Behind the Spotlight of an Icon: An Investigation into the Construction of Taylor Swift's Authentic Star Image



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Spring 2024

Submitted to the Department of Communication Arts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code, and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

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Approved by:

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Joe Tompkins, First Reader

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Vesta Silva, Second Reader

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Introduction

Like arguably most girls in their twenties, I am a fan of Taylor Swift. From listening to her music, to watching live streams of her most recent tour, *The Eras Tour,* on TikTok, to counting down the days until her next album, I have been following her career for nearly ten-years now. When the time came to select a topic for this project, I wanted to choose something both that I was genuinely interested in, and something uplifting that wouldn't leave me depressed all year after spending so much time researching the same subject. For these reasons, I chose to research Taylor Swift. I initially started this project with the intention of mapping out the way her star image has shifted over the course of her eighteen-year long career, from beginning her career as a sweet, country music star with the release of her debut album in 2006[1], to her genre shift to pop music in 2014 with the release of her fifth album "1989"[2], to her determination to reclaim ownership of her first six albums by re-recording and re-releasing them[3]. However, it became clear to me, through the gentle guidance of my advisors, that including all of this information about Swift spanning her eighteen-year long career would be better suited for a longer project like a book. I knew I needed to narrow my topic down further. I wondered more about Taylor Swift's star image. Why was I, among millions of others, so drawn to Taylor Swift? What was it that made her so special? My studies as a Communication and Cultural Studies student became useful as I navigated a possible explanation. Throughout my classes over the past four years, there has been a strong emphasis on the fact that nothing in the

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[1] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated February 6th, 2024. para 19. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[2] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings" para 33.

[3] For more information about the re-recorded albums see, Constance Grady, "Why Taylor Swift is ReRecording Her Old Songs". *Vox.* Updated August 10th, 2023 https://www.vox.com/culture/22278732/taylor-swift-re-recording-1989-speak-now-enchanted-mine-master-rights-scooter-braun

world is natural, and everything has been made or constructed by human beings. I realized that if what I have been taught is true, and everything in the world is constructed to serve a particular purpose or person, that also applies to Taylor Swift. Particularly in regards to her star image. It is not natural. Instead, it has been constructed. But how? And while I'm not sure we can ever truly know every material circumstance that led to its construction and subsequently her fame, I offer one possible explanation for why so many people, myself included, feel so drawn to Taylor Swift. I believe the answer lies in the fact that her star image has been constructed through a lens of authenticity.

The following sections aim to illustrate exactly how Taylor Swift's star image has been constructed through a lens of authenticity. First, by outlining a brief history of how Taylor Swift's star image has shifted throughout her career, through examining how the media has written about and understood Swift over the years. Second, by exploring what it means to be authentic in the music industry as defined by academic scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* and by Michael Serazio in his book, *The Authenticity Industries,* as well as by Emma Mayhew in her journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of 'Authenticity'". Finally, I will employ the theoretical concepts outlined by those scholars to analyze three case studies; first: Taylor Swift's third-studio album, *Speak Now,* from the fact that it was an entirely self-written album, to the media discourse surrounding its release, to analyzing three specific songs off the album, second: media discourse surrounding Taylor Swift's genre shift from country to pop with the release of her fifth studio-album *1989*, and third: analyzing a moment during Taylor Swift's 2023 and 2024 *The Eras Tour*, in order to understand how these moments work together to construct an

authentic star image for Taylor Swift. Overall, I argue that Taylor Swift's star image has been constructed through a lens of authenticity.

Background: A History of Taylor Swift's Star Image

Taylor Swift holds an undeniably significant presence in the media. In fact, according to *Exploding Topics,* a website that keeps track of Google searches, "according to March 2024 data, the most searched person on Google globally was Taylor Swift, at 18.1 million global searches"[4]. To garner this much interest from the public, clearly many articles have been published about her. Whether you have been a fan of hers since her first album was released, or her tenth, or have simply heard or read her name in the news, Taylor Swift is a recognizable name. A celebrity who officially began her career as a singer-songwriter in 2006 and is still creating new music[5] Taylor Swift is a prominent cultural figure in our society. As her career has spanned eighteen years, beginning as a seventeen year old in 2006, and has continued into the year 2024, her star image and identity has shifted on a few occasions. In order to understand how Taylor Swift's star image has been constructed through a lens of authenticity, first we must define what Taylor Swift's star image is, by analyzing a few examples of the way it has changed over the years. From Kayne West stealing Taylor Swift's microphone during her acceptance speech at the 2009 VMA Awards and the way afterwards the media defined Swift as sweet and innocent, to the media criticizing Swift for dating too many men in the years 2010 - 2013, and the way Swift reclaimed her image as a feminist who was invested in female friendship with the release of her *1989* album, to the media turning on Swift from 2015 - 2016 and defining her as someone who victimizes herself and is cold and calculating, to her reclaiming her identity in 2017 with the release of her *Reputation* album, it is clear that Taylor Swift's star image is a topic that is commonly

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[4] Josh Howarth, "Top People Searched on Google (April 2024)". *Exploding Topics.* April 2, 2024. https://explodingtopics.com/blog/most-searched-people#

[5] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

perpetuated by the media, and therefore moments of her star image must be understood before we can understand the construction of her star image.

2009 VMA Awards

One of Taylor Swift's earliest pivotal moments in her career occurred during the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards[6] (VMAs). The events that transpired during this night have played a prominent role in shaping her star image and identity throughout her career and is arguably the first time we see Taylor Swift being defined by the media to such a large extent. Thus, this moment is critical to analyze and understand. Taylor Swift arrived at the VMAs in September of 2009, with two of her eventual ten studio albums under her belt. Her self-titled debut album was released in 2006[7] and her second album, *Fearless*, was released in 2008[8]. The success of Taylor Swift's first two country albums, led to many awards and recognitions before she was nominated for the Best Female Video award at the 2009 VMAs including, "15 songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100, 1 Academy of Country Music Award, 1 American Music Award, 1 CMA Award, 5 CMT Music Awards, 3 Teen Choice Awards, 1 Grammy Nomination"[9]. At nineteen years old in 2009, Taylor Swift was already a well established country music star. However, the events that occurred during the 2009 VMAs catapulted Taylor Swift's star image into the media spotlight, and had long lasting effects throughout her career. In 2009, Taylor Swift was invited to perform at the VMAs, for the first time, a song from her second album, *Fearless,* called "You Belong

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[6] The Video Music Awards are hosted annually by cable channel MTV. They, "honor the best in the music video medium". For further information, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MTV_Video_Music_Awards

[7] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[8] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings".

[9] Natalie Finn, "Fact: Taylor Swift Was Plenty Famous Before Kanye West Came Along". *E Online.* Feb 12, 2016. para 9 https://www.eonline.com/news/739607/fact-taylor-swift-was-plenty-famous-before-kanye-west-came-along-plus-the-other-big-problem-with-what-he-said#

With Me". The music video for "You Belong With Me" was nominated for Best Video by a Female Artist[10]. Before her performance, she arrived on the red carpet "in a fanciful glass pumpkin-shaped Cinderella coach, wearing a glittering silver gown"[11]. Instead of walking the red carpet, she glided down it like a princess in a fairytale. In fact, "the coach and gown were a deliberate reference: Taylor was Cinderella, and the VMAs were the ball . . ."[12]. This is a crucial moment in which we see Taylor Swift's star image begin to form. Like Cinderella, Taylor Swift was viewed by the media as kind, sweet, and hard-working. This image was perpetuated further later in the night, when she won the category in which she was nominated for, Best Video by a Female Artist for the "You Belong with Me" music video, beating artists like Beyoncè. After she stepped onstage to receive the award, she took the microphone and began her acceptance speech. She said, "I always dreamed about what it would be like to maybe win one of these someday, but I never thought it actually would have happened. I sing country music. So thank you so much for giving me the chance to win a VMA Award! I - "[13]. In the middle of her speech, rapper Kayne West stormed the stage, ripped the microphone out of her hands, and began speaking in support of Beyoncè, who had just lost the category of Best Video by a Female Artist, for her "Single Ladies" music video. Kayne West shouted into the microphone, "Yo, Taylor, I'm really happy for you, I'mma let you finish, but Beyoncè had one of the best videos of all time! One of the best videos of all time!"[14]. He then handed the microphone back to Taylor Swift, who appeared frozen throughout his speech, and sauntered off the stage. The audience began booing and cheering

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[10] Constance Grady, "How the Taylor Swift-Kanye West VMAs Scandal Became a Perfect American Morality Tale". *Vox.* August 26th, 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/26/20828559/taylor-swift-kanye-west-2009-mtv-vmas-explained

[11] Constance Grady, ""How the Taylor Swift-Kanye West VMAs Scandal Became a Perfect American Morality Tale", para 6

[12] Ibid.

[13] To view the speech itself: see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvaakT52RjQ

[14] Ibid.

simultaneously; meanwhile the camera cut to an aghast looking Beyoncè who seemed to mouth the words, “oh Kanye”[15]. From the audience's shocked reaction, it became clear that this was not a scripted moment in the show. In the days following the airing of the award show, the media continued fueling the story. However, crucially, they fueled it in a very specific way. In fact, “the 2009 VMAS set in motion a pop culture narrative so compelling that we’re still dealing with the fallout”[16]. The narrative set in motion by the media helped construct Taylor Swift’s star image in a particular way that has followed her throughout her career. The media reported about this event in a way that depicted Taylor Swift as a sweet and innocent Cinderella like figure, who had been wronged, whereas they depicted Kanye West as the villian for taking this exciting and special moment away from her. Headlines from articles published in the days following this event, perpetuate this notion. On September 16th, 2009, 3 days after the VMAs, the *Daily Mail* published an online article with the headline, “Kanye West Ruins Taylor Swift’s Big MTV Acceptance Speech as he Storms on Stage”[17]. The strong language used within this headline, “ruins” and “storms” perpetuates the image of Taylor Swift as innocent and Kanye West a villain for taking this moment away from a young girl. Another article, published by *The Guardian,* on September 15th, 2009 is titled, “Furious Celebrities Condemn Kanye West after his VMA outburst”[18]. This article organizes online posts from celebrities like Kelly Clarkson, Pink, and Katy Perry, who all spoke out against Kanye West’s actions this night. Like most media reports

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[15] Ibid

[16] Constance Grady, “How the Taylor Swift-Kanye West VMAs Scandal Became a Perfect American Morality Tale”. *Vox.* August 26th, 2019. para 26 https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/26/20828559/taylor-swift-kanye-west-2009-mtv-vmas-explained

[17] Charlotte Spratt, “Kanye West Ruins Taylor Swift’s Big MTV Acceptance Speech as he Storms on Stage”. *Daily Mail.* September 16, 2009. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1213280/Kanye-West-ruins-Taylor-Swifts-big-MTV-acceptance-speech-storms-stage.html

[18] Sean Michaels, “Furious Celebrities Condemn Kanye West After his VMA Outburst. *The Guardian.* September 15, 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/sep/15/kanye-west-taylor-swift-vma

of this event, it situates Taylor Swift in a place of innocence, as someone who merits defense by multiple famous celebrities, against the villain of the night, Kayne West. Therefore, the 2009 MTV VMAs were a pivotal night in Taylor Swift's career, as it is one identifiable moment where we see the media begin to shape her star image as sweet and innocent.

