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“Got a Long List of Ex-lovers, They’ll Tell You I’m Insane”:
Gender, Agency, and Image in Taylor Swift’s Lyrics Over Time

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June 2023

Sociology Honors Thesis

Advised by Janice McCabe

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Sociology

Dartmouth College



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to start by thanking my incredible thesis advisor, Professor McCabe. This project would not exist if I hadn't taken two of your classes back to back and felt so supported the entire way through by you. I also want to thank my second reader, Professor Walton, for her incredible advice and enthusiasm for the topic. And of course, thank you to the Sociology department at Dartmouth for allowing me to do a project that I am truly passionate about.

Obviously, this project would not be possible without Taylor Swift herself. Thank you to her for baring her soul to the world for nearly the past two decades, for putting so much love and care into her albums, tours, and performances, for articulating experiences that make so many people feel less alone in this world. I've loved her music for as long as I can remember, and being able to work on a project like this that honors her in some small way is a dream come true.

Thank you to my mom, my dad, and my brother, for always supporting me even when I want to do things that don't seem conventional or proper. I know you're always in my corner regardless of what I choose to do, and that support has been the biggest factor in every triumph I've had throughout my life. Even though we don't all measure success in the same ways, your unwavering love and acceptance means the world to me.

Lastly, thank you to my friends, Emma Briskin, Dagny Scannell, Erich Woo, and especially Sam Hedley, for helping me in many ways throughout this project. Thank you to Emma for being a steadfast sounding board for me as a fellow Swiftie, to Dagny for being endlessly supportive and keeping me afloat during the countless obstacles I've faced, to Erich for always making me laugh in my darkest times, and to Sam, for spending countless hours fleshing out my thesis, helping with my presentation, lifting me up when I felt like this project would never be finished, and for being the best friend I could dream of. You are all my daylight.

ABSTRACT

As a globally renowned superstar, Taylor Swift's lyrics not only reflect notions of gender on a culture level, but also influence them, as language both reflects and constructs society. The purpose of my project is to identify how Taylor Swift's lyrics surrounding conceptions of gender, agency, and image have changed over the course of her career in order to better understand the messages she disseminates to the world. My central research questions are: How do Taylor Swift's lyrics display different types of femininity, such as normative or deviant femininity, over time? How do Swift's varying conceptualizations of her gender identity interact with her personal agency and her image as a celebrity? I conducted a content analysis on the entire population of Swift's songs through her seventh album, which was released in 2019. Content analysis is well suited for this project because it describes both the general themes in Swift's music as well as the longitudinal changes within these themes. I deductively created a coding sheet based on my literature review, focusing on normative and deviant notions of femininity. I also inductively incorporated codes about celebrity branding and personal agency as they arose during the data collection and preliminary analyses. By applying theoretical notions of gender and how it relates to agency as well as celebrity branding, drawing on literature from Bay-Cheng and Lieb, I will investigate the implications of Swift's discography. To my knowledge, this is the first content analysis of Taylor Swift's lyrics, making it a novel contribution to the research literature. Due to Swift's global reach, it is important to understand how the messages she disseminates around gender have changed in order to extrapolate these ideas to how her listeners may be influenced by her lyrics. This study contributes to sociological research by dissecting how sociological conceptions of normative and deviant femininity are reflected in popular music as well as providing a framework for future research of a similar structure.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

As evident from the title of this thesis, “*Got a Long List of Ex-lovers, They’ll Tell You I’m Insane*,” Taylor Swift has “been through the wringer” when it comes to love. How did she evolve from the innocent country girl who wrote about first loves in “Love Story” to the jaded popstar of “Blank Space”? My project covers how Swift’s lyrical rhetoric in relation to normative and deviant notions of femininity within heterosexual relationships has changed over time, from the start of her career in 2006 through her 2019 album. By analyzing her first seven albums, from *Taylor Swift* to *Lover*, I seek to understand how her depictions of femininity, her power, and her branding have changed over the course of her career. As the most streamed woman on Spotify with 12 Grammy wins and 9 songs claiming Billboard’s top spot, Swift is an essential artist to study. She has a far-reaching fanbase, predominantly made up of young women, and her career has spanned nearly two decades, making her an incredibly influential artist. Based on her popularity and longevity, it is important to dissect what her lyrics portray about what it means to be a woman, specifically in relation to gender norms and agency.

It is essential to study music in relation to gender because song lyrics can influence social attitudes. As Smiler et al. argue, most young people learn about romance through media consumption (Smiler et al. 2017: 1084). Cooper also argues that not only do song lyrics reflect certain social attitudes, but they also construct social attitudes and therefore play a powerful role in maintaining or dismantling sociological systems (Cooper 1985: 504). Albers and Bach (2003: 237) point out that song lyrics can also be used as a pedagogical tool for sociology because they serve as real-world examples of sociological concepts. It follows that Taylor Swift lyrics have a pedagogical influence because they both construct and perpetuate notions of femininity which

are then transferred to her listeners, who are susceptible to learning about these topics through popular culture.

While not the focus of this thesis, a bit of background on how the public and media view Taylor Swift is helpful context in understanding her image and how it has changed over time. The general consensus, as reflected by many conversations I have had throughout the years with friends and family, has been that Swift merely dates men to break up with them and write songs, therefore furthering her career. Critics often bring up this theme in their reviews of her albums. In a review of her 2008 album *Fearless*, critic Jody Rosen references Swift's penchant for writing about romance, stating that throughout the album "she mostly sticks to her favorite topic — boys, boys, boys— in songs filed neatly under 'love-struck' or 'pissed off'" (Rosen 2008). In a review of her next album, 2010's *Speak Now*, Rolling Stone's Rob Sheffield (2010) describes one of her breakup songs, joking that "we can already tell this guy's going to be long forgotten by the next song." Sheffield implies that Swift moves through guys quickly, viewing them as fleeting love songs instead of as real people. In a review of her 2012 album *Red*, Sheffield (2012) states that "Like Kanye West, Taylor Swift is a turbine of artistic ambition and superstar drama." Not only is it interesting to compare her to someone who publicly interrupted her three years earlier as she accepted her VMA, but this remark reflects the broader notion that Swift is merely an overdramatic and juvenile songwriter.

