is those willing to do creative work inspired by or dedicated to Lizzo. For example, one user said, "hey, I really like your

²⁶⁷ Villarreal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 287.

²⁶⁸ "Bestie," Urban Dictionary, Accessed July 11th, 2024, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Bestie>.

profile and your posts, and if you let me, I would make such an amazing mural out of it!" This user would like to create some artwork dedicated to Lizzo from her online posts. This kind of art creates connections between this artist and Lizzo. Moreover, it helps create engagement between Lizzo and her audience members, the artist, and Lizzo's community. Those who see what was created online by this artist can then repost, which supports Lizzo and the artist.

Some Instagram users only post photos in a particular aesthetic to match their theme. For example, they may use the same filter for each picture or have different color periods coordinating each month. These kinds of themed profiles take much more work than an average Instagram account, meaning this fan would be volunteering creativity and time to help Lizzo thematize. Other fans who view this themed Instagram page would know who created this work because Lizzo would promote said artist, and then they too could commission the artist to do work for them, or they could follow the artist on social media and support them in that way. This volunteering implies this person is willing to do this favor for Lizzo because they feel inspired by her. There may or may not be any compensation, but because they enjoy supporting Lizzo, these artists are willing to use their talents for her.

Greenberg argues that the technology available today allows for the sharing of fan art and work. He says fans can publish their work (from any medium) online and that it will consequently reach a global audience. Moreover, he gives the example of fan fiction, which is distributed across multiple websites and has led to physical

locations for meeting about the work.²⁶⁹ While Greenberg is often referring to the fan community around TV shows in this case, the Lizzo fandom is also able to share their art online and even meet up at concerts. However, they find a lot of their community in comment sections where others can share how they feel about their art.

Some comments on TikTok open discussion about the music they would like to hear from Lizzo in the future. Her audience indicates a level of comfort with the star by making requests about future releases. One comment said, "I want a Lizzo gospel-esque album." This comment implies that other fans might agree with this comment or discuss which kinds of albums they might like Lizzo to produce. Similarly, a comment said, "the world needs a SZA x Doja x Lizzo collab." This comment alludes to wanting to further discuss whether this collaboration might occur. These users are not trying to make demands but to create a space for discussion with the artist.

Some fans joined Lizzo's fandom because they enjoyed her acting work in Disney's "The Mandalorian." They connected to Lizzo's community through another franchise they enjoy. This indicates Lizzo is not only popular for her music but also her other endeavors. One comment said,

I have no idea who you are or what you did before you were cast in The Mandalorian you and Jack Black absolutely killed it. I adored this episode and your scenes were spectacular and heartwarming. what fun characters to be introduced to us all. I hope to see you both in the future episodes.

Although being a Star Wars fan is how this person discovered Lizzo, her work has brought them to her Twitter account. Then, on social media this fan can become a

²⁶⁹ Greenberg, "The Sociology of Fandom," 9.

more integrated part of Lizzo's community.



Figure 5.8 [Somebody learns about Lizzo and becomes a fan through another medium.]

As previously mentioned, Lizzo guest starred on the children's show Sesame Street. This well-known show links audiences from two platforms. As if they were sentient, the Muppets from the show began tweeting with Lizzo online, bringing new audience members. One Muppet Abby commented, "Pink floating hearts 4x." in response, Lizzo said, "HI ABBY THANK YOU FOR COMING! MISS Lizzo LOVES YOUUU [sparkle heart emoji] 3x." Online comments allow for new fans to cultivate a relationship with Lizzo as well.



Figure 5.9 [Lizzo communicates on Twitter with a Sesame Street character account.]

One user (SZA) commented on Lizzo's Twitter account, "YOUR BRAND IS MAKING FEEL GOOD MUSIC FOR BEAUTIFUL FOLKS EVERYWHERE THANK YOU Lizzo [white heart emoji] 2x." Of course, this user cannot speak for the entirety of Lizzo's community, but it seems as though it is a recurring theme that fans foster relationships with Lizzo as an inclusive social media influencer. The relationship between artists and audience is predicated on her being welcoming to all types of people. As a result, when Lizzo was treated poorly online, fans quickly came to Lizzo's defense. For example, one person said, "you're a powerhouse, a true talent, and a treasure Lizzo. Fuck them people." This user was alluding to the idea that if others do not like Lizzo, they are missing out on this community. They did not like that others would spread negativity in their space online. Furthermore, another user said, "I am, as always, in awe of how you are utilizing your platform for good. Thank you for being Lizzo! <3" Those who participate in the community around Lizzo encourage her to continue to post and make music despite online pushback and negativity. Lizzo's audience shows that they appreciate the fact that she tries to create a positive platform and say nice things to them in an online space, where negativity can run rampant.