***1989* Era**

The years 2010 through 2014 saw another shift in discourse in the way the media reported on Taylor Swift's star image. The years after the 2009 VMAs incident saw the release of three more studio albums including, *Speak Now* released in 2010, *Red* released in 2012, and *1989* released in 2014[19]. For the most part, during these years, the media seemed to be largely in favor of Taylor Swift. At the time, her biggest criticism by media outlets was that she dated too many men, and wrote too many songs about her exes when they broke up. A few examples of headlines during these years include, "Taylor Swift Kisses and Tells . . . and Goes Too Far"[20] published in 2010 by *The Atlantic,* "Why Has Taylor Swift Had So Many Relationships?"[21] published in 2012 by *Cinemablend,* "Vulture Therapy: A Relationship Expert Advises Taylor Swift"[22] published in 2012 by *Vulture*, and "Taylor Swift is the Ultimate Player"[23] published in 2013 by *New York Post*. As opposed to the media's reporting of Taylor Swift as sweet and innocent after the 2009 VMAs incident, in these headlines we begin to see a shift of their

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[19] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[20] Sandy Doyle, "Taylor Swift Kisses and Tells . . . and Goes Too Far" *, The Atlantic.* October 27th, 2010. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/10/taylor-swift-kisses-and-tells-and-goes-too-far/65097/

[21] Mack Rawden, "Why Has Taylor Swift Had So Many Relationships?" *Cinemablend.* October 24th, 2012. https://www.cinemablend.com/pop/Why-Has-Taylor-Swift-Had-So-Many-Relationships-48569.html

[22] Amanda Dobbins, "Vulture Therapy: A Relationship Expert Advises Taylor Swift". *Vulture*. October 26th, 2012. https://www.vulture.com/2012/10/relationship-expert-advises-taylor-swift.html

[23] Reed Tucker, "Taylor Swift is the Ultimate Player", *New York Post.* February 10th, 2013. https://nypost.com/2013/02/10/taylor-swift-is-the-ultimate-player/

perception to a more demeaning image of the star. In response, Taylor Swift attempted to combat these notions of being "the Ultimate Player"[24], and reclaim her positive media image by emphasizing her female friends instead of men during the year 2014. In discussing her new album with *The Guardian* newspaper*,* she claimed to have had a, "feminist epiphany, and that it", the album, "had arisen from the new female friendships she'd deeply invested in"[25]. Swift seemed determined to reclaim her star image as a woman who put herself and her female friendships before men. The media seemed to approve of this shift and reclaiming of star images, as the following months saw the publication of articles with positive headlines about Swift including, "21 Reasons Why Taylor Swift Owned 2014"[26], and "The Year of Taylor Swift" published by *The New York Times.* Various media outlets seemed to agree that this was Swift's new star image, and they praised her for it. Swift had seemingly successfully assisted in the shaping of her own star image as a positive one for the time being. From negative publications from media outlets about Swift's dating life, to her regaining control of her image in a positive light, the media discourse surrounding Swift had shifted once again.

Taylor and Kanye Feud

The positive media image that Swift had curated only lasted for a few years, up until 2016 when perceptions shifted once again. The pinnacle of this shift from positive perceptions to negative perceptions occurred as a result of a song Kanye West released in 2016 called, "Famous". The song references the 2009 VMA award incident with Taylor Swift with the lyrics, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / why? I made that b—famous"[27]. One could argue

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[24] Reed Tucker, "Taylor Swift is the Ultimate Player"
[25] Hermione Hoby, "Taylor Swift: 'Sexy? Not on My Radar'", *The Guardian.* August 23, 2014. para. 14 https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/23/taylor-swift-shake-it-off
[26] Josh Duboff, "21 Reasons Why Taylor Swift Owned 2014" *Vanity Fair.* December 23, 2014. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/12/taylor-swift-2014-year-in-review
[27] Kanye West, "Famous", DEF Jam, 2016 https://music.apple.com/us/album/the-life-of-pablo/1443063578

that these lyrics were West's way of declaring that he should receive credit for the plethora of positive media attention Swift received after the incident, which in turn elevated her career. Swift's fans were quick to condemn the song[28]. According to a *People* magazine article, "following the backlash"[29], Kanye West, "took to Twitter, claiming that he had gotten permission from Swift to name-drop her following an hour-long phone conversation with the star"[30]. Swift's team denied any approval by the singer. In fact, her representative said in a statement that, she "... was never informed about the 'I made that 'b — famous' line and that she cautioned West against 'releasing a song with such a strong misogynistic message'"[31]. It is arguable that in making this statement, Swift's team was attempting to remind fans that Taylor Swift's star image is still, in 2016, one similar to her star image seven years earlier in 2009, as a sweet and innocent woman, whereas Kanye West is an evil villain. Accusing Kanye West of being "misogynistic"[32] paints him in a negative light whereas she becomes the innocent bystander who has a very public and derogatory song about her circling in the media. She was supported in this narrative in the media at first, with newspapers such as *The Guardian*, publishing articles like, "Kanye West Faces Backlash Over Taylor Swift Lyric Attack", which organized the support that Swift received against Kanye West. Examples included her brother Austin who, "posted a video on Instagram of him throwing his Yeezy trainers[33] into a bin with the caption, 'getting a head start on some

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[28] See fans' reactions here, Stephanie Webber, "Taylor Swift Fans are Furious With Kanye West's 'Famous' Lyric: Read the Reactions". *Us Weekly.* February 12, 2016. https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/taylor-swifts-fans-are-furious-with-kanye-wests-famous-lyric-reactions-w164193/

[29] Grace Gravilanes and Sophie Dodd, "A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West's Feud". *People Magazine.* Updated on December 8, 2023. para. 15 https://people.com/music/kanye-west-famous-inside-his-and-taylor-swifts-relationship-history/

[30] Grace Gravilanes and Sophie Dodd, "A Complete Timeline of Taylor Swift and Kanye West's Feud".

[31] Nolan Feeney, "Kanye West Maintains Taylor Swift Approved 'Famous' Lyrics" *Time*. February 24, 2016. para 20 https://time.com/4235345/kanye-west-taylor-swift-famous-approval/

[32] Nolan Feeney, "Kanye West Maintains Taylor Swift Approved 'Famous' Lyrics"

[33] For reference, "Yeezy Trainers" are shoes from a collaboration between Kanye West and ADIDAS https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adidas_Yeezy#:~:text=Adidas%20Yeezy%20(or%20just%20Yeezy,%2C%20slides%2C%20lingerie%20and%20slippers.

Spring cleaning'"[34], as well as support from her newer friend from 2014, Gigi Hadi, who Tweeted of her "loyalty"[35] towards Taylor Swift. However, in July of 2016, Kim Kardashian, Kanye West's wife at the time, released a video on social media platform,Snapchat, that led to a downward spiral of Taylor Swift's star image. The video seemingly proved both that Taylor Swift had known West was going to release "Famous", and approved. In the video, Swift is heard speaking to West as she says, "I really appreciate you telling me about it. That's really nice. It's all very tongue-and-cheek either way"[36]. The media backlash against Taylor Swift after this phone call was released was instant. She went from being labeled in the media as a sweet and innocent bystander, to being labeled as a, "cold-blooded pop star"[37] by news outlets such as *Vox*. Journalist Alex Abad-Santos in the same *Vox* article writes how, "this new Snapchat shows that Swift is being inconsistent, or not telling the entire truth"[38]. Swift was essentially being framed by the media as a liar. Abad-Santos paints a clear picture of the gravity of this situation for Swift's star image as he writes of her past that, "every song she's released throughout her career, every post she's shared on social media - it's all helped paint a portrait of Swift as your best friend . . . with some pop stars, you want to be them; with Taylor Swift, you just want to hang out with her"[39]. In this statement, he compares the situation to discovering that your best friend lied to you, and the negative reaction that would arguably arise from that situation. At this moment in time, her star image saw a shift to being one of a lying best friend. Many media stories

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[34] Michael Hann, "Kanye West Faces Backlash Over Taylor Swift Lyric Attack". *The Guardian.* February 12, 2016. para. 4
https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/12/kanye-west-taylor-swift-controversy-i-made-that-bitch-famous-the-life-of-pablo
[35] Michael Hann, "Kanye West Faces Backlash Over Taylor Swift Lyric Attack"
[36] Alex Abad-Santos, "Kim Kardashian's Taylor Swift-Kanye West Snapchat Story, Explained". *Vox.* July 23, 2023. para 7
https://www.vox.com/2016/7/18/12210858/kim-kardashian-taylor-swift-snapchat-kanye-west
[37] Alex Abad-Santos, "Kim Kardashian's Taylor Swift-Kanye West Snapchat Story, Explained"
[38] Ibid para 15
[39] Ibid para 16

circulating at this time also painted Swift in a negative light. For example, an article published in 2016 by *Daily Bruin,* a Los Angeles newspaper, is titled, "Second Take: Taylor Swift Plays the Victim to Hide Manipulative Personality"[40]. The use of the headlining words "plays the victim" and "manipulative personality" are critical here to understand how the media was defining Swift's star image at this time. This strong language paints her in an extremely negative light, as well as invites the public to question not only her actions of denying she knew about the release of "Famous", but other key moments across her career. If she has "manipulative personality" disorder as the article suggests, was she playing the victim when West took the microphone from her back in 2009? Was she being manipulative to her new friends and using them for her own gain when she swore off men and dating in 2014? This language sows seeds of doubt into these moments, thus damaging her star image. The circulation of these negative articles about Swift in the media eventually sparked a response from the public as well, when "snake emojis began appearing in full force, as streams of them flooded the singer's comment section on Instagram"[41]. The snake represented the way the public felt about Taylor Swift at this time, as someone who was as sneaky and slithery as a snake. Kim Kardhasian posting the phone call proving that Swift knew West was going to release the song "Famous" and the negative media articles published about Swift after, marks a key shift in Taylor Swift's star image. This moment is arguably the most prominent shift we see in the discourse surrounding Swift, doing the most damage to her star image.