In a review of *1989*, Swift's 2014 album, Sheffield (2014) declares that the album "is a drastic departure — only a couple of tracks feature her trademark tear-stained guitar. But she's still Taylor Swift, which means she's dreaming bigger and oversharing louder than anyone else in the game. And she still has way too many feelings for the kind of dudes who probably can't even spell 'feelings.'" The author notes the genre change in this album but also implies that her

penchant for loudly oversharing has remained consistent. The image of Swift rambling on about her personal problems to anyone who will listen is striking and paints Swift in a similar light as in the *Red* review: she is a dramatic, boy-crazy little girl who does not know how to keep her feelings in check. *reputation* was a highly contentious album, mainly due to its dramatic genre shift and drastic lyrical change. In a review of the 2017 album, Sheffield (2017) notes Swift's intense focus on her reputation, remarking to "make no mistake, this girl's love affair with drama is alive and well." Sheffield (2017) adds that the majority of the songs on *reputation* are love songs, noting that "that's a daring swerve from a songwriter who's scored so many brilliant hits about pursuing the next romantic high. Taylor might love the players, but nowhere near as much as she loves the game." The idea that Swift enjoys her romantic lovers but enjoys writing about their relationships even more echoes earlier criticisms about her habit of writing love songs and directly references her hit single "Blank Space" from *1989*.

Despite the criticism she faced for *reputation*, *Lover* was received in a more forgiving manner. As Nick Catucci (2019) says, "it feels like an epiphany: free and unhurried, governed by no one concept or outlook, it represents Swift at her most liberated, enjoying a bit of the freedom she won for her cohort." At last, Swift's lyrics were viewed as a liberation from societal expectations. Catucci (2019) continues by saying "in sharing her actual feelings about relationships chronicled by the tabloids — and parrying the entire internet's judgements of those feelings — Swift helped open up a space for Ariana Grande to directly address Sean, Pete, and Malcolm on 'Thank U, Next' (to name one glorious example)" Swift paved the way for other female artists to frankly share about their love lives because she faced criticism head-on.

However, the idea of Swift as a chronic, boy-obsessed dater is still prevalent in popular media. Despite the fact that until a few months ago, Swift had been in a stable relationship with

one man for the past six years and has not written a breakup song based on her own experiences since her 2014 album *1989*, just recently (as in, 2021), however, the Netflix show *Ginny and Georgia* made a sexist and outdated joke about Swift's dating history: "You go through men faster than Taylor Swift." The fact that comments like this are still seen as a "funny" way to be relatable to the show's target audience, which is presumably Generation Z, goes to show how Swift's dating history is ingrained in the popular culture, even though in reality, she does not behave in the same way anymore.

In this project, I conduct a content analysis of Taylor Swift's entire discography, up until her 2019 album. Using deductive and inductive codes that track conceptions of femininity, masculinity, power, and other topics, this study analyzes how Taylor Swift portrays gender, agency, and image in her lyrics. This project descriptively tracks the changes in Taylor Swift's notions of gender and relationships. I investigate the cultural significance of her lyrics as well as the potential reasons why her lyrics have shifted. I apply both Bay-Cheng et al.'s (2018) work on female agency as well as Lieb's (2018) work on female celebrity branding to my findings in order to understand the potential implications of how Taylor Swift's lyrics reflect her perceptions of her own agency and image. This project sheds light on how female celebrities move through their careers, starting by highlighting high levels of normative femininity and therefore low levels of agency, then drawing on deviant ideas of femininity to demonstrate their newfound personal agency, then lastly, in the case of Taylor Swift, having a comeback that allows for multidimensionality in both femininity and agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender: Theoretical Perspectives and Normative Versus Deviant Conceptions of Gender

As this project is concerned with gender and its relationship with personal agency, it is useful to apply Schippers' perspective on hegemonic femininity, which functions as another term for normative femininity for the purposes of my project. Schippers (2007: 94) builds on West and Zimmerman's seminal piece, first by establishing that "masculinity and femininity are conceptualized here as produced, contested, and transformed through discursive processes, and therefore embedded within and productive of power relations." According to Connell (1995), who write about hegemonic masculinity, masculinity and femininity are intrinsically related to societal power dynamics. Schippers goes on to define "hegemonic femininity" as a continuation of Connell's notion of "hegemonic masculinity," stating that it "consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimize a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2007: 94). The central notion of normative femininity is that it is subordinate to normative masculinity; if normative femininity is definitionally less powerful than normative masculinity, then adhering to gender norms or deviating from them is intrinsically tied to personal power.

As Connell and Schippers allude to, there are certain norms attached to both hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity. Reich et al.'s (2018) article about Lego sets and their gendered tendencies outline traditional notions of femininity, such as "Helping, sharing, and caring" and "Beauty/attractiveness" for girls (2018: 290). Based on David and Brannon's work (1976), some important themes of hegemonic masculinity include the following key elements: "Self-reliance element," "Aggressive element," and "Sexual element." In contrast to these themes of male dominance and sexuality, relevant themes of femininity include "Dependency"

and “Nurturance.” Additionally, Virginia Cooper’s coding categories also influenced and reinforced mine, specifically “Woman as evil,” “Need for man,” “Possession of man,” and “Woman as delicate” (1985: 501). Through these key themes I not only gained an understanding of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity but also discerned deviant notions of femininity, such as dominance, success, and sexual prowess, which informed my coding sheet (see Appendix A).

Agency: Female Sexuality and Power in Relationships

As I established earlier, femininity and agency are inextricably linked, and one pillar of femininity is sexual activity. Swift is an artist who has been criticized for her sexuality; over time, she has gone from an innocent country singer to a sexually explicit popstar. A helpful guide for understanding how society views women and their sexualities is Bay-Cheng et al.’s piece, which uses survey results to analyze the intersection between sexual activity and perceived agency. They measure perceptions on the warmth versus competence scale, factoring in agency as a third axis. The authors place female sexuality into four categories, measuring sexual activity versus agency. Virgins, who are sexually inactive and agentic, were largely beloved; Agents, who are sexually active and agentic, were largely coolly respected; Losers, who are sexually inactive and non-agentic, were largely pitied; Sluts, who are sexually active and non-agentic, were largely disdained (Bay-Cheng, Bruns, and Maguin 2018: 705). Virgins are ranked as highly competent and warm because they actively refrain from sexual activity, making them seem in control and also favorable due to their low sexual activity. Agents are ranked as being highly competent because they are agentic over their sexual choices, but they are not ranked highly on the warmth scale due to their frequent sexual activity. Losers are ranked low on the competence scale due to

their inability to be sexually active, but they are also ranked high on the warmth scale because people tend to feel pity towards them. Lastly, Sluts are ranked low on both scales because they are highly sexually active and are perceived to have little control over such actions.