Figure 5.10 [The artist SZA shows support toward Lizzo and her music.]

Backlash for a Historically Marginalized Woman

Lizzo's visibility also invites backlash shaped by historical and cultural narratives and pressure. While this reproach might be justified, to some, due to the alleged actions she has against her, I cannot ignore the historical influences which shape responses to Lizzo as a plus sized woman of color in the music industry.

The history of popular music overall, is one written by those victorious and powerful over others. Popular music originated in Black music. Thereafter, appropriation of the popular music scene occurred by white musical characteristics. However, as questioned by Hartman, "must the story of the defeated always be a story of defeat?"²⁷⁰ I think musicians like Lizzo show that circumventing ideals put forth by those in power helps the marginalized show resilience. Rather than conforming to normative standards, Lizzo has shown that as a plus-sized, Black woman, she is quite popular among many kinds of audience members from many backgrounds.

Perhaps before the lawsuit was alleged, Lizzo had already released a statement, through music, about allegations made against her. Vanessa Angelica Villarreal says, "Cancel culture is the practice of collective memory... collective memory is its counter public— the insubordinate publics that form an opposition to a dominant narrative."²⁷¹ I argue that Lizzo uses music to communicate with her fans

²⁷⁰ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 192.

²⁷¹ Villarreal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 12.

and connects with them through different lyrics to which they have a deeper cultural connection. In her song “Rumors,” released in 2021, she sings with the artist Cardi B about how people online make fun of her and misconstrue her attempts to represent her cultural identity. She laments about the attacks on herself as a plus-size woman, what she posts online, and sarcastically comments on her sexual encounters as proposed by the media. By interpreting the rumors spread about herself in this song, Lizzo has taken back agency and rewritten the narratives being told about her life.

One such lyric in “Rumors” is, “No, I ain’t fu*k Drake yet.” Drake, the rapper, is a constant source for different internet memes. One of the reasons Drake is a target of memes is he constantly has a new girlfriend, with a list spanning over twenty famous women at the time of writing this dissertation. His image became gifs, and he is also often in on the joke because he similarly jokes with fans online. As such, Lizzo points out that she is also often the source of rumors in this song, though this rumor about her and Drake does not have a basis in reality.

Some lyrics Lizzo sings in “Rumors” are:

Spending all your time trying to break a woman down
Realer shit is going on, baby, take a look around
If you thought that I was ratchet with my ass hanging out
Just wait until the summer when they let me out the house
Sick of rumors
But haters do what they do

The song “Rumors” demonstrates Lizzo connecting with fans. She tells her audience, through her music, that despite being treated poorly online and by “haters,” she will continue to be herself. Moreover, she is communicating that rumors about her are often false and unrealistic. Perhaps, Lizzo did not think it necessary to address the

allegations in the lawsuit filed against her by her former backup dancers because she had already given fans this song.

Zarah Caldwell points out, “Historically, Black female cool has played a role in the expansion of the national understanding of Black women's positioning and standpoints.”²⁷² Representation as “cool” according to fans carries with it a cultural currency that allows for more popularity for an artist. Caldwell argues, “Artists in the lineage of Black female cool, such as Beyoncé and Solange, reside at the intersection of gender, race, cultural production, and sometimes the activism of political and cultural movements.”²⁷³ Indications of Black female cool include rebellious acts, performance outside of the normative, and as Caldwell indicates the idea of the “slay.” Caldwell argues that “slay” is undefinable, stating, “The elusiveness and chasing of the slay within the larger culture often led to the misuse and abuse of Black female cool in popular culture.”²⁷⁴ Those who do not belong to nor participate in the Black community will have a hard time understanding “slay” or “slaying.” Moreover, Caldwell says, “It has forced the spotlight on African-American women's contributions even as they were quickly subsumed and minimized. By enlisting and connecting with the legacy of feminist cool, Black women show American society the important cultural, social, and political spaces that they fill.”²⁷⁵ An understanding of the community is created through this “cool” factor and is represented to those outside the community.

²⁷² McGee and Baade, *Beyoncé in the World: Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times*, 46.

²⁷³ Ibid, 48.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 36.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 58.