***Reputation* Era**

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[40] Nina Crosby. "Second Take: Taylor Swift Plays the Victim to Hide Manipulative Personality". *Daily Bruin.* 2016. https://dailybruin.com/2016/10/23/second-take-taylor-swift-plays-the-victim-to-hide-manipulative-personality

[41] Alexandra Holterman, "Taylor Swift and the Snake: A History" *Billboard.* July 2016. para 8 https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/taylor-swift-the-snake-history-kim-kanye-instagram-7934297/

The events of 2016 left Taylor Swift's positive star image in shambles. How could she recover from the backlash she was facing? From July 2016 - August 2017, Taylor Swift was not seen in the public eye. Constance Grady from *Vox* notes how of this year, "for the first time, she skipped her biannual album release. She disappeared from the tabloids, more or less going into hiding"[42]. If she had followed her own precedent of releasing an album every two years, Swift should have released a new album in 2016 since her previous album "1989" had been released in 2014[43]. However, Swift wouldn't release another album until November of 2017, titled, fittingly, *Reputation.*[44]. The album is about Swift reclaiming her reputation, and arguably crafting a better star image than that of a lying friend, from its shattered form after the events of 2016. It was announced in August of 2017 by Swift, who "delet[ed] all her old social media posts" and "replac[ed] them with a video of a snake hissing, in what appeared to be a reference to her reputation as a lying snake"[45]. Arguably, this was a moment of Taylor Swift attempting to control and take ownership of her star image by claiming the symbol of the snake that had once been used against her, as her own. Swift also attempted to reclaim a more positive star image in a music video for the sixth track on *Reputation,* "Look What You Made Me Do". In the music video, as an *MTV* headline explains, "Taylor Swift Murders All of the Old Taylors In 'Look What You Made Me Do' Music Video"[46]. The video shows "past" versions of herself, with the underlying message that she is no longer these versions of herself instead she is reinventing

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[42] Constance Grady, "Taylor Swift Just Announced a New Album and Single in a Typically Savvy Fashion". *Vox*. August 23, 2017. para 15 https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/22/16181300/taylor-swift-new-single-album-2017-timeless

[43] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. para 30 https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[44] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings" para 33

[45] Constance Grady, "A Unified Theory of Taylor Swift's Reputation". *Vox.* Updated May 7th, 2018. para. 3 https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/9/16598106/taylor-swift-reputation-intimacy-control

[46] Emilee Linder, "Taylor Swift Murders All The Old Taylors In 'Look What You Made Me Do' Music Video, *MTV,* August 2017. https://www.mtv.com/news/nbrc2i/taylor-swift-look-what-you-made-me-do-video

herself [47]. For example, one lyric in the song and music video, "I'm sorry/ the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now/ Why? Oh! / Cause she's dead"[48] demonstrates reinvention of her star image. According to her, she is no longer the old person she used to be. Perhaps in this case, the sweet, innocent girl that the media defined her as before. This is further demonstrated by the end of the music video after the music has faded out, which features a few different versions of Taylor Swift's wearing outfits from a ringleader outfit that she wore during her 2012, *Red* tour, to a version of herself wearing an outfit from her 2008, "You Belong With Me" music video, to a version of herself wearing a ballerina outfit from her 2014, "Shake It Off" music video. The Taylor Swift's banter with each other, in a way that is self-aware to the media backlash that Swift faced. One Taylor says to another, "what's with that b—-?" to which another Taylor responds, "don't call me that!"[49] likely in reference to Kanye West referring to Swift in this derogatory way in his 2016 song, "Famous". Next, one Taylor says to another, "Y'all!"[50] referencing her slight country accent that she used during the first few years of her career when she was a country-music artist, before she had dived into pop. A different Taylor looks at her and says, "oh stop acting like you're so nice, you are so fake!"[51] to which country Taylor Swift begins crying. This is likely in reference to media backlash critiquing her sweet and innocent, public perception. Finally, a version of Taylor Swift wearing the exact same outfit she wore to the VMA's in 2009 when Kanye stormed the stage and took her microphone, speaks into a microphone and says, "I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative"[52] to which all of the Taylor's

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[47] Taylor Swift. "Look What You Made Me Do". Directed by Joseph Kahn. August 27, 2017. Music Video, 4:15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tmd-ClpJxA
[48] Taylor Swift. "Look What You Made Me Do"
[49] Ibid
[50] Ibid
[51] Ibid
[52] Ibid

collectively yell, "shut up!"[53]. Overall, the "Look What You Made Me Do" music video is critical because it comes as a response to Taylor Swift's negative star image in the media in 2016, in an attempt to reclaim a positive star image. Arguably, Swift is trying to show in the video both that she is self-aware of her faults, and that she is ready to take ownership of them. Understanding the material circumstances that led to the "Look What You Made Me Do Music Video" is critical for understanding how Taylor Swift's star image has shifted over the years, and her attempts to reclaim it.

Star Images Summarized

Throughout Taylor Swift's eighteen year long career, there have been many instances where her star image has shifted and been defined both by the media, and defined by Taylor Swift herself. From the events of the 2009 VMA awards leading to a star image of Swift as being sweet and innocent, to negative reports of Swift during the years 2010 - 2013 about her dating too many men and how she reclaimed her star image by announcing the fact that she is a feminist, to Kanye West releasing a derogatory song about her in 2016, to her denying the fact that she gave him permission to release the song and was eventually found out to have been lying about that fact, to the way she reclaimed her star image in 2017 with the release of her album, *Reputation*, these are just a few examples of shifts in Taylor Swift's star image that have occurred over the years. Now that we understand a little bit more about Taylor Swift's star image, and its prominence in the media, it is time to begin unpacking how specifically it is constructed, and the fact that I argue the answer is by a lens of authenticity.

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[53] Ibid

Literature Review

In this section, I will explore theoretical concepts such as the construction of the popular music industry, star systems, genre labels, and the history of pop music, as understood by scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock.* I will also examine the theoretical concept of authenticity, specifically authenticity in the popular music industry as described by Michael Serazio in his book, *The Authenticity Industries.* Additionally, I will explore the theoretical concept of authenticity as seen through the lens of gender in the popular music industry, as described in Emma Mayhew's journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of 'Authenticity'". While these scholarly sources do not directly reference Taylor Swift, they work to create a framework for understanding the construction of her star image and stardom, and how it was largely constructed through a lens of authenticity.

As Taylor Swift's celebrity status is largely due to her success in the popular music industry, in order to fully understand questions surrounding her star image and stardom, first we must ensure that we understand what the popular music industry is and how it was constructed, which is defined by academic scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock.* This industry, according to these authors, did not come from nowhere and was developed and created to satisfy specific needs, largely money-making needs. Frith describes this process in Chapter 2 of the book, titled, "The popular music industry". According to Frith, the music industry faced difficulty in turning something "non-material" and "intangible", such as music, into a commodity[54]. Thus, the pop music industry was built off of technologies that privatized the listening experience and made it

[54] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001, 26

tangible including the invention of the phonograph, portable gramophone and transistor radio, and the Walkman[55]. These allowed for a more individualized experience of listening to music, one where people could, in a sense, directly own it. However, although the popular music industry wanted to reduce pop music to an individual market experience, it is important to note that for many, the appeal of pop music is that it provides "access to a collective world" [56]. For example, "we buy a record knowing that our taste is shared - and is measured by the charts; we listen to a radio station whose appeal is that its deejays can make us feel like members of a taste 'community"[57]. In this way, music becomes a social experience. The industry thus tries to capitalize on the collective, public experience of music, through selling a sense of belonging by creating both pop music stars and music genre categories.

Frith introduces the theoretical concepts of *star systems* and *genre labels,* by describing how mainly they work to "keep control of [the] unreliable demand"[58] of the music market. *Star systems* work to control this unreliable demand because, "stars can be defined as musicians whose past sales successes are taken to guarantee their future sales successes"[59]. In fact, "star-making, rather than record selling, is a record company's core activity: the latter is dependent on the former"[60]. Star-making is largely rooted in how the industry decides to brand and market an artist. As Frith says, "the music an act or artist makes has to fit a star image and personality: these days as much money is spent on image making as on music-making and no one gets assigned to a record label without a discussion of how they will be marketed"[61]. Stars are typically marketed in the media, which plays an important role in the *star system* model. In

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[55] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock", 27
[56] Ibid, 27
[57] Ibid, 27
[58] Ibid, 35
[59] Ibid
[60] Ibid
[61] Ibid

fact, "records are, in effect, made for the media rather than the public or rather perhaps, that they are made for the public as defined by the media"[62]. Frith lists some popular stars that have made record labels an exorbitant amount of money through this model of branding and marketing an image in the media including, "Elvis Presely for RCA, the Beatles for Capitol, U2 and Bob Marley for Island"[63]. Overall, stars account for unreliable demand, and generate profit for the music industry. Later, we will see how this model of a *star system* has been used in recent years to make the music industry money, with pop star Taylor Swift as an example.

Additionally, Frith describes how *genre labels* are used by the music industry to account for unreliable demand. *Genre labels* are another way to market music. Frith writes that, "pop music marketing has always meant marketing different types of music to different types of consumers"[64]. For example, "in the lay out of record shops: discs are racked as rock, country, dance, rap, reggae, world music and so on"[65]. Separating music into specific genres like this helps sell more records. When music is separated for consumers, they are more likely to purchase music made for their taste, that they feel they can relate to, rather than to consume music created for a larger, more generalized audience. *Genre labeling* is thus another way that the music industry is able to generate profit and control an unreliable demand in the music market.

In Chapter 3 of *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* academic scholar Will Straw takes a closer look at the consumption of music. According to Straw, the music industry has always seen the consumption of popular music as "chaotic and incomprehensible"[66]. This is particularly true in determining the music tastes of the youth. Straw delves into research

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[62] Ibid, 43
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid, 35
[65] Ibid
[66] Ibid, 53

conducted by Tom Freston "the head of the United States-based MTV Networks"[67] who spoke to a journalist about his methods for understanding teenagers and their relation to music. According to Freston, the taste of teenagers in music are both "elusive" and "mysterious" and he attempts to understand them through "methods of the psychotherapist and anthropologist".[68] As elusive and mysterious Freston says that teenage culture is, it is critical to understand this market because the youth market is central to the popular music industry. In fact, "the markets for popular music in Western countries have been skewed towards youth for some thirty years now, with only minor fluctuations"[69]. As this book was published in 2001, Straw is talking about the years from 1971 - 2001. Straw describes the reason for music being central to youths as being, "circular in nature", as "youths, it is regularly assumed, buys more recorded music because the industry keeps producing the kind of music which young people are likely to buy"[70]. One reason that Straw provides for why youths are so interested in music, and therefore an integral part of the music industry, is because of how they tie music to their identity. He says that by youths having a choice of music, is, "a key token . . . by which individuals learn what it might mean to be young or old, black or white, male or female". Thus, music becomes important in identity formation for youths and may explain the circular relationship between the industry gearing music to youths, and youths being drawn to the music industry as it offers them a chance to form their identity.