Additionally, an important metric is personal agency. Bay-Cheng et al. also studied different power distributions amongst heterosexual relationships, finding that women experience feelings of instability when in relationships where they have less power. In relation to Schippers' conception of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, Bay-Cheng et al. establish that "men's power over women in relationships is a keystone of hegemonic masculinity" and it is therefore essential to investigate how this conception operates in Swift's lyrics (2018: 8). Their overall finding was that for women, "balanced and dominant relationships...were recounted by participants as more intimate and less tumultuous than relationships in which participants felt subordinate" (Bay-Cheng et al. 2018: 16). A result of lacking power in a relationship is this feeling of volatility, which can have lasting effects on future relationships and is a prevalent theme in Swift's lyrics.

Image: Female Celebrity Branding and the Lifecycle Model

An inductive finding was the concept of image, where Swift makes references to her own reputation as time goes on. The idea of image, or branding, was helpful to me as a way to categorize both femininity and agency as they apply specifically to celebrities, as many of Swift's lyrics relating to her reputation may not apply to the average person. Kristin J. Lieb's book, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, takes an interdisciplinary approach to investigating female celebrity branding. Lieb's lifecycle model (see Appendix B) is the most relevant to my work, specifically her argument that all female celebrities start in the "Good Girl"

phase and move into the “Temptress” phase as they get older (2018: 111). The “Good Girl” phase draws on normative conceptions of femininity to market young female celebrities, capitalizing on their apparent innocence and naivete (Lieb 2018: 117). As female celebrities grow older, they become more sexually overt as they enter the “Temptress” phase (Lieb 2018: 124). Lastly, female celebrities can move into a number of phases after their “Temptress” phase. I argue that Swift moved directly into the “Comeback/Redemption” phase, skipping over the middle of the lifecycle model, because she faced a fall from grace during her “Temptress” phase. Although Lieb mainly discusses branding in terms of publicists and marketing teams instead of the artist’s own lyrics, her model is still useful in understanding how Swift conceptualizes her reputation as she moves through her career, as her image is an important theme in her music.

The Current Study

Although there is research on traditional and deviant gender norms, female sexuality and agency, and female celebrity branding, there is nothing that investigates the intersection of these intrinsically connected ideas. In order to understand Swift’s conceptualization of her own femininity over time, we must understand how her agency also fluctuates over time.

Additionally, it is impossible to ignore her celebrity status as it influences her song lyrics and since her image in the media is crafted to meet societal expectations of womanhood.

I discuss my analysis in three chapters, which correlate to each lifecycle phase that Swift moves through. First, I discuss *Taylor Swift, Fearless, Speak Now, and Red*, which were released during her “Good Girl” phase and therefore draw on normative notions of femininity as well as low levels of agency. Next, I discuss *1989* and the first part of *reputation*, which were released during her “Temptress” phase as well as after her fall from grace and therefore draw on deviant

notions of femininity as well as high levels of agency. Lastly, I discuss the second part of *reputation* and *Lover*, which mark her “Comeback/Redemption” phase and draw on both normative and deviant notions of femininity as well as low and high levels of agency, demonstrating her multidimensionality as she strives to define herself.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do Taylor Swift’s lyrics display different types of femininity, such as normative or deviant femininity, over time? How do Swift’s varying conceptualizations of her femininity interact with her personal agency and her image as a celebrity?

METHODS

Research Design

I used content analysis in order to document key themes related to gender and track changes over time in Taylor Swift’s lyrical rhetoric. I coded for the presence of general conceptions of normative femininity, deviant femininity, presence of agency, lack of agency, and other ideas as they arose during coding. The advantage of using content analysis in a study like this is that I could start to understand both the frequency of general themes put forth and how they changed over time. Although I initially intended for this project to be mixed methods and coded both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the songs as my coding sheet reflects (see Appendix A), I ultimately focus on qualitative analysis in the discussion section of the write-up.

My independent variable is time, more specifically, Taylor Swift’s different albums. She has released an album roughly every two years since 2006, and my study stops after the release of her 2019 album (I will explain this choice later in the paper). Therefore, this study is

longitudinal because I am looking at Taylor Swift's music over time, across nearly her entire career. My dependent variables are her conception of femininity, personal agency, and her lifecycle phase.

My unit of analysis is Taylor Swift songs, which was measured at the interval-ratio level when analyzing my data. I coded for the presence of a certain theme in the lyrics by recording its presence in a given song on the coding sheet. I took both an inductive and deductive approach to this project. Through my literature review and prior research I have identified several themes deductively that I applied to my preliminary coding. I used these themes to construct my initial coding sheet so that I had a sense of direction when I started coding. However, while I conducted my research, several inductive themes arose that I did not originally anticipate, such as volatility, which quickly became relevant and therefore became part of my central framework. I then incorporated these new themes into my coding sheet and re-coded the earlier songs that I had already coded. I coded every song 2-3 times so that I could have a thorough understanding of the themes represented in each song and more generally on each album.

Rather than sampling songs to examine, I have chosen to use her entire discography until her most recent three albums (*folklore*, *evermore*, and *Midnights*). I exclude these three albums for many reasons, primarily because Swift has stated that the first two albums cover fictional stories and the most recent has songs that she has written throughout her life. In terms of *folklore* and *evermore*, I did not want to include them because I want to focus on her personal experiences for this project. For example, she might write about a fictional character's reputation in a small town, but that song would not necessarily reflect her own conception of her reputation. I did not include *Midnights* because my project is longitudinal and it was important that the songs I am coding were written close to their release dates. For example, a song from *Midnights*

could have been written last year or in 2010, which would defeat the purpose of a longitudinal study. I did not sample from her albums—I coded each song on each album—but I did not code any non-album singles, such as collaborations or holiday releases or movie soundtracks. I eliminated these songs for a similar reason that I eliminated her most recent three albums, which is that these special releases may have been written for purposes other than sharing her own life experiences. For example, a song written for a movie soundtrack will be geared lyrically toward that movie, or a Christmas song will be geared toward Christmas. I focused strictly on Taylor Swift’s personal expression, unfettered by outside expectations or project requirements that could skew her authenticity.

