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ABSTRACT

Humans have found countless ways to create and consume media. Particularly, the world loves to consume music. With the variety of music available at any given moment due to streaming services and radio, musicians now must compete harder than ever for their popularity. An artist now must create something new and exciting that sets him or her apart from every other artist, highlighting the importance of novelty. One artist who used novelty as a key to her success is Taylor Swift. Using image and roles from the concept of persona and Standpoint Theory, I created a theoretical framework to rhetorically analyze Taylor Swift's novelty throughout her career. I then selected three albums for analysis, and included four songs, at least one live performance, and one music video from each album to answer my research question: How do rhetors create novelty in the music industry? Through my analysis, I found that by setting up a simple persona at the start of her career, Swift proactively created space for her persona to change. Swift then was able to incorporate changes into her image and roles, making both subtle changes to show how she has matured and major changes to show that she is gaining new understandings of life and fame. Swift's use of persona creates novelty in the music industry as she shows that musicians do not need to completely change who they are but can establish themselves through their rhetorical persona and changes to that persona.

“Look What You Made Me Do”:
A Rhetorical Analysis of Taylor Swift’s Persona

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

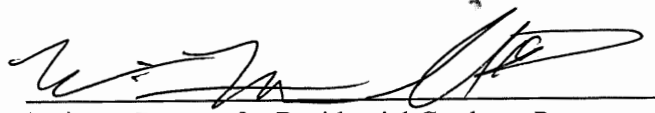
By

Sydney Risher

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Sydney Risher, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Rhetorical Situation.....	2
	Swift's Early Career.....	3
	Swift's Legal Battles.....	4
	Swift's Awards.....	6
	Swift's Audience.....	7
	Theoretical Framework.....	8
	Image.....	10
	Roles.....	14
	Complementary Roles.....	14
	Contradictory Roles.....	17
	Standpoint Theory.....	20
	Methodology.....	22
	Taylor Swift's Albums.....	23
	Fragmented Text Construction.....	26
	<i>Fearless (Taylor's Version)</i>	27
	<i>Red (Taylor's Version)</i>	28
	<i>reputation</i>	30
	Thesis Preview.....	31
II.	<i>FEARLESS (TAYLOR'S VERSION)</i>	32

Text Construction and Methodology.....	33
Analysis.....	34
Image.....	35
Angry.....	35
Frustrated.....	36
Petty.....	37
Sad and Remorseful	40
Innocent.....	41
Naïve and Inexperienced.....	41
Overly Optimistic.....	42
Nervous and Insecure	43
Role	44
Teenager	45
Girlfriend.....	46
Ex-Girlfriend	47
Standpoint.....	48
Conclusion.....	49
III. <i>RED (TAYLOR'S VERSION)</i>	51
Text Construction and Methodology.....	52
Analysis.....	53
Image.....	54
Judgmental	54
Contemplative	60
Role	62

	Celebrity	63
	Young Girlfriend	64
	Ex-Girlfriend	65
	Standpoint.....	66
	Conclusion.....	67
IV.	<i>REPUTATION</i>	69
	Text Construction and Methodology.....	71
	Analysis	72
	Image.....	73
	Insecure	73
	Manipulative.....	75
	Role	76
	Celebrity	76
	Girlfriend.....	78
	Villain.....	80
	Standpoint.....	83
	Conclusion.....	85
V.	CONCLUSION	87
	<i>Fearless (Taylor's Version)</i>	89
	<i>Red (Taylor's Version)</i>	91
	<i>reputation</i>	93
	Conclusion.....	96
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	105

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Humans have found countless ways to create and consume media. Particularly, the world loves to consume music. From genres such as classical that include Mozart and Beethoven, to classic rock with artists such as The Beatles and Pink Floyd, each person can find music that suits his or her musical and lyrical tastes. However, with the variety of music available at any given moment due to streaming services and radio, musicians now must compete harder than ever to prove that they should be a popular artist. An artist now must create something new and exciting that sets him or her apart from every other artist, highlighting the importance of novelty. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *novelty* as “something new or unusual . . . the quality or state of being novel . . . new and not resembling something formerly known or used.”¹ Specifically, the last definition is most appropriate to my thesis as it applies to how musicians must market themselves to their audience: each musician must present him or herself as something new that does not resemble another band or artist. Musicians can also create novelty, however, by reshaping things that have been previously used, making something familiar feel new and different in a way that is relatable to their audience. By creating novelty, musicians are able to gain popularity, hopefully leading to fortune and fame.

1. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Novelty (*n.*),” accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/novelty>.

One artist who used novelty as a key to her success is Taylor Swift. Swift has worked in the music industry for almost two decades and has thus had to create novelty in her work to set herself apart from other female musicians. Swift has even discussed the need for novelty for musicians, female musicians especially, in her documentary, *Miss Americana*:

Everyone's a shiny new toy for, like, two years. The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves 20 times more than the male artists. They have to or else you're out of a job. Constantly having to reinvent, constantly finding new facets of yourself that people find to be shiny. Be new to us, be young to us, but only in a new way and only in the way we want. And reinvent yourself, but only in a way that we find to be equally comforting, but also a challenge for you. Live out a narrative that we find to be interesting enough to entertain us, but not so crazy that it makes us uncomfortable.²

Swift's understanding of novelty as a musician placed her in a unique situation as a rhetor. In my thesis, I will analyze how Swift has created novelty in three of her albums through the use of varied personas. In this thesis, I will first overview the rhetorical situation to provide key background information from Swift's career. After establishing the rhetorical situation, I will review the theoretical framework I apply to Swift's work in the analysis chapters of my thesis. Finally, I will preview the albums and songs I use as my fragmented text and the criteria I used for excluding other albums/songs.

Rhetorical Situation

When she started her career as a musician at age 14 by moving to Nashville, Tennessee, Taylor Swift had already broken records. By signing a record deal with Sony/ATV Music Publishing at 14, Swift became the youngest staff songwriter to sign with the company. By the age of 16, Swift had released her debut single "Tim McGraw,"

2. *Miss Americana*, directed by Lana Wilson, released January 31, 2020, on Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=miss%20americana&jbv=81028336>.

landing at number six on the Billboard Magazine Hot Country Songs chart. Her debut album, *Taylor Swift*, sold 39,000 copies within the first week of release. Swift's rise to stardom did not stop with her debut album and has continued for 16 years with the release of eight more albums, countless songwriting credits, two re-recorded albums, five tours, and many award nominations.

Swift's Early Career

Taylor Swift, despite her reputation from her days as a country singer, was not a Nashville native. Born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania, Swift got her start as a songwriter early in life. Swift learned how to play guitar from Reading musician Ronnie Kremer at the age of 12.³ Kremer's lessons about how to play guitar and structure songs kickstarted Swift's passion for songwriting, and she wrote her first song, "Lucky You," shortly after her lessons began. Swift then began making frequent trips with her mother to Nashville, Tennessee, to start work on securing a contract with a record label.⁴ Swift finally caught a lucky break when performing at a showcase at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville, a spot known as the starting point for musicians such as Garth Brooks, Dierks Bentley, Keith Urban, and others.⁵ Swift completed her performance at the Bluebird Cafe and was met by Scott Borchetta, former senior vice president of promotion and artist

3. Andy Martino, "Exclusive: The Real Story behind Taylor Swift's Guitar 'Legend': Meet the Computer Repairman Who Taught the Pop Superstar How to Play," *New York Daily News*, January 10, 2015, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/computer-tech-taught-taylor-swift-guitar-exclusive-article-1.2072638>.

4. "'CMT Insider' Interview: Taylor Swift (Part 1 of 2)," CMT, November 26, 2008, <https://www.cmt.com/news/1600309/cmt-insider-interview-taylor-swift-part-1-of-2/>.

5. Hoda Kotb, "On Tour with Taylor Swift," NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, May 31, 2009, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna31032270>; Mickey Rapkin, "Oral History of Nashville's Bluebird Cafe: Taylor Swift, Maren Morris, Dierks Bentley & More on the Legendary Venue," *Billboard*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/country/the-bluebird-cafe-taylor-swift-dierks-bentley-oral-history-7880979/>.

development for Universal Records⁶ and founder of Big Machine Records.⁷ With the help of Big Machine Records, Swift then went on to release her first six albums: *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, *Speak Now*, *Red*, *1989*, and *reputation*.⁸

Swift's Legal Battles

Swift's contract with Big Machine Records expired in 2018, giving her the opportunity to sign on with a new label, Universal Music Group. Not long after Swift left Big Machine Records, the recording company was purchased by Scooter Braun of Ithaca Holdings LLC for \$300 million. Braun began his career in the music arena in 2007 by starting a marketing, talent management, and television/film production company called Scooter Braun Projects.⁹ Through Scooter Braun Projects, Braun built his name around discovering Canadian artist Justin Bieber, and managing Ariana Grande, The Black Eyed Peas, Demi Lovato, Kanye West, and other high profile celebrities.¹⁰ In purchasing the company, Braun and Ithaca Holdings then became owners of Swift's master recordings. Swift's original contract with Big Machine Records gave the company the rights to the master recordings of all her songs from her first six albums. However, Swift has retained

6. "Scott Borchetta Leaves Universal to Start Label," CMT, March 7, 2005, <https://www.cmt.com/news/t068eg/scott-borchetta-leaves-universal-to-start-label>.

7. Corinne Sullivan, "Here's What You Should Know about Scott Borchetta, the Man behind Big Machine," POPSUGAR Celebrity, November 21, 2019, <https://www.popsugar.com/celebrity/who-is-scott-borchetta-46917315>.

8. Swift stylizes the title of this album to be lowercase, so I have intentionally left it as she wrote it. This is also applicable to *folklore* and *evermore*.

9. Charles Trepany, "Who Is Scooter Braun? A Look at the Man Who Became Taylor Swift's 'Worst Case Scenario,'" *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 2, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2019/07/01/who-is-taylors-swift-newest-enemy-scooter-braun/1622301001/>.

10. Angelica Acevedo, "Talent Manager Scooter Braun Is in a Very Public Feud with Taylor Swift. Here Are 29 of His Biggest Clients," *Insider*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.insider.com/list-of-artists-that-scooter-braun-manages-2019-7#braun-insists-that-he-isnt-kanye-wests-manager-but-is-more-of-an-adviser-3>.

some rights to her songs through her work as the writer for each of her songs. By writing all the songs herself, Swift managed to keep the synchronization or publishing rights to her music, giving her some control over how her music is used commercially.¹¹ Swift's retention of the synchronization rights means that while Big Machine Records can grant permission for the music to be used in a commercial or movie, Swift would also have to give her permission for the music to be synchronized with the imagery. Braun's ownership of the master recording rights facilitated his control of the rights to the songs and the earnings from distribution and licensing the songs in commercial projects such as television shows, movies, and commercials. However, the songs cannot be properly used without the synchronization rights, as these rights controlled the ability to combine the song with a visual chosen by the purchaser.

Swift was significantly concerned with Braun's ownership over her master recordings, claiming that he subjected her to "incessant, manipulative bullying" for years.¹² Swift cited bullying from Braun as well as from his clients, Justin Bieber and Kanye West, as evidence of why she was upset with Ithaca Holdings' purchase of Big Machine Records. While Swift had made peace with Scott Borchetta's decision to sell Big Machine Records, she claimed that both Braun and Borchetta knew what the purchase meant: "Controlling a woman who didn't want to be associated with them. In

11. Rhea Rao, "Explained: Why Taylor Swift Is Re-Recording Her Studio Albums, and What It Says about Copyright Battles with Mega Music Labels," Firstpost, November 16, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/explained-why-taylor-swift-is-re-recording-her-studio-albums-and-what-it-says-about-copyright-battles-with-mega-music-labels-10138211.html>.

12. Taylor Swift, "Taylor Swift," Tumblr, June 30, 2019, <https://taylorswift.tumblr.com/post/185958366550/for-years-i-asked-pleaded-for-a-chance-to-own-my>.

perpetuity. That means forever.”¹³ Swift had experienced previous issues, specifically with Kanye West, thus her issues with Braun were compounded, as Braun claimed to be an advisor to West rather than a manager.¹⁴

Swift, however, was permitted to re-record the songs owned by Big Machine Records and thus create new master recordings. While this would not change the fact that the original master recordings were owned by Big Machine Records or Scooter Braun, it diminishes the value of the original records, as Swift is now able to authorize song use herself. If she says no to songs being authorized to a certain project, the project owner can then go to Big Machine Records and Scooter Braun to request the original masters, but this creates some difficulty as they then have to deal with synchronization rights. As of November 2021, Swift has released two re-recorded albums, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* and *Red (Taylor’s Version)*.

Swift’s Awards

Of Swift’s many accolades and awards, she has been number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart eight times and has landed in the top ten on the Billboard charts 30 times.¹⁵ Swift has also collected 42 Grammy award nominations and has won 11 times, gaining recognition for being the “first and only woman solo artist to win the Grammy for Album Of The Year thrice for her solo recordings.”¹⁶ Other notable awards that Swift has won include a Primetime Emmy Award, multiple Billboard Music Awards, multiple

13. Swift, “Taylor Swift.”

14. Acevedo, “Talent Manager Scooter Braun Is in a Very Public Feud with Taylor Swift.”

15. “Taylor Swift,” Billboard, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/taylor-swift/>.

16. “Taylor Swift,” Recording Academy, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.grammy.com/artists/taylor-swift/15450>.

iHeartRadio Music Awards, and multiple MTV Video Music Awards.¹⁷ Overall, Swift has amassed 196 award nominations and 140 wins in her career.¹⁸ Additional accolades for Swift’s success come in the form of recognition from *Forbes*. As of June 2022, Swift had earned spots on multiple *Forbes*’ lists, such as the *30 Under 30*, *Highest-Paid Entertainers*, *Power Women*, *America’s Self-Made Women*, and *Celebrity 100*,¹⁹ with a net worth of 570 million dollars at the age of 32.²⁰

Swift’s Audience

Taylor Swift, starting her career at a young age, obviously set herself up to write music for other teenage girls. Scott Borchetta had been criticized for signing Swift onto his brand-new label, but his decision was supported by critics who claimed Swift appealed to an untapped target market: “teenage girls that listen to country music.”²¹ As Swift’s career has continued for almost two full decades since the initial signing of her record label contract, her target audience has grown with her. The initial group of fans who enjoyed her country music beginnings have grown as people and as fans with various and broad music tastes. As Swift’s music and songwriting skills have evolved to reflect her changing understanding of the art and the world, her fan base, known as *Swifties*, have also grown and evolved in their understanding of Swift and of how her

17. “Taylor Swift,” IMDb, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2357847/awards>.

18. “Taylor Swift,” IMDb.

19. “Taylor Swift,” *Forbes*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/taylor-swift/?sh=35d9168b18e2>.

20. Kerry A. Dolan and Chase Peterson-Withorn, eds. “America’s Richest Self-Made Women 2022,” *Forbes*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/self-made-women/>.

21. Lizzie Widdicombe, “You Belong With Me,” *The New Yorker*, October 2, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/10/taylor-swift-profile-you-belong-with-me>.

lyrics are often influenced by life experiences, relationships, art, and media. More recently, the *Wall Street Journal* found that a large portion of Swift's current audience is made up of millennials, showing that many of her fans have grown up with her as they have had similar experiences through their teen years and young adulthood.²²

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have rhetorically defined the concept of *persona* as “something the rhetor does, not something a rhetor innately has,”²³ “a human presence that saturates a text,”²⁴ and “‘persona does not refer to the personality’ of the actor as a person, but to ‘the characteristics assumed by the actor when [she or] he dons the mask.’”²⁵ *Merriam-Webster* defined *persona* as “a character assumed by an author in a written work,” and “the personality that a person (such as an actor or politician) projects in public.”²⁶ Thus, scholars and laypeople alike have typically used the term *persona* in identifying an organized and pre-determined action of an individual or character. Understanding the ways *persona* has previously been defined and studied creates a foundation for analysis of how a rhetor's *persona* changes over time.

22. Chris Jackson, Mallory Newall, and Haley Gullquist, “Nearly Half of Americans Consider Themselves at Least a Little Bit of a Fan of Taylor Swift and Her Music,” ISPOS, October 20, 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/nearly-half-of-Americans-consider-themselves-at-least-a-little-bit-of-a-fan-of-Taylor-Swift-and-her-music>.

23. Catherine Helen Palczewski, John Fritch, and Richard Ice, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2022), 165.

24. James Jasinski, “Persona,” in *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 429.

25. B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, “The Rhetorical Persona: Marcus Garvey as Black Moses,” *Communication Monographs* 49 (1982): 50, quoted in Catherine Helen Palczewski, John Fritch, and Richard Ice, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2022), 165.

26. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “Persona (n.),” accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persona>.