Also, Daphne Brooks argues, “Nearly an extinct form in mainstream pop recordings of today, liner notes are all but confined to the world of classic Jazz and lavish box set reissues at this point (with some exceptions).”²⁷⁶ I argue, replacing liner notes is online communication with artists. There are malleable interactions with audiences and musicians online, which explain meanings behind different songs in audio and visual format. The archive has shifted because community can now be found in these explanations. Today alternative archives can be passed along through discussion online first, and then continued through oral communication and video. Brooks also questions, “How often have we asked Black women musicians, critics, and fans about what they've been listening to and why or which records they bought (or downloaded!), which song set them on a journey to write, perform, and record their own music?”²⁷⁷ These kinds of archives are seen as Lizzo communicates with fans.

Unfortunately, a consequence of the allegations against Lizzo may have been that she was “shadow banned.” This means, the content produced on her TikTok videos was no longer readily shown to fans. The TikTok algorithm is not easily understood, however, allegedly there are instances where user’s content has been limited to viewers because of disagreements with the platform and creators. Also, engagement with Lizzo's videos may have decreased because her audience was frustrated with these allegations. However, this affects the archival information online.

²⁷⁶ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 116.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 81.

One fan commented, concerned about what they felt was a lack of engagement to Lizzo's posts. They said, "why does this have only 5K likes? I don't understand. Now need to see this with hope." Due to her usual views and likes being higher, this user thought that the video should have been seen more by Lizzo's community. Lizzo then responded herself, "TikTok really don't show my videos to my followers anymore [annoyed-face-emoji]." Both Lizzo and this user were insinuating that this post and lack of engagement were demonstrating a shadow ban for Lizzo's account. TikTok allows shadow banned users to post but does not show their videos to many or all of their followers and will not promote their videos to the main "for you page." There will be no notification to the user nor an official banning of the account. Fans may disagree with this shadow ban, and users may become aware of the lack of promotion of their posts. However, because none of this happens officially and users cannot prove the social media platform is silencing them, there is no process for reversal.

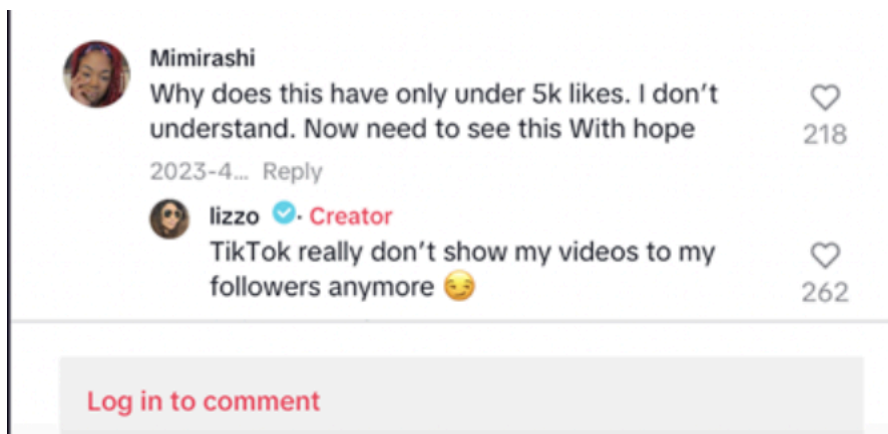


Figure 5.11 [Lizzo alludes to being shadow banned on TikTok.]

Erich Matthes argues, “the problem when it comes to our love of artists is that the maintenance of ideas we trust them isn’t really a shared project the way it is in a personal relationship- the artist is in complete control.”²⁷⁸ Moreover, Villareal argues, “Through fabulation, the specter then haunts the archive becomes animated, embodied, the document now a site for what we can never know interacting with what we do know.”²⁷⁹ For example, one user said, "I like my celebrities NORMAL!... how can you not love her?" This tweet implies that Lizzo's characteristics are relatable to this Twitter user. This user shows their connection to her and wonders if others feel similarly to themselves. Those commenting on Lizzo's Twitter account seem to express the feeling that she is different from other artists online because of this relatability. Matthes' and Villareal's arguments are explored here where this fan explains a link to how they believe they know Lizzo. In this example, they cultivate an idea that Lizzo is somehow relatable and normal compared to other celebrities. However, Lizzo cannot maintain a personal connection to this fan alone, and the relationship can break.



²⁷⁸ Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists From the Museums to the Movies*, 123.

²⁷⁹ Villareal, *Magical Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders*, 36.

Figure 5.12[A fan comments on Twitter as to why they love Lizzo.]

As pointed out by Matthes, fans sometimes choose to ignore art in favor of focusing on immoral acts and vice versa. However, he believes the reason others care about immorality in the first place is because they have produced art that others want to see.²⁸⁰ Fans were disappointed in the way that Lizzo had allegedly treated her backup dancers, and one another for the way they were behaving toward Lizzo. The construction of this community online becomes precarious when we see the breakdown of the connections to Lizzo.