I used a coding sheet in order to collect and organize my research. As can be seen in the Appendix, at the top of the coding sheet, I first recorded the song title and which album the song appears on. Then, I recorded which general category the song falls into according to its primary subject matter: love song, breakup song, or reputation song. Lastly, I recorded which themes the song referenced and noted at least one lyrical example of that theme (see Appendix for more detail on the coding sheet). Once I finished coding, I inputted my results into an Excel spreadsheet in order to visually organize the data. Then, in the discussion section of the write-up, I qualitatively analyzed the implications of the themes I had coded as well as the potential reasons for these themes and the changes in them.

Generalizability is not a core goal of this project since I am not sampling; rather, I am looking at a whole population of songs. However, I think one thing that could be generalizable is any sort of typology or model that I come up with when conducting this project, which could be applied to other musicians and their discographies. I think that this project lacks validity because at the moment there is only one coder. Validity would increase if there was more than one coder

so that we could cross-check our work and calculate intercoder reliability. On the flip side, this project is highly reliable because there is only one coder; I would be able to reproduce my results over and over again.

One strength of this research design is that I took both an inductive and deductive approach. This mixed approach allowed me to be flexible because although I went into the project with some codes already in mind, I had the flexibility to add more if I found more, which is important because research often yields unexpected results. Another strength of this research design is that I had a complete population at my disposal that was highly accessible. I did not have any difficulties with obtaining the full population and was therefore able to form a very detailed, well-rounded view of Taylor Swift's lyrical rhetoric. In essence, I could get a complete picture of Taylor Swift's personal conceptions of gender due to my ability to utilize the full population of her songs (excluding special, non-album releases, as I stated earlier).

A weakness of this research design is that, as I mentioned in the previous section, the project has slightly low validity. I was the only one coding which could lead to some bias or inaccuracy. Another weakness of this project is that I am a big fan of Taylor Swift and I have listened to her music since I was very young, so I might have some personal associations with some of her lyrics that influenced the way I coded them. Therefore, there is a risk that I will attribute certain codes to certain lyrics when in fact another coder would not do the same. I hope to get another coder to work on this project in the future, especially someone who is not a fan of Taylor Swift or who has not heard a lot of her music, so that we could cross reference our coding and come up with more valid and less biased results. However, by having a standardized coding sheet and carefully questioning my own reasoning for the coding choices I made, I feel confident that these limitations are not major.

Positionality

I already spoke about my personal support of Taylor Swift being a potential weakness to my research design due to my own connections to her song lyrics. There is also a broader implication to my support of Taylor Swift, which is that I believe she is a good person. This may not seem like a glaring problem, but I think it could have potentially affected my evaluation of her songs while collecting data and my subsequent discussion of my findings, which I related to her career. I may have given her too much benefit of the doubt or I may have seen her in a highly favorable way. Although my study does not cover the morality or merit of her artistry or persona, and therefore this concern is not extremely pressing, in the spirit of disclosure, I wanted to mention this conflict of interest.

Significance

Something unique about this project is that it covers an artist who has not been studied in depth. It is important to study Taylor Swift because she is a popular artist and has a very far-reaching message. She has been on multiple world tours, demonstrating her international popularity, and her career has spanned multiple generations. Not only does she have a large fan base but she is generally popular, so her songs are played on the radio and are recommended to people who might not be fans of hers, thereby disseminating her lyrics even further. Her message and her lyrics are widespread, so it is important to study what types of concepts she puts forth in her music as they have the potential to influence the worldview of many people.

Another important thing to consider when studying this topic is that it could help on an academic level by providing a typology for how to study other artists' lyrics, as I mentioned

earlier. Perhaps other female artists, male artists, or bands could be studied in this way, as well as other genres. This study might fit into a larger study about the general trends in the music industry, but conducted based on individual artists instead of based on popular songs. As established in the literature review, songs can be used as pedagogical tools which means that they must have sociological value, therefore, it is important to analyze the content of song lyrics in order to understand which sociological messages may be conveyed. Ultimately, it is essential to understand which messages Taylor Swift is presenting to the world, because it lends an understanding to potential conceptions of gender and relationships that listeners are exposed to on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 2: The Good Girl

High Normative Femininity, Low Agency

“Romeo, save me, I’ve been feeling so alone” - “Love Story”

In this chapter, I will break down themes in each of the four albums I examine, going chronologically within the sections. First, I will identify the norms of femininity and masculinity that Swift invokes throughout her early discography as she emphasizes the “Good Girl” phase of her career. As I referenced in my literature review, the main norms of femininity are dependency, which relates to a lack of agency, fragility, and an emphasis on physical appearance. Swift also uses traditional notions of femininity to elevate herself, as well as disparaging women who typically fall under the deviant category. Then, I will discuss how at the beginning of her career Swift positions herself as an innocent, naive girl, leading to a lack of agency at first despite her attempts to fall into the “Virgin” archetype (Bay-Cheng et al. 2018). Lastly, I will point out some early examples of a tumultuous relationship due to lack of agency, relating to Bay-Cheng et al.’s work about power in romantic relationships, which will come into play in more depth later on in her career.

NORMATIVE FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

In her debut album, Swift emphasizes her normative femininity and naivete, playing into the “Good Girl” phase of her career. In “Our Song,” she talks about riding shotgun while her love interest drives, which emulates typical gender roles of a man being in control. She also describes herself as being idealistic which feeds into the notion of innocence in “Cold As You,”

when she states that she is a “mess of a dreamer.” Lastly, the song “A Perfectly Good Heart” hinges on the notion that she is innocent and untouched by heartbreak, alluding to the normative idea that women should be pure and also highlighting her naivete.

On *Fearless*, Swift continues aligning herself with normative femininity while also incorporating notions of deviant femininity and portraying them as negative. In “Love Story,” she compares her relationship to the story of Romeo and Juliet, detailing limitations from her parents, dramatic balcony scenes, and an epic marriage proposal. By likening herself to Juliet, she invokes notions of youthful innocence and a classic, patriarchal love story. In “You Belong With Me,” Swift argues that she is a better match for her male best friend than his girlfriend. She depicts herself as a laid back, sneakers-wearing marching band member who is in opposition to an uptight, heels-wearing cheerleader. In this case, she seems to be arguing for the “Virgin,” herself, over the “Agent,” her best friend’s girlfriend. Swift positions herself as an innocent, low maintenance woman in comparison to a high maintenance woman who knows what she wants, as evidenced by the girlfriend “going off about something that you said.” Although Swift paints it in a negative, nagging light, the girlfriend is standing up for what she believes is right in a relationship. In “White Horse,” Swift chides herself for her own naivete, saying “stupid girl, I should’ve known” in response to her idealization of her relationship. She continues by saying “I’m not a princess, this ain’t a fairytale,” which recalls the themes of “Love Story,” but shows her maturity by recognizing their inherent falseness.