In Chapter Four of, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* a chapter titled, "Pop music", Simon Frith takes a closer look at the pop music genre. Although Taylor Swift began her career as a country music star, this chapter remains relevant due to her genre shift in 2014 when she released her first pop album, "1989", and continuous release of pop albums ever since.

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[67] Ibid, 53
[68] Ibid
[69] Ibid, 61
[70] Ibid

According to Frith, an important feature of pop music is that, “it is designed to appeal to everyone”[71]. In fact, pop music is, “music accessible to the general public (rather than aimed at elites or dependent on any kind of knowledge or listening skill)”[72]. Unlike classical, jazz, or rock, pop music is, “accessible music that is also singable and performable”[73]. It does not take skill for audiences of pop music to sing along to their favorite pop songs, which makes it accessible to a larger audience of listeners. Additionally, a key feature of pop music, according to Frith, is that, “it is not about realising individual visions or making us see the world in new ways”, instead it provides a space to express, “commonplace feelings - love, loss, jealousy”[74]. This relatability makes pop music more accessible as well. Another important feature of the pop music industry lies in its history. Frith discusses the creation of the microphone in 1930 as important to the development of the pop music genre. He says, originally, the microphone’s, “immediate use was to enable singers to make themselves heard above the noise of a jazz band or swing orchestra”[75]. However, for pop music, it had a different use. Frith writes that, “the microphone’s importance was not that it enabled people to sing loudly but that it let them be soft”[76]. The microphone opened up music artists to a whole new world of skill and technique, and led to the creation of the “singer” and the “popstar”. For example, Frith describes how Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday, “quickly realized that [with the microphone] they could sing with a new expressive intimacy”[77]. Instead of shouting during performances, the invention of the microphone allowed, “a tone and pitch that were previously only heard in private conversation [to] be reproduced

[71] Ibid, 95
[72] Ibid, 94
[73] Ibid, 106
[74] Ibid, 96
[75] Ibid, 97
[76] Ibid
[77] Ibid, 98

publicly"[78]. With this new technique, singers and pop stars, "thus needed, simpler, more directly emotional songs"[79]. As well as being emotional for the singer, these songs needed to be broad enough that a wide variety of listeners could relate to them. As Frith says, pop singers success lies in their ability to, "lay their personality on a song such that we can make it our song too"[80]. With the intimate sound that microphone produced, according to Frith, "listeners could now pretend that they knew the singer, that the singer understood, or at least, articulated their own feelings"[81]. Traditionally, those labeled "pop stars" are female, as these ideas of being emotional and vulnerable connect to a wider gender ideology that women are better at expressing emotion than men. Frith says that this lies in the fact that women are seen as being, "more confident at holding up their emotions for our exploration as it were"[82]. Finally, Frith describes how love songs have been a central part of the popular music industry. This is particularly true in the film industry, Frith citing songs such as 'My Heart Will Go On' from *Titanic,* and 'Moon River' from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*[83]. Frith's analysis of the pop music industry will be important later when we examine pop star Taylor Swift's success in the popular music industry.

In Chapter 5 of *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock, "*Reconsidering rock", Keir Keightley discusses the history of rock music and its relation to pop music. He describes rock music as viewing itself as being more serious than pop music, and how, "the idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe, or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' - the very opposite of rock"[84]. In fact, according to Keightley, through the lens of rock ideology pop music is "corrupt"

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[78] Ibid
[79] Ibid
[80] Ibid
[81] Ibid 98
[82] Ibid, 101
[83] Ibid, 104
[84] Ibid, 109

because of how it is commercially manufactured[85]. Keightley also outlines the connections that rock music has to folk music as they are both viewed as being created to reject mass society, and are therefore more authentic in nature. He says how specifically for folk music, "folk authenticity refers to musical experiences that are valued as unalienated and uncorrupted, 'anti-mass' pleasures which were perceived to be musically pure, genuine and organically connected to the community that produced them"[86]. This is very much unlike pop ideology which is perceived to be constructed as being mass-produced. However, ironically, Keightley points out that even though rock believes itself to be authentic, it has still always been a, "large-scale, industrially organised, mass-mediated, mainstream phenomenon operating at the very centre of society"[87]. However, it "seeks to produce a virtual cultural place outside of consumer capitalism" all the while convincing itself, "as a 'special case of mass consumption"[88]. Essentially, participating in this consumer culture to listen to rock music provides more for listeners than simply entertainment, so therefore they see themselves as a special case. Additionally, Keightley also points out how important authenticity is to rock ideology and that, "authenticity can be thought of as the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream"[89] whereas with pop music, specifically with Elton John, authenticity of emotions has never been questioned, and is "not an issue"[90]. Keightley defines authenticity as, "a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences"[91]. It is also important to note that, "authenticity is a complex phenomenon, and involves more than personal

[85] Ibid, 128
[86] Ibid, 121
[87] Ibid, 127
[88] Ibid
[89] Ibid, 131
[90] Ibid, 94
[91] Ibid, 131

preference"[92]. To rock fans, and rock ideology, authenticity is key to a piece of music being considered of high artistic quality. Keightley also notes that rock ideology's foundation of authenticity is, "an insistence upon the integrity of the individual self" and that its goal is about, "finding a true self in the midst of corruption and conformity",[93] which alludes again to the fact that rock ideology views pop music as mass-produced and corrupt. Finally, Keightley outlines two historical conceptions of authenticity, romantic and modern. He explains first Romanticism, stating how it, "emerged in response to the social dislocations of the Industrial Revolution" and how, "the Romantic artist was seen to be involved in a personal journey of self-discovery and fulfillment, through the direct expression of his or her innermost thoughts and emotions" [94]. On the other hand, "Modernism embraced the chaos of the city and aesthetic possibilities of the machine"[95]. In connection to authenticity, "while Romanticism locates authenticity principally in the direct communication between artist and audience, Modernism manifests its concern with authenticity more indirectly, at the aesthetic level so that the authentic artist is one who is true to the Modernist credos of experimentation, innovation, development, change"[96]. These two versions of authenticity will be important in analyzing the media's perception of the authenticity of pop singer Taylor Swift. Overall, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* has been a useful tool in understanding the construction of the popular music industry, as well as will be useful in our upcoming analysis.

Now that we understand more about the creation and construction of the popular music industry, Michael Serazio in his book *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics,* introduces his take on the concept of authenticity, that is more centralized

[92] Ibid
[93] Ibid, 133
[94] Ibid, 135
[95] Ibid
[96] Ibid, 136

to authenticity in media culture, than Keir Keightley's analysis of authenticity specifically in rock music. In the introduction of his book, Serazio sets the stage to understand authenticity in the pop music industry, by first defining what authenticity is. He says, "the pursuit of authenticity is . . . an effort to recover what remains human within us, at a time when society, commerce, and technology are grafted onto how we interface with the world" [97]. He cites reality TV programming, the popular social media apps, *TikTok* and *BeReal,* and former President Donald Trump's disregard for 'political correctness' as examples of how authenticity has fueled our cultural understanding of the world[98]. According to Serazio, the importance of authenticity lies in the fact that it is, "nothing short of the central moral framework of our time: a quasi-religion for self-discovery; a way of coping with the conditions, anxieties, and external pressures of contemporary reality through ideals and pretenses of higher purpose and inner meaning"[99]. *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics,* was published in 2023, more recently than *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* which was published in 2001, so by using the phrase, "our time" he means the reach that the concept of authenticity has had in our culture today. Serazio also notes how, "the pursuit of authenticity is, therefore, an effort to recover what remains human within us, at a time when society, commerce, and technology are grafted onto how we interface with the world"[100]. According to Serazio, our culture's focus on authenticity is a direct result of a time in which the world continues to grow more technology-focused and as our private lives become public, there is a growing need to remind ourselves of our humanity[101]. At least, this is the public's view of authenticity. However, Serazio

[97] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics". *Stanford University Press.* 2023, 2
[98] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics", 2
[99] Ibid
[100] Ibid
[101] Ibid

analyzes this concept further by making note of the fact that, "authenticity is not actually real"[102]. Instead, more and more companies that are attempting to sell a product or service, marketers, artists, social media companies, etc, are purposefully appealing to people's humanity by appearing authentic. In fact, "authenticity gets made" by "professionals who construct, communicate, and accentuate authenticity on behalf of their clients"[103]. Simply put, it does not naturally exist, it is constructed. Next, we will see how authenticity is constructed in the music industry.

Serazio begins Chapter 3 of his book, a chapter titled, "Pop Music's Sponsorship Play: *The Art of Selling Out"* by stating that, "authenticity has always been an obsession in pop music"[104]. Serazio, much like Frith in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* cites Billie Holiday, as an example of a singer who helped, "shape this archetype of unrepressed soul-baring" in their songs, striving for authenticity. According to Frith and Serazio, it appears that pop music and authenticity go hand in hand. One way that authenticity is constructed by the popular music industry is through the production of songs about intimate subjects that appeal to audience's humanity, like love and desire. Another criteria for authenticity lies in its relation to identity. Serazio writes that, "the identity and lifestyle of the musician has to be authentic to their output; that is, a novelist, filmmaker, or actor need not to have lived their characters and stories quite as much as expected of songwriting counterparts"[105]. To be a successful singer is to be authentic and to be authentic in this situation is to sing about your real-world experience. This type of music, "helps fans locate and validate their own identities . . . most especially for young fans and those within distinctive subcultures" [106]. If an artist is singing about something that a fan

[102] Ibid, 1
[103] Ibid, 2.
[104] Ibid, 82.
[105] Ibid, 85
[106] Ibid, 85

relates to, they will find the singer more authentic, and thus appreciate their music more. In particular, younger fans are generally more fond of pop music than older generations, so this particularly comes into play here. Serazio also writes that, "fans *consume* music, yes, but they want it to feel like something more than a mere market exchange, and authenticity, theoretically, can bridge that empty gap of capitalism with meaning and affirmation"[107]. Thus, authenticity is constructed by the music industry for the specific purpose of selling more records, and making more money. Next we will see how authenticity is specifically constructed by women in the pop music industry.

