Graphika

Now We Got Bad Blood

Exploring Harassment Dynamics Within the Online Taylor Swift Fandom

By Cristina López G. and Avneesh Chandra

03.2023

Online Harassment

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Introduction

'We See You Over There on the Internet'

In October 2022, Taylor Swift's underline announcement she would be releasing a new album activated her online fandom. Among "Swifties" on Twitter, Tumblr, and TikTok, speculation swirled about the meaning of track titles as fans attempted to identify "easter eggs" and decipher encoded messages Swift is known to hide in her music. Something else, however, came to dominate this online conversation, prompting major media coverage and explainers: a years-old theory called #Gaylor.

Simply put, #Gaylor is an unproven theory that Swift is queer. Proponents believe that careful scrutiny of Swift's lyrics and social media activity tells a story of secret relationships with female celebrities. The theory originated in queer communities on Tumblr in 2014 before shifting to Twitter, with #Gaylor content moving from Tumblr's walled garden of complex tags and a nearly inscrutable posting culture over to Twitter's mainstream. For many Swifties, #Gaylor amounts to a malicious and false narrative about their favorite celebrity. For true believers who see attempts to debunk the theory as homophobic attacks, it has become a pillar of their online identity.

As the theory has received more attention, with mentions of the key term and hashtag "Gaylor" spiking sharply on Twitter after the October release of the Midnights album, this adversarial dynamic has fuelled intra-fandom harassment. To understand how a seemingly harmless fan theory fractured this online community, Graphika created a network map of the Gaylor conversation on Twitter, revealing sub-communities that have become increasingly polarized under mainstream attention. As the divide has deepened, these groups have engaged in doxxing, coordinated harassment, and online intimidation to silence opposing views.

Swifties have long been the subject of journalistic and academic interest for their prolific content creation, digital savvy, organizing capacity, and sometimes vicious online behaviors. In this report, we analyze how contested, niche beliefs can fragment online fandoms and result in intra-community harassment dynamics, a phenomenon also observed in other fandoms: that of One Direction, the TV show Sherlock, and even the QAnon movement. By studying how this

increasingly divided community has evolved and interacts, we hope to better understand all online discourse, whether it be a debate over sports, politics, or an icon's sexuality.

Network Analysis

'Drew a Map on Your Bedroom Ceiling'

To understand the structure of the online Taylor Swift fan community, we created a network map of 84 influential Swiftie Twitter accounts and their followers. We identified these accounts by the use of relevant key terms and hashtags in their bios, including neutral terms associated with the Swiftie community, such as swifties, swiftie, and #taylornation, as well as those used by proponents of the Gaylor theory (e.g. Gaylor, Gaylorswift, #Swiftgron, #lgbetty, #bettygate, and #lavendergate). Once mapped, we labeled these accounts based on their shared interests, as determined by uniquely popular accounts within each cluster. This allowed us to establish whether they were proponents of Gaylor-related narratives, critical of the theory, or indifferent.

The resulting network map (shown below) comprises 13,292 accounts split into six distinct but connected groups, providing an overview of the community dynamics in Swift's fandom on Twitter. These groups include:

- **INT Anti-Gaylor Swifties |** The largest group, comprised of Taylor Swift fan accounts who reject or criticize Gaylor theories in their tweets or bio information.

- **INT Neutral Swifties |** Taylor Swift fan accounts with a variety of self-reported locations and who appear indifferent to Gaylor theories. Their content never mentions any key terms associated with either side of the divide. They are the map's second-largest group.

- **INT Gaylors |** Swiftie accounts engaged in queer readings of Swift's work or pushing the theory that Swift is queer. This group is internally polarized, in part due to historic extremism allegations within the Gaylor community relating to anti-semitism and doxxing incidents.

- **INT Larries |** Accounts that root for former One Direction bandmates Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson to end up together, or "ship." They do so either ironically for fanfiction purposes or earnestly by creating content based on unproven fan theories. In the same way that #Gaylor split Swifties into warring factions, Directioners were bitterly split by Larries and for years engaged in an intense intra-fandom war.

