City, University of London Institutional Repository

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

People as Institutions or Why Taylor Swift Rules the World

Amit Nigam[1]* iD, John Amis[2]* iD and Danielle Logue[3]* iD

Abstract

Drawing on Taylor Swift as an example, we propose that people, as individuals rather than as representatives of an office, can become institutions. We propose that an individual can become a focal point around which a distinctive and enduring set of roles and repertoire of interactions across roles emerges, enabling and embodying a distinctive set of values. In doing so, these people together with the role relations around them become institutions. As institutions, they provide an important blueprint for social life for at least some people in a broader society. Our work advances organizational and institutional theorizing by proposing a new mode, individuals, by which institutions, with their attendant values, norms and understandings, can develop and spread.

Keywords

culture, diffusion, identity, institutional theory, social constructionism

On a ferry in Sydney harbour on a sunny day, three tween girls were heading to Manly beach. They were chatting with one another as they were disembarking, when a young girl, around 4 years old, perhaps noticing a Taylor Swift T-shirt or bag, reached up to give one of the tweens a friendship bracelet. As the young girl's mother started to apologize, the tween took off one of her own friendship bracelets and gave it to the young girl. They left the ferry smiling, saying "awww, that's so cute."

[1]City St Georges, University of London, London, UK
[2]University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
[3]University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia

*All authors contributed equally to this piece. The author order has been randomized

Corresponding author:
Amit Nigam, City St Georges, University of London, 106 Bunhill Row, London, EC1Y 8TZ, UK.
Email: Amit.Nigam.1@city.ac.uk

A young man was having a catch-up with his uncle in the UK. He was talking about the past year as his "grind era", really focused on work, more or less all the time, saying that he was anticipating a shift to a new "era" where he would enjoy his twenties and have more fun and balance. Queried later, he said that he might have heard about people talking about life phases as eras, but it really became a popular way for people in their 20s and 30s to think about their lives after Taylor Swift came out with it.

"Hi, I'm Taylor". As impressive as the concert is, that introduction really stuck out. As she introduced herself to her fans, she used just her first name. To them she isn't Taylor-Swift-the brand – she's just Taylor. . . they are more than just people engaged in a transactional relationship, they are friends.

(Aten, 2024)

Taylor Swift is a global phenomenon. Her fan base crosses countries and generations and her recent 'Eras' tour, a 'mega-cultural event' celebrating every musical stage of her career, grossed more than US\$2 billion, the most of all time for a concert tour. The tour sold out hotel rooms in cities around the world and saw governments provide multi-million-dollar inducements to secure a tour stop, sometimes leading to regional geopolitical conflict among countries desperate to secure the anticipated economic and reputational boost that Swift could bring (The Guardian, 2024). Within the music industry, Swift's records have crossed musical genres, broken sales records and won numerous awards. She has been embraced by preeminent cultural institutions, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum in London with their creation of the Taylor Swift Songbook trail. Most distinctive, however, is the network of organizations and other actors who have coalesced around Taylor Swift that range beyond her own skilful business organizing efforts and her relationship with her fan base. The emergence of a specialized language among fans, or Swifties, the development of a globally recognized set of rituals and practices (such as the exchange of friendship bracelets described above), and a distinctive set of values – authenticity, integrity, empathy, community, and inclusiveness – associated with her suggest to us that Taylor Swift is more than just a musical phenomenon, icon or brand (see e.g. Bengtsson & Edlom, 2023; Théberge, 2021): Taylor Swift is an institution.

In thinking about Taylor Swift as an institution, we use this paper to develop theory for conceptualizing people as institutions. Specifically, we propose that some individuals can become a focal point around which a distinctive and enduring set of roles, and an associated recognizable repertoire of interactions, emerges that embody and represent certain values. The individuals themselves, together with the role relations and values, can then become constituted as an institution. We argue that, by neglecting this idea, organizational theorists have missed a powerful opportunity for developing insight into the emergence and spread of institutions and their attendant values, norms and understandings. Thus, our theorization of person-centred institutions complements and extends the predominant focus within organizational institutionalism on organizations, industry systems and professions. To develop our argument, we draw on recent theorizing on the emergence and sedimentation of institutions across levels, geographic communities and societies (Lounsbury & Wang, 2023; Ocasio, 2023). In so doing, we explain how the Taylor Swift institution has emerged from deliberate and emergent decisions and associated behaviours. These include the organizing efforts of her business empire, the repertoire of roles embraced by her global 'Swifties' fan base, the values and meanings that inform and are animated by these roles, and the other institutions and micro-institutions with whom she interacts. This allows us to develop theory to explain the processes by which Taylor Swift, and potentially other individuals, can become constituted as institutions. We also develop suggestions for future work that we hope can flesh out, extend and potentially challenge our theorizing both on people-centred institutions and their role within a multi-level inter-institutional system.