While scholars have traditionally used persona to understand the rhetor's role in the rhetorical situation, I argue that it can also be applied to understand how the rhetor's public persona changes throughout a certain time period. According to Palczeswki, Ice, and Fritch, five aspects go into building the rhetor's persona: ethos, roles, identity, authority, and image.²⁷ Within these categories, Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch provide additional subcategories to break down the aspects even further. Ethos includes credibility, virtue, and goodwill, all relating to the rhetor's personal ethos formation. Roles consist of two forms: complementary roles and contradictory roles. The difference in role defines how the rhetor is viewed by their respective audience. Third, identity is traditionally seen as an internal aspect of persona, with identifying fluidity, political bias, and the concept of strategic essentialism as core aspects. The rhetor's authority to perform and his or her social power are subcategories of authority. Finally, image includes six subcategories: synthetic, believable, passive, vivid and concrete, simplified, and ambiguous.²⁸ The breadth of the concept of persona provides many opportunities for me to direct my rhetorical analysis. For the purpose of this thesis and its length constraints, I will focus specifically on roles and image. The other concepts of persona overlap in some ways with roles and image, thus including them would create redundancy. Even further, I have limited the subcategories of the aspect of image so I can focus on the synthetic and believable aspects of image. The synthetic yet believable aspect of image provides the rhetor with the agency to choose the parts of his or her personality that he or she would like to present to the audience and is thus important to

27. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 163–198.

28. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 180.

developing his or her persona. I have also chosen to examine both complementary and contradictory roles to build a full connection with Standpoint Theory and to understand how the rhetor is able to critique the social systems in his or her life. With general definitions established, I will now break down the segments of my theoretical framework, reviewing previous literature regarding synthetic yet believable images, complementary roles, and contradictory roles.

Image

While there are numerous research studies on visual images, the rhetor can also construct his or her image verbally through vivid descriptions. Boorstin defined an image as being synthetic when it is “planned: created especially to serve a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression.”²⁹ While a synthetic image is one that is planned, it is not always fake, as the rhetor’s planning in this context is sometimes only focused on how the real image of the rhetor is portrayed to a certain audience. Rhetors who create and enact a synthetic image must make strategic choices about the aspects of their image they want to promote and those that they want to hide. However, Boorstin argues that the image must be perceived as authentic to be of any use, bringing in the aspect of believability.³⁰ Many examples show that images are most believable when they are consistent with the audience’s perceptions of a certain group. For example, analyses of politicians’ rhetoric suggests that image construction can be seen in verbal depictions of foreign enemies. Kobylska argues that former United States President, Donald Trump, used verbal depictions of savage imagery in describing the 2019 and 2020 Persian Gulf

29. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 185.

30. Boorstin, *The Image*, 188.

crisis to justify the United States' actions.³¹ By describing the enemy in the crisis with vivid language depicting violence and aggression, Kobylska argues that the descriptions provide an image of an enemy that must only be dealt with using violence and aggression, writing that "while the language demonstrates the US' goodwill, the interpretation is that it also becomes evidence for little likelihood that cooperation between the two parties will develop, because the blame for a lack of collaboration is placed on the enemy."³²

However, this language would not be successful if it did not confirm the audience's perception of foreign enemies, as there is a longstanding tradition of United States presidents using image construction of a foreign enemy to justify force.³³ Merskin articulates the same sentiment in her analysis of former United States President George W. Bush's image construction of Middle Eastern people as enemies in the years following 9/11. Merskin argues that George W. Bush relied on the enemy image and accompanying stereotypes of the Middle East to gain the approval of the American people as the United States retaliated against the terroristic attacks.³⁴

Scholars also apply the same concepts to visual images. In Mielczarek's analysis of the "Pepper-Spraying Cop" meme, she argues that various depictions of assailant and victim can be seen as the photo is passed through various internet forums and used to

31. Marta Kobylska, "President Donald J. Trump's Enemy Image Construction in the 2019–2020 Persian Gulf Crisis," *Res Rhetorica* 9, no. 2 (2022): 42–61, doi:10.29107/rr2022.2.3.

32. Kobylska, "President Donald J. Trump's Enemy Image Construction," 51.

33. Kobylska, "President Donald J. Trump's Enemy Image Construction," 52.

34. Debra Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush," *Mass Communication & Society* 7, no. 2 (2004): 172, doi:10.1207/s15327825mcs0702_2.

critique the person or group depicted in the image.³⁵ By crafting one party as the assailant to another group, the members internet forums were able to create jokes about their experiences. However, Mielczarek raised a concern about the transformational capacity of internet memes, arguing that “anonymity and spreadability combined with the ease of photo editing make such character assassination a daily practice, propagating ideas that are impossible to correct or control in the social media environment.”³⁶ This sentiment is echoed in Shirley’s analysis of the Kony 2012 movement, in which activists sought to make Kony’s name famous, while also destroying his reputation, and framing him as a villain to the world. Shirley argues that while the activists were not going after Kony’s physical image, they were seeking to control the image of his brand in similar ways to the iconoclasts of images in religious wars.³⁷ Finally, scholars find synthetic, yet believable images in social movements as protesters make use of visuals to bring attention to their cause. Protesters have used the handmaid’s costume from the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s novel as they stand against policies and politicians in countries around the world.³⁸ The protesters brought attention to policies that pointed to a dystopian future they did not want, such as the one depicted in *The Handmaids’ Tale*, through the use of a recognizable costume from a fictional society. Birkin argues that the

35. Natalia Mielczarek, “The ‘Pepper-Spraying Cop’ Icon and Its Internet Memes: Social Justice and Public Shaming Through Rhetorical Transformation in Digital Culture,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2018): 69, doi:10.1080/15551393.2018.1456929.

36. Mielczarek, “The ‘Pepper-Spraying Cop’ Icon and Its Internet Memes,” 78.

37. Trey Adam Shirley, “KONY 2012: Branding the Enemy—Activism Imagery in the Age of Social Media and the Political Brand,” *Journal of Media & Religion* 15, no. 1 (2016): 46, doi:10.1080/15348423.2015.1131044.

38. Laura Birkin, “The Protester’s Tale - the Handmaid Costume as Feminist Dystopian Protest Rhetoric,” *Femspec* 22, no. 1 (2022): 25-35, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2667860739/E0B33003B54B4A65PQ/2?accountid=7006#>.

use of “the handmaid image enabled handmaid protesters to achieve a level of visibility that might otherwise not have been possible,” despite the lack of a unified cause.³⁹

Finally, rhetors can have an influence on their own image. This is exemplified through Image Restoration Theory, as it is applied to individuals in their respective personal brand crises. Oprah Winfrey, as an entertainer, experienced multiple personal brand crises throughout her career, but she employed concepts of Image Restoration Theory to both repair her image and make it stronger than it was previously.⁴⁰ Hugh Grant experienced an average level of image restoration as he employed the prescribed strategies, but his success can be attributed to his position in society as an entertainer. Benoit argued that “entertainers are much less likely to have third parties make, or prolong, attacks reported in the media,” positioning them in a more forgiving place to restore their image than a politician or company.⁴¹ However, individual image restoration is not always successful, despite someone’s social position as an entertainer. Tonya Harding, after her image crisis, employed various strategies of image restoration. However, Harding’s strategies were inconsistent with her public image and were not accepted by her audience.⁴²

39. Birkin, “The Protester’s Tale,” 29.

40. Denise L. Oles, “Deny, Delay, Apologize: The Oprah Winfrey Image-Defense Playbook,” *Northwest Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (2010): 58.

41. William L. Benoit, “Hugh Grant’s Image Restoration Discourse: An Actor Apologizes,” *Communication Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1997): 265, doi:10.1080/01463379709370064.

42. William L. Benoit and Robert S. Hanczor, “The Tonya Harding Controversy: An Analysis of Image Restoration Strategies,” *Communication Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1994): 429, doi:10.1080/01463379409369947.

Roles

In this thesis, I will focus on two subcategories of roles: complementary roles and contradictory roles. Complementary roles, as explained by Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, are roles that the rhetor takes on that are agreeable to the audience and meets their social standards.⁴³ This role can be thought of as an individual performing tasks in ways that meet the expectations of those who have the power to establish and/or reinforce the normal of a social system.⁴⁴ As the rhetor performs tasks that please the standards of the social system, their status is complementary to the system and the people that dictate what is acceptable. This is relative to a performance, as an actor playing a businessperson role may dress in a suit, use formal language and specific jargon that is appropriate for the setting. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch. also define contradictory roles as roles that challenge social norms by pointing out inconsistent or unspoken rules in the social system.⁴⁵ The boundaries between these roles are typically easy to establish, with the complementary role what is agreeable to society, and the contradictory role being a critique of social norms. Thus, examining both types of roles provides clear division in how the audience may review the rhetor's image, depending on the social norms in place and the rhetor's embodiment of the image.

Complementary Roles

In addressing complementary roles, it is important to understand expected roles for women specifically, as this section addresses the roles of women in the public eye. In

43. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 169.

44. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 169.

45. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 169.

traditional western perspectives, the idealized role of women is similar to that of a 1950s housewife: quiet, domestic, subservient to the men in her life, and solely dedicated to caring for her husband and children.⁴⁶ Keohane provides a strong example of women embodying complementary roles in her analysis of the Smithsonian's "First Ladies" exhibit. In a social system that historically wanted women to be homemakers and submissive to their husbands, former First Ladies embodied the role of homemaker and obedient wife to their husband as he became the leader of the United States. The role of First Lady, as Keohane describes it, is one that depicts effortless perfection and makes the audience feel these women are familiar, yet full of mystery.⁴⁷ Keohane argued that by viewing artifacts from former First Ladies, the audience is set to view the artifacts and outfits with a male gaze as they are prescribed traditionally feminine roles of silent, passive beauty, and homemaking performances.⁴⁸

When First Ladies adopt positions as silent, passive, beautiful homemakers, they reinforce the traditional feminine roles; however, Michelle Obama incorporated aspects of motherhood into her role. Obama's use of motherhood in addition to her dedication to her role as a First Lady created novelty for the role. While previous First Ladies prioritized the role of First Lady over motherhood, Obama prioritized her role as a mother who is also a First Lady. Hayden argues that Obama's commitment to her children displayed "intensive mothering, suggesting that a woman's first and foremost

46. Violet K. Dixon, "Western Feminism in a Global Perspective," *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 3, no. 2 (2011): para. 1, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=395>.

47. Jennifer Keohane, "'The Most Important Dress in the Country': The Rhetoric of Glamour in the Smithsonian's 'The First Ladies.'" *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 271, doi:10.1080/07491409.2017.1346531.

48. Keohane, "'The Most Important Dress in the Country,'" 274.

priority lies with her children.”⁴⁹ This focus on her children reinforced a previously set complementary role through the perspective that women’s primary goal should be to take care of their children, something that is typically complementary to social expectations of women. Additionally, while her husband, former U.S. President Barack Obama, was able to be both the President and a father without compromising his title and authority, Michelle Obama was First Lady and mother, despite her identity being separated into two categories: her philanthropic affairs and her ability to be a mother. This dichotomy shows a tension between the aspects of being a working woman and a mother as it constrains the idealized role of women.

Taylor and Pye provide another example of a First Lady’s complementary role in their analysis of *Time Magazine* covers featuring former First Lady, Hillary Clinton. Through her husband’s position in politics and her own political endeavors, Clinton has taken on many roles, but media representations have limited her ability to embody all these roles at once.⁵⁰ Taylor and Pye claim that “Hillary’s image through *TIME* has varied from a woman with agentic role in politics, to a woman dependent on the men around her, and finally as a lone ruthless Godzilla-like presence in American politics.”⁵¹ Taylor and Pye’s analysis of Hillary’s image, as depicted by the magazine, shows movement from occupying a complementary role as the silent, passive, dependent wife, to adopting a contradictory role as a political powerhouse. Hillary’s role as a mother met

49. Sara Hayden, “Michelle Obama, Mom-in-Chief: The Racialized Rhetorical Contexts of Maternity,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 1 (2017): 24, doi:10.1080/07491409.2016.1182095.

50. Mary Anne Taylor and Danee Pye, “Hillary Through TIME: The (Un)Making of the First Woman President,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 7 (2019): 808, doi:10.1177/0002764217711801.

51. Taylor and Pye, “Hillary Through TIME,” 808.

social norms as she focused on caring for her family and staying out of the political arena, focusing on being a wife to former U.S. president, Bill Clinton. Moreover, Hillary's role in politics provided the opportunity for her to critique the social system she resided in and gave her the chance to point out inconsistencies with the ways men and women were treated. The separation of her role as a mother and as a politician further exemplifies the tension Hayden highlighted between Michelle Obama's roles as a working First Lady and a mother.

Contradictory Roles

As she gained a spot in the American political arena, Hillary Clinton, began to define the complementary roles she had once embodied. As Anderson argues, Hillary gained a reputation for getting involved in politics as a First Lady, and as a result, earned the title of "bitch."⁵² The title began with an utterance from the mother of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, but soon became the "rhetorical frame through which the public came to view" Hillary.⁵³ However, Hillary was able to take on the metaphor of Madonna, depicting women as morally pure, and providing a tool for maintaining her contradictory role in a way that was more palatable to the general public. The Madonna metaphor is imbued with innocence, deriving from the biblical story of Mary, mother of Jesus.⁵⁴ The Madonna metaphor has changed through history, taking on "a variety of female identities, from sexless saint to empowered mother to heterogeneous individual," and providing

52. Karrin Vasby Anderson, "Hillary Rodham Clinton as 'Madonna': The Role of Metaphor and Oxymoron in Image Restoration," *Women's Studies in Communication* 25, no. 1 (2002): 1, doi:10.1080/07491409.2002.10162439.

53. Anderson, "Hillary Rodham Clinton as 'Madonna,'" 1.

54. Anderson, "Hillary Rodham Clinton as 'Madonna,'" 3.

rhetors with options to take on as a guiding role.⁵⁵ As scholars have studied the change of the Madonna metaphor throughout literature and society, some have concluded that the metaphor portrays a “self-subsistent monarch . . . [who] reigns in defiance of patriarchal authority.”⁵⁶ Anderson argued that Hillary used the Madonna metaphor’s feminine aspects of innocence and strength despite the circumstances that placed limitations on her, such as her role as a wife, mother, and First Lady.⁵⁷ Anderson concluded that through Hillary’s use of the Madonna metaphor, she was able to be both “feminine and powerful, assertive and accommodating, caring and competent” in order to maintain a political identity.⁵⁸ However, Erickson and Thomson argue that first ladies often participate in contradictory roles as they “simultaneously signal institutionally condoned subordinacy and institutionally condoned equality,” through their roles as mothers, wives, and philanthropists.⁵⁹ By maintaining some aspects of a complementary role—feminine, caring, and accommodating idealized woman—Hillary was able to restore her image to appease some social norms while critiquing other norms that made her political career difficult.

Finally, society may not always view a contradictory role as being contradictory. While scholars have defined some roles as complementary because a role agrees with social norms at a certain point in time, they may also diverge from agreed upon social

55. Anderson, “Hillary Rodham Clinton as ‘Madonna,’” 4.

56. Anderson, “Hillary Rodham Clinton as ‘Madonna,’” 3.

57. Anderson, “Hillary Rodham Clinton as ‘Madonna,’” 4.

58. Anderson, “Hillary Rodham Clinton as ‘Madonna,’” 20.

59. Keith V. Erickson and Stephanie Thomson, “First Lady International Diplomacy: Performing Gendered Roles on the World Stage,” *Southern Communication Journal* 77, no. 3, (2012): 242, doi:[10.1080/1041794X.2011.647502](https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2011.647502).

norms as perspectives change throughout time. As roles move from complementary to contradictory, there is a sense of novelty created as society navigates ways to interact with the formerly socially consistent role. For example, while some previous societal perspectives about police were complementary because the occupation was understood to provide protection for the general public; however, the role of police has changed in recent years as public opinion began to shift in response to current events and social movements. The reality television show *Live PD* gives an example of this transformation. The show was once popular, but in the midst of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, it quickly lost popularity and faced significant criticism.⁶⁰ McVey points out that despite public perception that the show was authentic, *Live PD* used authenticity as a replacement for transparency about current events. McVey argued that “*Live PD* presented viewers with a mediated and selective view of police officers, even going so far as to destroy footage depicting police violence,” giving insight as to how transparent the show truly was about daily policing norms.⁶¹ As viewers became aware of how images were manipulated on *Live PD*, the officers featured in the show, and even the host, took on contradictory roles that pointed out issues with former public perception.

Understanding the tools a rhetor has available for creating a persona is important as they may aid audiences in understanding how a rhetor has changed over time in many novel ways and how his or her persona has changed. A single rhetor can remain in a complementary role for the entirety of his or her time in the public eye without anyone ever questioning the authenticity of his or her persona if the rhetor remains in a position

60. Alex McVey, “Police Officer or Social Media Star? Live PD and Microcelebrity,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 8, no. 3 (2020): 237–49, doi:10.1386/jfs_00021_1.

61. McVey, “Police Officer or Social Media Star,” 247.

to follow social norms. The rhetor can also switch between complementary and contradictory roles as needed, often sparking a wider societal discussion about what is acceptable within the social system and why. Finally, the rhetor crafts his or her role through his or her image as he or she plans how his or her image will be used for a specific purpose, while also making it believable in context of public perception. By establishing a change in persona over a period of time, a rhetor can create novelty through subtle changes in image and role and thus adjust his or her standpoint. As a rhetor takes on a complementary or contradictory role, he or she is then in a position to either critique the power structure or uphold the expectations of those in power. Thus, role and Standpoint Theory are connected as both concepts are dependent on whether or not the rhetor critiques the power structure.