- **INT MultiStan Swifties |** Accounts whose content focuses on updates, streams of live performances, fan cams, photos, lyric bots, or chart statistics for multiple celebrities in addition to Taylor Swift. They contribute to the map's ecosystem by bridging otherwise

unconnected nodes through mutual followership but do not necessarily participate in Gaylor discourse.

- **Spanish-Language Swifties |** Taylor Swift fan accounts from a variety of self-reported Spanish-speaking locations that tweet predo minantly in Spanish. They are largely indifferent to the Gaylor divide.
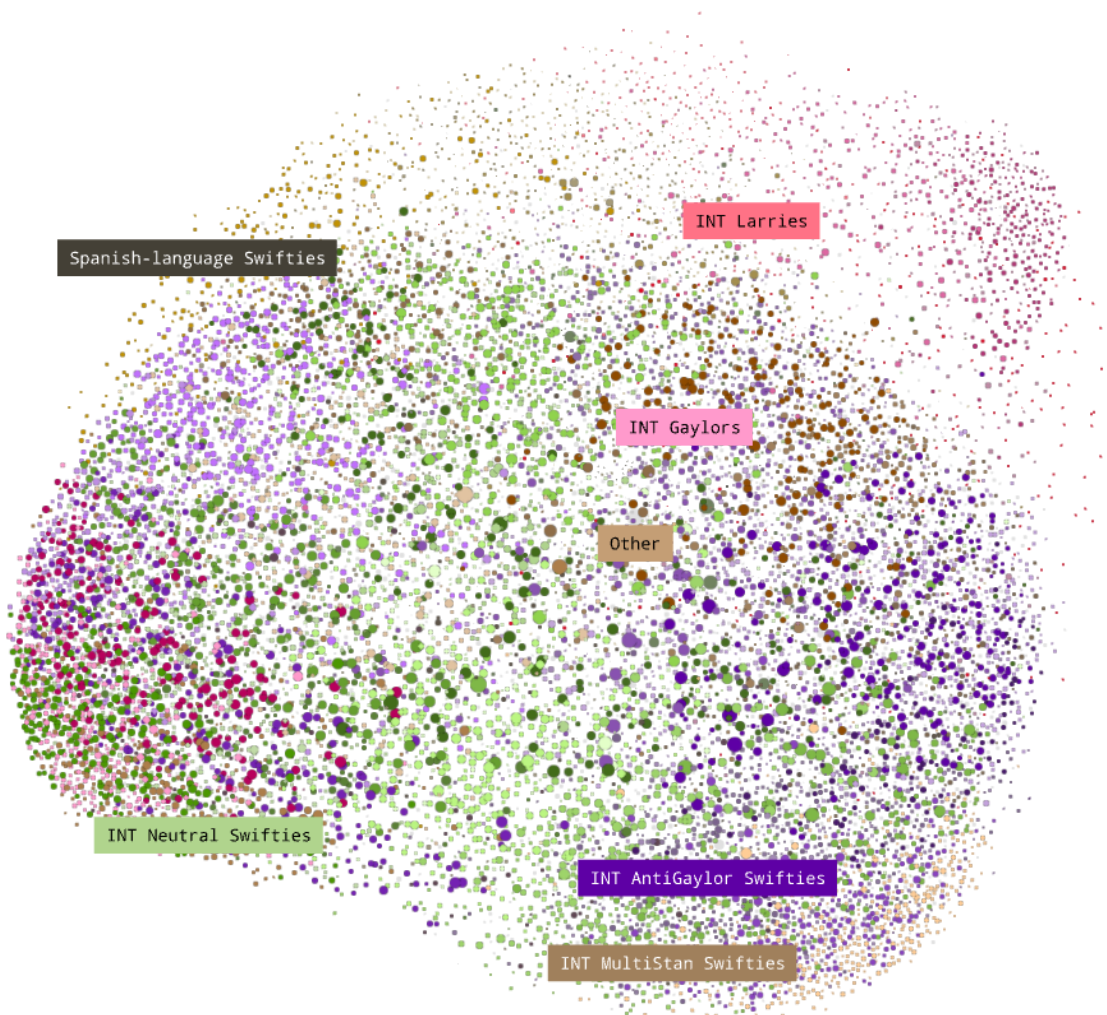
Network map showing a sample of 13,292 Twitter accounts in the Taylor Swift fandom divided into six distinct communities. Each circle, or node, represents an account and its size is relative to the size of its in-map followership.