It seems apposite now to be considering whether Taylor Swift is an institution with her Eras Tour coinciding with the 75th anniversary of Selznick's (1949) influential work on the Tennessee Valley Authority that pointed to why we should think of (at least some) organizations as institutions. Selznick moved beyond thinking of organizations as formal rational tools, instead conceptualizing them as infused with value and meanings, and able to take on a life of their own. We echo this thinking to propose that individual people can become institutions that are similarly imbued with values and meaning, and co-constituted by a set of relations.

It is important to note that, while there is a rich tradition across the social sciences of conceptualizing and empirically exploring what is an institution, institutions' impacts and how they constitute and are constituted by a larger society, the variety of work from different ontological and theoretical perspectives has led to a lack of agreement over what is meant by the term 'institution' (Ocasio, 2023; Searle, 2005). In this essay, we adopt Ocasio's (2023, p, 2) definition of an institution as 'a taken-for-granted, organized system of roles and interactions' that offers a 'blueprint' that is infused with values for some aspect of social life. Institutions thus structure how those involved with them may act, interact and think by conveying meaning of what is important. This 'is generated and reproduced through the activities of a social network of role practitioners' that may be across organizations, communities, geographies and societies, sedimenting at higher levels over time (Ocasio, 2023, p. 3).

In our case Taylor Swift, as an institution, offers a 'blueprint' for people to live lives that they perceive as authentic. This may be particularly true for core members of her Swiftie fan base, the network of role practitioners that has emerged around Swift comprising particularly young women, digital natives and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Driessen, 2022; Lansky, 2023). These role practitioners can feel supported, often in defiance of societal expectations, and can find forms of belonging that are non-religious and fit with their own sense of individuality. People in online fora and other settings speak about the emotional resonance of Swift's songs as they navigate relationship break-ups, deaths of family members and friends, coming out and other events they feel on a deeply personal level. As such, a common refrain among Swifties is the finding of community in their efforts to navigate their lives (Vinter, 2024).

Swift's lyrics, and the roles and role relations that have accumulated around her and her music, emphasize a particular way of navigating the world. The narrative meaning-making in her work focuses on emotional reflection and agency, cultivating deep relations, ethical resolve and continuous personal growth (Evers, 2025). Thus, the institution of Taylor Swift, including her words and lyrics – along with the roles, words and actions of Swifties and other actors affiliated with her – signal the importance of authenticity, embracing difference and belonging as key norms and values that guide how people can live their lives. This is something beyond the material and instead focuses upon those aspects of an institution that are 'ideational and symbolic' (Zilber, 2008: 152). In this conceptualization, institutions can be established and subsequently reproduced through interactions that occur across different geographic communities. These communities are connected digitally and located around the world resulting in a reach and typification of roles and interactions that become successively objectivated and sedimented (Ocasio, 2023). Thus, we adapt Ocasio's argument of what constitutes an institution to build a three-stage process model revealing how a person can become an institution; the first stage is typification.

Typification

The typification of roles and interactions constitutes a common first stage of institutionalization (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Ocasio, 2023; Zucker, 1977). Typification 'emerges from the routinization of social practices and the classification of component roles and interaction orders' (Ocasio, 2023, p. 4). It is through

typification that the roles, role relations and rules governing relations and interactions are specified, collectively understood and thus more readily replicated across contexts (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). As practices become established, understood and shared, they become commonly accepted as appropriate ways to act in particular situations. Thus, these practices can become powerful means for both establishing and transmitting an institution, along with its associated values and norms, 'as long as the hosts find these models appealing and want to adopt them' (Bitektine et al., 2020, p. 890). Over several years, Taylor Swift and her fans have cultivated a set of practices, both online and offline, that create and project a sense of belonging and often result in shared experiences. These can range from making and trading friendship bracelets (signalling community and belonging), to publishing letters to Swift about the impact of her music on their personal lives (signalling authenticity in their navigation of life's challenges). There is some conveyance of a belief in positivity and 'goodness', of being welcoming and kind to others and of sharing vulnerabilities that underlies these practices.