Standpoint Theory

Each rhetor, through his or her unique persona, can portray a specific standpoint. Standpoint Theory is founded on the idea that a rhetor has a unique place in relation to power structures within society that directs his or her perspective on the world. For example, in the case of women who work jobs that are traditionally seen as “feminine jobs” (e.g., teacher, nurse, secretary) known as “pink collar work,” the organizational construction of maternity leave as time off or disability is seen as a step forward, but does not represent all of the needed change.⁶² The standpoint of the workers in these jobs provides insight about how these jobs may prioritize male and female worker equality, but the women also are still not seen as equals due to how their maternity leave is framed

62. Patrice M. Buzzanell et al., “Standpoints of Maternity Leave: Discourses of Temporality and Ability,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 1 (2017): 82, doi:10.1080/07491409.2015.1113451.

organizationally.⁶³ This sentiment of improper framing is continued in the analysis of Meghan Trainor's "Dear Future Husband." Trainor attempts to provide a perspective on female empowerment within the song, but instead reinforces patriarchal standards of male domination. Woodman explains that "standpoint theory implies that it is not possible for a male-dominated society to compose the feminist perspective without females providing that perspective," thus placing the burden on Trainor as a woman who has experienced multiple standpoints, but who now holds a standpoint closer to the source of societal power.⁶⁴ The discussion of framing maternity leave is also similar to discussions of Muslim women and veiling. While framing maternity leave as disability in need of time off rather than as a time of caretaking, Muslim women's choice to veil is often framed as oppression from the religion rather than as an autonomous choice.⁶⁵ Droogsma argues that Muslim women would typically rather provide their standpoint on veiling rather than relying on assumptions, giving them a chance to express their agency in relation to power structures.⁶⁶

While persona is a concept with many different sub-sections within it, focusing on the concepts of a strategic and believable image, the use of both complementary and contradictory roles, and the addition of standpoint theory, I will be able to assess Taylor Swift's dynamic persona as it changes throughout three different albums. With the

63. Buzzanell et al., "Standpoints of Maternity Leave," 82.

64. Kimberly Woodman, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Meghan Trainor's "Dear Future Husband": A Rhetorical Criticism," *LOGOS: A Journal of Undergraduate Research* 11, no. 1 (2018): 91.

65. Rachel Anderson Droogsma, "Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women's Standpoints on Veiling," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 35, no. 3 (2007): 294, doi:10.1080/00909880701434299.

66. Droogsma, "Redefining Hijab," 315.

theoretical framework established, I will move on to discussing how I selected texts to examine in my thesis.

Methodology

In narrowing the texts selected for this thesis, I have navigated through many difficulties. Taylor Swift produces an immense number of texts that can each be analyzed on their own or as part of a larger, composite text, creating what can be best described as a web of information that she has used to build a connection with her fanbase. Swift has created spaces on the internet within various social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, tumblr, and more recently, TikTok, where she has fed into fan theories about her upcoming projects. Much of Swift's interaction with fans has been through social media, giving her a unique ability to provide content in ways other musicians have not yet tried. By feeding into the channels and platforms where her fans most often interact, Swift has provided them an almost endless amount of digital content. This digital content typically includes hints, known as "Easter eggs," that hide in the background of photos and videos or come as word puzzles in which Swift capitalizes a certain letter within various words throughout a paragraph. The Easter eggs Swift provides can range from song titles, to hints about release dates, or album titles.

The volume of content that Swift provides to her fan base forced me to make numerous decisions about what type of analysis I could complete within the scope of this project. In narrowing down and selecting the texts I would examine, I have considered the range of her discography, including singles, live albums, movie soundtrack songs, and songs she has written for other artists or that other artists have invited her to be featured on. I have also considered the visual content available from her expansive list of music

videos, the various concert recordings she has made, her documentaries, and her own social media photos and videos. It was critical for me to include these texts, which are beyond her musical releases, because her music alone hardly covers the scope of all the content she has released. With the breadth of content available established, I will proceed with breaking down Swift's discography with examples of some of the hits from each album. I will also explain how her re-recorded albums factor into the potential content for analysis. Finally, I will provide the justification for my fragmented text construction and the texts that I will use for analysis.

Taylor Swift's Albums

Swift has a lengthy discography, as her career began in 2006 and has continued for almost 20 years. Not long after signing with Big Machine Records, Swift released her self-titled debut album in 2006. This album settled her firmly in the country genre with songs such as "Tim McGraw," "Our Song," "Picture to Burn," and other country and banjo-focused hits. Swift released her sophomore album, *Fearless*, in 2008, two years after her debut album release. Maintaining a country-pop genre, *Fearless* capitalized on the naivety of young love and the troubles of growing up. Songs on *Fearless* that exemplify the troubles of growing up and young love include "Fifteen," "Love Story," and "You Belong with Me." *Speak Now*, a more pop than country album, provided more insight into Swift's love life and the trials she encountered with songs such as "Dear John," "Better than Revenge," and "Mean." By 2012, Swift released *Red*, sparking discussion about her potentially moving away from her country music beginnings and venturing into styles such as pop and indie music.⁶⁷ As *Red* was more focused on

67. Billy Dukes, "Taylor Swift, 'Red' – Album Review," Taste of Country, October 19, 2012. <https://tasteofcountry.com/taylor-swift-red/>; and Jon Caramanica, "No More Kid Stuff for Taylor

relationship, fame, and heartbreak, this album signaled a change in Swift's writing as she began to establish an understanding of relationships gone wrong and her role in them. Through collaborations with other artists, Swift branched out in her songwriting and musical genre by learning how other musicians composed their own music, stating "they're true collaborations, it's not just somebody else singing on one of my songs that sounds like one of my songs. It's a real mixture of the two influences"⁶⁸. *Red* provided more angsty songs such as "I Knew You Were Trouble" and "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," as well as sadder songs such as "All Too Well" and "The Last Time." The rumors about Swift's venture out of country music came true when she released *1989* in 2014, focusing heavily on pop style music with simple melodies through songs such as "Shake It Off," "Blank Space," and "Welcome to New York." However, Swift sparked more discussion and controversy with the release of her 2017 *reputation* album, following her ongoing conflict with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian West. Relying on synth heavy music, Swift stepped into a new persona and a new section of her life with this record through songs such as "Look What You Made Me Do," "Getaway Car," and "...Ready For It?" However, Swift did not stay in this segment of her life for long. In releasing a pop, in-love-focused album, *Lover*, in 2019, Swift acknowledged that a villain role was not her goal, and instead, she focused on happy aspects of her life through "ME!," "Paper Rings," and "Cruel Summer." Swift made quick a turnaround with her songwriting after the release of *Lover*, by releasing *folklore* in July of 2020.

Swift." the *New York Times*, October 24, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/arts/music/no-more-kid-stuff-for-taylor-swift.html>.

68. Brian Mansfield, "Taylor Swift Sees 'Red' All Over," *USA Today*, October 18, 2012, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2012/10/17/taylor-swift-red-interview/1637307/>.

Amid an international pandemic, Swift's release of the folksy album came as a shock to consumers, since many artists rescheduled their own releases due to the pandemic's unpredictability. *folklore* also gained notability as Swift's first album that was focused primarily on telling stories unrelated to her life, including "August," "The Last Great American Dynasty," and "Betty." Swift remained in the folksy style for *evermore*, which she released in December 2020, just five months after *folklore*. *evermore* continued Swift's endeavors into musical storytelling with songs such as "No Body, No Crime," "Champagne Problems," and "Tolerate It." Swift's most recent release, *Midnights*, was released in October 2022 as a concept album themed around a question: what keeps you up at night?⁶⁹

Swift has also recently been hard at work releasing re-recorded albums that were previously owned by Big Machine Records. Swift was able to create new masters and re-record her old music due to the permissions granted within her holding of the publishing rights, releasing *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version)* by November 2022. Similar to the way a deluxe album would include bonus songs and content, Taylor's versions of *Fearless* and *Red* include songs that are "From the Vault," songs that Taylor wrote during the time period the original album was released and that provide an additional context to listeners about her experiences and songwriting skills at the time. The "From the Vault" songs also include some songs that she had written for other artists such as "Better Man," which was originally recorded by Little Big Town and "Babe," which was recorded by Sugarland and which featured Swift's vocals.

69. The Graham Norton Show, "Taylor Swift's Opens Up About What 'Midnights' Means To Her," Youtube Video, 0:00-0:11, October 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7w94MwxSxE>.

Fragmented Text Construction

Swift has provided a multitude of options for analysis with each of her albums, but this also means that I have had to make decisions in narrowing down the texts I will analyze in this thesis. I have selected a few criteria to aid in narrowing the texts: specific musical styles, time periods, and the topics discussed within each album. In considering specific musical styles, I will focus on Swift's use of different genres to differentiate herself from many modern pop artists. Next, I will use the difference in time periods to identify that Swift, like many young adults, discovers new information and perspectives as she ages, thus informing her presentation of certain ideas to her audience. I will consider how the different time periods of her life inform her discussion of topics such as love, friendship, grief, and more. While Swift provided dozens of songs to be considered for analysis, the selections I made not only fit my criteria, but differed drastically from the albums released prior and the ones released later in style, language use, vocabulary, and topics. As I selected texts, I excluded albums that, because of their similarity to others, lacked the variation I wanted to highlight in this thesis. I also applied this process to choosing songs, looking for variation of topics, music styles, and language use to provide points of differentiation for my analysis. These criteria helped me to select albums that show differences in specific musical style changes, the time periods represented, and the variations of topics discussed within each album text.

It is also important for me to address why I have not selected Swift's more recent albums for analysis. While Swift is a prolific writer and has expanded her discography significantly in recent years, it is also important to note that the focus on her music has changed with more recent albums. Two of her more recent albums, *folklore* and

evermore, deviate from her established writing style of autobiographical music that recount the relationships and situations she has experienced. Instead, *folklore* and *evermore* focus more on telling fictional stories, with rare instances of autobiographical information. With the theoretical framework I have established, having such a limited amount of Swift presenting her own stories and identity through the contents of these recent albums severely limits the amount of assessment I am able to do of her persona. Additionally, her most recent album, *Midnights*, was released in the midst of the formation of this thesis and was therefore excluded from my list of albums available for analysis.

Fearless (Taylor's Version)

While Swift released her debut album before *Fearless*, the *Fearless* album captures the naivety of youth and young love in a way that was not discussed in Swift's previous work. Swift's use of literal language as she describes the situations of the songs shows her limited vocabulary and limited perspective on life, art, and love and establishes her as a young adult artist that is still learning about herself and about the world. By focusing on the perils of navigating high school, the loss of friendships, and the limitations of young love, Swift covers topics appropriate for a 19-year-old. Swift finds herself in a place of reflection as she confronts lost relationships in both the original version of *Fearless* and the *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, showing additional context to Swift's love life in 2007 and 2008. Finally, *Fearless* is one of the last albums where Swift is placed firmly in the country music genre, differentiating it from her future work. In order to create a well-rounded analysis of Swift's *Fearless* album, I plan to narrow my

focus to four songs. These four songs also include at least one live performance video and one music video to broaden my analysis.

The first song that I believe is crucial for my analysis of Swift's persona is "Fifteen." Swift's country-pop focus on young love in "Fifteen" provides evidence of how teenage girls think about love and relationships, making the relationship into something that consumes their entire lives. Additionally, Swift provides a look into the popular music video style of 2009 with her "Fifteen" music video, using visuals to depict the story she portrays. The second song necessary for analysis is "Forever & Always." Swift specifically addresses the controversies she had been involved in regarding how she writes about past relationships in the live performance of this song. Swift provides additional context to the background of the song through a youthful display of angst and sarcasm while touching into a country-rock genre. The third song I analyze is "The Other Side of the Door." Swift discusses an off-again, on-again relationship in this song, showing a range of emotions as she bargains both with herself and with her partner. Swift also uses simple language in the song, providing a young outlook on language and vocabulary that was standard for of the time teenagers. Finally, "Bye Bye Baby" is the fourth song I have chosen, in which Swift discusses a break-up using simple language, saying goodbye to her partner through the form of a country-pop song.

Red (Taylor's Version)

Swift released *Red* four years after *Fearless* in 2012, providing a new insight into her maturity as a young adult as she was aged 23. Swift's understanding of lyricism expanded, as shown through the lyrics in the *Red* album that made use of metaphors and more abstract language. The topics she covered within *Red* at the time of initial release

were primarily relationship and break-up centered. *Red (Taylor's Version)* introduces more relationship and breakup focused songs, including a few songs about losing friends and being replaced. Swift, after releasing *Red*, was categorized as moving away from her country roots and into indie and pop genres, starting her transition into new music genres for her future work.

The first song that is needed to show change in Swift's persona is "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)." Swift, in her longest song to date, establishes the ups and downs of an intense relationship through a pop ballad, explaining her experiences surrounding a relationship from her early 20s. Swift provides additional context into the arguments and subtle non-verbal behaviors used in this relationship through the music video-short film starring Dylan O'Brien and Sadie Sink. The second text I have selected is "Everything Has Changed," featuring a duet with pop star, Ed Sheeran. Swift shows an understanding of perspective through this song as she identifies that the relationship she is discussing as young love and has changed her perspective on life, despite how new the relationship was. Swift provides a different perspective on lost love through the third song I will analyze, "I Bet You Think About Me," featuring vocals from country singer, Chris Stapleton, as she recounts a relationship that was so strong, it has caused her ex-partner to be unable to escape her influence on their life. Swift makes strong use of descriptive language in this song as she describes specifics of her life with her partner and the differences in their upbringings that led to the demise of their relationship. Finally, Swift focuses on the perils of fame and fortune in "The Lucky One," adding extra context to the storyline she is portraying through her live performance of the song on the Red Tour.

Swift compares the life of an old-Hollywood film star to her own rise to fame and recounts the stresses of being famous.

reputation

Five years after releasing *Red*, Swift made a quick turn into pop-synth music with her release of *reputation*. Swift's transition into pop-synth differed strongly from her previous albums where she had been placed firmly in a formulaic pop genre. Following her very public feud with Kanye West, Swift focuses this album on her recent media controversies, discussing her embrace of the villain role the media had placed her in and how she has settled into her most recent relationship. Swift focuses strongly on use of abstract language in *reputation*, using references to crimes to describe breakups and colloquialisms to describe the tensions of her relationships. Now 28 years old in 2017, Swift has gained new perspective on life, love, and her role as a celebrity and uses *reputation* to reminisce on her success in her most recent relationship and tell of her issues with the media, other celebrities, and the controversies she has found herself in.

“Call It What You Want” is the first song from *reputation* that I feel is crucial to building Swift's persona from the album. Swift establishes her fall from her previously good reputation, citing references to Alice in Wonderland as she explains that her relationship has been a stable aspect of her fall from grace. The next song that is needed for analysis is “I Did Something Bad,” in which Swift elaborates on the demise of her reputation, owning her new reputation as a villain and claiming that her actions in building the bad reputation were worth it. “Delicate” and its music video are crucial for analysis as Swift highlights that her current relationship is delicate but is not dependent on her role in fame or her reputation. “Delicate” sets the stage for the music video, as

Swift highlights that her invisibility due to her bad reputation is freeing for her. Finally, “Look What You Made Me Do” is particularly important to the analysis, as Swift uses both the song and the music video to not only justify her decisions that led to her bad reputation, but also to show that she did not have a choice in her reaction.

Thesis Preview

The analysis of the admittedly fragmented text throughout my thesis will be guided by the question: How do rhetors create novelty in the music industry? I will use each aspect of my theoretical framework regarding persona to guide my analysis and answer my research question. My focus will be how Swift uses both complementary and contradictory roles and a synthetic yet believable image to portray a persona that changes from album to album. By applying the aspects of roles and image to each song selected as a text, I plan to make an argument for the differences between Swift’s works. I will also use the visual aspects of the music videos and live performances to further support my argument as I argue that each aspect of Swift’s work is intentionally fashioned to support the persona she has crafted. In Chapter II, I will focus on applying the aspects of complementary roles, contradictory roles, and a synthetic yet believable image to the *Fearless*, using the songs I selected from that album. In Chapter III, I will continue my analysis by applying the same aspects previously mentioned to the *Red* album, comparing the differences between Swift’s persona in *Fearless* to the new persona she established in *Red*. In Chapter IV, I will apply the previous aspects to Swift’s *reputation* album to show the differences in persona from the previous two albums. Finally, I will conclude my thesis in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II

FEARLESS (TAYLOR'S VERSION)

Two years after her debut album release, Swift compiled the songs that she wrote during her promotional concert openings for other bands and produced her second album, *Fearless*. Swift, an 18-year-old musician, explained that she regularly used her time on tour to write, often working on new songs in the concert venue.¹ While touring with Brad Paisley in 2007, Swift wrote the title song for the album about her idea of the perfect first date.² She used her second album to focus on common themes of the teenage-girl experience to maintain the relatability her audience had previously connected with, stating: “I really try to write more about what I feel and guys and love because that’s what fascinates me more than anything else.”³ Swift used her own experiences in past relationships to find the core emotions she wanted to focus on within her songs, explaining that she had not run out of material despite her limited experience in relationships at the time.⁴ *Fearless* continued to follow Swift’s country-pop genre from

1. Dale Kawashima, “Taylor Swift Interview (2007): She Discusses Her Debut Album, *Taylor Swift*, Her Hit “Tim McGraw,” and How She Got Started,” *Songwriter Universe*, February 16, 2007, <https://www.songwriteruniverse.com/taylorswift123.htm>.

2. Jackie King, “Taylor Swift – A Place In This World,” *Unrated Magazine*, July 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20110929103301/http://www.unratedmagazine.com/Document.cfm?Page=Articles%2Findex.cfm&Article_ID=495.