On her third album, *Speak Now*, Swift continues her tirade against deviant women, positioning herself as the better option. In “Better Than Revenge,” a song about a girl stealing her love interest, she discusses a woman who is “better known for the things that she does on the mattress,” implying sexual promiscuity and placing herself above such things. She also argues

that “no amount of vintage dresses gives you dignity,” tearing down this woman for her apparent lack of self-respect and likening her to the “Slut” archetype. Additionally, in “Speak Now,” a song about a hypothetical wedding where Swift wants to object to the marriage, she argues against a deviant woman again, painting her as controlling and rude: “She is yelling at a bridesmaid, somewhere back inside a room wearing a gown shaped like a pastry.” She not only paints this woman as condescending but also high maintenance and over the top, lamenting the fact that her love interest is “marrying the wrong girl.”

In *Red*, Swift circles back to portraying herself as innocent and young, but with a somewhat more jaded perspective due to her being older and therefore having more heartbreaks under her belt. In “All Too Well,” she describes how her ex-love interest keeps her scarf because “it reminds you of innocence, and it smells like me.” She also describes herself as “spinning like a girl in a brand new dress” in “Holy Ground,” likening her relationship to something youthful and naive. In “The Lucky One,” she discusses the pitfalls of fame, stating that “everybody loves pretty, everybody loves cool,” invoking themes of feminine beauty and low maintenance as factors that would contribute to someone’s fame. She also invokes feminine beauty by mentioning herself wearing red lipstick in “The Moment I Knew,” which became her signature look. Lastly, demonstrating her newfound life experience, in “Girl At Home” she says “and it would be a fine proposition, if I was a stupid girl, but honey I am no one’s exception, this, I have previously learned.” She begins to distance herself from the naive girl that she used to portray herself as, now invoking the lessons of her past.

Swift also occasionally uses her love interest’s masculinity against him. In “Picture to Burn,” she tells her love interest that “I hate that stupid old pickup truck you never let me drive,” dissing his masculinity through his choice of car and refusal to let her use it. In “Forever &

Always,” she mocks her love interest because he is emotionally unavailable, saying “did I say something way too honest, make you run and hide, like a scared little boy.” In “Mean,” her first song about her reputation, she belittles the subject of the song by saying “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 thing.” Despite his masculine assertiveness, she argues that no one will care about him in the future. Lastly, in “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” she mocks her love interest’s music taste by saying that after fighting he would “hide away and find some peace of mind, with some indie record that’s much cooler than mine” using a sarcastic tone, thereby referencing how he would mock her music taste and turning the narrative back onto him. One norm of masculinity is dominance, and in this case, she uses his dominance as a way to make fun of him.

Swift draws on normative notions of femininity to portray herself as a “Good Girl” while also disparaging women who fall into the “Temptress” category. In this case, she is criticizing women who are highly sexually active, so both the “Agent” and “Slut” archetypes, as a way to boost her own femininity. Additionally, she utilizes normative notions of masculinity to mock her love interests by asserting that they lack hegemonic masculinity.

LACK OF AGENCY

On her second album *Fearless*, Swift depicts herself as an innocent girl who cannot help but fall for the men in her life. In the titular song “Fearless,” she talks about how her love interest is so charming but unaware, leading him into “absentmindedly making me want you.” In this example, Swift does not choose to desire this man but rather falls for him despite herself. Again, Swift puts the power in her love interest’s hands in “Hey Stephen” when she states that “I can’t

help it if you look like an angel”; because of how handsome he is, she cannot help but fall for him. In “White Horse,” Swift acknowledges her naivete, stating that “maybe I was naive, got lost in your eyes, and never really had a chance.” These lyrics paint a picture of a young girl who unwittingly falls for men without even realizing it, pointing to her lack of agency in these situations; despite her attempts at depicting normative femininity, Swift falls under the “Slut” archetype in this case because she cannot control her tendency to fall in love.

Coming two years later, *Speak Now* continues these depictions of a young, naive woman who cannot control her romantic encounters. In “The Story of Us,” Swift explicitly gives power to her love interest, stating that “the battle’s in your hands now, but I would lay my armor down if you’d say you’d rather love than fight.” Her love interest is holding their relationship in his hands but if he decides to stop fighting, Swift will follow suit, demonstrating how she does not make her own choices but rather relies on her love interest to dictate her actions. In “Enchanted,” she discusses a potential new relationship, relaying that “now I’m pacing back and forth, wishing you were at my door.” Again, she is not seeking him out but rather waiting for him to come to her as she passively wishes for him to be at her door. *Speak Now* also marks her first song about her reputation in “Mean,” where she accuses the subject of the song of “picking on the weaker man.” Here, she uses her naivete and lack of power to her advantage, painting her nemesis as someone who unfairly attacked her, the small, unassuming country star.

In *Red*, Swift displays a mix of being out of control while also making certain choices for herself, demonstrating a complicated relationship with agency. In the opening track of the album, “State of Grace,” she depicts a relationship in which she has given herself to her love interest entirely, stating that “you’re my Achilles heel.” He is her fatal weakness, demonstrating that this relationship is vulnerable rather than making her stronger. When discussing her relationship in

“Traacherous,” she explicitly battles with her own agency; “I can’t decide if it’s a choice, getting swept away.” In this case, she is recognizing that she might have a choice in this situation but is unsure. In the titular track, Swift describes her relationship as a whirlwind where she lacks agency; “Loving him was like driving a new Maserati down a dead end street, faster than the wind, passionate as sin, ending so suddenly, loving him was like tryna change your mind once you’re already flying through the free fall.” In this case, her relationship is fast-paced and unpredictable, and she lacks agency because she describes herself as free falling and therefore is hurtling towards the ground without being able to stop. In the bridge of “Red,” she states that “moving on from him is impossible when I still see it all in my head,” illustrating how she is rooted in this past relationship and does not have the agency to move forward because she is haunted by memories. Again, she emphasizes a similar notion in “All Too Well,” singing about how her painful and vivid memories of the relationship prevent her from moving on: “Time won’t fly, it’s like I’m paralyzed by it.” Lastly, in “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” Swift initially expresses a lack of agency but moves towards reclaiming her agency. At first, she notes how “I’m really gonna miss you picking fights and me falling for it screaming that I’m right,” emphasizing her immaturity as well as her inability to make agentic decisions, as evidenced by her use of the phrase “falling for it.” Ultimately, she reclaims her agency through the chorus of the song, where she repeats the phrase “we are never, ever, ever getting back together,” asserting her desires firmly and making a decision for both her and her love interest.