Important here is a 'collective intentionality' (Searle, 2005), a shared understanding of appropriate forms of activity among 'transnational communities' (Djelic & Quack, 2010) that are acted upon communally. Further, there is understanding of what it means to engage in shared activities. That is, behaviours are underpinned by socially constructed, and agreed, meanings and actions that are mutually constitutive (Dolfsma & Verbürg, 2008; Zilber, 2008). Indeed, Taylor Swift's fans, and their engagement around the values of the institution, have impacted Swift and her music. It was after her fans, through social media, pushed her to take a stand on inclusivity that she responded with the video for 'You Need to Calm Down', which celebrated LGBTQ+ pride and inclusivity. More routinely, a unique practice between Taylor Swift and her followers is 'Easter Egg hunting' and theory crafting. Easter Egg hunting involves Taylor Swift leaving clues in her songs, videos and posts about future projects.

This is a strategy that Swift draws on to explicitly engage her fans in a reciprocal relationship of meaning-making (Evers, 2025). Fans then craft theories, using these and other materials to construct, speculate and develop shared understandings about upcoming releases or connections between songs and their deeper meanings. This helps create a highly active and engaged fan base that Swift then involves and embraces in her concerts (Corbin, 2024; Evers, 2025). Fans also add lyrics and actions to specific songs that they sing and enact together, a sense of collective contribution to the musical experience. They are not passive recipients but co-creators of the institution.

We see this process of typification of roles and role relations for an individual person becoming an institution as distinct from a person who is appointed to and, often temporarily, occupies a formal institutional role, such as the office of the President of the United States of America. We thus extend from Searle's (2005, p. 8) theorizing when he argues that a key requisite of an institution is an agreed 'status function' in which 'the object or person acquires a function which can be performed only in virtue of the collective acceptance of the corresponding status'. For Searle (2005, p. 13), the President of the United States can be considered an institution but only if we can think of two different levels at once; that is, we not only see the person but also see them 'as a leader or President of the United States'. Our theorizing differs in that we see Taylor Swift as an institution in and of herself. While the President is an institution due to the office that he or (someday) she occupies, Taylor Swift, and the typified roles and interactions that coalesce around her, are deeply personal, due to her individuality and vulnerability. It is these roles, and the values that are shared among Swift, the Swifties and other entities with whom she interacts, that help constitute Swift as an institution. Her lyrics, which often speak to her personal struggles and narrative, as well as her open and vulnerable persona, reinforce these values, roles and relationships that have been typified as commonly understood and shared.

Objectivation

As roles and interactions become socially accepted as appropriate, so they may become perceived as a form of 'objective reality' (Ocasio, 2023). That is, they become exteriorized beyond the accepted practices of a small group of like-minded people in a constrained setting (Zucker, 1977). As different groups become exposed to an institution, so typifications become more broadly established. This process is accelerated as the expected ways to act and interact become spread by various cultural means, including stories, narratives, theories and 'material artifacts associated with observable practices' (Ocasio, 2023, p. 5). Roles may be expanding and interactions spreading, though they are not as yet fully taken for granted. As Meyer et al. (2018) pointed out, the communication that is central to this does not have to be verbal. Indeed, non-verbal sources are often extremely powerful alongside the verbal, as exemplified in our case by the Eras concert tour, the associated film of the concert and the mass of written, photographic and video reporting that has taken place. The scale of the tour, 152 shows across five continents, led to Swifties around the world educating non-Swifties on concert etiquette and other expectations, widening engagement and understanding of what it means to be a Swiftie. For example, even when, over the years (or eras) Taylor Swift has changed musical genres and the content and cadence of her work, the roles and role interactions of Swifties surrounding her have endured, adapting to accommodate changes in Swift's work and perhaps making even stronger some of the practices, such as theory crafting, discussed earlier. This seems only to have increased in the face of external pressures as Taylor Swift took on the music production industry regarding artists' rights and traversed new geographies (Foggatt, 2025).