3. Gary Graff, “Living ‘Fearless’ Taylor Swift Talks About Her Whirlwind Rise To The Top,” *The Oakland Press*, March 26, 2010, www.theoaklandpress.com/articles/2010/03/26/entertainment/doc4baba3395e3ef490410773.txt?viewmode=fullstory.

4. Ken Tucker, “The Billboard Q&A: Taylor Swift,” *Billboard*, March 26, 2008, <http://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/the-billboard-qa-taylor-swift-1046063/>.

her debut album, and Swift continued to use literal descriptive language in her songs to portray the emotions and experiences she was sharing.

Swift was able to provide additional context for the initial release of *Fearless* when she released her recorded version titled *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* in 2021. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* was the first of Taylor's recorded albums to be released as she was able to create new master recordings of the albums owned by big machine records. The bonus songs released on *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* were initially written at the time of the original fearless album but were recorded and produced for Taylor's version. The bonus songs included features from newer artists, such as Country singer Maren Morris, or artists she has worked with in the past, such as Country singer Keith Urban, who Swift opened for when promoting her debut album, and production from Jack Antonoff who has worked on some of her newer releases.

Text Construction and Methodology

Fearless (Taylor's Version) is the album I will focus on in this chapter, and I have selected four texts through which to analyze Swift's persona through her image, role, and standpoint. The first text I have selected is "Fifteen" and its accompanying music video. "Fifteen" highlights youthfulness and is focused on high school, friendships, relationships, and heartbreak. Swift tells the story of one of her friend's experiences with young love and her own initial optimism about high school relationships. The "Fifteen" music video highlights the dream-like state of the theme, showing that the optimism almost casts the story like a fairytale. The second text I have selected is "Forever & Always" and the live performance of this song from Swift's *Fearless* tour. "Forever & Always" has more of a rock feel but captures frustration as Swift copes with the loss of a

relationship that she thought was going to last. The live performance of “Forever & Always” adds to the context of her frustration with the end of this relationship through choreography and visuals. The third text I have selected is “The Other Side of the Door,” which captures an off and on relationship as Swift tries to determine what her breaking point is with the relationship and the transgressions she experienced from her partner. The fourth text I selected from *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* is “Bye Bye Baby.” Swift, through her lyrics in “Bye Bye Baby,” has found that her breaking point for the relationship is admitting that the relationship was not as cinematic as she thought and has accepted it is time to say goodbye to that partner.

In this chapter, I will examine each text, analyzing the lyrics and imagery used to determine image, role, and standpoint that Swift portrays of her 18-year-old self to her audience. Within the sections of image, role, and standpoint, I will create divisions for common themes and provide evidence to support these claims. In doing this, I will work towards my goal of answering my research question: How do rhetors create novelty in the music industry?

Analysis

Taylor Swift’s persona at the time of the *Fearless* album release was still relatively new and in early development as she determined her goals both professionally and personally. Swift’s youth is apparent in this album and can be seen in both her use of literal descriptive language and her perspective on things such as relationships, break-ups, and being young. Swift shows strong emotions such as frustration, pettiness, remorse, naivety, and optimism through her image. Swift also strongly portrays complementary roles through her enactment of the teenager, girlfriend, and ex-girlfriend

roles. Finally, Swift shows an indifference to the power structures at play in her life because she is young and does not care to write songs about things that her audience cannot relate to.

Image

In constructing her own image, Swift references new experiences, such as young love and freshman year of high school to set up a strategic image of youth. Swift's image is believable due to the audience's ability to connect with the raw emotions she shares in each line of the songs. Since Swift is 18 at the time *Fearless* was initially released, her image matches the expectations of the audience because she is now a young adult and is recounting the things she experienced early in her teenage years. By relying on these raw emotions, Swift's strategic image of a naïve, optimistic, yet frustrated and petty teenager is understandable. Swift's image through the *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album is one that uses broad emotions such as anger and innocence but narrows to pettiness, frustration, sadness, naivety, and excessive optimism to enact a well-rounded range of emotions.

Angry

Swift takes on a broad range of emotions that can all be nestled into the category of negative emotions such as anger. As Swift grapples with things such as heartbreak and disappointment, she takes on emotions such as frustration, pettiness, and remorse in order to portray a realistic account of her experience. While Swift constructs the image of a sweet and innocent musician, her use of anger shows that she understands the experience of heartbreak and is able to properly convey that emotion to her audience by distilling it to a more narrowed emotion.

Frustrated. Swift often expresses her heartbreak through a theme of frustration in *Fearless*. Portraying her frustration with how the relationship ended, the events that led to the end of the relationship, and how she was treated, Swift hints towards the things that upset her the most. Looking first at “Forever & Always,” Swift’s tone throughout the song portrays frustration as her voice comes off loud and irritated. Swift’s explores her frustration verbally as she states, “and you flashback to when he said, ‘forever and always,’ oh, and it rains in your bedroom everything is wrong, it rains when you’re here and it rains when you’re gone.”⁵ Using the image of rain, Swift tells the audience that no matter where her partner is, she is also experiencing a storm and is frustrated that she cannot have peace with or without her partner. Swift also shows her frustration with the relationship visually in her live performance from the *Fearless* tour. Swift opens her live performance of “Forever & Always” with a recreation of an interview she participated in by sitting in red chairs with a performer portraying the role of interviewer. Swift, part of the way through the song, gets up from the chair and scares the “interviewer” as she physically expresses frustration with the ex-partner she is singing about. The interviewer in the real interview asked an inflammatory question of Swift. and this sudden movement during the live performance recreation depicts Swift preparing to physically react to the interview. Swift then picks the chair up and throws it off the platform it had been sitting on.⁶ By staying somewhat calm through most of the song and then throwing an armchair, Swift shows how her frustration with the situation she is in with her ex-partner has grown

5. “Forever & Always,” Spotify, track 11 on Taylor Swift, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1msEuwSBneBKpVCZQcFTsU?si=315c4905adf44b2d>.

6. Taylor Swift Evolution, “Taylor Swift – Forever & Always (Fearless Tour), YouTube Video, 5:15, June 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFyGIYz2Hes>.

and has come to a breaking point.

Swift also portrays her frustration through “The Other Side of The Door” and the unraveling relationship she explains in the song. Swift states,

in the heat of the fight, I walked away,
ignorin’ words that you were sayin’,
trying to make me stay,
I said this time “I’ve had enough,”
and you’ve called a hundred times, but I’m not picking up,
cause I’m so mad I might tell you that it’s over,

explaining that she is so frustrated with her partner that she left the room during an argument and is giving him the silent treatment.⁷ Swift’s frustration is continued in the bridge of the song as she acknowledges there are major flaws in their relationship, citing “the conversation with the little white lies,” and “I broke down crying, was she worth this mess? After everything and that little black dress.”⁸ Swift, in her youth, is expressing feels of frustration that only enhance the audience’s understanding of her age, as teenage girls are often portrayed as highly emotional people. Using this frustration to her advantage, Swift captivates her audience by expressing a shared feeling.

Petty. In her heartbreak, Swift includes instances of mocking language to portray the emotions she is experiencing. Frustrated with the unmet expectations she had for the relationship, Swift uses quick tone changes to show that she is having to jump between the different types of grief she is feeling, moving from sad, to frustrated, and back to sad. One of the most apparent instances of this is in “Forever & Always” as Swift begins

7. “The Other Side of The Door,” Spotify, Track 19 on Taylor Swift, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1cSF1SBdpT4F5vb1frQ231?si=22b31f8b953642de>.

8. “The Other Side of The Door.”

sounding remorseful before giving her perspective of the relationship ending. Swift illustrates this by singing,

I hold on to the night, you looked me in the eyes and told me you loved me,
were you just kidding?
'cause it seems to me, this thing is breaking down,
we almost never speak.⁹

Swift starts reminiscing on the relationship by thinking about the good times, but quickly changes directions as she begins questioning her partner with the comparison of how the breakup looks from her perspective. Swift continues to belittle her partner as she asks, “was I out of line? Did I say something way too honest, made you run and hide, like a scared little boy,” comparing her partner’s behavior to the behavior of a child. Swift’s petty reaction to the heartbreak is compounded by her live performance of “Forever & Always.” Swift begins the live performance by playing a clip from an interview where she is asked about her relationships and her music:

Interviewer: If you are naming the guys you’ve dated in your songs, why do you think any guy is gonna wanna date you?

Swift: Well, um, I guess in that situation, I just figure that if guys don’t want me to write bad songs about them, then they shouldn’t do bad things.¹⁰

Swift’s use of this clip at the start of the performance provides perspective into her focus for the song: frustration and heartbreak. She also uses this interview clip to identify that the partner she is speaking about has done something distasteful, and she is using this song to somewhat name him.

Swift’s use of belittling and sarcastic language aids in her portrayal of youth as she does not handle the breakup with grace as an adult might. Instead, Swift does what

9. “Forever & Always.”

10. Taylor Swift Evolution, “Taylor Swift.”

she can to make the partner feel bad about the situation she has experienced. Swift uses the phrase, “coming down to nothing,” a few times in the *Fearless* album, specifically to portray the end of a relationship. In “Forever & Always,” Swift uses the phrase in a sarcastic toast to the relationship, stating “so here’s to everything coming down to nothing, here’s to silence that cuts me to the core.”¹¹ Swift acknowledges that the promises of forever and always from her partner have ultimately resulted in nothing but pain and silence for her as her expectations are left unmet. Swift carries this sentiment into “Bye Bye Baby” as well, stating “bye, bye, to everything I thought was on my side, bye, bye, baby, I want you bad, but it’s coming down to nothing.”¹² Swift highlights that, while her expectations were set by her partner, they were left unmet as she finally accepts the end of the relationship and acknowledges that all of the promises of a lasting relationship are empty and unfulfilled. Finally, Swift mocks her immature partner in “The Other Side of The Door” as she states “oh, babe, if you know everything, tell me why you couldn’t see, when I left, I wanted you to chase after me.” While Swift’s expectations for her partner are unrealistic in expecting him to know that she wanted him to follow after her when she left, she belittles him by reminding him that he has built himself a reputation for knowing the answer to everything. Swift’s use of mocking language to provide her perspective of her ex-partner’s issues maintains her youthful perspective as she uses conversations with that partner to make jokes at his expense. The petty perspective also provides a believable image as the phrasing and storytelling used can be

11. “Forever & Always.”

12. “Bye Bye Baby,” Spotify, Track 26 on Taylor Swift, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4qUijfYU8EoIWiy6oSyrGT?si=226554b8ce9e4e8e>.

similar to the way that teenaged girls tell stories about break-ups, their ex-partners, and the drama they experience.

Sad and Remorseful. Swift, while she has established her frustration and petty reactions to her partner letting her down, also expresses sadness in her music. In “Bye Bye Baby,” Swift hints briefly at her sadness with lines such as, “lost in the gray and I try to grab at the fray,” “all I have is your sympathy,” and “the picture frame is empty, on the dresser, vacant just like me.”¹³ Swift spends most of “Bye Bye Baby” acknowledging the end of the relationship and how she was not expecting it to end, but the brief hints to her sadness also depict that she is disappointed that the relationship is ending. Swift also shares her experience with sadness in “Fifteen” as she states “when all you wanted was to be wanted, wish you could go back and tell yourself what you know now,” “Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his mind and we both cried,” and “I found time can heal most anything.”¹⁴ Swift expresses regret for her past self as well as remorse for the things her best friend, Abigail, experienced, but acknowledges that her sadness is temporary. Swift acknowledges the hardships of relationships and expresses remorse for both herself and those around her as she connects with her audience. However, Swift also produces an understanding that the sadness of the situations will not last forever, providing a mature perspective.

13. “Bye Bye Baby.”

14. “Fifteen,” Taylor Swift, Spotify, track 2 on Taylor Swift, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2nqio0SfWg6gh2eCtfuMa5?si=d4650fccbc814c83>.

Innocent

Many members of Swift's audience and the general public viewed her as a wholesome country singer, just barely getting introduced to the world around her. Swift capitalizes on this perspective by focusing on the niche emotions within the category of innocence. By narrowing down the emotions she is feeling in certain situations, Swift is able to amplify even the smallest emotion to further her connection to her audience as they experience a full range of emotions together.

Naïve and Inexperienced. "Fifteen" includes references to the naivety of youth as teenagers are just starting to figure out what they want in their adult lives but do not have enough experience to always make full judgements about people's character or behaviors. Swift cites wanting to be noticed by an older boy despite her young age and how she accepted statements of love without much consideration for the authenticity of the statement: "hoping one of those senior boys will wink at you and say 'you know I haven't seen you around before' 'cause when you're fifteen and somebody tells you they love you, you're gonna believe them."¹⁵ Swift visually depicts a bubbly and shy reaction to making eye contact with a boy she passed in the hallway, hiding her smile a little with her hand while her other arm hugs her body.

Swift also highlights being naïve in "Forever & Always" as the protagonist is confronted with disappointment from her expectations of a relationship not being met. Swift opens the song with "once upon a time," referencing a common opening for fairytale stories.¹⁶ Swift's use of this line also highlights how young she is as she views

15. "Fifteen."

16. "Forever & Always."

relationships as comparable to fairytale stories. Swift's inexperience in relationships forces her to rely on fairytale stories as background for how she should be treated and how things should work out—with a happily ever after at the very end.

Swift also expresses her reliance on fictional tales for relationship expectations in "The Other Side of The Door." Swift explains that, despite the fact she was fighting with her partner and did not handle the argument well, she still wants the partner to react like they are in a movie, citing "I said 'leave' but all I really want is you, to stand outside my window, throwin' pebbles, screamin' 'I'm in love with you,' wait there in the pourin' rain, comin' back for more."¹⁷ Swift's use of this imagery provides the listener with the capability to connect the situation Swift is describing to common emotional scenes in romantic drama movies such as *The Notebook* and *Say Anything*. Swift uses the same imagery from these movies to show her reliance on fictional stories to set her expectations for her own romantic relationships.

Overly Optimistic. Swift's naivety also creates an opportunity for her to be overly optimistic about relationships and life. Swift depicts her excess of optimism in a few of the texts. One of the first depictions of her optimism comes from "Fifteen," as Swift states, "then you're on your very first date and he's got a car and you're feeling like flying and your mama's waiting up and you're thinking he's the one."¹⁸ Swift's optimism about this first date working out well enough to result in a functional marriage provides insight into how her naivety has set her up for disappointment when things do not work out like they do in romance movies. The theme of romance movies represents Swift's

17. "The Other Side of The Door."

18. "Fifteen."

foundational understanding of the way relationships and love is carried on in “Bye Bye Baby.” Swift starts the song by stating, “it wasn’t just like a movie, the rain didn’t soak through my clothes, down to my skin,” showing that her expectations of the relationship and subsequent breakup were not met, at least in part, due to her optimism that things would happen like they do in movies.¹⁹ Swift also states, “I was so sure of everything, everything I thought we’d always have,” referencing the main focus of “Forever & Always”—that her partner in the song promised their relationship would be forever and always.²⁰ While Swift is optimistic about her relationships and has possibly been led astray by her partners, her young age and inexperience in romantic relationships has left her with the expectation that things will always work out for these relationships, despite the warning signs she has witnessed.

Nervous and Insecure. Swift opens “Fifteen” with statements of nervousness and insecurity as she begins a new experience: Freshman year of high school. Swift cites the typical nerves of a new experience stating, “you take a deep breath, and you walk through the doors, it’s the morning of your very first day.”²¹ Swift elaborates on her expression of nervousness in the music video as she walks through an ornate door rather slowly, taking her time to step through the doorway into the room or hallway that follows. Swift also illustrates a small reference to the insecurity that many teenagers face as she states, “try and stay out of everybody’s way,” referencing that the school is busy, and she does not want to impede those who know where they are going and what they are doing.²²

19. “Bye Bye Baby.”

20. “Bye Bye Baby.”

21. “Fifteen.”

22. “Fifteen.”

Swift visually depicts this sentiment in the music video for “Fifteen” as she hugs her arms to her body and slouches to depict that she is in an uncomfortable situation. Swift then steps around a group of people, looking at them as she walks to make sure she does not disturb their conversation. Swift does not openly admit to being self-conscious, but through her use of visuals and small hints lyrically, the audience is able to see the signs of insecurity and nervousness. By providing common feelings such as nervousness and insecurity, Swift builds subtle connections with the audience that may not be as apparent to the general public.

Swift’s image can be volatile in terms of the range of emotions portrayed in just four songs. However, understanding that this is the image of a teenage girl who is experiencing first loves, heartbreaks, and general disappointments, the range of emotions portrayed feels realistic. This provides connection to the audience because Swift’s ability to portray an image that was consistent with the lives of other teenage girls gave her the chance to seem like she was just a normal girl and not a young, famous musician. By building an image that is believable, her persona becomes more acceptable to the audience because it does not defy their expectations of what a teenage girl should be interested in.

Role

Taylor Swift’s reputation in the beginning of her career was that of a sweet, innocent, yet boy-crazy teenage girl. Her primary audience of teenage girls found her to be relatable because she portrayed experiences that they were also living through at the time. Swift’s portrayal of these situations relied on amplifying the basic emotions she was feeling so that her songs matched the experience she was having.