Like Frith and Serazio, Mayhew begins her journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity" with her definition of authenticity. She provides a very straight-forward definition of authenticity, stating that, "if something is authentic, it is assumed that is is believable and reliable, that it is genuine and thus acceptable"[108]. While Serazio states that all artists must appear to be writing their own songs in order to appear authentic, Mayhew argues that female performers in particular must write their own songs in order to appear authentic. She says, "examination of the textual analysis of female popular performers has revealed that those female performers who do not write their own material lose out in the authentic musical stakes because of their seeming lack of musical input"[109]. She continues her article by arguing that women are criticized more heavily in the media if they are found to have not written their own songs. She cites artist Kylie Minogue as an example. According to Mayhew, Minogue, an Australian singer whose first album was released in 1988, was found to have only co-written one of her songs on an album released in 1994. Mayhew writes that because

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[107] Ibid, 85
[108] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity". *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.* (June 1999).
[109] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity" p. 70

of this, Minogue is, "criticized both overtly and covertly for not having enough input into composing the material [she] performs and/or relying on producers for the more innovative sounds on [her] album"[110]. Thus, she appears inauthentic to audiences and her star image suffers for it, and likely music sales as well.

Mayhew also notes how the construction of authenticity in female artists has also largely reflected gendered stereotypes. For example, Mayhew describes how, "the division of labour in rock positions men as … instrumentalists, while women are the singers"[111]. She says that this is due to the fact that, "the dominance of women in the role of the singer can be partly seen as the outcome of the essentializing discourses which conceive of the voice as biologically fixed and natural"[112]. This idea is similar to Frith's ideas about gender ideology and explanation as to why most pop stars are women as seen in Chapter 4 of *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* when he describes how women are seen as having voices that are better at expressing emotion. Mayhew relates this back to the criticism that Minogue faced when she was found to have only co-written one of her songs. Mayhew writes that this criticism of her, "lack of musical input situates her voice as secondary to the success and genius of the overall sound of the music" [113]. Her voice, the voice of a woman, is not enough for her to be successful in the music industry. Instead, she must embody authenticity and write her own songs. In the popular music industry, there is a difference between writing music and performing it, and in order to be successful and appear authentic, women must do both. Mayhew's definition and understanding of how authenticity is constructed in regards to female artists will be important to keep in mind as we

[110] Ibid, 71
[111] Ibid, 73
[112] Ibid, 73
[113] Ibid, 73

begin to analyze Taylor Swift's star image and stardom, as she is a female artist who writes her own songs.

Analysis

In November of 2023, the Merriam-Webster dictionary announced their word of the year as "authentic". According to them, searches for the word "saw a substantial increase in 2023, driven by stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media"[114]. Singer-songwriter Taylor Swift is cited as playing a significant role in the increase of interest in the word authentic this year as the article states, "celebrities like singers Lainey Wilson, Sam Smith, and especially Taylor Swift all made headlines in 2023 with statements about seeking their 'authentic voice' and 'authentic self'"[115]. While I believe that Taylor Swift's authentic star image has been constructed in largely unseen ways since the beginning of her career, as academic scholar Michael Serazio describes how authenticity is made, not natural, "by professionals who construct, communicate and accentuate authenticity on behalf of their clients"[116], clearly, the concept is generating newfound examination in recent years with discourse such as articles published by the Merriam-Webster dictionary drawing attention to the word and how celebrities embody it.

In this section, I will employ the theoretical concepts of female artists constructing their authentic star image as defined by academic scholar Emma Mayhew in her journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity" authenticity in songwriters as defined by scholar Michael Serazio in his book, The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics, as well as the history of authenticity in the popular music as defined by scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* to understand how Taylor Swift's star image has been constructed. I will use

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[114] "Word of the Year 2023". *Merriam-Webster.* 27. Nov, 2023. para. 2 https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year
[115] "Word of the Year 2023" para. 4
[116] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics". *Stanford University Press.* 2023, 2

these concepts to examine three case studies, the first: Taylor Swift's third-studio album, *Speak Now,* from the fact that it was an entirely self-written album, to the media discourse surrounding its release, to analyzing three specific songs off the album, the second: media discourse after Taylor Swift switched genres from country music to pop music in 2014, and the third analyzing a speech Swift gave during her live *Eras Tour* performance, to ultimately argue that Taylor Swift's star image is constructed through a lens of authenticity.

In the span of her eighteen-year career, Taylor Swift has released ten studio-albums. However, I argue that one particular album, *Speak Now* released on October 25th, 2010[117] has been perhaps the most crucial to the construction of her authentic star image. I have chosen this album specifically to analyze for three reasons. The first, because the album was entirely self-written by Swift; she is the only writer credited on each of the songs. This plays a large role in the construction of her authentic star image as can be explained through the work of academic scholar Emma Mayhew in her journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity"[118]. The second reason I have selected *Speak Now* to analyze is because of the plethora of media discourse about identifying the subject of these songs from *Speak Now*. There is a pattern in the discourse surrounding Taylor Swift of media outlets including *Vulture, MTV,* and *Cosmopolitan* discussing her in terms of her relationships to men and speculating on which men her songs are about. This discourse has mostly taken the form of magazine articles, which work to attribute authenticity to Swift as can be explained by the work of academic scholar Michael Serazio in his book, *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and*

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[117] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[118] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity". *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.* (June 1999). P. 70

Politics[119]. The third reason I have chosen this album to analyze is because of how the songs themselves work to construct an authentic star image through their lyrics as can be explained by the work of academic scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*[120].

Speak Now as a Self-Written Album

First, we will examine the media discourse surrounding the fact that *Speak Now* is an entirely self-written album. As academic scholar Emma Mayhew highlights, it is especially important for women in constructing an authentic star image to write their own music. If they do not, they are criticized for their "seemingly lack of musical input"[121] and thus appear inauthentic. As Taylor Swift is a female artist, writing her own music was crucial to avoid being criticized in the media like Mayhew describes artist Kylie Minogue was when she was found to have not written her own music[122]. Mayhew cites a 1994 article written by D. Ridgers for *New Music Express,* a British music, film, and gaming magazine who in reviewing Minogue's album states, "Kylie actually co-wrote only one of the songs on her new album. For all the talk of 'expressing' herself, she hasn't suddenly become Sinead O'Connor"[123]. For reference, Sinead O'Connor is listed on *Biography.com* as a famous Irish "singer-songwriter" who unfortunately passed away in 2023[124], so it is likely the connection Ridgers is making here is that Sinead O' Connor expressed herself authentically because she sang the music that she wrote, whereas Kylie Minogue is not an authentic artist because she sings music other people write for her. In contrast to the discourse

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[119] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics". *Stanford University Press.* 2023
[120] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001
[121] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity"
[122] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity"
[123] Ibid
[124] Tyler Piccotti, "Sinèad O'Connor" *Biography.* https://www.biography.com/musicians/sinead-oconnor

surrounding Minogue's lack of self-written music in the mid 1990's, the discourse surrounding Taylor Swift, specifically in relation to her 2010 *Speak Now* album, has been a consistent pattern of emphasis on the fact that she writes her own music, thus attributing authenticity to her. This discourse has been perpetuated by both Taylor Swift herself in her social media posts and interviews, as well as has been perpetuated by different media outlets including *Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, People,* and *Billboard* magazine, as well as the media organization *NPR,* and online newspaper *The Washington Post* .

Taylor Swift herself has publicly addressed her *Speak Now* album as self-written both in interviews and social media posts. For example, in an August 2010 interview with *Entertainment Weekly,* an online-only entertainment magazine, Swift answers questions about her then upcoming album which journalist Tanner Stransky outlines in his article titled, "Taylor Swift Tells EW About New Album 'Speak Now': 'I've Covered Every Emotion that I've Felt in the Last Two Years"[125]. One of the interview questions that Stransky describes in his article says, "I would think that working on an album is stressful. But when you talk about working on *Speak Now,* you seem so happy. Was it a joyful process? Or was there a stressful part to making it?"[126]. Swift responds, " . . . if I've just written a song, I'm the happiest you will ever see me. But if I haven't written a song in a week and a half, I am more stressed than you will ever, ever see me at any other point. If I haven't written a song in more than about nine days, that's when I start to zone out in the middle of conversations because I'm thinking about what I could be writing about next . . ."[127]. By answering the question this way, Swift draws attention to the fact that her songs

[125] Tanner Stransky, "Taylor Swift Tells EW About New Album 'Speak Now': 'I've Covered Every Emotion that I've Felt in the Last Two Years", *Entertainment Weekly.* https://ew.com/article/2010/08/27/taylor-swift-speak-now-new-album/
[126] Tanner Stransky, "Taylor Swift Tells EW About New Album 'Speak Now': 'I've Covered Every Emotion that I've Felt in the Last Two Years", para 6
[127] Ibid, para 7

are self-written. In fact, the phrase "written a song" is spoken three separate times. There is no mention of working with a collaborator, instead she takes ownership of all the stress and joy that comes with writing music. Clearly, the fact that she writes her own music is something she wants her audience to understand. I believe that in drawing attention to the fact that she writes her own music, she is working to construct her own star image as authentic as this would be cause for her audience to attribute authenticity to her as an artist, as according to Mayhew, authenticity in female artists stems from them writing their own music[128].

Swift continued to discuss *Speak Now* through an emphasis on the fact that it was entirely self-written, even as recently as 2023. When *Speak Now* (Taylor's Version), the re-recording of the 2010 album, was announced by Swift in May 2023 to be released that upcoming July[129], she emphasized the fact that the album was self-written in a post on the social media platform X that reads, "I first made Speak Now, completely self-written, between the ages of 18 and 20. The songs that came from this time in my life were marked by their brutal honesty, unfiltered diaristic confessions and wild wistfulness. I love this album because it tells a tale of growing up, flailing, flying and crashing…and living to speak about it"[130]. In this post, Swift eloquently highlights once again, the fact that this was a self-written album. Even thirteen years later, establishing this fact to her audience appears to still be important to Taylor Swift. Therefore, Taylor Swift herself emphasizing the fact that *Speak Now,* was self-written appears to be a pattern in the discourse.