Further, if we think about songs and our historic association with music as a powerful and emotive medium, we can see that when the verbal is accompanied by music, the opportunity for creation and transmission of an institution becomes potentially more powerful than when words are simply used on their own. In a similar vein, though a different form of theorizing, Schwartz (1996) recounts how Lincoln's place in American society was made manifest in multiple cultural forms, including statues, films and plays. This, as with Taylor Swift, creates a recognizable repository of value-infused artefacts that can be drawn upon in multiple ways as and when needed.

Also important in the objectification phase of our theorization of a person-centred institutionalism is Bitektine et al.'s (2020, p. 890) point that 'the likelihood of transmission is determined by the susceptibility of the potential host and by the credibility and social influence of the source actor(s)'. Bitektine and his colleagues (2020) argue that there must be an appealing identity component associated with some economic, social or psychological benefits. Many fans identify with the sense of support and understanding in Taylor Swift's music and connect with others who feel the same. This forms a community with members who uplift and empower each other in a way that is creative, expressive and welcoming. There is a strong focus on Swifties behaving in ways that celebrate inclusivity and acceptance of difference; a moral order emerges through these shared and observed practices (Douglas, 1986). For example, there is the musical experience, common to every concert, that stimulates one's limbic system with emotions and behaviour manifesting a 'collective effervescence' (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Yet the Taylor Swift Eras tour is more than a 'greatest hits' celebration, with reviews arguing it is conveying a story of human growth, change, development and healing (Aten, 2024). As the second vignette in the opening of the paper illustrates, Taylor Swift has created a language that a generation of people draw on to conceptualize or think or feel about the phases and turning points in their lives. Much has been written about the concert experience being a gathering of peace, love, tolerance, acceptance, consideration and inclusion, with 'invisible strings connecting everyone everywhere' (McKenzie, 2024), creating an environment in which people feel safe. Undoubtedly, the emotions that are motivated by the shows, the

music and even the reporting, and that are shared by the Swiftie fan base, both transmit and cement an understanding of how one should think, feel and act. While there is clearly heterogeneity, the shared and recognizable experience is apparent.

Sedimentation

As typified roles and interactions become objectivated and more widely shared, so over time they become embedded as the broadly accepted way of acting, moving from cultural blueprints into durable institutions. Ocasio (2023, p. 7) explains, 'through sedimentation, objectivated role structures and interaction orders become taken for granted and normatively sanctioned—hence institutionalized'. Previous theorizing has suggested that sedimentation may occur through processes such as generations transmitting collective memory through language, the layering of practices and components into existing organizations and institutions, or the generation of a committed network of role practitioners with specialized knowledge who transmit and protect institutionalized practices (Cooper et al., 1996; Furnari, 2019; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Similarly, we see the role of Swifties engaged in various practices that are common around the world. Indeed, the vignette at the opening of the paper of the girls exchanging friendship bracelets in Sydney could have taken place, and indeed has, in Edinburgh, Singapore, Los Angeles and scores of other locations around the world. The commitment of Swifties is signalled through emergent practices that serve to build connections in local and global communities, distinct from those efforts usually associated with celebrity business building driven by artists and their managers. These include hosting listening parties and streaming marathons; routines of 'Taylor Tuesdays' and 'Swiftie Saturdays'; letter writing and social media messaging to Taylor Swift and other Swifties; and theory crafting around artefacts such as Taylor Swift's favourite number 13 (Driessen, 2022). Swifties celebrate Swift's music but further foster a unique, supportive community.