|	Group	Accounts	Percentage of Map	Density
	INT Neutral Swifties	3,494	26.29	9.98%
	INT Anti-Gaylor Swifties	3,738	28.12	5.02%
	INT Larries	468	3.52	2.18%
	INT MultiStan Swifties	1,941	14.6	5.28%
	Spanish-language Swifties	1,345	10.12	2.50%
	INT Gaylors	1,225	9.22	11.42%
	Other	1,081	8.13	0.45%

Table showing the communities present in Graphika's network map of the Taylor Swift fanbase on Twitter

Key Findings

- The largest group in the map, representing over 28% of accounts in the sample, is the **Anti-Gaylor Swifties** group. It sits adjacent to the smaller and highly interconnected **Gaylors** group, implying that these communities – while distinct – are likely to see each other's content and interact with it.

- **Gaylors** are also the map group closest to the **Larries**, or accounts dedicated to shipping former One Direction bandmates Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, making members of these groups likely to interact and boost each others' content. This is likely a consequence of the structural and rhetorical similarities between the two groups of accounts.

- In terms of connectedness, the **Gaylor** group is particularly dense, representing high rates of mutual followership. It also has the map's second-highest "heterophily" score, indicating its members have a higher affinity for each other than for accounts in other groups. As a result, **Gaylor** accounts are more likely to interact with like-minded accounts in a Twitter echo chamber, reinforcing existing beliefs. The **Spanish-language Swifties** group registered the highest heterophily rate, which is unsurprising given their shared language within the larger thematic universe of accounts.

- While dense, the **Gaylor** community itself has distinct poles, explained in part by whether the accounts displayed affinity (or lack thereof) for the #Kaylor theory, a sub-Gaylor belief that fashion model Karlie Kloss and Taylor Swift were (or may still be) in a secret, romantic

relationship. This section of the fandom is motivated more by the allegation that Swift's sexuality has a hidden side, versus other Gaylors, who simply prefer queer readings of Swift's work. Historical rifts within the **Gaylor** community stem from the radicalization and hateful rhetoric of some of the [most influential nodes](#) of Kaylor discourse in the years that the #Kaylor theory was ascendant on Tumblr.

● Additionally, as indicated by their geographical proximity in the map, **Anti-Gaylors** are more likely to follow accounts or see content from the Kaylor sub-faction - the most extreme version of #Gaylor content. This may explain why extremism has been framed as archetypal of **Gaylors**, and not as an outlier within a more radical sub-community.