Overall, Swift aligns herself with the “Good Girl” image, drawing on normative notions of femininity. However, she lacks the agency that the “Virgin” archetype displays by constantly putting power into the hands of her love interests, which positions her closer to the “Slut”

archetype. This complex relationship with personal agency continues to develop during her transition into being more agentic in the next phase of her career.

VOLATILITY: EARLY EXAMPLES

As Swift loses agency in her relationships, she begins to view love in general as a tumultuous and volatile phenomenon, which reflects Bay-Cheng et al.'s findings about power in heterosexual relationships. In "Haunted," a track on *Speak Now*, she describes how her relationship is volatile because "you and I walk a fragile line." In the opening track to her fourth album, *Red*, "State of Grace," Swift states that "love is a ruthless game, unless you play it good and right," arguing that love is a game unless the players are willing to play it correctly, which will result in stable, genuine love. In "Red," she compares her relationship to "the colors in autumn, so bright, just before they lose it all;" she foreshadows the end of the relationship and implies that it is destined to end just like the seasons are destined to change. In "I Knew You Were Trouble," she mentions multiple times that the relationship was vulnerable from the start, as evidenced by the title of the song. She blames herself throughout the song for not taking action sooner despite knowing that her love interest was bad for her, stating that "the joke is on me" and "shame on me now." Lastly, she fears that the entire relationship was invalidated by her love interest's potentially sinister motives, describing how "the saddest fear comes creeping in, that you never loved me, or her, or anyone, or anything." Swift begins to compare love to ever-changing and volatile ideas like autumn leaves and ruthless games, demonstrating her developing understanding of relationships.

HIGHLIGHTED SONGS

There are several songs throughout *Speak Now* specifically that highlight Swift's complicated relationship with agency as she defines herself through normative femininity. The first is "Sparks Fly," from her third album, a song about her experiences with someone who she acknowledges may not be a good fit for her, but she finds herself in the relationship regardless, demonstrating her lack of agency. Another important song from her third album is "Dear John," which chronicles a relationship with an older man who capitalizes on her naivete and takes away her personal agency by making the relationship volatile.

Sparks Fly

This song generally depicts Swift as an innocent girl who lacks experience getting swept away by her love interest. She establishes early on that "you're the kind of reckless that should send me running but I kinda know that I won't get far," demonstrating that she understands this relationship is unwise but also knows she can't stop it or distance herself. Again, she portrays a similar sentiment in the second verse, stating that "I'm on my guard for the rest of the world but with you I know it's no good" - she knows she should be acting a certain way but also knows that with this love interest, she does not have the agency to do so. She also explicitly references her lack of experience, detailing an intimate encounter with her love interest: "You touch me once and it's really something, you find I'm even better than you imagined I would be." In this case, she references her lack of sexual activity but also alludes to her natural sexuality, demonstrating an early example of her eventual shift to the "Temptress" phase.

Dear John

Swift details a difficult relationship wherein she lacks power due to her love interest being volatile. She opens the song by stating that “long were the nights when my days once revolved around you,” demonstrating how her world was entirely her love interest, thereby lacking personal agency due to an unequal relationship. She continues by saying “wondering which version of you I might get on the phone” which emphasizes how tumultuous the relationship was as her love interest had many sides to him. In the second verse, she wonders who is at fault for the situation; “Maybe it’s me and my blind optimism to blame, maybe it’s you and your sick need, to give love then take it away.” She references her innocence and naivete while also illustrating how her love interest had the power to give and take love, rendering her without agency. Lastly, she invokes her young age and therefore innocence in the chorus when asking “don’t you think 19 is too young to be messed with?” By questioning her love interest in terms of her age, she paints him out to be a nefarious person who is meddling in a young person’s life.

SUMMARY

Swift begins as an innocent, helpless “Good Girl” who criticizes sexually active women and plays with normative themes of masculinity. However, by performing normative femininity within the “Good Girl” phase, she loses her agency within her relationships, the effects of which are already apparent in her early albums as she displays volatility. In the next chapter, Swift moves into her “Temptress” phase, becoming more agentic and sexually explicit. She displays even more volatility as an after effect of her lack of agency in early relationships and also grapples with her personal image.

CHAPTER 3: The Temptress

Low Normative Femininity, High Agency

“Got a long list of ex-lovers, they’ll tell you I’m insane” - “Blank Space”

Moving into her fifth album *1989*, Swift demonstrates both the presence of agency as well as a lack of agency when grappling with relationships and her reputation. Swift demonstrates a lack of agency within her relationships as well as over her image, but also recognizes places where she can regain control. A close reading of her lyrics show places where she begins to capitalize on deviant femininity as a way to gain agency, embodying the “Agent” archetype. In her lyrics, she also discusses her reputation at length and responds mainly by playing into what the media says about her, which relates to Lieb’s discussion of female celebrity branding as Swift moves into her “Temptress” phase. She also reflects Bay-Cheng et al.’s findings about power in heterosexual relationships by demonstrating a sense of volatility within her relationships, which is an after effect of her earlier lack of agency in previous albums.