Additionally, it is not just Taylor Swift herself who discusses this album in terms of the fact that it was self-written. The media is consistent in addressing this fact about the creation of

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[128] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity". *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.* (June 1999). P. 70

[129] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[130] Taylor Swift (@taylorswift13), "I first made Speak Now, completely self-written", Twitter, May 5, 2023, 11:59 p.m., https://twitter.com/taylorswift13/status/1654697334012366849?lang=en

the *Speak Now* album as well. For example, in a *Rolling Stone* magazine article titled, "Taylor Swift 'Speak Now' Album Review", published in 2010 by journalist Rob Sheffield, he writes of the album that, "these 14 tunes chronicle the hopes and dreams of boy-crazy small-town Everygirls, and Swift wrote them all by herself"[131]. In another review of the album published in 2010 by *NPR,* journalist Ken Tucker writes, "an important selling point for her best-selling new album, *Speak Now,* is the way she uses her albums as musical diaries, writing songs that contain barely concealed allusions to the celebrities she's dated and been wounded by"[132]. Like Taylor Swift described how these songs were "diaristic"[133] in her 2023 social media post, so too does the media understand and speak about her album, emphasizing the fact that she wrote the songs on the album. After *Speak Now* (Taylor's Version) was released in July 2023, reviews continued highlighting the fact that it was a self-written album. An article published by *The Washington Post,* by journalist Emily Yahr, assures audiences that even though *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* was re-recorded, Swift, "did retain the sole writing credit . . . even with the six extra tracks 'from the vault'"[134]. Reviews of the album, even thirteen years later after its original release, are still highlighting the fact that the album was self-written, even the new songs Swift put on the re-recorded version of the album. Overall, there is clearly a pattern in the discourse emphasizing the fact that Taylor Swift's third studio-album *Speak Now,* is self-written as seen both through the

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[131] Rob Sheffield, "Taylor Swift "Speak Now" Album Review" *Rolling Stone.* October 26, 2010. para, 2 https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/speak-now-105838/

[132] Ken Tucker, "Taylor Swift: Country-Pop with Joyous Ambition" *NPR.* November 4, 2010. para 4 https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131070169

[133] Taylor Swift (@taylorswift13), "I first made Speak Now, completely self-written", Twitter, May 5, 2023, 11:59 p.m., https://twitter.com/taylorswift13/status/1654697334012366849?lang=en

[134] Emily Yahr, "What to Know About 'Speak Now' (Taylor's Version) As it Consumes the Internet"*The Washington Post.* July 7, 2023. Para, 6. https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2023/07/07/speak-now-taylors-version-album-release/

way Swift herself addresses the album, and the way various media outlets review the album. This is key to the construction of her identity as an authentic artist.

Speak Now **Through Taylor Swift's Relationships**

Next, I will address the second reason I have selected *Speak Now* to analyze. Another consistent pattern in the discourse surrounding this album has been the fact that certain songs on the album have been understood by the media as a direct reflection of men Taylor Swift had dated before the album was released. These articles work to construct an authentic star image for Swift which can be explained by academic scholar Michael Serazio's concept of authenticity as seen in his book, *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics.* According to Serazio, unlike actors who portray characters on screen living different lives than their own, songwriters' authenticity comes from their ability to write and sing about their own lives and stories[135]. While Swift herself has never directly confirmed nor denied the identity of her songs' subjects, multiple articles published after *Speak Now*'s release, speculated that certain songs were about men whom she was linked to dating in the past. These articles attribute authenticity to Swift as an artist, as according to Serazio, part of songwriters authenticity stems from them writing songs about their own lives.

One example of an article attributing authenticity to Swift, is a 2010 *Vulture* magazine article titled "Who Is Each Song on the New Taylor Swift Album About"[136] in which journalist Amos Barshad speculates on the subject of each song on *Speak Now.* He begins the article by claiming, "Taylor Swift never, ever makes up anything for her tales of young love and heartbreak"[137]. This attributes authenticity to Swift because it argues that she is writing about her

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[135] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics". *Stanford University Press.* 2023, 85

[136] Amos Barshad, "Who Is Each Song on the New Taylor Swift Album About" *Vulture.* https://www.vulture.com/2010/10/vulture_attempts_to_figure_out.html

[137] Amos Barshad, "Who Is Each Song on the New Taylor Swift Album About" para. 1

own real life experiences, not creating characters or singing about someone else's life. He then continues the article by addressing all fourteen songs on *Speak Now* with short paragraphs of who he thinks each song is about. Examples include speculation that the third track of the album, "Back to December" is about actor Taylor Lautner, the fifth track of the album "Dear John" is about singer John Mayer, and the sixth track of the album, "Mean" is about people who have been critics of Swift in the past[138].

Another example of an article speculating on who certain songs on *Speak Now* are about, is a 2010 article published by *MTV* titled, "Taylor Swift: 'Speak Now' Cheat Sheet: Everything You Need to Know"[139]. In this article, journalist Jocelyn Vena echoes journalist Amos Barshad claims that third track on *Speak Now* "Back to December" is about actor Taylor Lauter by stating, "Swift and 'Twilight' star Taylor Lautner famously dated in late 2009, and there are two tracks on the album that may give fans some insight into their relationship. It is widely believed that both 'Back to December' and 'Story of Us' are about the pair's romance"[140]. Here, we can already see a pattern in the discourse forming about the fact that the media has understood Swift's "Back to December" as being about Taylor Swift's real life relationship with actor Taylor Lautner. Additionally, Vena continues to claim that certain songs on *Speak Now* are about men Swift dated by stating, "in perhaps the most obvious reference on the track 'Dear John', Swift sings about feeling used by a boyfriend. It's widely believed that this person is John Mayer".[141] Again, a consistent pattern in the discourse that "Dear John" is about John Mayer. Finally, she writes, of Swift that, "she's not only addressing her love life on the album, but also her critics.

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[138] Ibid
[139] Jocelyn Vena, "Taylor Swift 'Speak Now' Cheat Sheet: Everything you Need to Know". *MTV.* https://www.mtv.com/news/t4ikm9/taylor-swift-speak-now-cheat-sheet-everything-you-need-to-know
[140] Jocelyn Vena, "Taylor Swift 'Speak Now' Cheat Sheet: Everything you Need to Know" para. 3
[141] Ibid para. 5

She takes a scathing jab at them on the track 'Mean'[142]. Once again, as with journalist Amos Barshad, Vena repeats speculation that "Dear John" is about John Mayer, while "Mean" addresses Taylor Swift's critics.

As with the pattern of media discourse understanding *Speak Now* as a self-written album continuing thirteen years later with the release of *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*[143], so to has the media discourse understanding the album as being written about Swift's real life experiences continued thirteen years later. For example, a 2023 article published by *Cosmopolitan* magazine titled, "Taylor Swift's Speak Now: Who are the Songs About"[144] explains to newer Taylor Swift fans who were perhaps not listening to the album when it was originally released in 2010, who the songs on *Speak Now* are about. Of the re-release journalist Furvah Shah writes, "seriously, it's like we've been transported back ten years!"[145]. She then reiterates the same discourse that journalists Amos Barshad and Jocelyn Vena had described years earlier when the album was first released, naming the same people they did as who she believes certain songs on *Speak Now* are about. She says, "the ultimate sad girl song for those who let a good one get away, Taylor reportedly wrote 'Back to December' about none other than *Twilight* heartthrob Taylor Lautner"[146]. She also says, "now, the name here pretty much gives it away but Taylor reportedly wrote the song 'Dear John' about John Mayer"[147]. She then reminds her audience, or explains for the first time, that, "Taylor and John dated between 2009 and 2010, with him joining her on stage to perform throughout her Fearless tour"[148]. In this sentence, Shah succinctly links a past

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[142] Ibid para. 7
[143] Speak Now (Taylor's Version) was released on July 7th, 2023
[144] Furvah Shah, "Taylor Swift's Speak Now: Who are the Songs About?" *Cosmopolitan.* https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44472412/taylor-swift-speak-now-who-are-the-songs-about/
[145] Furvah Shah, "Taylor Swift's Speak Now: Who are the Songs About?" para. 2
[146] Ibid para. 4
[147] Ibid para. 12
[148] Ibid para. 13

relationship of Swift's to this song, even linking the same person that journalists Barshad and Vena had in the past. Clearly, there is a pattern in the media discourse surrounding *Speak Now* understanding the album as largely being about past relationships of Swift's. This plays a role in the construction of her authentic star image, as these articles attribute authenticity to Swift by claiming that she is writing songs about her own personal life and experiences by writing about men she has dated. What seems to be important to the media when speaking about Swift is not the logistical process behind writing a song, the notes, the keys, etc, but instead the fact that the songs are about her own experiences. This has been a consistent pattern in the discourse. Next, we will look at three particular songs that I have selected as case studies, to see how the song lyrics themselves also play a role in the construction of her authentic star image as can be explained by the work of academic scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*[149]. The songs I have chosen include the third track on the album, "Back to December ", the fifth track, "Dear John", and the sixth track, "Mean".

Back to December

The first song I will be describing, "Back to December", the third track on *Speak Now,* begins instrumentally with a variety of instruments working together to create a sound that sets the tone for the rest of the song as melancholic. While Swift herself has never confirmed it, this song is rumored to be about her relationship with Taylor Launter, whom she was spotted going on a few dates with in the year 2009. As *People* magazine reports, "Taylor Swift and Taylor Launter's short-lived romance is forever memorialized in the singer's music"[150]. The soft

[149] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001

[150] Kelsie Gibson, "Taylor Swift and Taylor Lautner's Relationship: A Look Back". *People.* Updated on July 19, 2023, https://people.com/music/taylor-swift-and-taylor-lautner-relationship-timeline/

melodies of the beginning continue into the first few song lyrics as Swift sings, "I'm so glad you made time to see me/ how's life, tell me how's your family?/ I haven't seen them in awhile"[151]. There is a distinct sadness in Swift's voice as she sings these lyrics, that between her tone of voice and the lyrics themselves, tells the listener that this is likely a conversation happening between Swift and someone she used to know very well, and is now distant from. As the song progresses, we learn that she is likely speaking to someone she used to be romantically involved with, as she sings, "you gave me roses, and I left them there to die"[152]. The act of giving someone a rose typically symbolizes a romantic relationship, and the fact that she "left them there to die" indicates a relationship that is now dead, or over. Within the next few lines, we discover that Swift was the one who ended the relationship as she sings the line, "you gave me all your love, and all I gave you was goodbye"[153]. Her tone is sorrowful and reflective, likely regretting the decision to end the relationship. Then, in the chorus, her feeling of regret is confirmed. She sings, "so this is me swallowing my pride/ standing in front of you, saying, 'I'm sorry for that night'/ and I go back to December all the time/ it turns out freedom ain't nothing but missing you/ wishing I'd realized what I had when you were mine"[154]. As the song continues into the bridge, we learn more details about the relationship with the line, "and how you held me in your arms that September night/ the first time you ever saw me cry"[155]. Then, Swift sings the chorus again and the song concludes.