● A heatmap (below) illustrating the use of the #Gaylor hashtag relative to other groups in Graphika's map of the Taylor Swift fandom shows that while **Gaylor** accounts used the hashtag most frequently, **Anti-Gaylor** accounts also engaged with the topic while criticizing or debunking the theory. While accounts in both groups post at similar volumes, **Anti-Gaylor** accounts outnumber **Gaylor** accounts and play a key role in amplifying this conversation to mainstream audiences.
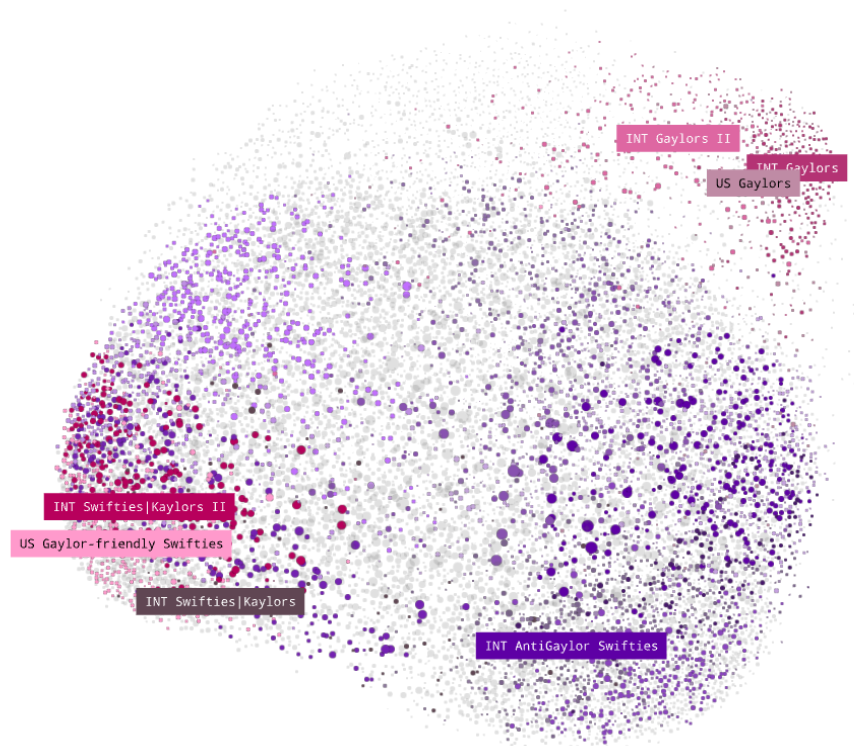
Map highlighting only Gaylor, Anti-Gaylor, and Kaylor accounts, illustrating the polarized Kaylor subfaction within Gaylor accounts
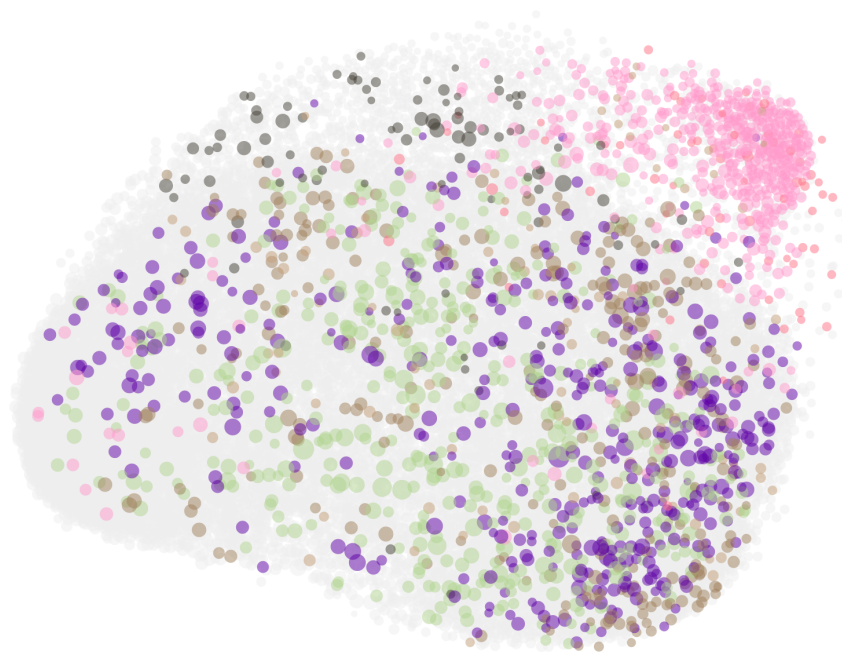
Heatmap based on usage of #Gaylor in Graphika's Swifties map, depicting Anti-Gaylors, Gaylors, and Neutral Swifties

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

'The Great War'

The community structure detailed above provides the framework for a sustained online conflict between Gaylors and Anti-Gaylors, with members of both groups engaging in coordinated harassment campaigns and other adversarial behaviors. In this section, we provide an overview of the different tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by these warring factions.