Conclusion

In this chapter I use work by Angela McRobbie to analyze Lizzo's online fan relationships and to examine how Lizzo's persona operates within the broader cultural norms of society. I demonstrate how Lizzo shows femininity and empowerment through non-traditional representations in lyrics and online posts. I also examine how fans react to Lizzo's music and how cultural expectations shape these reactions.

I further use Daphne Brooks' work in this chapter by centering a Black woman, Lizzo, in popular culture. Because Lizzo functions at the center of this community, the community can only exist because Lizzo has an online presence, and fans' communications depend on what Lizzo makes visible. Through this chapter, I show how she is central to this popular phenomenon. One of the goals of this chapter is to represent a wide variety of voices in the Lizzo audience, and I do so by using

²⁸⁰ Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists From the Museums to the Movies*, 145.

anonymous online data, which rather than excluding participants, embraces uncertainty in fandom.

I also use Stacy Wolf's work on *Wicked* to examine how popularity can be dismissed when it is associated with femininity, in this chapter. She posits that girl fandom is meaningful and this is seen through complex engagement with online discussion. Consequently, I use online discussions around Lizzo to show cultural snapshots of the popularity around Lizzo in her online comment sections. I consider how a perceived sense of intimacy is created through social media and how fans build this relationship with a persona created by Lizzo, not necessarily herself.

I then use work by Saidiya Hartman to examine power dynamics in historical preservation of narratives. I consider Black women in popular music through scholarship like Rene Richardson who argues that these stories can disrupt the centering of white narratives. Moreover, I show Lizzo is successful and joyful despite this marginalization. I also use work by Cienna Davis who writes about the historical legacy of colorism, which I link to fatphobia against Black women. I examine then, how Lizzo redefines these stereotypes. After, I examine work by Elena Herrera Quintana who shows that Black women's bodies have historical meaning imposed upon them. As such, I consider how Lizzo is affected within this context.

In this chapter I also use work by Rebeca J. Sheehan to show how fans feel represented in the online culture around Lizzo. I examine how intersecting identities are represented online through the Lizzo audience and fans share experiences through comment discussions. By doing this, fans create both fan to fan and fan to artist

connections allowing for feedback and the sharing of values. Moreover, I use work by Eric Porter to examine Lizzo as a commodified performer. I consider her music and the legacy of commodification of Black musicians proposed in his work. I examine how the online platforms sometimes censor her and control her posts, a digital continuation of historical oppression. In this chapter I use fan engagement to examine body positivity, identity, and culture. I demonstrate the importance of representation for Lizzo and her fans as well as the production of meaningful ideas for all involved.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I used digital ethnography and participant-observation methods to study social media platforms. Looking forward, I consider these sites as alternative archives, where fans shaped discourse around the community in more than just Lizzo's case. I position fan communities online as critical sites of production for culture where meaning is constructed collaboratively through language, atemporally, and through engagement with audience and musician. While each fan cannot be studied, analyzing some individual accounts is important toward understanding nuanced pieces of the audience online.

What happened next..

In 2024 Lizzo's lawsuit saw traction in the judicial system. The judge for her case dropped many of the charges pending against her which included dropping an allegation of fat-shaming from the star toward her backup dancers. However, the sexual assault allegations toward Lizzo remain. Lizzo refuses to settle the lawsuit and vehemently denies the claims made against her.

This leads to questions of Lizzo's music, audience reaction, and the social media community built around Lizzo, currently. On June 5th, 2026, Lizzo is releasing a new album titled *Bitch*, which she has been heavily promoting, particularly with related posts on Instagram. Top comments on related posts include "THIS ALBUM COVER IS TEA," "Heart eyes emoji 2x red heart emoji," and even "Can't wait heart eyes emoji 3x." Top comments for the last 5 album related posts on Lizzo's page

seem to have no negativity, and she does not have comment filters on her page any longer. It seems as though that because some of the charges were dropped, Lizzo is facing a more positive climate on her social media page. To examine her social media platforms “post-cancellation” would lead to even more nuanced responses about culture from her fan community and this is further work to be investigated.

Conclusionary ideas...

I have explored questions such as: What are alternative methodological frameworks to study popular music online? How is the relationship to Lizzo developed online? What are the development and changes of this relationship as information becomes available to the audience? How does time function for Lizzo’s online community? What background information is necessary to participate in Lizzo’s community online? What information must a participant know, and is this information able to be gained?