Dear John

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[151] Taylor Swift, "Back to December", Republic Records, 2023 https://music.apple.com/us/album/back-to-december-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840121
[152] Taylor Swift, "Back to December"
[153] Ibid
[154] Ibid
[155] Ibid

The next song I have chosen as a case study to analyze is the song, “Dear John”, the fifth track on *Speak Now.* The title of the song indicates a potential reference to a “Dear John” letter that was popular during World War II as a letter written by a woman to a soldier whom she was breaking up with. Using only the soldier's name and not a term of endearment in addressing the letter was a sign that the letter would contain news of a breakup instead of good news[156]. As we will see, Swift’s “Dear John” is also about a failed relationship. Additionally, although Swift has never confirmed it, rumors have circulated for years, perpetrated by media outlets like *People,* that the song is about John Mayer, whom Swift was romantically linked to in late 2009 and early 2010 when she was nineteen years old and Mayer was thirty two years old[157]. “Dear John" begins in a similar way to “Back to December", instrumentally with a tone of sadness.. The song picks up during the chorus as Swift sings, “Dear John, I see it all now that you’re gone/ don’t you think I was too young to be messed with? / the girl in the dress cried the whole way home/ I should’ve known”[158]. These lyrics indicate the fact that Swift is singing about a relationship that has ended, one that has left her heartbroken as she describes herself crying and having feelings of regret. The song continues during the bridge as she sings, “don’t you think nineteen’s too young to be played by/ your dark twisted games when I loved you so?”[159] In directly stating her age, alludes to the fact that perhaps Swift is describing a relationship between herself and someone much older, who manipulated her. As John Mayer was thirteen years older than Swift at the time they were thought to have been together, it is not a stretch to believe that the song is about him[160].

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[156] Susan L. Carruthers, “How World War II’s ‘Dear John’ Letters Changed American Society” *Time.* February 14th, 2022. https://time.com/6137746/dear-john-letters-world-war-ii/
[157] Sophie Dodd, “Taylor Swift and John Mayer’s Relationship: A Look Back” *People.* Updated on July 6, 2023 https://people.com/music/taylor-swift-john-mayer-relationship-timeline/
[158] Taylor Swift, “Dear John”, Republic Records, 2023 https://music.apple.com/us/album/dear-john-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840371
[159] Taylor Swift, “Dear John”
[160] Sophie Dodd, “Taylor Swift and John Mayer’s Relationship: A Look Back”

This idea that Swift was manipulated is reinforced as she sings, “you are an expert at sorry/ and keeping lines blurry / never impressed by me acing your tests / all the girls that you’ve run dry / have tired, lifeless eyes ‘cause you burned them out/ but I took your matches before fire could catch me”[161]. These lyrics are filled with emotion as she seemingly confronts her abuser, and attempts to regain a sense of empowerment by describing how in the end, she got away from their manipulation and deception.

Mean

The final song that I will be describing that I believe merits further analysis, is the sixth track on *Speak Now,* titled, “Mean”. Unlike “Back to December" and “Dear John” which are ballads of heartbreak and loss, the tone of “Mean” is upbeat and spirited. The subject of “Mean” while not confirmed by Swift, is rumored by outlets like *People* magazine in an article titled, “Who Are Taylor Swift’s Speak Now Songs About? What She Has Said About the Inspirations”[162] to be about critic Bob Lefsetz who, “reviewed her 2010 Grammys performance on his blog Lefsetz Letter by calling her ‘young and dumb’ declaring that she ‘can’t sing’ and had ‘destroyed her career overnight’”[163]. The song begins with Swift singing the lyrics, “you, with your words like knives and swords/ and weapons that you use against me”.[164] Swift continues describing the ways in which she’s been hurt, likely by critic Bob Lefsetz’s review, as she sings the chorus of the song, “someday I’ll be living in a big old city/ and all you’re ever

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[161] Taylor Swift, “Dear John”, Republic Records, 2023 https://music.apple.com/us/album/dear-john-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840371

[162] Kelsie Gibson, “Who Are Taylor Swift’s Speak Now Songs About? What She Has Said About the Inspirations”. *People.* https://people.com/who-are-taylor-swift-speak-now-songs-about-7557272#:~:text=Swift's%20song%20%E2%80%9CMean%E2%80%9D%20is%20rumored,%E2%80%9Cdestroyed%20her%20career%20overnight.%22

[163] Kelsie Gibson, “Who Are Taylor Swift’s Speak Now Songs About? What She Has Said About the Inspirations”, para 24

[164] Taylor Swift, “Mean”, Republic Records, 2023, https://music.apple.com/us/album/mean-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840385

gonna be is mean/ someday I'll big enough so you can't hit me/ and all you're ever gonna be is mean/ why you gotta be so mean?"[165]. In these lyrics, her voice is strong as she attempts to take back power from the negativity she received in the media. A few lines later she sings, "And I can see you years from now in a bar/ talking over a football game, with that same big, loud opinion/ but nobody's listening/ washed up and ranting about the same old bitter things/ drunk and grumbling on about how I can't sing/ but all you are is mean"[166]. These lines showcase Swift's determination to stand up for herself against her adversaries who do not believe she can sing. In "Mean", she dismisses these claims as no more than the grumblings of old men who do not matter. Overall, Swift's lyrics in "Mean" are slightly different from "Back to December" and "Dear John", as in this song she seems to be singing about standing up for herself against people who believe she is untalented.

Lyrical Analysis

Now that we have a more in- depth understanding of these three songs, I will now analyze how Taylor Swift's authentic star image is constructed through the lyrics of "Back to December", "Dear John ", and"Mean ". I will analyze these lyrics using academic scholar Simon Frith's theoretical concept of key features that define pop music, and Keir Knightley's concept of romantic authenticity, as well as academic scholar Michael Serazio's concept of authenticity in the popular music industry. The emotionally ridden lyrics of "Back to December", "Dear John", and "Mean" suggest that these songs fit into the genre of popular music, a genre that Frith describes in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* was created by the music industry to control an unreliable demand in the music market, a place where singers express, "commonplace

[165] Taylor Swift, "Mean".
[166] Ibid

feelings" such as "love, loss, jealousy"[167]. As "Back to December" is about love and loss, particularly the tragedy of realizing you love someone too late, it fits into this category of pop music as Frith describes. The lyrics in the chorus, "so this is me swallowing my pride/ standing in front of you, saying, 'I'm sorry for that night'/ and I go back to December all the time/ it turns out freedom ain't nothing but missing you/ wishing I'd realized what I had when you were mine"[168] are particularly emotional, expressing two of the commonplace feelings that Frith describes, both love and loss. "Dear John" is similar in that it expresses these commonplace feelings, perhaps in an even more emotional way with the lyrics, "Dear John, I see it all now that you're gone/ don't you think I was too young to be messed with? / the girl in the dress cried the whole way home/ I should've known"[169]. These lyrics express the commonplace feeling of sadness and loss as they work to tell a story of an emotional breakup for Swift, one where perhaps she was manipulated by someone much older than herself. The song "Mean" describes a different commonplace feeling than Frith directly describes, but one that I still argue allows the song to fit into the category of popular music. These lyrics from, "Mean" "someday I'll be living in a big old city/ and all you're ever gonna be is mean/ someday I'll be big enough so you can't hit me/ and all you're ever gonna be is mean/ why you gotta be so mean?"[170] describe the commonplace feeling of resilience, and standing up for yourself in the face of adversity. Therefore, as these songs all describe commonplace feelings, as defined by academic scholar Frith, these songs fit into the popular music category genre, which aids in the construction of her

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[167] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001, 96
[168] Taylor Swift, "Back to December", Republic Records, 2023 https://music.apple.com/us/album/back-to-december-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840121
[169] Taylor Swift, "Dear John", Republic Records, 2023 https://music.apple.com/us/album/dear-john-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840371
[170] Taylor Swift, "Mean", Republic Records, 2023, https://music.apple.com/us/album/mean-taylors-version/1690839749?i=1690840385

authentic star image as she is singing about commonplace emotions that arguably everyone feels at one point in their lives or another.

Additionally, these lyrics are crucial to analyze because they showcase her ability to write songs that remain broad enough that a wide variety of listeners can relate to them. Frith describes this as singers being able to, "lay their personality on a song such that we can make it our song too"[171]. Swift embodies this concept as within her lyrics, she never directly addresses the person she is singing to by name, instead only using the identifier "you". For example, in "Back to December" she sings, "you gave me roses, and I left them there to die"[172]. Even though the song is rumored to be about Taylor Launter, she does not address him in the song by saying "Taylor Lautner gave me roses". She leaves it open to interpretation for her audience to make the song theirs and relate it to someone in their own lives. Although it is important in constructing an authentic star image for artists to sing about their real-world experiences, according to Frith, listeners still need to be able to relate to the songs. Another example of allowing listeners to make a song their own lies in the lyrics to "Dear John". Swift does not directly name John Mayer in the song "Dear John", even though the song has his name in the title, it is open to interpretation that it could also just be a reference to a "Dear John" letter from World War II. As in "Back to December" she uses the word, "you" when she sings the lyrics, "don't you think I was too young?"[173]. She does not say, "John Mayer, don't you think I was too young", which allows listeners to make the song their own. This idea is also seen in the song, "Mean". This song is perhaps the most open for interpretation, with the least amount of clues for who it could really be about. Listeners have the ability to imagine whomever they want when singing along to

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[171] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001, 98
[172] Taylor Swift, "Back to December"
[173] Taylor Swift, "Dear John"

the lines, “all you are is mean”[174]. Therefore, I argue that these song lyrics from *Speak Now,* were chosen specifically to assist in the construction of Taylor Swift’s star image, as they allow her to be a successful pop singer. The lyrics fit both Frith’s requirements for a song to be considered pop, as well as the ability for listeners to make a song their own.

Real-World Experiences

Earlier we examined how the media has understood *Speak Now* to be about Taylor Swift’s real-world experiences. Now, I will examine examples of how Swift’s lyrics themselves perpetuate the narrative that she is singing about her real-world experiences, as I argue that Taylor Swift’s star image was constructed through the authenticity reflected in singing about her real-world experiences. As academic Michael Serazio states when describing how authenticity is made in the popular music industry, “the identity and lifestyle of the musician has to be authentic to their output; that is, a novelist, filmmaker, or actor need not to have lived their characters and stories quite as much as expected of songwriting counterparts”[175]. By these standards, I believe that Taylor Swift’s stardom was constructed authentically as she sings about her own personal experiences in her music. For example, in “Back to December” she sings the line, “and how you held me in your arms that September night/ the first time you ever saw me cry”[176]. Many people have argued that this line references the 2009 VMA awards, which were hosted on September 13th, 2009. These awards, as discussed in my background chapter, saw the interruption of Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech after winning an award by Kanye West who stormed the stage and started shouting about how artist Beyoncè should have won the award instead. Taylor Lautner, who is rumored to be the subject of Swift’s “Back to December”, was the one who presented

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[174] Taylor Swift, “Mean”.
[175] Michael Serazio, “The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics”. *Stanford University Press.* 2023, 85
[176] Taylor Swift, “Back to December”

Swift with the VMA that night, and witnessed the entire interaction on stage[177]. As they were also rumored to be dating at this time, it is likely that he is the one who comforted her after this onstage disaster. Therefore, Swift sings about her own personal experiences, which according to Serazio is key to the construction of her identity as an authentic artist.