Doxxing & Harassment: Anti-Gaylor groups appear to use homophobic language to target individual Gaylor accounts, including the anonymous authoring of derogatory fan fiction featuring the owners of influential accounts in the Gaylor community. Sometimes, this has strayed into doxxing and outing rival accounts' sexualities online. Following the release of Swift's Folklore album in 2020, for instance, Gaylor fans cited the ambiguous use of pronouns in a track titled Betty as apparent evidence of queer messaging. Swift later clarified that the song was written from the perspective of a 17-year-old boy, prompting Anti-Gaylors to launch a harassment campaign targeting fans who had previously posted queer interpretations. In what became known as "BettyGate," some Gaylor fans had personal information, including about their sexuality, shared online without their consent. Consequently, fear of doxxing is evident in the Gaylor community, where users frequently share security tips to help each other stay safe.

An exchange between two Gaylor Twitter accounts discussing the doxxing and harassment episode known as 'Bettygate.' The term 'hetlors' is used by Gaylors to refer to anti-Gaylors.

Brigading & Mass Reporting: Both Gaylor and Anti-Gaylor users regularly engage in coordinated hostile actions targeting specific accounts or groups of accounts, a practice sometimes referred to as brigading. Anti-Gaylors, in particular, have attempted to censor Gaylor discourse by mass-reporting influential accounts and their posts to social media platforms in an attempt to have them suspended. In November 2022, for instance, TikTok permanently suspended the account of @diickvandyke, a user focused on discussing Swift lyrics from a Gaylor perspective. The account had recently received widespread attention in the Swifties fan community after Taylor Swift's account liked one of its videos, and after its suspension, Anti-Gaylor accounts claimed they had triggered the takedown by repeatedly submitting reports of hateful behavior.
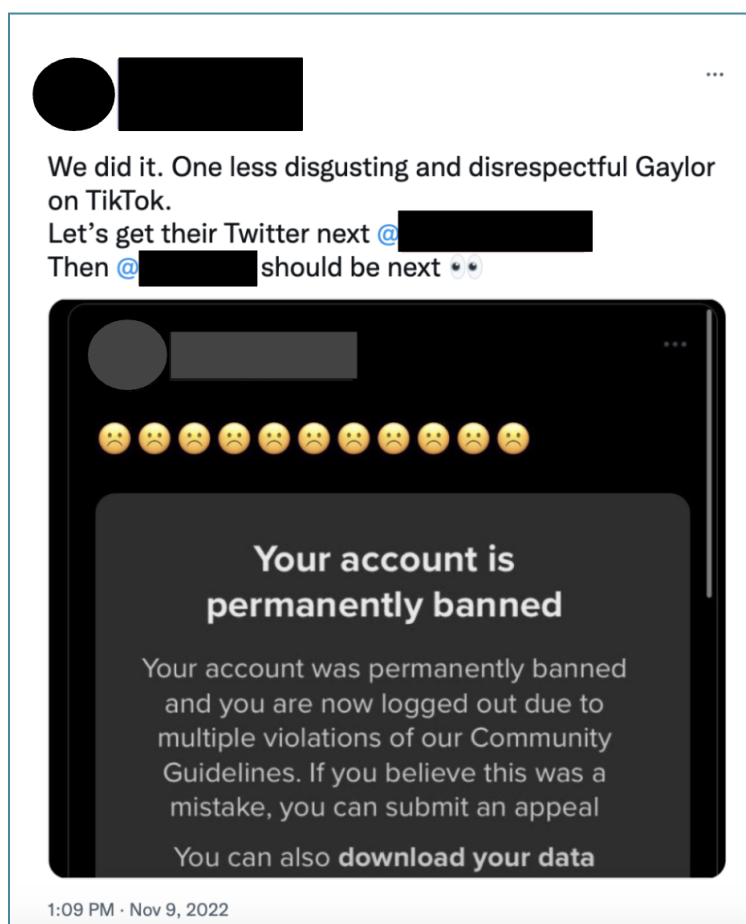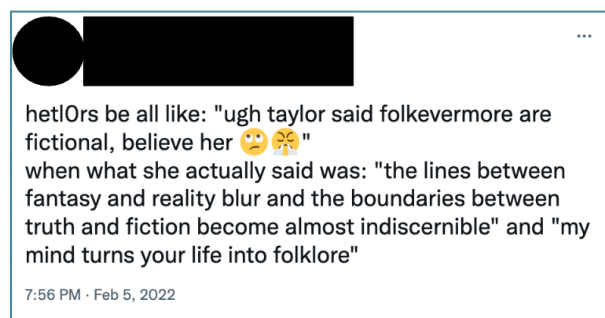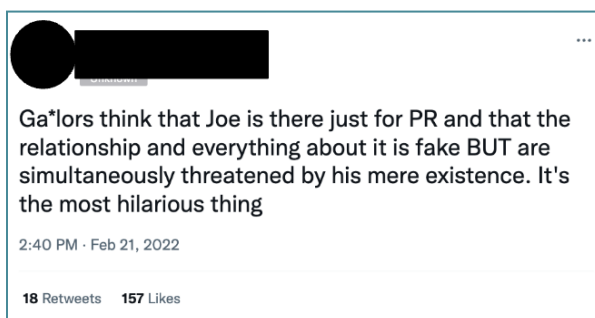