The process of sedimentation involves a strong normative impetus (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996) and adherence to the values espoused by the focal institution. While the values of authenticity, embrace of community and inclusivity are not unique, the institution of Taylor Swift offers a particular way of enacting and expressing these values – there is cultural imprinting and reciprocity through established practices. This reciprocity builds a relational exchange not only between Swift and her fans, but among fans themselves, and between fans and other organizations. We note that this is not necessarily an exchange by equals, but an exchange that conveys a mutual agreement and expression of helping and supporting each other. This, we argue, is powered by a strong emotional connection between Swift and her fans. This connection plays out in multiple ways, such as sharing personal stories and dressing up in ways that are simultaneously inspired by her fashion (e.g. sequins, boots) but also expressive of her fans' idiosyncratic interpretations. Swifties 'engage in scripted interactions' as prescribed by the institution (Bitektine et al. 2020, p. 893), exemplified by shared and very precise actions. The co-creation and ongoing circulation of artefacts, such as making and exchanging friendship bracelets, actions such as dressing up for concerts, and engaging in the communal events described earlier, all speak to direct and sustained institutional interaction. Taylor Swift's management team – part of the set of committed role practitioners – actively nurture fan loyalty, steer behaviours (discouraging hate, promoting kindness) and protect narratives through regulative and legal means, and even quietly sidelining fans who violate norms (Franssen, 2022).

Sedimentation also emerges when the institution of Taylor Swift impacts and shapes other institutions, such as political institutions (e.g. voting choices at a Presidential election with her endorsement of Kamala Harris), sporting institutions (e.g. bringing a new audience to the National Football League through her relationship with Kansas City Chiefs' player Travis Kelce) and in conflicts with the music and film

industries. For example, she has championed artists' rights, protesting low royalty payments on platforms such as Spotify by removing her catalogue and taking on Apple Music when it planned to not pay artists during its 3-month free trial period for customers. Further, in trying to regain ownership of the master recordings of her earlier albums, she re-recorded all of them and persuaded her fans to switch to 'Taylor's version', something that has resulted in major changes to artists' contracts with record labels (Foggatt, 2025). She also promoted major ticketing reforms, working with providers such as Ticketek to reduce opportunities for ticket scalping and mass purchases by online bots of tickets that are then sold at inflated prices (Beam, 2023).

In describing the stages of typification, objectivation and sedimentation, we explain how Taylor Swift has become constituted as an institution. In the next section, we develop the broader theoretical implications of considering people as institutions.

Discussion

In this essay we draw on the process model of institutions developed by Ocasio (2023) to help motivate our argument that individuals, as people, can become institutions. Person-institutions are constituted by a specific set of roles, role relations and practices, rooted in a set of values and reciprocal interactions that are created by and coalesce around a focal individual. These can be articulated abstractly, diffused globally across levels, and be taken for granted as rules or ways of acting for people who become part of or think their way into a particular institution. In making our case, we contend that the ways in which the values, roles, role relations and practices that have coalesced around Taylor Swift have become a way for many to help understand their own emotions and life journeys. Thus, Swift, the person, is institutionalized not because of the role she occupies, but because the values that she espouses have been adopted, embraced and elaborated by a community that has coalesced around her. Taylor Swift

is an institution because she is constitutive of, and simultaneously represents, a community and an associated set of values that define what is sacred for people who feel deeply connected to her. She reflects and amplifies in a totemic way a blueprint for people to enact their membership in a socially constructed community (Douglas, 1986; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

Given the nature of our example, we also make the point that person-institutions are distinct from celebrities. This points to specific boundary conditions that accompany our theorizing: reciprocity and resonance. To illustrate, there are prominent celebrities who do not adhere to our conceptualization of person-institutions. Oprah Winfrey may be one example. Though groundbreaking in her popularity and the breadth of her business empire, and influential in articulating a particular set of values and meanings around self-improvement, the communities formed around her have been more deliberately created and managed. They are also singularly directional (not reciprocal) in their influence and engagement (of Oprah towards fans). It is beyond the scope of this piece to do a full analysis of Oprah Winfrey but sociological research emphasizes that she was groundbreaking in creating a commodified and mediated form of intimacy through her personal disclosures. However, this work also emphasizes that the format of the television talk show left little space for reciprocal engagement with fans. Rather, Oprah's intimacy, which was curated through the production company she owned, has been conceptualized as a 'parasocial relationship' where audiences feel addressed, but are not authors of meaning (Illouz, 2003). Oprah's book club, which did directly engage audiences in reading, were similarly centrally orchestrated with reading guides and controls over what groups could be constituted as official Oprah book clubs, and interpretive frames provided by Winfrey that positioned reading as a form of self-improvement (Rooney, 2008). There was, to our knowledge, no strong network of role practitioners who embraced the values and meanings associated with Winfrey, and somewhat autonomously promulgated them through

artefacts, rituals, stories and other means: there is no Oprah equivalent of a Swiftie.