Swift, through the *Fearless* album, portrayed roles that matched her audience's expectations of her. Portraying herself as a sweet, yet emotional teenager who values friendship, relationships, and making her ex-boyfriends regret hurting her, Swift was able to use songs to portray the roles she was playing in life. All of the roles Swift played were complementary to social expectations for teenagers: they might be overly emotional, naïve, are sweet when they want to be, and are generally interested in connecting with others.

Teenager

Swift portrays the role of teenager throughout her album, but by using specific language, she puts herself in settings that are typical for a teenage girl. In "Fifteen," Swift sets up the scene for the first day of freshman year and being at a new school with the lyric "it's your freshman year, and you're gonna be here for the next four years in this town."²³ She then elaborates on being 15 and the teenage experience of developing who you want to be by stating "and when you're fifteen, feeling like there's nothing to figure out, count to ten, take it in, this is life before you know you're going to be." Swift also makes careful use of the word "room" in both "Fifteen" and "Forever & Always" to show that she is still young and is not living alone yet. Swift states "and you're dancing around your room when the night ends"²⁴ and "it rains in your bedroom"²⁵ to show that her room, much like the common teenager's, is where she celebrates good experiences and mourns bad experiences. Swift capitalizes on the emotions and common situations that

23. "Fifteen."

24. "Fifteen."

25. "Forever & Always."

many teenagers find themselves in, giving her the opportunity to maintain a complementary role in the eyes of her teenaged audience and the general public.

Girlfriend

Taylor Swift also plays the role of girlfriend in many of her songs. Because of her age, she is often found in relationships that are not healthy because she lacks experience to see the warning signs. Swift shows this in “The Other Side of The Door” as she explains the tension with her and her partner within the relationship by saying, “I keep goin’ back over things we both said, and I remember the slamming door, and all the things that I misread.”²⁶ Swift is actively bargaining with herself and her partner in the song, trying to overcome the issues they are experiencing, but she does not tell the audience the issues that have led to the argument she is explaining in the song until the end, stating,

the conversation with the little white lies,
and the faded picture of a beautiful night,
you carried me from your car up the stairs,
and I broke down crying, was she worth this mess?
After everything and that little black dress,
after everything I must confess, I need you.²⁷

Swift’s explanation of this argument and subsequent admittance of reliance on her partner shows that, despite the issues of infidelity they are experiencing, she is not ready to give up, much like many girlfriends who want to mend the relationship issues rather than call it quits. Swift also portrays her hesitancy to end the relationship in “Bye Bye Baby.” While Swift is in the middle of saying goodbye to her partner, she is also admitting there is a tension between her love for her partner and a need for the relationship to end. Swift

26. “The Other Side of The Door.”

27. “The Other Side of The Door.”

portrays this through lyrics such as “I still love you but I can’t,” and “you’re all I want but it’s not enough this time.”²⁸ Swift provides the audience with the complementary role of girlfriend as she shows love for her partner, dedication to working through problems, and an understanding of boundaries that should not be crossed.

Ex-Girlfriend

Swift also has to acknowledge the role of ex-girlfriend in her music as her role of girlfriend comes to an end. Swift eventually must acknowledge the issues that are causing her relationship to suffer and not meet her expectations. Swift’s change in perspective is one that reflects on the warning signs that were not initially seen. Swift first acknowledges her change in perspective in “Fifteen” as she sings, “back then I swore I was gonna marry him someday, but I realized some bigger dreams of mine.”²⁹ Swift’s youth led her to think that her relationship with this boy while she in high school would result in a marriage, but as she grew up, she realizes that her priorities are focused on things other than marriage. She also takes note of the big experience of first love by stating, “in your life you’ll do things, greater than dating the boy on the football team” and directing the audience to consider that it isn’t always a bad thing to let go of a relationship and become the reminiscent ex-girlfriend.³⁰ Swift also takes on the role of the angry ex-girlfriend in “Forever & Always” as she recounts the unmet expectations her partner had set. Swift states “‘cause I was there when you said, ‘forever and always,’ you

28. “Bye Bye Baby.”

29. “Fifteen.”

30. “Fifteen.”

didn't mean it baby," and sets herself in the role of the angry ex-girlfriend as she reminds her partner that he promised things that could not be achieved.³¹

Finally, Swift portrays the role of sad ex-girlfriend through "Bye Bye Baby" as she lets go of the relationship and reflects on the experience of mourning the relationship through lyrics such as, "I'm driving away and I guess you could say, this is the last time I'll drive this way again," "because you took me home but you just couldn't keep me," "feels like I'm becoming a part of your past," "I'm so scared of how this ends," and "you took me home, I thought you were gonna keep me."³² Swift takes on smaller roles within the role of ex-girlfriend, but each role is understandable and realistic to the audience's expectations of an ex-girlfriend: they can be sad, angry, or reminiscent of the relationship.

Standpoint

With an understanding of Swift's strategic image and the complementary role that she portrays through the *Fearless* album, I will now move on to discussing the standpoint she takes in this text. Swift's standpoint comes from that of a teenager who is experiencing first love and first heartbreak. As Swift has to confront the emotions she is feeling, such as frustration, insecurity, and sadness, she then crafts her perspective of the world through her relationship to those emotions. Swift, much like many teenagers, is heavily focused on portraying one emotion at a time, as that makes them easier to identify. As previously mentioned, Swift prioritizes writing about things that are interesting to her, such as guys, friendships, and heartbreak. Swift's standpoint is, then,

31. "Forever & Always."

32. "Bye Bye Baby."

one that is highly relatable to her audience and somewhat indifferent to the power structure. By writing about things that her audience relates to rather than things that other celebrities would relate to, Swift stands closer to her audience than she does to the power structure and does not let the power structure change her perspective. Swift's use of words such as "bedroom," and "window," and "class," in songs such as "Forever & Always," "The Other Side of The Door," and "Fifteen" maintain the interest of the audience, rather than praising the power structure. By expressing herself in ways that feel familiar to her audience as they are most likely not homeowners, are in school, and have a limited amount of space in their home, Swift draws herself closer to the audience. Swift's focus on maintaining her identity as a teenager rather than as a celebrity provides her with a standpoint that neglects the power structure. Swift does not actively criticize the life of fortune and fame she is involved in, but simply ignores it to prioritize the perspective of an average teenage girl. Swift's indifference to the power structure does have the potential to change as she gains more influence and fame; thus Swift could potentially take a critical stance in the future or could take a stance that urges her audience to not criticize the power structures. As she portrays herself in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, Swift does not seem to care one way or another about the power structure as her focus is on maintaining a genuine connection with her audience.

Conclusion

Despite Taylor Swift's quick introduction to fame, her persona through the *Fearless* album is one that matches the experiences of her audience. Swift's novelty in *Fearless* comes from the fact that she is a successful, teenage, country music star, who has not been able to craft a dynamic persona yet. As Swift writes about things that she

has experienced in her teenage years and that are being experienced by her audience, her audience accepts a persona because it is relatable and believable, even though it is strategic. Her persona is also acceptable to the audience because it does not contradict their expectations of the average teenager, girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will address Taylor Swift's *Red* album along with a music video and a live performance of songs from that album. In addressing the songs, music video, and live performance, I will compare and contrast the differences between her persona in *Fearless* and her persona in *Red*.

CHAPTER III

RED (TAYLOR'S VERSION)

In 2012, Taylor Swift had established a name and reputation for herself as a country-pop singer with a history of writing songs about the various boys she was dating and her experiences growing up. With three albums in her repertoire, Swift branched out to experiment with different writing styles and sounds through collaborations with many different producers and other songwriters. Swift, following the success of her *Speak Now* album, wrote 25 songs within a year, but was not happy with the production and outcome of the songs.¹ She intentionally decided to challenge herself with learning new production and writing styles, partnering with musicians who had varying styles. The variation of writing styles used caused Swift to determine that her next album would not follow a very specific style or formula as her previous albums had.²

Swift's reputation was also starting to become less favorable as the general public began to define her as a serial dater. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Swift focused on writing about things that were interesting to her, particularly boys, relationships, and growing up. However, this interest backfired and caused her to be shamed by many people. Swift stated, "the media has sent me a really unfair message over the past couple of years, which is that I'm not allowed to date for excitement, or fun,

1. Chris Willman, "Exclusive: Taylor Swift Talks About 'Red,' How to 'Begin Again' with New Love, and Being The World's Best-Behaved Bad-Ass," Yahoo, October 22, 2012, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/blogs/our-country/exclusive-taylor-swift-talks-red-begin-again-love-184143313.html>.

2. Willman, "Exclusive."

or new experiences or learning lessons. I'm only allowed to date if it's for a lasting, multiple-year relationship. Otherwise, I'm a, quote, serial dater." Ultimately, she argued that the rumors about her dating for the experience caused her to disengage from romance for a while.³ These issues were exasperated by the release of her *Red* album, as many of its songs focused on love and relationships. As Swift recounted heartbreak and the demise of her rumored relationship with Jake Gyllenhaal, many of the songs on the *Red* album were born.⁴

In the same way that *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* provided additional context to the time period and experiences Swift had during the production of her original *Fearless* album, the release of *Red (Taylor's Version)* provided the audience with a better understanding of Swift's experiences during that period of her life. Some of the collaborators she included on the re-released album were Ed Sheeran and Gary Lightbody, who had previous collaborations with Swift on the original album, and newcomers Chris Stapleton and Phoebe Bridgers.

Text Construction and Methodology

I have selected *Red (Taylor's Version)* as my second text for evaluating Taylor Swift's endeavor to create novelty in the music industry, and I have specifically chosen four songs as well as a live performance and a short film-music video for analysis. The first song I will analyze from *Red (Taylor's Version)* is "The Lucky One." Swift begins

3. Nardine Saad, "Taylor Swift Says She's 'Jaded,' 'Shamed' by Media into Staying Single," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/gossip/la-et-mg-taylor-swift-media-date-shaming-love-life-20150424-story.html>.

4. Aly Weisman, "A Timeline of Taylor Swift's Age-Inappropriate Romances," *Insider*, December 13, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/timeline-of-taylor-swifts-relationships-2012-12>.

her endeavor into telling other people's stories with "The Lucky One," providing the story of a celebrity who once had it all in the eyes of the public but traded this fortune and fame for a peaceful life. Swift's use of another's story allows her to compare the celebrity's experience to her own and to suggest that fortune and fame is not all she had imagined it to be. The second song I have selected from *Red (Taylor's Version)* is "Everything Has Changed," which features a duet with British folk-pop singer, Ed Sheeran. Because Swift was 22 when *Red* was released, her perspective on love has changed a little, but her portrayal of young love is more abstract than in the love songs featured in the *Fearless* album. Swift uses "Everything Has Changed" to portray young love, focusing on the trope of love at first sight and the simple things that cause a person to be captivated by another. The third song I have selected, "I Bet You Think About Me," focuses on the aftermath of a breakup and an ex-boyfriend with a superiority complex and the inability to forget about Swift. Swift recounts the issues with the relationship portrayed in "I Bet You Think About Me" and how the ex-boyfriend is unable to forget about her as easily as he was able to leave her. Finally, Swift airs out quite a few details about a relationship in "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)." The original version of "All Too Well" was five and a half minutes long, but it was heartbreaking and relatable as Swift captured the emotion of remembering the good parts of a bad relationship. The 10-minute version of "All Too Well" shares even more details, as Swift provides major insight into the issues in a relationship that caused it to end.

Analysis

In this chapter, I will analyze the four texts I have selected as well as the accompanying live performance of "The Lucky One" and the short film-music video for

“All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” to analyze how Swift communicates a new persona in this album. I will again use the aspects of image, role, and standpoint to determine the new persona Swift is portraying. I will use this analysis to answer my research question: How do rhetors create novelty in the music industry?

Image

Taylor Swift’s image prior to the release of *Red (Taylor’s Version)* was that of a sweet, innocent teenage girl. Portraying a strategic yet believable image, Swift was able to connect with her audience and their experiences. Swift’s use of a relatively favorable image set up opportunities for her to change her persona as she aged and matured. Swift’s image in *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* was primarily focused on portraying the volatile emotions of a teenage girl, using an amount of both negative and positive emotions that had multiple subcategories. Now as Swift is 22 years old, she explains her image through two categories: judgmental and contemplation.

Judgmental

Swift takes on a rather mocking and belittling tone in two of the texts selected for this analysis. She has already made sarcastic and belittling comments about her ex-partners in the songs I analyzed in Chapter II, but the comments made in *Red (Taylor’s Version)* deviate from the format used in *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. As Swift recounts the issues she experienced with an ex-partner, she also recounts the financial and attitude differences between them. Swift begins by commenting on her ex-partner’s need to compare his life to others in “I Bet You Think About Me” by stating, “3 a.m. and I’m still

awake, I'll bet you're just fine, fast asleep in your city that's better than mine."⁵ She continues this sentiment by commenting on her ex-partner's new girlfriend in a rather derogatory way, stating, "and the girl in your bed has a fine pedigree."⁶ Pedigree often is used in relation to the generational lines of dogs, making Swift's comment about the new girlfriend an insult as she insinuates that his new girlfriend is a dog, or a bitch. Despite the "fine pedigree" of his new girlfriend, Swift knows that her ex-partner's friends are feeding into his need for validation, stating "and I'll bet your friends tell you, she's better than me, huh."⁷

Additionally, she comments on her ex-partner's need for validation by calling him "mister superior thinking" and arguing that he is "scared not to be hip, scared to get old, chasing make-believe status."⁸ From Swift's assessment of the relationship, her ex-partner's need for validation could be stemming from either his friends or his upbringing. Swift states that his friends are upper-class and are often exclusive as "they sit around talkin' about the meaning of life and the book that just saved them that I haven't heard of."⁹ Swift also comments on her ex-partner's upbringing as she contrasts the differences in their childhood homes. While her ex-partner "grew up in a silver-spoon gated community, glamorous, shiny, bright Beverly Hills," Swift was "raised on a farm, no, it wasn't a mansion, just livin' room dancing and kitchen table bills."¹⁰ Swift also adds that

5. "I Bet You Think About Me," Spotify, track 26 on Taylor Swift, *Red (Taylor's Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4CkgMiMqZ5JzW9iYXSTMTL?si=0413f7cf6a14472b>.

6. "I Bet You Think About Me."

7. "I Bet You Think About Me."

8. "I Bet You Think About Me."

9. "I Bet You Think About Me."

10. "I Bet You Think About Me."

her ex-partner, despite his efforts to fit in with his upper-class friends and neighbors in Beverly Hills, will never be satisfied with his life as she states, “I don’t have to be your shrink to know you’ll never be happy.”¹¹ The ex-partner, despite all of his efforts to be superior to Swift, is unable to move on from the relationship. Swift acknowledges the ex-partner is unable to stop thinking about her in every situation as she states:

I bet it’s hard to believe but it turned out I’m harder to forget than I was to leave, then yeah I bet you think about me (x3), I bet you think about me when you’re out, at your cool indie music concerts every week, I bet you think about me in your house, with your organic shoes and your million-dollar couch, I bet you think about me, when you say “oh my god, she’s insane, she wrote a song about me,” I bet you think about me.

Swift also echoes this sentiment in “All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” as she states, “but you keep my old scarf from that very first week, cause it reminds you of innocence and it smells like me, you can’t get rid of it, cause you remember it all too well.”¹²

Swift’s inclusion of her ex-partner’s affinity for indie music concerts, organic shoes, and million-dollar couches shows his strong need to be seen as a unique individual with unique tastes. Swift’s ex-partner uses unnecessarily expensive and elaborate items and tastes to give himself additional reasons to feel superior to Swift.

Swift also makes regular comments about her ex-partner’s issues throughout “I Bet You Think About Me” and “All Too Well (10 Minute Version),” using these issues as points of contention within their relationship. One of the issues that she encountered with her ex-partner is that he would never admit they were actually in a relationship, which she explains when she says, “I was thinkin’ on the drive down, ‘Any time now

11. “I Bet You Think About Me.”

12. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version),” Spotify, track 30 on Taylor Swift, *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5enxwA8aAbwZbf5qCHORXi?si=6bc78b9a044e4718>.

he's gonna say it's love,' you never called it what it was" and "And there we are again when nobody had to know. You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath."¹³

These lyrics also indicate that Swift did not have much control in the relationship as she was often too hopeful that her partner would want to show off their relationship as she did.

Swift alludes to a false hope in control as she states, "you were tossing me the car keys, 'fuck the patriarchy' keychain on the ground, we were always skipping town."¹⁴ This line, in of itself, reveals a lot about the issues Swift experienced in the relationship. Swift uses the contradictory behavior of her ex-partner to pass judgment on the fact that the version of himself he presented to her was not the same person she experienced during their relationship. First, using the car keys as a metaphor, Swift was often not the one in the control of the relationship because the one in control would initially have had the car keys in his or her possession. The previously mentioned keychain could also be seen as a metaphor. If the ex-partner did not care enough to make sure the keys were in her possession, he would not have cared to maintain a feminist personality, thus the keys falling the ground. Finally, if the ex-partner did not want to qualify their relationship as a real relationship, then skipping town may have been a strong option for keeping the situation hidden from people they might know. She also communicates her ex-partner's avoidance of defining the relationship clearly in the "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)" short film-music video as the partner, played by Dylan O'Brien, sits next to the female protagonist, played by Sadie Sink, but takes special care to avoid holding her hand in

13. "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)."