LACK OF AGENCY

Swift’s lack of agency lingers throughout *1989* and parts of *reputation*. In “How You Get The Girl,” Swift discusses how her love interest “left her all alone and never told her why,” demonstrating her lack of agency in the situation as the one being left behind instead of the one actively leaving. Again, Swift is the one lacking agency in “This Love” when she says “I watched you leave.” In both examples, she lacks agency because she is not the one walking away but rather she is the one being left. In “Clean,” Swift is unable to rid herself of her former love

interest; “You’re still all over me like a wine stained dress I can’t wear anymore.” The chorus of the song truly emphasizes her lack of agency as she describes being washed clean by a rainstorm: “The rain came pouring down...I think I am finally clean.” Despite being rid of her former love interest at this point, she did not have agency in the process but rather was washed clean by an outside force. There is a sense that she has given up her agency voluntarily in the song, when she says, “hung my head as I lost the war,” which symbolizes her acceptance of defeat.

reputation also has a few instances of lacking agency. In “Don’t Blame Me,” Swift tells her love interest that “my name is whatever you decide, I’m just gonna call you mine,” letting him dictate her life because she is intensely fixated on her relationship with him. Swift alludes to the “Loser” archetype by saying “I guess I’ll just stumble on home to my cats alone” in “Gorgeous.” The “crazy cat lady” is a classic stereotype that relates to a woman who is typically involuntarily single and therefore replaces a relationship with her pets, although she follows up by saying “unless you wanna come along,” which invokes promiscuity, demonstrating her shift towards the “Temptress” phase.

Swift also acknowledges multiple times that she knew that a situation was headed in a negative direction yet still engaged in it, demonstrating that despite her knowledge, she still lacks agency and instead goes along with potentially negative or harmful situations. In “...Ready For It,” she says that she “knew he was a killer, first time that I saw him,” implying that she knew he had nefarious or dangerous intentions but she continues the song by describing their relationship, so she still ends up with him despite her earlier premonition. Additionally, in “Dancing With Our Hands Tied,” she states that “I had a bad feeling” and yet she continued with the relationship.

There are several examples of Swift admitting her lack of agency overall, but recognizing certain aspects that she can control, such as what advice she offers her fans, and some aspects

that she cannot, such as what the media says about her. In “Blank Space,” she says “got a long list of ex-lovers, they’ll tell you I’m insane,” demonstrating her lack of control over her reputation. Her former love interests will slander her to her potential love interests, thereby taking her image into their own hands. In the bridge of the song, she fires back at these love interests by saying “boys only want love if it’s torture, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She positions herself as a wizened woman who understands how boys work, thereby regaining agency by using her breadth of experience as leverage. In “Wildest Dreams,” Swift says “someday when you leave me, I’ll bet these memories follow you around.” Although her love interest has agency because he is the one leaving her, ultimately she retains agency because her love interest will be haunted by memories of her and therefore be unable to forget her, which is a callback to the themes on *Red*, specifically in the titular track and “All Too Well.”

DEVIANT FEMININITY

Swift takes back some agency by portraying herself as an “Agent,” a woman who is sexually active and possesses agency. She juxtaposes the “Virgin” and “Slut” archetypes in “Style” by saying “I got that good girl faith and a tight little skirt,” referencing innocence and promiscuity in the same line. She also references her appearance multiple times in “Blank Space,” such as remarking upon her “cherry lips” and stating “darling I’m a nightmare dressed like a daydream.” This line references the stereotype of a deviant woman as someone who is crazy and difficult to deal with, as opposed to the normative ideal of being docile. Again, she juxtaposes innocence with promiscuity in the chorus of “Wildest Dreams,” where she asks her love interest to “say you’ll remember me, standing in a nice dress, staring at the sunset babe, red lips and rosy cheeks, say you’ll see me again, even if it’s just in your wildest dreams.” She paints

a feminine picture and then alludes to somewhat explicit dreams, which she doubles down on in the bridge: “You’ll see me in hindsight, tangled up with you all night, burning it down.” She paints a passionate, deeply romantic picture that has to do with more overt conceptions of sex instead of demure euphemisms. Additionally, she explicitly tells her love interest that she will appear in his dreams, demonstrating her newfound agency.

Swift also makes multiple sexual references in *reputation*, again alluding to her newfound agency in the form of deviant femininity. In the opening track, “...Ready For It?,” she says, “In the middle of the night, in my dreams, you should see the things we do.” Here, as in “Wildest Dreams,” she alludes to explicit dreams that include her and her love interest. In “So It Goes...” she makes several explicit references, such as “you know I’m not a bad girl but I do bad things with you” and “come here dressed in black now / scratches down your back now,” both of which reference her and her love interest engaging in sexual acts. Here, she positions herself as an “Agent” who has dirty dreams and chooses to do bad things with her love interest.

VOLATILITY

Swift continues to conceptualize love as volatile throughout *1989* and *reputation*, demonstrating how her lack of agency affects her relationships. On the opening track of *1989*, “Welcome To New York,” Swift talks about how New York is “like any great love, it keeps you guessing, like any real love, it’s ever-changing, like any true love, it drives you crazy.” She views love as tumultuous, unstable, and frustrating in this song. In “I Wish You Would,” Swift also describes how frustrating love can be when she says “you always knew how to push my buttons, you give me everything and nothing, this mad, mad love makes you come running.” In “Style,” she says that her relationship “could end in burning flames or paradise,” again speaking to the

vulnerability she feels. She depicts a similar idea in “Blank Space,” saying “so it’s gonna be forever, or it’s gonna go down in flames.” Also in “Blank Space,” she says “love’s a game, wanna play?”; although she also said love is a game on *Red* (“Love is a ruthless game”), in this case she is willing to play the game instead of trying to avoid it, which demonstrates her embrace of volatility. She also alludes to the idea that love is bound to end in “Out of the Woods,” stating that “we were built to fall apart, then fall back together.” Despite the relationship eventually continuing and not actually ending in the context of the song, the idea that it was built to end at some point references the strong sense of vulnerability Swift feels in general. She also acknowledges this inevitable end in “Wildest Dreams,” saying “I can see the end, as it begins.” “I Know Places” also speaks to her sense of vulnerability and the fear that her relationship will be ended by external factors, as she states “love’s a fragile little flame, it could burn out.” In “...Ready For It,” Swift continues to embrace love as a game, chanting “baby let the games begin.” Lastly, Swift alludes to her own volatile tendencies in “Getaway Car,” saying “should’ve known I’d be the first to leave, think about the place where you first met me.” In this case, she is the one who is leaving her love interest instead of being left behind, but she also recognizes that the relationship was bound to end from the start because of how it began. The idea that a relationship is bound to end or that it is a game takes away both her agency and her partner’s agency, as neither of them can control the ending or how the game is played, but rather must follow the rules.