Further, for people to become institutions, they must tap into, represent and give tangible expression to some set of values and beliefs that are present in society, and that resonate with people in a way that allows them to constitute themselves into members of a particular community. This can happen on varying scales. For example, Jim Jones, a cult leader whose followers committed mass suicide in Guyana in 1978, may, on a smaller scale, have become an institution, with specific roles, role relations and beliefs sedimenting around him. Clearly, in the case of Jim Jones, the community of the institution was small. However, there was clearly something that became taken for granted. While it is hard to know, given that the reputations of individuals are socially and culturally constructed (Fine, 2001), it is possible that Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali were also people who became institutions around whom a set of roles and role relationships formed. The practices and values that were espoused were constitutive of anti-imperialism, the struggle against oppression, anti-racism and black pride. In the institutionalization of person-centred institutions, both the resonance and the reciprocity in the interaction and engagement between the focal person and the network of committed role practitioners is important in the objectification and sedimentation phases (Cooper et al., 1996; Ocasio, 2023).

People-institutions, such as Taylor Swift, are also a particular type of institution, separate, but connected, to other institutions, such as markets, hierarchies and networks. This has broader implications for institutional theorizing, and requires that we take the idea of the multi-level, inter-institutional system that has been advanced in other work seriously (Marquis et al., 2011; Zietsma et al., 2017). The values of authenticity, diversity and community that are sacred in the institution of Taylor Swift connect with people in a societal context of individualism (in identity expression and interests), social isolation, online communities and polarization into diverse competing communities. While other scholars have

shown that people's identities and emotions can be connected with the institutions that they inhabit (Toubiana et al., 2017; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018), we believe that people are likely to take on the characteristics of institutions in societal domains that have traditionally been less studied by organization theorists. In our case, Taylor Swift became an institution that was constituted of a community of people who came to share and inhabit a particular set of values through a specific set of roles and practices. The societal realms of religion, politics and family would be interesting to study to see if and how people may become institutions.

Our conceptualization suggests opportunities to explore when and where person-institutions might emerge. Taylor Swift, we argue, became an institution because, as a person with a biography and vulnerabilities, she connects with people in ways that generate a sense of belonging and community at a particular point in time, when other formal institutions (e.g. religion) have become less widely resonant. The practices, roles and values associated with Swift have resonated widely, in a manner that echoes Schwartz's (1996, p. 913) observations of Abraham Lincoln in the first half of the twentieth century: 'Devotion to Abraham Lincoln as an ideal person cut across class, ethnic, racial and religious lines and was one of the sentiments that members of an otherwise fractious society shared.'

Person-institutions also raise different questions, such as how the institution can live on when the central person dies. We can point to other examples, such as Muhammad Ali, where the associated values more universally spread later, after the individual's death (e.g. Saeed, 2002; Townsend, Phillips, & Osmond, 2018). Other examples raise questions as to person-institutions living on beyond a formal office, for example Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan (e.g. Jessop, 2015). While each had distinct individual legacies, Thatcher and Reagan also reinforced each other, producing a larger set of meanings, values, practices and role practitioners that shaped inter-institutional systems, societies and economies for decades after their

formal roles ended, and indeed after their deaths. A similar case could be made for Mao Zedong in China. And yet not all national leaders become institutions, of course. Person-institutions raise questions as to who and when such institutions arise, what we can learn about institution transmission, intersections with formal roles, and death more generally.