14. "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)."

front of his friends. He removes her hand from on top of his, places it on the table they are seated at, and pats it before removing his hand.¹⁵ Sadie Sink's character then expresses her frustration with the situation as she argues with Dylan O'Brien's character, providing connections to Swift's issues with her ex-partner's friends and his avoidance of an egalitarian relationship:

Her: You didn't ask me one thing the entire night!

Him: That's bullshit. That's such bullshit.

Her: You dropped my fucking hand! What am I supposed to do with that?

Him: I didn't even fucking notice. What are you talking about— I dropped your hand?

Her: I don't know any of these people, they're all strangers, they're all older than me.

Him: But like, what are you talking—

Her: I feel so out of place you're the only one that makes me comfortable, and you won't even look at me!

Swift, the director and writer of the short film, used this moment to portray one of the major arguments she experienced in this relationship. This moment could also be connected to a lyric from "I Bet You Think About Me" as she states, "I tried to fit in with your upper-crust circles, yeah they let me sit in back when we were in love," showing that while Swift was seated at the table with these friends, she was not able to be an active participant in the conversation because she did not fit in or know the people she was seated with.¹⁶ She also portrays this sentiment visually as Sadie Sink's character

15. Taylor Swift, "Taylor Swift – All Too Well: The Short Film," YouTube Video, 14:55, November 12, 2021, <https://youtu.be/tollGa3S0o8>.

16. "I Bet You Think About Me."

wanders through a large group of people in an art gallery. While each person in the gallery is conversing with friends, drinking champagne, and having a good time, Sink's character looks lost, scared, and out of place in a room of older adults. The use of Sink as a main character in this scene also provides connection to the line, "you said 'if we had been closer in age, maybe it would've been fine,'"¹⁷ and a line from, "I Bet You Think About Me," where Swift sings, "but then reality crept in, you said we're too different."¹⁸ Sink's character looks significantly younger than the other people in the room and shows that she did not fit in with her ex-partner's friends, not only because they did not have any common interests, but also because she was significantly younger than her ex-partner, and his friends perceived she was immature. However, Swift makes a mockery of her ex-partner's taste in women as she states, "and I was never good at telling jokes, but the punchline goes, 'I'll get older but your lovers stay my age,'"¹⁹ which is similar to the line in "I Bet You Think About Me," when she states, "you laughed at my dreams, rolled your eyes at my jokes."²⁰ Swift, because of her age, was seemingly too immature to be compatible with her ex-partner. He judges her dreams to be childish and her jokes to be weak, but he does not let age gaps stop him from dating women who are significantly younger than he is. Swift's image of derision comes primarily from these two songs, but her tone in each one is both contemplative and mocking as she recounts the good situations and uses the bad experiences as jokes and ways to point fingers at her ex-partner for being the instigator of ending their relationship.

17. "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)."

18. "I Bet You Think About Me."

19. "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)."

20. "I Bet You Think About Me."

Contemplative

Swift often presents herself as reflective about her past, as are many musicians when they write about common experiences. While Swift can get rather specific in discussing situations from her own life, the relatability of how she shares her feelings provides unique connections with her audience. A second aspect of Swift's image from the *Red (Taylor's Version)* reveals how contemplative she is. Swift often reflects on the good and bad aspects of the situations she writes about, providing a niche perspective on topics such as heartbreak and disappointment.

Swift, in "I Bet You Think About Me," sets herself up to be both mocking and contemplative. Looking at the contemplative aspect, she gives the audience insight about the length of her relationship when she states, "but you know what they say, you can't help who you fall for, and you and I fell like an early spring snow."²¹ Swift uses the comparison to an early spring snow to show that her relationship was not meant to last, just as an early spring snow will fall and soon melt. Potentially speaking about the same ex-partner in "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)," Swift uses the concept of snow and cold weather as metaphors for her relationship. Swift uses snow to describe the glittery appeal of the new relationship and how she remembers it fondly, despite the issues she experiences, citing, "cause in this city's barren cold, I still remember the first fall of snow, and how it glistened as it fell."²² Swift's use of cold as a metaphor for the feeling of being uncomfortable yet welcomed also comes from "All Too Well (10 Minute

21. "I Bet You Think About Me."

22. "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)."

Version)” when she states, “I walked through the door with you, the air was cold, but something about it felt like home somehow.”²³

Swift uses other nature-themed metaphors to connect with the emotions she has felt in her relationships. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” carries most of the metaphors, as when Swift cites, “we’re singing in the car, getting lost upstate, autumn leaves fallin’ down like pieces into place, and I can picture it after all these days,” using a commonly understood visual of leaves gracefully falling to the ground in the fall to describe how their relationship came together neatly.²⁴ Swift also uses the wind as a metaphor for feeling free, singing, “wind in my hair, I was there, I remember it all too well.”²⁵ Swift’s focus on the things she was feeling and seeing allows her to build a connection with the scenes she is describing. Swift references even small moments in the relationship that she is contemplating, such as “cause there we are again in the middle of the night, we’re dancing round the kitchen in the refrigerator light, down the stairs, I was there, I remember it all too well,” providing niche details to remind both herself and the ex-partner that she is unable to forget the good and bad times in their relationship.²⁶

Swift is also able to be contemplative about the experiences of others as they relate to her own. Using “The Lucky One” as an example, Swift uses another person’s story as a basis for comparison with her own, finding similarities between the experiences. The media have often termed Swift a serial dater, so she is all too familiar with the lack of privacy she has in her dating life and uses her understanding of tabloids

23. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version).”

24. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version).”

25. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version).”

26. “All Too Well (10 Minute Version).”

and dramatized situations to explain how empty the life of fame feels. Swift explains, “your lover in the foyer doesn’t even know you, and your secrets end up splashed on the news front page,” acknowledging the experience of many female celebrities as they are treated as commodities with no privacy and a lack of genuine connections.²⁷ Swift also acknowledges that the fame is not always positive, stating “and they tell that you’re lucky but you’re so confused cause you don’t feel pretty, you just feel used, and all the young things line up to take your place.”²⁸

Swift uses contemplation to set up her image as someone who is reflective about her past experiences, creating a connection with audience members who may also be spending their time reflecting on things they went through in their youth. By connecting the concepts of contemplativeness and judgment, Swift shows a more abstract understanding of how to review past behaviors, understand red flags, and point out relationship-enders by using metaphors and jokes at her ex-partner’s expense. Swift does show some maturity in her ability to assess personality-based relationship issues, but by mocking her ex-partner for niche aspects, Swift also establishes that she is still young and has not developed the maturity to leave the relationship in peace.

Role

Swift, no longer a teenager, now has the capacity to focus on a wider range of roles she would like to take on. When she was a teenager, every role that Swift took on was marked with the addition of “teenage,” rather than just the role itself as it could be applied to teenagers and adults. Acknowledging her role as a celebrity now, Swift has

27. “The Lucky One,” Spotify, track 13 on Taylor Swift, *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, Republic, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4e5ayHsOLJNLTGfjau2mEw?si=41c907b26b174fbd>.

28. “The Lucky One.”

taken on a new role in addition to adjusting how she communicates about portraying the roles of girlfriend and ex-girlfriend.

Celebrity

In her *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album, Swift did not acknowledge her status as a celebrity, instead focusing on more teenager-centric topics such as boys, love, and friendships. Now in her fourth album as a musician with a couple of awards and recognitions in her possession, Swift firmly fulfills the role of celebrity and is gaining an understanding of both the good and bad aspects of that role. She acknowledges that the role of celebrity is quite volatile based on audience expectations, saying, “you had it figured out since you were in school, everybody loves pretty, everybody loves cool, so overnight you look like a 60s queen.”²⁹ Swift also acknowledges the excitement of being a new celebrity, stating, “new to town with a made up name, in the angels city chasing fortune and fame, and the camera flashes make it look like a dream,” and providing insight that the reality may not be as dreamy as she initially expected.³⁰ Swift also shows this visually during her live performance of “The Lucky One” as when she is happily surrounded by a group of dancers dressed as photographers, posing and interacting with them before quickly ignoring them further along in the performance.³¹ Swift finally acknowledges that the life of a celebrity is not enjoyable when the role quickly becomes unfavorable in the eyes of the audience and makes many celebrities want to leave their profession as she sings:

29. “The Lucky One.”

30. “The Lucky One.”

31. Anderson Lopes, “Taylor Swift – The Lucky One (DVD The RED Tour Live),” YouTube Video, 3:57, October 1, 2016, <https://youtu.be/PWgnSF1uCVo>.

it was a few years later, I showed up here
and they still tell the legend of how you disappeared,
how you took the money and your dignity and got the hell out,
they say you bought a bunch of land somewhere,
chose the rose garden over Madison Square.³²

Swift acknowledges the volatility of her role as celebrity, thus setting herself up for a higher level of self-awareness than many celebrities have regarding their position in society. By acknowledging the potential for not being favored by the general public, Swift accepts both the complementary role of being a celebrity as well as the potential for the role to become a contradictory role should she violate societal expectations for how celebrities should behave. For example, if Swift were to become a drug addicted, rude, or generally unlikeable celebrity, her role as a celebrity would then be seen as a contradictory role because she would have violated societal expectations.

Young Girlfriend

Many of Swift's songs on *Red (Taylor's Version)* are focused on heartbreak and disappointment, but "Everything Has Changed" provides a new understanding of Swift's perspective on young love. In this song, she focuses on love at first sight, and Swift's role as a girlfriend becomes highly optimistic and hopeful that her future relationship with this person will work out. Swift explains that the relationship begins with a simple introduction, stating, "'cause all I know is we said, 'Hello.' And your eyes look like comin' home. All I know is a simple name, and everything has changed."³³ Swift mentions the simple aspects of an early relationship as well, stating, "and all I feel, in my

32. "The Lucky One."

33. "Everything Has Changed," Spotify, track 14 on Taylor Swift, *Red (Taylor's Version)*, Republic, 2021. <https://open.spotify.com/track/7qEUFOVcxRI19tbT68JcYK?si=f98e229c6ef64119>.

stomach is butterflies, the beautiful kind, makin' up for lost time, takin' flight, makin' me feel like, I just wanna know you better.”³⁴ Swift also explains that this person has caused her to be less protective of her love, singing, “and all my walls, stood tall painted blue, but I'll take 'em down, take 'em down, and open up the door for you,” providing them with access to who she is as a person because she wants the equal and optimistic love.³⁵ She then argues that the walls that she once had exist because of her past experiences as she sings, “so dust off your highest hopes, all I know is pouring rain, and everything has changed. All I know is a new-found grace, all my days, I'll know your face.”³⁶ These lyrics also provide an expectation that this relationship will be long lasting. Swift's optimism about the love at first sight she experiences embodies a renewed perspective on her role as a girlfriend, one who is determined to know her partner so well that the relationship will be long-lasting and worth the vulnerability of sharing a life with a stranger. Swift maintains a complementary role as a girlfriend, as she is hopeful for the future with someone she does not know very well but who she is willing to give the opportunity to become her partner for a long time, seeking out the best in him.

Ex-Girlfriend

Swift's role as an ex-girlfriend is one that does not seem to portray much sadness in the *Red (Taylor's Version)* album. As she recounts the issues of a past relationship, her acknowledgements of its ending often come from a place of mockery and irritation with the relationship and her ex-partner. Swift acknowledges that she was a one-of-a-kind

34. “Everything Has Changed.”

35. “Everything Has Changed.”

36. “Everything Has Changed.”

girlfriend who is going to be hard to forget, stating, “but now that we’re done and it’s over, I bet you couldn’t believe, when you realized I’m harder to forget, than I was to leave, And I bet you think about me.”³⁷ Swift acknowledges that the end of the relationship was one where her ex-partner did not seem very troubled, but she reminds him that she will always be a part of his past, despite their separation, mocking this as she asks, “Do you have all the space that you need?”³⁸ Swift then acknowledges the mental hardship of a break-up and the potential for regret as both partners think over the relationship and the reasons it ended. Swift’s statement on the concept of thinking over the relationship, however, comes from mocking questions as she expresses, “The voices so loud sayin’, “Why did you let her go?” Does it make you feel sad, That the love that you’re lookin’ for, Is the love that you had?”³⁹ Swift also suggests that her ex-partner will end up looking for the same love she gave him, but from different people, making it even harder to forget about her. Swift takes on a complementary role as an ex-girlfriend since the audience expects ex-girlfriends, especially ones who feel they have been wronged, to be mean and vindictive, making themselves hard to forget for either good or bad reasons.

Standpoint

Swift, in her *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* album, takes a rather indifferent stance on the power structures she was involved in. Swift’s previous standpoint was focused on appealing to the audience she had, promoting interests in things such as relationships, friendships, and heartbreak rather than indicating that fame had become a major part of

37. “I Bet You Think About Me.”

38. “I Bet You Think About Me.”

39. “I Bet You Think About Me.”

her personality. However, Swift in her *Red (Taylor's Version)* album takes on a more critical stance of the fame she is involved in. Having experienced the bad side of fame with masses of people critiquing her every move and her relationships becoming a public spectacle, Swift uses "The Lucky One" to provide an explanation for her hesitation to fully embrace the celebrity lifestyle. Swift argues that despite her success and the success of the woman in the song, she understands why the woman decided to retire from her career, stating "it took some time but I understand it now cause now my name is up in lights, but I think you got it right."⁴⁰ Swift's understanding of the celebrity's need to be removed from the lights and attention of Los Angeles could be attributed to the differences in what the tabloids say versus what the public has said, as when she sings, "they tell that you're lucky, but you're so confused 'cause you don't feel pretty, you just feel used, and all the young things line up to take your place."⁴¹ Swift's critique of the emptiness she has experienced at the hands of fame and fortune shows a perspective that, again, does not praise the power source, but rather shows the audience that the perception that fame is fulfilling and wonderful is misleading.

Conclusion

Through her transition into adulthood, Swift has developed a persona that feels jaded about love and expectant that relationships will leave her as disappointed as fame has already left her. However, Swift maintains a small hold on hope that love at first sight does exist and is as beautiful as it is portrayed in movies. Using a mocking and contemplative image and the roles of celebrity, girlfriend, and ex-girlfriend, Swift

40. "The Lucky One."

41. "The Lucky One."

rhetorically communicates small changes to her persona that maintain her individual experience as she experiences new relationships, different forms of heartbreak, and unmet expectations from her career instead of from her peers and partners. Her persona, while slightly different from the one portrayed in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, is still acceptable to the audience because she has remained within the bounds of their expectations for her language, relatability, and behavior. Because Swift previously established the original version of her persona, her subtle changes to her persona through the *Red (Taylor's Version)* album show that she is establishing novelty in her career. The novelty Swift provides shows both her development into adulthood and an understanding that she cannot remain the same in her career if she wants to maintain her relevancy. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will analyze how her persona has changed through her *reputation* album and accompanying music videos.

CHAPTER IV

REPUTATION

Since 2006, Taylor Swift had released one album every two years; however, her release of the *reputation* album deviates from her usual pattern—both in genre and release schedule, as *reputation* was released three years after her previous album.¹ *reputation* is also Swift’s last album recorded with Big Machine Records, making it the last album Scooter Braun owns the masters for. Swift used synth-pop as the genre for the album, deviating strongly from her previous work with country, pop, and indie music styles. She collaborated with Jack Antonoff, Max Martin, and Shellback to produce *reputation* and also features Ed Sheeran and Future on one song.

reputation has a unique conception story, as the album came from a wave of controversy that caused many to turn their backs on Taylor Swift. When Swift initially won the Moon Man at the MTV Video Music Awards for Best Female Video in 2009, her excitement was cut short by Kanye West who got onto the stage, took the microphone from her, and stated, “Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’m a let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time!”² Swift, at the time, only heard the audience booing, and believed that they were booing her winning the award rather than

1. Swift stylizes the title of this album to be lowercase, so I have intentionally left it as she wrote it.

2. Grace Gavilanes and Sophie Dodd, “A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West’s Feud,” *People*, September 2, 2022, <https://people.com/music/kanye-west-famous-inside-his-and-taylor-swifts-relationship-history/>.

West's actions.³ West's actions quickly spiraled into an off and on feud between the two. West initially apologized, then rescinded his apology. Swift and West formed a neutral friendship, spending years joking with each other and having conversations at various events together.⁴ However, the friendship between the two musicians quickly took a turn in February 2016 when West released "Famous," in which he says, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex, Why? I made that bitch famous."⁵ West received backlash for the lyric but tried to defend himself by clarifying that Swift had given him permission to mention her name within the song on an hour-long phone call. Swift commented indirectly on the situation at the Grammy Awards, stating, "I want to say to all the young women out there, there are going to be people along the way who will try to undercut your success or take credit for your accomplishments or your fame."⁶ The feud worsened as Kim Kardashian-West stepped in to defend Kanye before the release of the music video. The "Famous" music video featured naked sculptures of celebrities such as Bill Cosby, Donald Trump, Rihanna, Chris Brown, Anna Wintour, and Swift. Kardashian-West, in her reality television show, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, is shown having a conversation about why she defended her husband's actions, promptly releasing a video recording of West's phone call with Swift. In the phone call, West reads the lyrics "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex," while not providing the following line in which

3. Andres Tardio, "This Is Why Taylor Swift Really Cried When Kanye Interrupted Her At VMAs," MTV, October 16, 2015, <https://www.mtv.com/news/paj7yq/why-taylor-swift-cried-vm-as-kanye-west>.