An Anti-Gaylor account on Twitter (purple) taking credit for the permanent ban of a Gaylor TikTok account (pink) and naming other users as future mass reporting targets

Sock Puppet Accounts: We observed multiple references to sock puppeting – the practice of using multiple accounts, often under different names – by users on both sides of the Gaylor divide. While not necessarily nefarious, the reasons for using sock puppet accounts vary and may include attempts to expand a user's reach, lurk in private spaces, evade suspensions and bans, or anonymously harass other users.

A meme posted to Reddit referencing the use of sock puppet accounts by Gaylor fans in order to gain access to spaces where the discussion of Swift's sexuality is prohibited

Coded Language: Members of both communities use a constantly evolving series of coded terms and alternative spellings, apparently in an effort to avoid attracting the attention of the rival faction. For example, Anti-Gaylor accounts will use "Ga*lor" or "G@ylor" in their posts, while Gaylors refer to Anti-Gaylors as "Hetlors" - a portmanteau of "heterosexual" and "Taylor" meant to evoke Hitler and also the group's alleged homophobic practices.

Ga*lors think that Joe is there just for PR and that the relationship and everything about it is fake BUT are simultaneously threatened by his mere existence. It's the most hilarious thing

2:40 PM · Feb 21, 2022

18 Retweets   157 Likes

hetl0rs be all like: "ugh taylor said folkevermore are fictional, believe her 🙄🎆"
when what she actually said was: "the lines between fantasy and reality blur and the boundaries between truth and fiction become almost indiscernible" and "my mind turns your life into folklore"

7:56 PM · Feb 5, 2022

Tweets by Anti-Gaylor (left) and Gaylor (right) accounts using alternative spellings to refer to the opposing group