Conclusion

Drawing on recent theorizing, we mobilize the example of Taylor Swift to argue that people can become institutions and to show how communities can emerge around a person co-constituted by a set of values, roles, role relations and practices that produce a blueprint for action, for a way of being. This is why Taylor Swift rules the world. The person-centred institution transcends physical representation, and provides a source of cultural continuity and collective and individual resonance. Also key is reciprocity in the interaction and engagement between the focal person and the network of role practitioners, especially in the objectification and sedimentation phases. Further explorations of our arguments could take place in other societal realms, with examination of endurance, intersection with other institutions and reach across communities. Importantly, one could examine whether individuals are more likely to emerge as institutions in unsettled times, when there is deterioration of traditional institutions, fracturing social relations, and now also alternative digital forms of connection that contribute to new modes of and opportunities for belonging. These, of course, are empirical questions. We hope that others will take on these ideas and push forward why, how, when and for how long individuals can become institutions.

Acknowledgements

ORCID iDs

Amit Nigam ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6772-9643
John Amis ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0627-0522
Danielle Logue ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7892-2553

Funding

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared the following potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Danielle Logue is involved in multiple ongoing collaborations with Markus Höllerer and employed at the same institution, hence we worked exclusively with the journal's second Editor-in-Chief, Sigrid Quack, throughout the editorial process related to this manuscript.

References

Aten, J. (2024, March 21). *Taylor Swift Uses 1 Word to Connect With Fans and It's a Brilliant Example of Emotional Intelligence*. Inc.com. https://www.inc.com/jason-aten/taylor-swift-uses-1-word-to-connect-with-fans-its-a-brilliant-example-of-emotional-intelligence.html

Barley, S. R., & Tolbert, P. S. (1997). Institutionalization and structuration: Studying the links between action and institution. *Organization Studies*, *18*, 93–117.

Beam, A. (2023, September 2). After outrage over Taylor Swift tickets, reform has been slow across the US. Associated Press News. https://apnews.com/article/american-concert-ticket-sale-reforms-taylor-swift-a5ddb8282a2c72f6dedaf-c8139c75921

Bengtsson, L. R., & Edlom, J. (2023). Commodifying participation through choreographed engagement: The Taylor Swift case. *Arts and the Market*, *13*(2), 65–79.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.

Bitektine, A., Haack, P., Bothello, J., & Mair, J. (2020). Inhabited actors: Internalizing institutions through communication and actorhood models. *Journal of Management Studies*, *57*, 885–897.

Cooper, D. A., Hinings, B., Greenwood, R., & Brown, J.M. (1996). Sedimentation and transformation in organizational change: The case of Canadian law firms. *Organization Studies*, *17*, 623–647.

Corbin, S. (2024, January 1). Modern Swifties have transcended the joke. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/01/crosswords/taylor-swift-lyrics.html

Djelic, M.-L., & Quack, S. (2010). Transnational communities and governance. In M.-L. Djelic & S. Quack (Eds.), *Transnational communities: Shaping global economic governance* (pp. 3–36). Cambridge University Press.

Dolfsma, W., & Verbürg, R. (2008). Structure, agency and the role of values in processes of institutional change. *Journal of Economic Issues*, *42*, 1031–1054.

Douglas, M. (1986). *How institutions think*. Syracuse University Press.

Driessen, S. (2022). Look what you made them do: Understanding fans' affective responses to Taylor Swift's political coming-out. *Celebrity Studies*, *13*(1), 93–96.

Evers, K. (2025). *The strategic genius of Taylor Swift. Harvard Business Review*, March–April 2025 issue. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2025/03/the-strategic-genius-of-taylor-swift.

Fine, G. A. (2001). *Difficult reputations: Collective memories of the evil, inept, and controversial*. University of Chicago Press.

Foggatt, T. (2025, June 8). *Taylor Swift's master plan. The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/pop-music/taylor-swifts-master-plan

Franssen, G. (2022). Policing the celebrity of Taylor Swift: introduction. *Celebrity Studies*, *13*(1), 90–92.

Furnari, S. (2019). Situating frames and institutional logics: The social situation as a key institutional microfoundation. In *Research in the sociology of organizations*. Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/s0733-558x2019000065b015

The Guardian (2024, March 5). Taylor Swift: Singapore prime minister defends deal to secure exclusive access to Eras tour. Retrieved November 24, 2024, from https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/mar/05/taylor-swift-singapore-exclusive-southeast-asia-eras-tour-deal

Hallett, T., & Ventresca, M. J. (2006). Inhabited institutions: Social interactions and organizational forms in Gouldner's Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy. *Theory and Society*, *35*, 213–236.