Another way we can understand the construction of Swift's authentic star image is through academic scholar Keir Keightley's theoretical concept of romantic authenticity. He describes this concept as being seen through artists singing about personal experiences, for example, "the Romantic artist was seen to be involved in a personal journey of self-discovery and fulfillment, through the direct expression of his or her innermost thoughts and emotions"[178]. I argue that Swift's authenticity has been constructed along the lines of this romantic authenticity, as her songs appear to contain her innermost thoughts and feelings. For example, in "Dear John" when she sings, "don't you think I was too young to be messed with/ the girl in the dress cried the whole way home"[179]. Also, in "Mean" when she sings, "you have knocked me off my feet again, got me feeling like a nothing"[180]. While Swift may have felt exactly these emotions of sadness and loss, I offer another possible explanation that at the very least, these lyrics were chosen specifically because they assist in the construction of her authentic star image because of how open and honest they are. These fall under the lines of romantic authenticity as scholar Keightley describes. Swift's authentic star image is also highlighted in the media, specifically in a 2010 published by *MTV*, shortly after the release of the *Speak Now* album, titled, "How Did Taylor Swift's 'Speak Now' Sell A Million In a Week". In this article, there is a quote from a

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[177] Constance Grady, "How the Taylor Swift-Kanye West VMAs Scandal Became a Perfect American Morality Tale". *Vox.* August 26th, 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/26/20828559/taylor-swift-kanye-west-2009-mtv-vmas-explained
[178] Ibid, 135
[179] Taylor Swift, "Dear John"
[180] Taylor Swift, "Mean"

member of *Billboard,* a music based magazine, who says about Swift's power to sell albums, "people feel that she's speaking from the heart and making a very personal statement. The songs come from her heart and talk about her feelings. You feel like you have more of a connection with her than other artists". Essentially, what he is outlining here without directly saying, is that Swift's songs feel authentic. Her song lyrics aid to her authentic star image, specifically "Back to December", "Dear John", and "Mean" as they are all arguably about her real-world experiences. This aids to the construction of her authentic star image. Overall, we can understand the *Speak Now* album as essential to the construction of Taylor Swift's authentic star image.

Country to Pop

As we saw in my background chapter, Taylor Swift's star image is not fixed. Instead, its flexibility has actually been one of her greatest assets in maintaining an authentic star image. For example, after eight years of releasing country albums, in 2014 Swift released her first ever pop album, *1989*[181]. This album came as a direct response to discourse that had been circulating for a few years that her previous album, *Red* released in 2012[182] as country, should have been labeled pop. *Saving Country Music* magazine published an article in 2012 titled, "No Really, Taylor Swift's 'We Are Never Ever . . . Is Not Country"[183]. The unnamed journalist is describing track number eight on Swift's *Red,* called, "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together". Within the article, they say of the song, "you can make a clear case that this is the first song ever that is 100% certified pop, yet is somehow labeled country"[184]. Additionally, *Bustle* magazine,

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[181] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

[182] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings"

[183] "No Really, Taylor Swift's 'We Are Never Ever . . . Is Not Country". *Saving Country Music.* October 19th, 2012. https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/no-really-taylor-swifts-we-are-never-ever-is-not-country/

[184] "No Really, Taylor Swift's 'We Are Never Ever . . . Is Not Country" para 1

described *Red,* as "mostly pop music with a few songs that could kinda, sorta be considered country, if you tilt your head and squint"[185]. Instead of denying these claims, a few years later in 2014, Swift seemed to lean into claims that her music was no longer country but pop, by re-branding herself as a pop music artist, with the release of *1989.* When doing promos for the album's release, Swift said, "with my last album *Red,* I kind of had one foot in pop and one foot in country, and that's really no way to walk and get anywhere"[186]. Arguably, she wanted to appear more authentic to the media, who after the release of *Red* alluded to the fact that she was inauthentic by attempting to be something she was not, a pop artist releasing country labeled songs. Genre labeling is important to the popular music industry and authenticity, a concept that is described by Simon Frith in the book, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock.* According to Frith, "pop music marketing has always meant marketing different types of music to different types of consumers"[187]. According to media discourse after the release of *Red,* Swift was seemingly attempting to market music to the wrong brand of consumer which made her an inauthentic artist. However, she was able to rectify the situation by leaning into pop music entirely and releasing her first pop album, *1989.* Therefore, making an official genre switch from country music to pop music, was a crucial moment to the construction of her authentic star image.

Authenticity in *The Eras Tour*

Finally, I will briefly analyze a moment during Taylor Swift's most recent live performance, *The Eras Tour,* that I believe is crucial to understanding the construction of her

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[185] Nicole Pomarico, "Is Taylor Swift Still Country?" *Bustle.* December 2, 2014. Para 1. https://www.bustle.com/articles/51729-is-taylor-swift-still-a-country-artist-this-girl-has-seemingly-gone-full-pop

[186] Nicole Pomarico, "Is Taylor Swift Still Country?" para 3

[187] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001, 87

authentic star image. Disney recently distributed a recording of *The Eras Tour* on their streaming service, Disney Plus[188], which has brought this moment further into mainstream public view. In the recording of the performance, moments before Swift launches into singing her 2019 song, "Lover", rumored to be about her ex-boyfriend actor Joe Alywn[189], to a crowd of fans in California, she addresses the crowd in a speech. At around minute 15 minutes and 50 seconds, Swift says as she lightly strums her guitar, "let me tell you my secret little dream for this evening. So these are songs that I have written about my life or things I felt at one point in time, whether I was a teenager, in my 20s, or a couple years ago, but after tonight when you hear these songs out and about in the world my dream is that you're gonna think about tonight and the memories we made here together at SOFI stadium!"[190]. Although these are just a few sentences, there is a lot to unpack about how they work to construct her authentic star image. For example, in the speech, she once again emphasizes the fact that she writes songs about her own life and personal experiences, which as academic scholar Emma Mayhew notes is important in the construction of the authenticity of female performers[191] in her academic article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity". However, Swift also emphasizes the fact that even though these songs are about her life and experiences, she invites her audience to make them their own as well. This is reflective of academic scholar Simon Frith's theoretical concept of successful pop singers being able to create songs that are broad enough for a wide variety of

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[188] Monica Mercuri, "What Time is "Taylor Swift" The Eras Tour (Taylor's Version) Premiering on Disney +" *Forbes.* March 14, 2024. https://www.forbes.com/sites/monicamercuri/2024/03/14/when-is-taylor-swift-the-eras-tour-taylors-version-coming-to-disney/?sh=3239363c6561

[189] Claudia Harmanta, "Taylor Swift Says She Knew 'Lover' Would Be Her Title Track and Shares Its 'Special Meaning'". *People.* https://people.com/music/taylor-swift-opens-up-about-lover-and-its-special-meaning/

[190] *Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour (Taylor's Version),* directed by Sam Wrench. (2024).

[191] Emma Mayhew, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity". *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.* (June 1999).

listeners to relate to[192]. Essentially, she seems to be saying that even though these songs are about her life, namely past relationships she has been in, she appears to want her fans to make the songs their own, thinking of their own experiences when they listen to them as well. Be it their own relationships, or their time spent singing the songs at *The Eras Tour.* I am of the opinion that Swift, or her team, did not choose to say this exact phrase lightly, and in fact it was chosen specifically to aid in the construction of her authentic star image. As authenticity is constructed, not natural, as academic scholar Michael Serazio notes is a regular occurrence in the popular music industry[193], it is likely that these words were not naturally spoken offhandedly by Swift, but instead were specifically chosen and phrased in a particular way to construct her authentic star image. Overall, I argue that Taylor Swift's star image was constructed through a lens of authenticity as seen through media understanding of her *Speak Now* album, and through the songs themselves, namely, "Back to December", "Dear John", and "Mean", and was constructed through her shift to pop music in 2014 with the release of *1989,* as well as was constructed during her live performances in *The Eras Tour*.

[192] Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street, "The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock" *New York: Cambridge University Press.* 2001
[193] Michael Serazio, "The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics". *Stanford University Press.* 2023

Conclusion

As we have seen, Taylor Swift's star image is constructed through a lens of authenticity. The work of academic scholars Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street in their book *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* Michael Serazio in his book, *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics,* and finally the work of academic scholar Emma Mayhew in her journal article, "Women in Popular Music and the Construction of Authenticity" have all been useful to apply to analyzing specific moments of Taylor Swift's career that have aided in the construction of her authentic star image. I have argued that Swift's authentic star image has been constructed through her third studio-album, *Speak Now,* from the way the media made sense of the album as entirely self-written, to the way they understood the album as being reflective of Swift's relationships, and finally through the lyrics themselves specifically on three songs, "Back to December", "Dear John", and "Mean". Swift's authentic star image has also been constructed through media discourse surrounding her genre shift from releasing music under a country label at the beginning of her career with her debut album in 2006, her second album *Fearless* released in 2008, her third album *Speak Now* released in 2010, and her final country album *Red* released in 2012, to releasing her first album under a pop label, *1989,* in 2014[194]. And finally we have seen how Swift's authentic star image has been constructed through a speech where she addresses fans during one of her live performances on, *The Eras Tour,* where she encourages her fans to apply her songs to their own lives. Now, I make no claim that these are the only moments in Swift's career that have aided in the construction of her authentic star image. In fact, I'm not sure it would be possible to outline every single moment that has aided in its construction. A project attempting to detail every moment would

[194] Lydia Venn, "Taylor Swift Albums: Every Album in Order and the Complete Track Listings". *Cosmopolitan.* Updated October 27th, 2023. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a44471722/taylor-swift-albums/

likely need to take the form of a book. In my opinion, further moments that could be analyzed, that I wish I had the space to have included in this project, include, the 2020 *Miss Americana* documentary on Netflix where Taylor Swift reflects on her career, as well as the 2023 and 2024 phenomenon of fans gathering on the social media platform, *TikTok,* to watch live streams of Swift's *Eras Tour,* where they communicated with one another via the chat section and watched as Swift gave variations of her different speeches throughout the night in real time. There are many different directions future research of this topic could take.

As a Taylor Swift fan researching how her star image has been constructed, I have to admit it has been slightly disheartening to learn that her actions, the songs she releases, her word choices during interviews, are not natural, but instead have been constructed to suit the particular need of maintaining stardom. Of course, I knew to some extent that this was the case, but after completing this project it has become clearer. Almost every new interview I watch or song I listen to, I wonder about how it is working to assist in the construction of her authentic star image. Of course, I cannot deny that I am still a fan of Taylor Swift; I have just learned that her authenticity and therefore relatability is constructed, not natural.

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