

Barbz: Literary Persuasion in the Age of Social Media

Modern-day fan culture rose during the birth of the Hollywood in the roaring twenties. Film allowed entertainers to be visually broadcasted, and consequently recognizable, all over the country. As a result, fan culture intensified throughout the rest of the twentieth century as national icons like Charlie Chaplin progressed to the Beatles and to superstars like Madonna. Celebrity and fan culture have since exploded due to the rise of the internet, and social media. Suddenly fans from across the country had a rallying point to discuss and promote their artist of choice, oftentimes this safe space was Twitter. Such fans have come to be known as “Stans” (a combination of stalker + fan). Investigating the relationship between the stan and their artist as a discourse community provides important insight into the value of intercommunication. Discourse communities, broadly defined as a group of people who use communication to achieve a goal, have been studied in many contexts. However, this contemporary context remains uninvestigated, the discourse communities created by fans on social media platforms. The most prominent are fans of Nicki Minaj on Twitter (also known as stans of Nicki, specifically Barbz). Barbz demonstrate an ever evolving and intricate lexis which reverberates across the internet. Social media platforms such as Twitter act as the catalyst for their discourse community which has widespread influence on pop culture. Viewing Barbz as a discourse community helps to transform the way we view multiliteracy (the manifold ways that literacy can be understood) and update and align our understanding of discourse community as it relates to our contemporary reality.

Looking at Barbz as a discourse community provides multiple layers of information to analyze. Discourse community as a concept has been extensively studied by leading theorists John Swales and James Gee who point out that, at some basic level, members of a discourse

community share some common goal. The primary goal of Barbz is to promote Nicki Minaj and her music. They have developed a distinct way of communicating to accomplish this goal, developing something that Swales refers to as Lexis (which is essentially a specialized vocabulary). A unique and storied use of language is a marked feature of the Barbz, helping to popularize phrases like “wig” (shortening of “wig snatched”, an expression of shock) which eventually spread across all social media. Barbz also bring enhanced meanings/popularity to existing words such as referring to an artist (oftentimes one of Nicki’s perceived rivals) as “flops” or “cancelling” them. This is congruent to one major element of discourse community noted by Swales, the creation of a specific terminology. He asserts that discourse communities have “abbreviations and shorthands of all kinds” (Swales 8). This also aligns with Gee’s idea of “Vernacular social languages” (Gee 24). All of which further highlights Barbz as a multilayered and complex discourse community.

Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram are the birthplace of the stan. The freedom and instant connectivity they provide offers the perfect place for Barbz’ discourse community. They follow not only Nicki but each other on the app and are constantly making and responding to posts about her. Pictured on the left is a comment thread on one of Nicki’s Instagram posts. Nicki announces the release of her podcast and underneath a Barb expresses their support of Nicki through some ongoing drama and validates Nicki’s side of the story. Underneath, Nicki replies, “To god be the glory”. Barbz validate her and the struggles she faces as a titan of the music industry; in return she replies to them which brings them delight and is such a special intimate interaction between fan and idol that would never be possible without these platforms. The instantaneous discourse between idol and fan is the differentiating factor between modern day fan groups such as Barbz and fan groups of the past. This discourse is also

of increasing importance as events such as the COVID-19 pandemic so vividly show us how necessary virtual connections.



Twitter is the perfect platform for Barbz to accomplish their primary goal of promoting Nicki, they do so through carefully crafted viral tweets and memes (basically internet jokes). In the image on the left a social media influencer mentions a photoshop scandal of Nicki's without even directly attacking her, underneath a Barb replies with an attack on the influencer saying that they

”can’t stop saying Nicki’s name”. The Barb then proceeds to correct her own grammar on the attack which was correct in the first place. The social media influencer points out that the Barbz’ grammar was correct the first time. A screenshot of this comedic interaction was shared thousands of times on Twitter shortly thereafter. This exchange highlights not only the vicious way that Barbz will go about defending Nicki and calling out those who diss her (whether they

even intended diss her or not), but it also highlights the way that Barbz bring attention to Nicki just by the comedy of their mistakes and plain buffoonery. You'll notice the checkmark next to the influencer's name which indicates that she is famous, highlighting that Barbz are not afraid of going after anyone – regardless of where they stand in the conventional hierarchy of social media.

Similarly, to the exchange detailed above, Barbz will disregard conventional internet hierarchy, even within their own fandom, to defend and promote Nicki. Pictured on the right rapper Lil Nas X, who to some is seen is at the top of the Barb fandom hierarchy due to his longstanding support of her, comments on a post commemorating Nicki as one of the best female rappers of all time. Nas comments "remove 'woman'" to emphasize that she is one of the best rapper's period, regardless of gender. A barb misunderstands, thinking Nas was trying to imply that Nicki is a man, and calls him out on it. Although well intentioned, the comment is clearly completely misguided and a screenshot of the amusing exchange garnered hundreds of thousands of likes on a screenshot posted shortly after. This is another clear example of Barbz' use of comedy to promote her or at the very least keep her name on our collective consciousness.