Censorship: As shown in our network map, the Anti-Gaylor community significantly outnumbers Gaylor proponents, making them the dominant force in the majority of online spaces used by Swift's fandom. Anti-Gaylor accounts have used their strength of numbers to "exile" Gaylor fans from the mainstream, banning them from subreddits and other forums. On the main Swiftie subreddit r/TaylorSwift, for example, speculating about the artist's sexuality can be a [bannable offense](#), and other spaces for celebrity gossip auto-ban members of r/GaylorSwift, citing allegations of brigading and harassment.
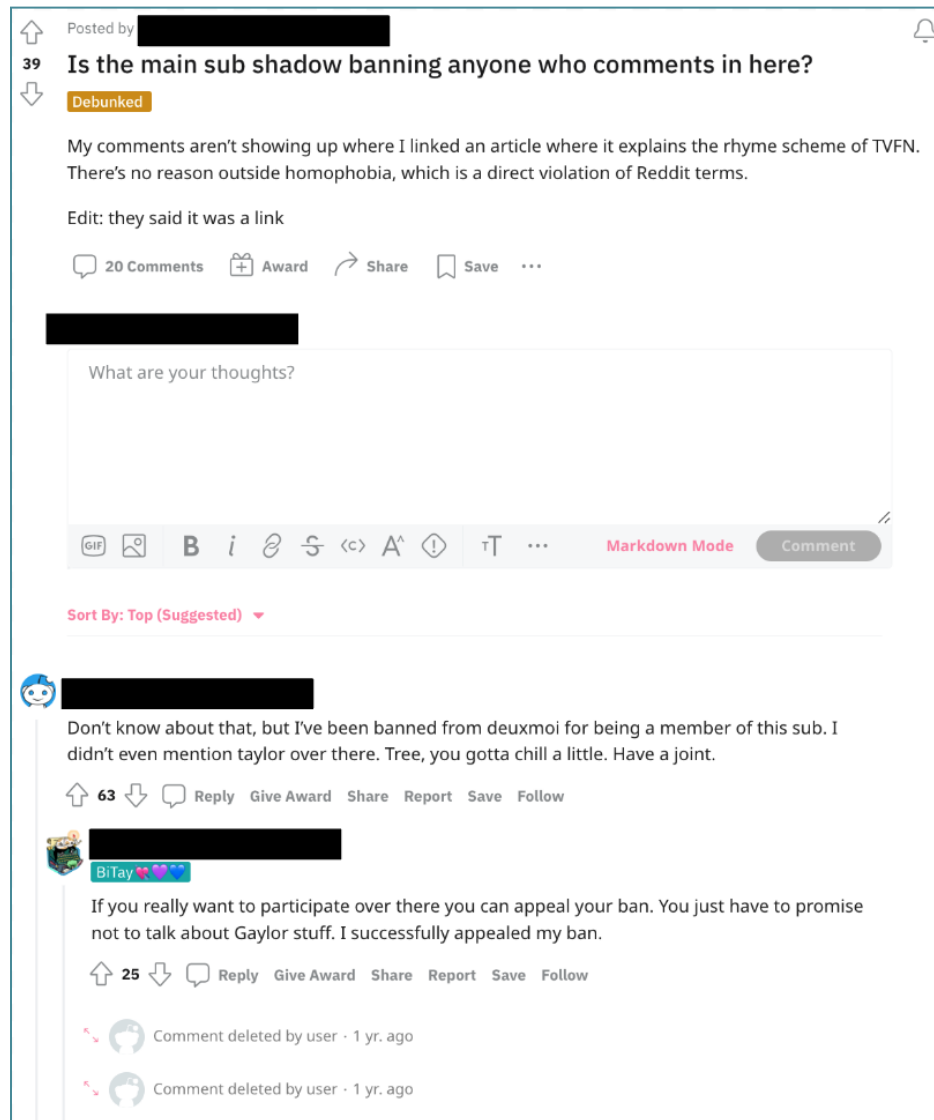
Members of a Gaylor subreddit discussing bans imposed on them in other subreddits

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About Us

Graphika is an intelligence company that maps the world's online communities and conversations. We help partners worldwide, including Fortune 500 companies, Silicon Valley, human rights organizations, and universities, discover how communities form online and understand the flow of information and influence within large-scale social networks. Customers rely on Graphika for a unique, network-first approach to the global online landscape.

For more information, please contact: info@graphika.com