4. Gavilanes and Dodd, "A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West's Feud."

5. "Famous," Spotify, track 4 on Kanye West, *The Life of Pablo*, Def Jam, 2016, <https://open.spotify.com/track/19a3JfW8BQwqHWUMbcqSx8?si=de32f8159e9148d1>.

6. Gavilanes and Dodd, "A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West's Feud."

he calls her “that bitch.”⁷ Swift promptly released a statement regarding the video of the phone call, stating:

Where is the video of Kanye telling me he was going to call me “that bitch” in his song? It doesn’t exist because it never happened. You don’t get to control someone’s emotional response to being called “that bitch” in front of the entire world. Of course, I wanted to like the song. I wanted to believe Kanye when he told me that I would love the song. I wanted us to have a friendly relationship. He promised to play the song for me, but he never did. While I wanted to be supportive of Kanye on the phone call, you cannot “approve” a song you haven’t heard. Being falsely painted as a liar when I was never given the full story or played any part of the song is character assassination. I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that I have never asked to be a part of, since 2009.⁸

A year and a half after Swift and West’s song-based feud began, Swift deleted all her Instagram posts, completely emptying her social media accounts. As fans noticed Swift’s absence from social media platforms, talk began to spread about what was going on. Swift, then, posted a promotional video featuring a snake to announce her next album.⁹ Having been called a snake by those who believed West’s side of events, Swift turned the comment that she was a snake and a liar into a promotional feature of her next album.

Text Construction and Methodology

I have selected Taylor Swift’s *reputation* album as my third album to analyze, and more specifically, I have chosen four songs from the *reputation* album and two accompanying music videos to construct my text. The first song I have selected for analysis is “I Did Something Bad.” With the general theme of *reputation* being one of

7. Gavilanes and Dodd, “A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West’s Feud.”

8. Gavilanes and Dodd, “A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West’s Feud”: original statement comes from a now deleted Instagram post on @TaylorSwift on July 17, 2016.

9. Gavilanes and Dodd, “A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West’s Feud.”

accepting a bad reputation, Swift uses “I Did Something Bad” to show that she is not apologetic about the things she has done, but rather enjoyed the bad actions she committed. The second song selection I have made is “Delicate,” along with the accompanying music video. “Delicate” focuses on the formation of Swift’s relationship with her current partner, actor Joe Alwyn. Because her reputation was poor at the time, Swift comments on the delicate formation of their relationship as they must navigate media perceptions and public comment while also getting to know each other. My third song for analysis is “Look What You Made Me Do” its music video. “Look What You Made Me Do” highlights that the bad actions Swift committed prior to the album as more reactionary rather than proactive. My fourth song selection is “Call It What You Want,” where Swift provides a focus on her current partner, examining their relationship and accepting that he provides her with a good support system and a genuine love that she has not experienced before.

Analysis

In this chapter, I will use my selected texts and the accompanying music videos for “Delicate” and “Look What You Made Me Do” to analyze the shifts Swift makes in her persona through this album. To analyze Swift’s new persona as presented in the *reputation* album, I will again apply to the concepts of image, role, and standpoint to the texts. I will highlight the differences among the personas provided in *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* and *Red (Taylor’s Version)* with the persona she develops in *reputation* to answer my research question: How do rhetors create novelty in the music industry?

Image

Swift's image in the past two chapters has been well balanced, and I have analyzed both its negative and positive aspects. But with the controversy that inspired Swift's *reputation* album, it is no surprise that the image Swift constructs in the album is negatively focused. Swift uses the *reputation* album to accept that she is no longer in the good graces of the general public and is now portrayed as a bad person in the media and by other celebrities.

Insecure

A major image theme that arises from Swift's *reputation* album is that she is insecure about herself and her relationships. She highlights this theme both visually and lyrically in the song "Delicate" and its accompanying music video. Swift begins the song by singing, "this ain't for the best, my reputation's never been worse so, you must like me for me," drawing attention to the fact that the formation of this relationship may not be a good idea for her partner as she does not have the fame she once had to offer him.¹⁰ As Swift repeats this line for the second chorus in the "Delicate" music video, she highlights her insecurity with herself as she stares into a mirror to see her reflection, looking dissatisfied with her resting face and then making silly faces at herself. Swift's use of silly faces highlights that she is her true self when not surrounded by fans, security, or paparazzi as she was earlier in the music video.¹¹ Swift also argues that past relationships may not have been as genuine as they could have been some had dated her

10. "Delicate," Spotify, track 5 on Taylor Swift, *Reputation*, Big Machine, 2017, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6NFyWDv5CjfwuzoCkw47Xf?si=52596dab29764523>.

11. Taylor Swift, "Taylor Swift – Delicate," YouTube Video, 3:54, March 11, 2018, <https://youtu.be/tCXGJQYZ9JA>.

in exchange for media attention due to her well respected reputation as a sweet and innocent musician, but now her new partner likes her for who she truly is and not the persona she publicly presents. Swift also claims that because her reputation is so poor, she cannot offer much in terms of her future because her fame and fortune could plummet at any moment, singing, “we can’t make any promises, now can we babe?”¹²

Swift’s insecurity about what she is able to bring to the relationship also causes her to question herself, wondering aloud in “Delicate” if she is moving too fast in the relationship or if she is saying the right things to the new partner, singing, “is it cool that I said all that? Is it chill that you’re in my head? Cause I know that it’s delicate, is it cool that I said all that? Is it too soon to do this yet?”¹³ As Swift sings this line in the music video, she also expresses insecurity visually as a group of girls walks into the room where she is sitting alone and does not acknowledge the small wave and smile that Swift directs to them. Swift’s smile then falls as she turns away from trying to interact with the group of girls, looking rather defeated.¹⁴ She also mentions curiosity about what her new partner thinks of her and whether he is as invested in the relationship as she is, singing “sometimes I wonder; when you sleep, are you ever dreaming of me?”¹⁵ Swift, understanding that her past relationships have been fast-paced, toxic, or unequal, has reason to be insecure about making the right decisions for the formation of this new relationship. However, she is also forced to grapple with what she can offer in a relationship with her volatile reputation impacting her fame and career.

12. “Delicate.”

13. “Delicate.”

14. Swift, “Taylor Swift – Delicate.”

15. “Delicate.”

Manipulative

Settling into her reputation as a bad person, Swift sheds her images of being remorseful and contemplative and instead takes on an image of being manipulative of those around her. Swift highlights this at the beginning of “I Did Something Bad” as she sings, “I never trust a narcissist, but they love me, so I play them like a violin, and I make it look oh so easy,” explaining that she has learned her lesson with narcissists and understands how to use their manipulation tactics against them without much effort.¹⁶ Swift then argues that she manipulates the narcissists she interacts with by lying, saying that “for every lie I tell them, they tell me three, this is how the world works, now all he thinks about is me.”¹⁷ Swift, using manipulation, understands the games that others have tried to involve her in and has turned the tactics around to benefit herself. Through her experiences, she also understands that reputations do matter, as they can sometimes be based in reality. Having dated her fair share of other celebrities, Swift explains “I never trust a playboy, but they love me, so I fly him all around the world, and I let them think they saved me,” providing the audience with the understanding that the playboys who love Swift often want a damsel-in-distress who will bend to their will.¹⁸ However, as Swift manipulates these playboys, “they never see it coming, what I do next, this is how the world works, gotta leave before you get left,” explaining that she is simply doing what they were planning to do to her.¹⁹ Swift’s use of manipulation comes from both her

16. “I Did Something Bad,” Spotify, track 3 on Taylor Swift, *Reputation*, Big Machine, 2017, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4svZDCRz4cJoneBpjpx8DJ?si=9f7bb0c7ff614d5e>.

17. “I Did Something Bad.”

18. “I Did Something Bad.”

19. “I Did Something Bad.”

experience with manipulative individuals and her new reputation as a bad person, accepting that it is okay for her to manipulate people because that is what is expected of her.

Role

As Swift has aged and has become more accustomed to a variety of roles, such as celebrity and girlfriend, she has expressed different perspectives in speaking about fame and her partners. Having written previous songs about relationships that did not last, Swift's perspective on love in the *reputation* album is novel as she recounts a long-lasting relationship, despite how public opinion has turned against her. Swift's presentation of her relationship with Joe Alwyn provides her with the only complementary role she portrays within this album, that of girlfriend. Swift's roles of celebrity and villain show her taking a position that is critical of the celebrities she interacts with and the system she abides in, giving her two contradictory roles.

Celebrity

In Swift's role as a celebrity, she has previously acknowledged that there are flaws in the system of fame and fortune but has not provided many specifics about the issues she has experienced. However, in her *reputation* album, Swift begins to call out common issues that many female celebrities have experienced as they have made names for themselves. Swift begins to list her issues with men who take credit for her fame, belittle her work, and use her for her money as she sings, "if a man talks shit, then I owe him nothing," "if he drops my name, then I owe him nothin,'" and "if he spends my change, then he had it comin'".²⁰ Swift also discusses her very public feud with Kanye

20. "I Did Something Bad."

West and Kim Kardashian-West, drawing attention to the changing opinion on who was truly lying about Swift's opinion of West's song "Famous." Swift highlights her perspective on the situation in "Call It What You Want" as she sings "my castle crumbled overnight, I brought a knife to a gunfight, they took the crown, but it's alright, all the liars are calling me one, nobody's heard from me for months," showing that her role as a celebrity is volatile due to the situation with West and Kardashian-West.²¹

Swift also highlights her issues with media attention in "Delicate" as she overviews the formation of her relationship with her current partner and how they had to meet secretly to avoid media involvement. Swift recounts this as she sings:

dive bar on the east side, where you at?
Phone lights up my nightstand in the black,
come here; you can meet me in the back,
dark jeans and your Nikes, look at you,
oh, damn, never seen that color blue,
just think of the fun things we could do,
'cause I like you.²²

Swift highlights that, because she likes this new potential partner so much, she does not want to meet publicly in order to avoid possible major media attention on their new relationship. Swift also adds that she does not want to share the details of their relationship with the media because of how much she likes him and does not want to mess up the formation of their relationship, explaining:

third floor on the west side, me and you,
handsome, you're a mansion with a view,
do the girls back home touch you like I do?
Long night with your hands up in my hair,
echoes of your footsteps on the stairs,

21. "Call It What You Want," Spotify, track 14 on Taylor Swift, *Reputation*, Big Machine, 2017, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1GwMQaZz6Au3QLDbjbMdme?si=62f5a812cffe46d1>.

22. "Delicate."

stay here, honey, I don't want to share,
'cause I like you.²³

As Swift's experience as a celebrity evolves, her role becomes more solidified and thus gives her more opportunities to critique the systems and people she has met and interacted with. However, because female celebrities often experience backlash from the systems they are in by speaking against the system's operations, Swift's role is contradictory. Swift, in her *reputation* album, takes on a contradictory role as she violates the audience's expectations that celebrities will be opinionless creators of media, rather using her position as a celebrity to bring attention to toxic and unkind behavior.

Girlfriend

Swift's previous role as a girlfriend was built from failed relationships that ended from any combination of her own and her partner's issues. However, in *reputation*, Swift sings of a love that has lasted through a poor reputation and an unsure future as she is not sure if her reputation can ever recover. Swift first sings about the formation of this relationship and the unpredictable nature of her relationships in "Delicate," saying, "sometimes when I look into your eyes, I pretend you're mine, all the damn time."²⁴ Swift understands that some relationships take longer to form, but she is hopeful that the relationship will pan out to exclusivity every time she looks into his eyes.

Swift depicts this relationship as a major support system for her through the controversies she is experiencing as she sings:

I'm doing better than I ever was,
'cause my baby's fit like a daydream,
walking with his head down,
I'm the one he's walking to,

23. "Delicate."

24. "Delicate."

So, call it what you want, yeah, call it what you want to,
My baby's fly like a jet stream,
high above the whole scene,
loves me like I'm brand new,
so, call it what you want, yeah, call it what you want to,
all my flowers grew back as thorns,
windows boarded up after the storm,
he built a fire just to keep me warm.²⁵

Swift also highlights that the support she is experiencing in this relationship makes her aware of her past mistakes and how they have impacted her relationships, but that she feels free in this relationship to admit her mistakes and be herself. Swift explains this as she sings:

and I know I make the same mistakes every time,
bridges burn, I never learn, at least I did one thing right,
I did one thing right,
I'm laughing with my lover, making forts under covers,
trust him like a brother, yeah you know I did one thing right,
starry eyes sparkin' up my darkest night.²⁶

Swift highlights the freeing aspect of her relationship even more as she asks her partner to run away with her, singing, "I recall late November, holdin' my breath, slowly I said, 'you don't need to save me, but would you run away with me?'"²⁷ Being a celebrity, Swift experiences constant media attention, but being able to run away with someone who she trusts to let her be herself indicates significant trust, as past partners have run away with her to other towns out of shame regarding their relationship. Swift also mentions being proud of the relationship, singing "I want to wear his initial, on a chain round my neck, chain round my neck, not because he owns me, but 'cause he really

25. "Call It What You Want."

26. "Call It What You Want."

27. "Call It What You Want."

knows me, which is more than they can say.²⁸“ Swift focuses on the fact that she is not owned by her partner, but rather is able to express herself openly with him. The comparison Swift makes in mentioning “which is more than they can say” is not completely clear, but within the context of the album, the “they” could be any combination of other celebrities, the media, or past partners.²⁹ Finally, Swift’s dancing in the second half of the “Delicate” music video highlights that the new relationship is freeing for her. Swift completes interviews and walks through a busy building with multiple security guards, visualizing herself as a spectacle to those around her as they all stare and whisper about her.³⁰ The massive attention Swift receives from those she walks by cause her to be insecure, which she communicates through her slouched posture and weak smiles.³¹After becoming invisible to those around her, the theme of the song shows a developing relationship, and her dramatic dancing in the second half shows her to be free from caring about the public’s perception of her. Swift also tries different styles of dance, such as ballet and contemporary, indicating that she is free to be herself in this relationship in whatever way she wants to experiment.

Villain

Swift develops a unique role in her *reputation* album. She has previously capitalized on the public’s opinion that she is a sweet, innocent country singer. Now deviating from the country genre and this sweet and innocent perception, Swift accepts the role that the media has placed her in as a villain. She argues that she fully accepts this

28. “Call It What You Want.”

29. “Call It What You Want.”

30. Swift, “Taylor Swift – Delicate.”

31. Swift, “Taylor Swift – Delicate.”

new role as she metaphorically kills the past versions of herself, singing “I’m sorry, but the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now, why? Oh, because she’s dead.”³² Swift also illustrates this visual at the start of the “Look What You Made Me Do” music video as a zombie version of herself climbs out of a grave, explaining that the controversies she is experiencing have “killed” her.³³

Within this role of villain, Swift uses comparisons to burning witches to illustrate the accusations made against her, as she sings “I can feel the flames on my skin, crimson red paint on my lips.”³⁴ Swift then accepts her fate as a “witch,” but explains that the accusations against her may be false as she explains, “they’re burning all the witches, even if you aren’t one, they’ve got their pitchforks and proof, their receipts and reasons, they’re burning all the witches even if you aren’t one, so light me up (3x).”³⁵ Swift explains that she has accepted that people may not believe her defensive actions to be truly defensive and not offensive, and accepts that she may be burned like those in witch trials.

Swift also fully accepts this new role as she denies any remorse for her actions that have caused public opinion to turn against her. Swift illustrates her lack of regret as she sings, “I don’t regret it one bit ‘cause he had it coming.”³⁶ Swift then elaborates that she does not regret her actions, as bad as they may be because it was freeing for her to

32 “Look What You Made Me Do,” Spotify, track 6 on Taylor Swift, *Reputation*, Big Machine, 2017, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1P17dC1amhFzptugyAO7II?si=5445863036504723>.

33. Taylor Swift, “Taylor Swift – Look What You Made Me Do,” YouTube Video, 4:15, August 27, 2017, <https://youtu.be/3tmd-ClpJxA>.

34. “I Did Something Bad.”

35. “I Did Something Bad.”

36. “I Did Something Bad.”

express herself in that way, saying, “they say I did something bad, then why’s it feel so good? Most fun I ever had, and I’d do it over and over and over again if I could.”³⁷

Swift’s role as a villain also comes with an understanding that she can now work through a list of people who have wronged her as she sings, “I got a list of names and yours is in red, underlined, I check it once, then I check it twice, look what you made me do,” explaining that there is one particular person who for whom revenge is a high priority.³⁸ Swift explains her potential reasons for this person to be such a priority for her revenge as she sings, “I don’t like your little games, don’t like your tilted stage, the role you made me play of the fool, no I don’t like you,” and “I don’t like your perfect crime, how you laugh when you lie, you said the gun was mine, isn’t cool, no I don’t like you.”³⁹ Swift uses these lyrics to explain that her desire to avenge herself and her reputation comes from the fact that this person framed her for a metaphorical crime and tilted the narrative to make her seem like a bad person. In the “Look What You Made Me Do” music video, Swift highlights her new role as a villain as she sings the song while enacting various stereotypical villainous roles such as acting as a bank robber, a mob boss, a dictator, a reckless driver, and a vandalizer.⁴⁰ Swift also highlights that she believes in karma and knows that the people who have wronged her will experience their own form of karma, singing “all I think about is karma, and then the world moves on, but one thing’s for sure, maybe I got mine, but you’ll all get yours.”⁴¹

37. “I Did Something Bad.”

38. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

39. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

40. Swift, “Taylor Swift – Look What You Made Me Do.”

41. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

Swift's new role of villain is unique as she both accepts that this is not a role she has created for herself, but rather one that she has been forced into. In some ways, the villain role is complementary because it matches the audience's expectations of villains: that they will be cruel, vindictive, and self-centered. However, as Swift presents her perception of the actions that caused her to become a villain, she expresses that her villainous behavior was reactionary and came from a place of self-defense rather than a place of cruelty. Swift's role as a villain has both complementary and contradictory aspects as she adopts the common understanding of what a villain is, but also highlights that she has lost some agency in the actions she is able to carry out because she is reactive to the position she has been placed in by other celebrities and media rather than being proactively evil, like a stereotypical villain.

Standpoint

Swift's standpoint has slowly taken on a more critical stance over the course of her career. In the *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album, Swift seemed rather indifferent to the power structures she was involved in and more focused on her life as a teenage girl than being a teenage celebrity. In *Red (Taylor's Version)*, Swift takes on a small critical stance as she compares her fame journey to the experience of a former celebrity who chose to leave her life of fame due to the experiences she was having. *reputation*, however, takes on a very critical stance against the power structure as Swift has experienced many controversies in her life at the hands of other celebrities and journalists who want to get ahead.

Swift highlights her issues with the media first, sharing about the formation of her relationship with Joe Alwyn, as she sings “I don’t want to share, ‘cause I like you.”⁴² She argues that because she is particularly fond of him, she does not want to immediately share him and their relationship with the world. Swift also highlights that she has been “killed” by the media in the past, but has learned from those past controversies in time to handle the current one as she sings, “I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time, honey I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time.”⁴³ Swift also articulates that she understands the controversies she has experienced at the hands of journalists are due to a need for fresh entertainment, explaining that “the world moves on, another day another drama.”⁴⁴ Swift’s use of this lyric also highlights that there is a quick turnaround for media-produced drama without much long term consideration for the people who are impacted.

Swift is also highly critical of the celebrities who have aided in turning the general public against her, arguing that they have control over the system and have used their influence poorly. Swift illustrates this as she sings, “I don’t like your kingdom keys, they once belonged to me, you asked me for a place to sleep, locked me out, and threw a feast,” explaining that she has essentially been removed from the good graces of the public and that her removal was a cause for celebration for these other celebrities.⁴⁵ She also explains that she has given them grace as they asked her for help, but regrets it because they used her kindness against her. Swift also claims that her past experiences within the system have caused her to be incredibly cautious as she sings, “I don’t trust

42. “Delicate.”

43. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

44. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

45. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

nobody and nobody trusts me.”⁴⁶ Finally, Swift expresses that not everyone who is involved in the controversy she is experiencing are who they say they are, singing, “all the drama queens taking swings, all the jokers dressing up as kings,” to explain that the “jokers” of the situation have a false credibility.⁴⁷

Swift’s standpoint is now highly critical of the power structures around her. As she has been pushed from the positive aspects of the power structure, she can make critical assessments of how that power structure has damaged her relationships with partners, other celebrities, and the media who often speaks about her. Swift’s criticism of the power structure highlights that she knows she has benefitted from having the “kingdom keys,” but she is not sure whether the cost of fame is worth the pain and frustration.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Swift’s persona in the *reputation* album is perhaps the most drastic persona change she has exhibited yet as she primarily takes on negative images and roles but justifies each of them. Swift, through her adoption of the villain role and the image aspects of insecurity and manipulative behavior, has set her *reputation* persona as controversial in the sense that audience members can accept her persona as highly contradictory to their expectations of her. However, Swift does not seem to care that her audience’s perceptions could change as she provides her own justification for her behavior and reactions to the controversies she is experiencing. Swift’s enactment of a

46. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

47. “Call It What You Want.”

48. “Look What You Made Me Do.”

completely different persona from previous albums creates novelty by subverting the audience's expectations for how she is going to portray herself and accepting the controversial position that general public opinion has forced her into.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Like many female celebrities, Taylor Swift is no stranger to the career-driven need to reinvent oneself. Swift has often advocated for herself, even from a young age, as she has worked to secure record deals, set stories about her personal life straight, and gain ownership of her own master recordings. Swift also provided an understanding that the life of a celebrity is fast paced and must be carefully navigated to find success. Having been a musician for over 15 years, Taylor Swift has created “eras” for her music to maintain her relevance. Swift has directly acknowledged that many women in her position are required to do something new with their career every few years to maintain relevance, even if the quality of their work stays the same.¹

As a female musician who started at a young age, Swift has experienced her fair share of wins and losses. Having garnered a large fanbase, she was quickly propelled into stardom. Swift started her career by finding a genre that she would be a novel player in: country music. As country music was primarily dominated by adults who sang about marriage, divorce, and the cowboy lifestyle, Swift capitalized on a lack of appeal towards teenagers and provided that group with music that talked about the things important to them. As Swift gathered a fanbase, she discovered ways to connect with them through

1. *Miss Americana*, directed by Lana Wilson, released January 31, 2020, on Netflix, www.netflix.com/search?q=miss%20americana&jbv=81028336.

social media and in-person gatherings, making her music feel even more personal as they could see that she was no different from them.

Using the concept of persona as a theoretical framework, I gathered prior research about image's importance to a rhetor and how an individual can use the role he or she is in to either appease their audience or to provide critiques of unfair social standards. Establishing how rhetors can craft strategic images for both themselves and others and how the perspective of a rhetor's role can change throughout time if social standards do not stay the same, I established the first half of my theoretical framework. I then took the understanding of a rhetor's persona and added standpoint theory to create additional context for how a rhetor can use his or her projected persona to critique the systems around him or her.

With the theoretical framework established, I then selected my texts. Taylor Swift's discography has a vast number of options for text construction, which made the text selection a rather daunting task. After careful consideration for genre, language used, and topics covered, I selected three albums: *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, *Red (Taylor's Version)*, and *reputation*. I then selected four songs from each album, along with two accompanying music videos or live performances that added additional context to the songs. For *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, I selected "Fifteen," "Forever & Always," "The Other Side of The Door," and "Bye Bye Baby," focusing on topics such as youth, love, heartbreak, and disappointment. I also utilized the "Fifteen" music video and the "Forever & Always" live performance to add additional depth and variety to my analysis. For *Red (Taylor's Version)*, I selected "The Lucky One," "Everything Has Changed," "I Bet You Think About Me," and "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)." With these four

texts, I also included a live performance of “The Lucky One” and the short film-music video for “All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” to aid in my discussion of love, heartbreak, and fame. For the *reputation* album, my texts consisted of “I Did Something Bad,” “Delicate,” “Look What You Made Me Do,” and “Call It What You Want” and the music videos for “Delicate” and “Look What You Made Me Do.”

Fearless (Taylor’s Version)

With my texts constructed and a theoretical framework established, I began my analysis of the first album, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. Swift, being only 19 at the time of the album’s release, has a limited perspective to provide because she does not yet have much life experience and is still experiencing things through the perspective of a teenager. This is evident through the texts, as Swift was quite literal in her descriptions of feelings and experiences and through her image, role, and standpoint.

Because *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* was one of Swift’s first major album releases, her persona was relatively undeveloped. Instead, *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* set up a baseline to analyze the changes in Swift’s overall persona as she progressed into other albums. Swift provided novelty in this album through establishing her unique persona. Being a new celebrity, Swift had many things to consider as she started her career, such as how she wanted to present herself and her music. The persona Swift communicated through *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* was perhaps one that was the least filtered version of her actual self, as she was young and would not have had much of a background in manipulating her own self presentation and thus was not tailoring herself to be perceived as a celebrity. Through advocating for herself in securing a recording deal, she also had an understanding of remaining true to herself and her goals. Swift’s

experience in searching for a label that would provide her with the opportunity to write her own music and say what she wants gave her a unique position with her career because she did not have to change how she presents herself to her audience but was able to find a record label that believed in the presentation they saw at the very beginning.

Because Swift's image in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* was both negative and positive, she needed to balance public perception of her. While the general public has an expectation that she is solely a sweet, kind, and innocent country singer, she also is a normal teenage girl and expresses emotions in a rather chaotic way. Swift's use of frustration, pettiness, and remorse to highlight the broad emotions she was feeling when she felt angry produced texts that highlighted her developing ability to process complex emotions. Swift mostly used literal language to express herself, showing that her emotions had to be processed very simply due to her age and understanding of heartbreak. Swift also expressed the positive aspects of her image very simply, highlighting that she was naïve, overly optimistic, and insecure. All these aspects of Swift's image crafted a full picture of a teenage girl experiencing love and heartbreak for the first time without the maturity to express emotions in more abstract and nuanced ways. Essentially, Swift's image provided novelty as teenage country singers were a rarity, as were teenage musicians who felt they could freely express their negative emotions without fear of major backlash. Swift also crafted novelty as a teenage country star through her roles as she fulfilled complementary roles in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, using common perceptions of teenaged girls, young girlfriends, and ex-girlfriends to easily meet her audience's expectations of her.

Despite *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, being her second album and solidifying her position as a celebrity, Swift did not acknowledge this position. Understanding what made her famous in the first place, being a teenaged, female, country singer who sang about topics relevant to young girls, Swift maintained her focus on the topics she knew would connect with her young audience. Swift's standpoint of neglecting the power structures in her life and instead focusing on her fan base and the things they want to hear from her also showed novelty. While many celebrities would take a quick rise to fame as an ego boost, Swift seemed to do the opposite and used it as a reason to be vulnerable with her audience as she displays the negative aspects of her image and her insecurities and concerns.

Red (Taylor's Version)

Swift, having set up her baseline persona in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, was able to deviate from that original persona in *Red (Taylor's Version)*. As Swift grew into her career and was able to garner more experience, both in lyricism and in her relationships, she was able to branch out into more abstract lyrics and non-country music styles. As *Red (Taylor's Version)* communicated more complex relationships and perspectives on fame, the general public discarded her reputation for being a sweet, innocent, teenage girl, which led Swift to also discard her previous persona to adopt a more mature perspective. Swift's new persona included an image that was judgmental, yet contemplative, and the complementary roles of celebrity, girlfriend, and ex-girlfriend. Swift's role as a celebrity was a new addition to her persona, replacing her role as a teenager because she was both 22 at the time of release and also making acknowledgements about fame in her music.

Swift also took on a more critical stance in her standpoint as she highlighted the bad aspects of fame through the story of a celebrity who gave up her fame for a peaceful life.

Swift's persona in *Red (Taylor's Version)* highlighted slight changes in her maturity and understanding of the power structures and her relationships. By using a judgmental tone to mock the personality traits of her ex-partner, Swift shows that her expectations for her relationships have matured slightly, but not by much. Swift's expectations for her relationships in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* were not realistic and appeared to be based on the types of love she had seen portrayed in movies. Swift's perspective of love in *Red (Taylor's Version)*, however, revealed that she was grounded in reality and understood that while relationships are messy, the mess should not be aggravated by a partner's toxic behavior. Swift's contemplative stance in constructing her image also showed that she understands how even bad relationships can have good moments that should be cherished.

Swift's persona also created novelty through the addition of the celebrity role. As Swift accepted her place as a celebrity instead of holding onto the normalcy she experienced as a teenager, she also had to confront the potential issues that could arise should she continue her career. Swift acknowledged the duality of fame, as she both acknowledged that she wanted the fame, but was also not sure if she made the right decision. Swift's established role of girlfriend only exhibits minor changes as Swift has now acknowledged young love as a pure, love at first sight moment rather than an unrealistic fairytale. Swift accepted the slow formation of a relationship based on a desire to truly know the other person in *Red (Taylor's Version)*, rather than the fast-paced relationships that she described in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. Swift also expressed

novelty through a small change in her role as an ex-girlfriend: she did not express remorse for the end of the relationship. Swift provided instances of remorse and sadness over the loss of her partner in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, but only exhibited a mocking and mean perspective in *Red (Taylor's Version)*, perhaps being almost glad the relationship ended.

Finally, Swift's critical stance about the power structures around her provided novelty as she had not even acknowledged power structures previously. Prior to the release of *Red (Taylor's Version)*, Swift prioritized connections with her young fanbase by writing about topics that were relevant to the audience. Swift intentionally neglected the interests of the powerful as a teen, only to feel the effects of not abiding by their unspoken rules as a young adult. She ignored unspoken dating rules that are only partially enforced by the power structure and received major media attention for her reputation as a "serial dater." Swift then expressed disinterest in praising the power structure, instead choosing to comment on how the power structure has harmed her and many other female celebrities.

reputation

Swift's *reputation* album represented a major genre shift and communicated significant changes to her persona, which provided the best example of her ability to create novelty across the three albums I analyzed in this thesis. Prior to the release of the *reputation* album, Swift had balanced her persona with negative and positive aspects of image, complementary roles, and only slight acknowledgments of the power structures in her life. *reputation*, however, provided Swift with both an opportunity and a need to make a major change to her persona. Through the controversies she was experiencing at

the hands of other celebrities and the media, Swift was confronted with the choice to either accept their appraisal of who she was or to try to continue marketing herself as a sweet, innocent girl.

The image Swift constructed in this album is negatively focused both on herself and the people around her. Swift's image of insecurity was not a new aspect but took a different direction than how she used it in the past. Because Swift was nervous and insecure in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, her insecurity was focused on the newness of the situations she was in and a need to make a good impression. Swift's insecurity in *reputation* came from an understanding that her reputation is rather controversial and that her position as a celebrity could be a major imposition to the formation of a genuine relationship. Swift also enacted a manipulative aspect of her image, significantly changing the direction of her image from previous albums. Having experienced accusations of being a "snake" and being manipulative during her feud with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian-West, Swift accepted the accusations against her and integrated their associated expectations into her image. Swift then openly used the expectation that she would be manipulative to not only other celebrities, but to the men she was dating, to make herself seem better. Swift's image in the *reputation* album was novel in the way that she changed her insecurities to communicate how volatile her career was without providing any positive aspects to create a balance.

Swift's role also created novelty through changes to her previously established role as a celebrity and a girlfriend, but also through the addition of the role of villain. Swift previously acknowledged the fun aspects of her celebrity role but was not very critical of the system of fame. Swift's celebrity role in *reputation*, however, was critical

of both the media and other celebrities as she acknowledged how men have taken credit for her hard work and how media attention has made the beginning stages of her relationships harder to navigate due to the potential for the details of the relationships becoming public. Swift also expressed that her role as a girlfriend was one that she is now more confident in enduring because it has persisted through the fall of her reputation. Swift had previously only portrayed the girlfriend role through discussions of failed relationships, but her relationship in *reputation* provided her with support, freedom, and trust that she had not communicated in previous albums. Swift's role of villain, however, provides a large amount of novelty as this was a completely new role and was the centerpiece of the *reputation* album. As Swift took on the villain role, she also took ownership of the accusations made against her of being a bad person, manipulative, and a "witch," and embraces the role. Swift's role as a villain was also unique in that it is both complementary and contradictory. Swift established that she did not choose the villain role for herself, but rather, that it was placed onto her through media attention and other celebrities' opinions about her feud with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian-West, making it contradictory as she used it to point out how systems of fame have turned against her and have not trusted her honesty. Swift's embracing of the villain role was also complementary as she established that villains were expected to be manipulative, mean, harsh people, thus meeting social expectations.

Finally, Swift's standpoint was also highly novel as she was much more critical of the power structures in her life. Having been scorned by other celebrities and the media, Swift had experienced the bad side of power structures and had decided to speak out about the injustices she has faced. Swift's ability to make assessments of the power

structures as someone who was removed from the structure's good graces showed that she understood what it takes to abide in the structure peacefully, but also how speaking up can result in removal from the structure. Swift's critical stance against the power structure had moved her from being an advocate for the structure and instead has placed her in the opposition, maintaining her close connection to her young audience.

Conclusion

There are multiple implications of my analyses in this thesis. Taylor Swift's career highlights unique issues that female celebrities experience as they navigate a way to both accomplish their goals, but also try to stay out of any unnecessary controversies. Swift's career and discography also provides unique evidence that female celebrities often have to re-invent themselves to maintain relevance in ways that male celebrities do not. Swift also highlights the importance of a rhetorical persona in determining persuasive rhetoric and the rhetor's potential standpoint. This thesis also provides evidence that rhetorical personas can be analyzed in ways other than overviewing the context of a text's rhetorical situation.

The theoretical framework I developed for this thesis could be adapted and applied to other forms of media such as short films or music videos to assess persona through visuals. I also believe that an interesting direction for future research regarding Taylor Swift's persona would be the application of this model to one song from each of the albums she has released to assess more minor changes in her persona from year to year.

My research question for this thesis was: how do rhetors create novelty in the music industry, and my analysis clearly indicates that Swift is a great example of an artist

who has rebranded herself uniquely throughout her more-than-15-year career. Swift's success as a musician shows her understanding of the need to maintain relevance in the music industry. By setting up a simple persona at the start of her career, Swift proactively created space for her persona to change. She then was able to incorporate changes into her image and roles, making both subtle changes to communicate how she has matured and also major changes to communicate that she is gaining new understandings about life and fame. Swift's rhetorical persona creates novelty in the music industry as she shows that musicians do not need to completely change who they are to remain relevant and successful but can establish themselves through their rhetorical persona and changes to that persona.

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