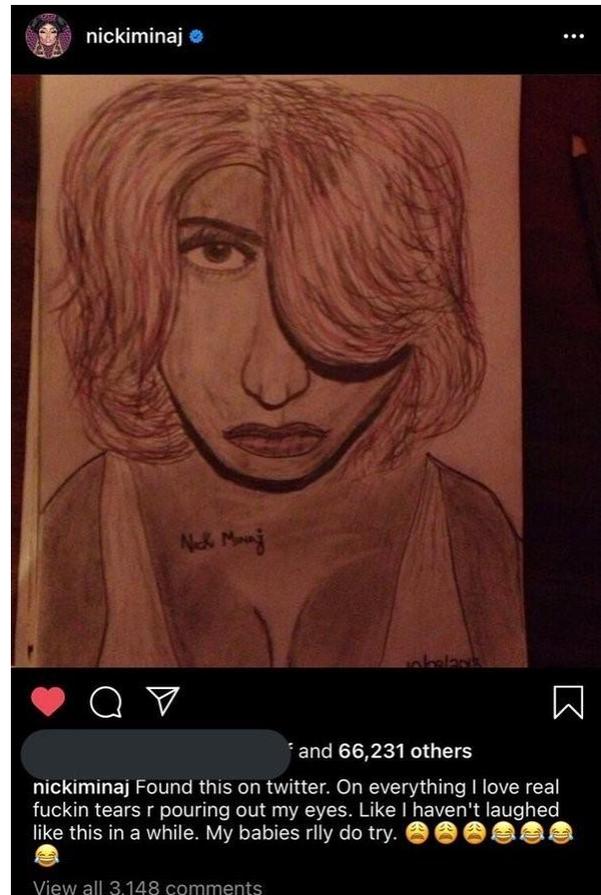




The anonymity provided by social media, such as Twitter, accelerate and intensify the actions taken by Barbz to accomplish their shared goals as a discourse community. Barbz will, as shown throughout the paper, **viciously** attack those who vehemently oppose Nicki Minaj. Shown on the left is a political figure named DeAnna Lorraine who tweets "Nicki Minaj just had a child. Poor kid". Her comments and direct messages inbox were soon flooded with hate messages from Barbz, so much so that she deleted her original tweet. However, not before, as shown above the

original tweet, someone "doxed" her by retweeted the message with her phone number and email for people to attack her even more personally. This instantaneous sharing of information to such a wide audience as well as the hive mentality of collectively tormenting people who hate on Nicki Minaj is a marked and consistently reoccurring feature of Barbz' discourse community.

Despite most of the interactions within the discourse community taking place without Nicki Minaj's direct involvement, she still plays an active role in the discourse community via her interactions with her fans. Although, as mentioned earlier, she sometimes replies directly to fans, most of her communications are aimed at the group as a whole and not a specific Barb in particular. Honesty and "keeping it real" is a cornerstone of the discourse community. Shown on the right is a repost Nicki Minaj made of art Barbz made for her. It is obviously not the most realistic and well-crafted portrait, which Nicki



points out, but she still appreciates it regardless. While another celebrity might lie and say it looks good or ignore it altogether, Nicki acknowledges the effort and intent while being honest writing "My babies rly do try" followed by laughing emojis. This honesty spills over into how Barbz, as shown in shocking detail earlier, do not hold back when defending her.

Although all Barbz share the goal of seeing Nicki succeed, there is bound to be more complexity in a group of so many people. Some Barbz support Nicki regardless of what she does, they are "ride or dies" who would never criticize her. Despite this, there are some of her supporters that are vocal about their discontents. They speak up when she does not post music. There was outcry in some Barbz when she started dating a convicted sex offender. In a direct twitter message with one such Barb, who choose to stay anonymous, they expressed their

happiness when she broke up with her boyfriend and their sense of shame when I mentioned the fact that she still defends her sex-offender brother writing “chile- i do not see 🙄”. This essentially means that they look the other way and choose not to acknowledge the situation. There are however, many Barbz who will fight you all day long and insist that you would defend your family too no matter the situation. This strengthens Swales assertion that members of discourse communities are multifaceted as he writes, “A third problematic area is that both the discourse community concept and that of communities of practice tend to view their objects of study through an overly idealistic lens, especially in terms of assumptions about shared beliefs, values, motives, and allegiances among its members” (4). Each Barb, while in some way loyal to Nicki Minaj, is an individual who has been formed by their unique life experiences. There is more to them than the fact that they are Barbz. They are students, they are teachers, they are daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, unemployed, CEO’s, the list goes on. Some Barbz may even be fans of “opposing” artists such as Cardi B, although this would be rare which Swales references when he writes “Many people are occasional members of more than one discourse community” (Swales 7). Although from the outside looking on Barbz may appear homogenous, the truth is that they are, as is every discourse community, a collective of individuals with their own unique experiences and perspective.

In conclusion, viewing Barbz as a discourse community offers a unique perspective on contemporary, real-world uses of intercommunication and helps to expand traditional definitions of multiliteracy. Barbz have been, and continue to be, a monumental force on the internet. They have indeed kept Nicki Minaj “relevant” when many major music corporations have tried to blacklist her. Despite their infamy and successes, Barbz are seen as somewhat of a joke in many

circles on the internet. Even when they are being laughed at though, Barbz are keeping Nicki Minaj in our collective conscious which is, in a way, a success within and of itself.

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