Illouz, E. (2003). *Oprah Winfrey and the glamour of misery: An essay on popular culture*. Columbia University Press.

Jessop, B. (2015). Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but not buried. *British Politics*, *10*(1), 16–30.

Lansky, S. (2023, December 6). "Taylor Swift: 2023 TIME Person of the Year." *Time Magazine*.

Lounsbury, M., & Wang, M. S. (2023). Expanding the scope of institutional logics research. *Management and Organization Review*, *19*, 1185–1188.

Marquis, C., Lounsbury, M., & Greenwood, R. (2011). Introduction: Community as an institutional order and a type of organizing. In *Communities and organizations* (Vol. 33, pp. ix–xxvii). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

McKenzie, H. (2024). The therapy of the Taylor Swift Eras tour. Retrieved February 28, 2024, from https://www.mamamia.com.au/the-therapy-of-taylor-swift-eras-tour/.

Meyer, R. E., Jancsary, D., Höllerer, M. A., & Boxenbaum, E. (2018). The role of verbal and visual text in the process of institutionalization. *Academy of Management Review*, *43*, 392–418.

Ocasio, W. (2023). Institutions and their social construction: A cross-level perspective. *Organization Theory*, *4*(3), 26317877231194368.

Rooney, K. (2008). *Reading with Oprah: The book club that changed America*. University of Arkansas Press.

Saeed, A. (2002). What's in a name? Muhammad Ali and the politics of cultural identity. *Sport in Society*, *5*(3), 52–72.

Schwartz, B. (1996). Rereading the Gettysburg Address: Social change and collective memory. *Qualitative Sociology*, *19*, 395–422.

Searle, J. R. (2005). What is an institution? *Journal of Institutional Economics*, *1*(1), 1–22.

Selznick, P. (1949). *TVA and the grass roots: A study in the sociology of formal organization*. University of California Press.

Théberge, P. (2021). Love and business: Taylor Swift as celebrity, businesswoman, and advocate. *Contemporary Music Review*, *40*(1), 41–59.

Tolbert, P. S., & Zucker, L.G. (1996). The institutionalization of institutional theory In S. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies* (pp. 175–190). Sage.

Toubiana, M., Greenwood, R., & Zietsma, C. (2017). Beyond ethos: Outlining an alternate trajectory

for emotional competence and investment. *Academy of Management Review*, *42*, 551–556.

Townsend, S., Phillips, M. G., & Osmond, G. (2018). Remembering the rejection of Muhammad Ali: Identity, civil rights and social memory. *Sport in History*, *38*, 267–288.

Vinter, R. (2024, June 17). Swifties and academics debate Taylor Swift, from misogyny to millipedes. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/17/swifties-academics-debate-taylor-swift

Zietsma, C., Groenewegen, P., Logue, D. M., & Hinings, C. R. (2017). Field or fields? Building the scaffolding for cumulation of research on institutional fields. *Academy of Management Annals*, *11*, 391–450.

Zietsma, C., & Toubiana, M. (2018). The valuable, the constitutive, and the energetic: Exploring the impact and importance of studying emotions and institutions. *Organization Studies*, *39*, 427–443.

Zilber, T. B. (2008). The work of meanings in institutional processes and thinking. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, & K. Sahlin-Andersson (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 151–169). Sage.

Zucker, L. G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. *American Sociological Review*, *42*, 726–743.

Author biographies

Amit Nigam is Professor of Management at Bayes Business School. His work examines the role of professions and professionals in processes of institutional and organizational change. He is not a Swiftie, but is a fan of "shake it off", which he believes offers important leadership insights.

John Amis is Chair in Strategic Management and Organization at Edinburgh Business School His work examines issues of organization, institutional, and social change with a focus on social and economic inequality. His daughter scored some Taylor Swift tickets but he regrets missing out.

Danielle Logue is Director of the Centre for Social Impact UNSW and Professor of Innovation and Impact at UNSW Business School. She is an organizational theorist whose work examines how enterprises and markets engage in processes of social innovation. Aware that Love Story has over a billion plays, it sets a modest benchmark for citation counts.