I proposed an alternative methodological framework for studying popular music and its musicians. I have emphasized the importance of analysis of marginalized groups and the artists which represent their musical and artistic interests. I have also shown the importance of digital spaces as cultural production sites and reception places. Lizzo has served as an important case study because of the interactions she has with fans online and her unique positionality both as a famous musician and public persona within digital engagement. I considered how social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit mediate fan communities

and parasocial bonds with Lizzo, and then contribute to the perception of an imagined community. I have created a new methodological contribution to popular music studies by centering digital ethnography, parasocial analysis, and an intersectional critique. Rather than considering online spaces as secondary, I focused on the importance of studying online communities as serious cultural sites. In this work I examined how the online Lizzo audience is a dynamic and changing digital community which is shaped through cultural production and engagement across social media platforms.

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Appendix

1. 100 emoji 
2. 3 music note emoji 
3. Angel emoji 
4. Balloon emoji 
5. Banana emoji 
6. Bicep flexing emoji 
7. Biting lip emoji 
8. Black and white hands shaking emoji  (supposed to be Black and white)
9. Black heart emoji 
10. Black spade emoji 
11. Blowing air emoji 
12. Blue heart emoji 
13. Boot emoji 
14. Butterfly emoji 
15. Cake emoji 
16. Cat heart eye emoji 
17. Chains emoji 
18. Circular sparkle emoji 
19. Clapping emoji 

- 20. Clown emoji 🤡
- 21. Confetti dropping emoji 🎉
- 22. Confetti popper emoji 🎊
- 23. Cookie emoji 🍪
- 24. Cow emoji 🐮
- 25. Crown emoji 👑
- 26. Crying face emoji 😭
- 27. Dancing man emoji 💃
- 28. Diamond emoji 💎
- 29. Drooling face emoji 🤤
- 30. Eighth note emoji 🎵
- 31. Exasperated face emoji 😩
- 32. Fingers crossed emoji 🤞
- 33. Fire emoji 🔥
- 34. Flower bouquet emoji 🌸
- 35. French fries emoji 🍟
- 36. Green heart emoji 💚
- 37. Guitar emoji 🎸
- 38. Hand covering mouth smiling emoji 🤗
- 39. Hand raised emoji 🙋
- 40. Happy face with upturned eyebrows emoji 😄
- 41. Heart around the face smiling emoji 😍

- 42. Heart eye emoji 🥰
- 43. Heart hands emoji 💞
- 44. Hiding behind hands emoji 🙌
- 45. Hijab wearing woman emoji 🧕
- 46. Hitting forehead emoji 🤔
- 47. Honey pot emoji 🍯
- 48. Inquisitive eyeglass emoji 🧐
- 49. Kiss lipstick emoji 💋
- 50. Kissing face emoji 😘
- 51. Laughing face crying emoji 😂
- 52. Lightning bolt emoji ⚡
- 53. Meh face emoji 😐
- 54. Mermaid emoji 🧜
- 55. Mushroom emoji 🍄
- 56. Okay hand emoji 🙌
- 57. One sweat on forehead face emoji 😓
- 58. One tear crying sad face 😥
- 59. Orange heart emoji 🧡
- 60. Painting nails emoji 💅
- 61. Party hat wearing emoji 🎉
- 62. Peach emoji 🍑
- 63. Pig emoji 🐷

- 64. Pink floating hearts emoji 
- 65. Pink heart emoji with sparkles 
- 66. Pink heart emoji with wings 
- 67. Pointing emoji 
- 68. Present emoji 
- 69. Purple heart emoji 
- 70. Racing flag emoji 
- 71. Rainbow emoji 
- 72. Rainbow flag emoji 
- 73. Red heart emoji 
- 74. Red rose emoji 
- 75. Rock n roll emoji 
- 76. Sad eyes emoji 
- 77. Shocked face emoji 
- 78. Shocked face emoji with no eyebrows 
- 79. Shrug emoji 
- 80. Side eye emoji 
- 81. Sideways crying laughing emoji 
- 82. Skull emoji 
- 83. Smile with teeth emoji 
- 84. Snake emoji 
- 85. Sparkle emoji 

86. Speak out emoji 🗣️
87. Star emoji ★
88. Star eye face emoji 🤪
89. Sweating face emoji 🥵
90. Tears in eyes happy emoji 😊
91. Thinking face emoji 🤔
92. Thumbs up emoji 👍
93. Tongue emoji 🐷
94. Tongue sticking out cross eyed emoji 🤪
95. Tongue sticking out face emoji 😜
96. Transgender acceptance flag emoji 🏳️
97. Unicorn emoji 🦄
98. Upset face emoji 😞
99. Upset looking down emoji 😓
100. Waving hand emoji 🖐️
101. White heart emoji 💜
102. Yellow heart emoji 🧡