REPUTATION

Swift begins referencing her reputation frequently starting with *1989*, indicating both an increase in her media reputation and a heightened awareness of it. In “Shake It Off,” Swift’s

anthem in response to her haters, she says “I go on too many dates, but I can’t make them stay, at least that’s what people say,” referencing her long-standing reputation in the media for dating too many men. Additionally, the idea of shaking off any hate she receives is a way to reclaim agency because anything people fire at her will just roll off her back. She also references the media’s role in her relationship in “I Know Places,” which is about being able to hide from the public eye, saying “they are the hunters, we are the foxes.” The feeling of being chased relates to how public Swift’s relationship was at the time. In “New Romantics,” Swift plays with stereotypes of youthfulness, sarcastically stating things like “we need love but all we want is danger” and “please leave me stranded, it’s so romantic.” She also embraces the stereotypes surrounding her age group by saying “heartbreak is the national anthem, we sing it proudly” which is a jab against those saying she dates men just to date; if constant heartbreak is the anthem of her generation, then she is proud of it. Lastly, she references comments that the media has said about her, saying “I could build a castle, out of all the bricks they threw at me.” The metaphorical bricks are all of the slander she has received, which is a castle’s worth.

The title of *reputation* speaks for itself in terms of Swift’s understanding that her image is well known. In “Dancing With Our Hands Tied,” she echoes sentiments from “I Know Places” in saying “people started talking, putting us through our paces” and “I loved you in spite of deep fears that the world would divide us.” Both of these lines reflect a fear that the public would interfere with her relationship. She also references her reputation in “...Ready For It,” saying “knew I was a robber, first time that he saw me, stealing hearts and running off and never saying sorry.” In this case, she acknowledges that her love interest had heard about her before and that her reputation is one that involves being a heartbreaker, referencing media opinions about her dating too many men. Again, in “Don’t Blame Me,” she says “I’ve been breaking hearts a long

time, toying with them older guys, just playthings for me to use,” reinforcing her reputation as a heartbreaker. She positions herself as an “Agent” once again, leaning into the idea that she dates men to further her career.

HIGHLIGHTED SONGS

There are several songs on *reputation* that reference multiple of the aforementioned themes. “End Game” grants Swift agency in her relationship despite not having control over her reputation, which is a departure from *1989*. “I Did Something Bad” strongly asserts Swift’s agency by directly rebuking many of the media’s conceptions of her as well as by leaning into deviant femininity. Lastly, “Look What You Made Me Do” gives Swift agency as she plays into the media’s ideas of her and also allows her a fresh start because she “kills” her old self (or perhaps, the media has murdered her).

End Game

The message of this song is that Swift wants a deeper, committed emotional connection, as she sings “I wanna be your end game, I wanna be your first string, I wanna be your A-team” and “I don’t wanna touch you, I don’t wanna be, just another ex-love, you don’t wanna see.” In this case, she is explicitly stating her desires to her love interest, thereby granting her agency.

The song also brings up a major theme on the album, Swift wanting to be honest instead of hiding under the facade of her reputation. Swift has agency in this song because she is advocating for her desires and saying exactly what she wants, but she loses agency from her reputation running rampant, as evident by her saying “big reputations, ooh you and me we got big reputations.” She proceeds to acknowledge specific facets of her reputation, such as when

she says to her love interest that “you like the bad ones too” or “I know what they all say, but I ain’t tryna play.” Her reputation has left a negative stain on her and her tendency to play games in love has become widespread knowledge. In the bridge of the song, she says “reputation precedes me, they told you I’m crazy, I swear I don’t love the drama, it loves me,” being tongue in cheek about the drama that occurs in her life as well as the rumors that swirl around her.

I Did Something Bad

Swift rebukes the media’s claims that her dating habits are unsavory in the chorus of this song, saying “they say I did something bad, then why’s it feel so good?” Not only does she frame herself as a villain, stating that she enjoys this supposedly bad act, but she also reveals that she is not in the wrong through the verses of the song. In the first verse, she says “I never trust a narcissist, but they love me” indicating that it is not her fault for hurting these men. She goes on to paint herself in a deviant and agentic light, saying “so I play ‘em like a violin, and I make it look oh so easy.” Despite playing this man similar to the games of *1989*, she then clarifies that “for every lie I tell them, they tell me three,” implying that her wrongs are less bad than the wrongs of her love interests. She also strongly states that “if a man talks shit then I owe him nothing, I don’t regret it one bit ‘cause he had it comin’,” demonstrating that even if she has indeed done something bad, her victims were deserving because they were bad first. The entire song is essentially a sarcastic and dramatized portrayal of Swift as a conniving woman who takes pleasure in the evil deeds she has done. In the bridge, however, she flips the script, saying “they’re burning all the witches even if you aren’t one, so light me up.” In this line, she argues that she will be painted as a villain regardless of the truth, and if that is the case, then the media

can go ahead and do it. It is by relinquishing control of her reputation that she finally regains some of her agency.

Look What You Made Me Do

Many people wonder what it was that Swift actually did in reference to this song's title, and the answer is that she portrays herself as the person the media made her out to be, specifically in the fallout of her years long feud with Kanye West. She paints a story of being tricked and betrayed, which turns her into a different person. The title of the song lends Swift little agency, as she is not in control of her actions but was rather *made* to do something in response to others. In the bridge, the damage of constantly being berated by the media as well as her celebrity feuds is apparent: "I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me, I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams." She understands how people view her and knows that she is the villain in the public eye. The climax of the song comes in one of her classic spoken monologues, where she says, "I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now...why? 'Cause she's dead." This line captures the crux of many themes on the album, which is that she had to completely change herself and play into the caricature that the media portrayed of her.

SUMMARY

Overall, Swift has a complicated relationship with personal agency at this point in her career. As Swift moves into her "Temptress" phase, she begins to display deviant femininity specifically through being sexually overt, aligning herself with the "Agent" archetype. She regains some agency through promiscuity but begins to recognize her loss of power over her image in the media by referencing what people say about her and how it affects her relationships.

Additionally, her notion of love as volatile continues to develop into the idea that love is a game that she is ready to play, demonstrating her embrace of volatility instead of working against it.

CHAPTER 4: The Comeback/Redemption

High Normative Femininity, High Agency

“I wanna be defined by the things I love” - “Daylight”

Lastly, Swift moves into a new phase of her career with the second half of her sixth album, *reputation*, and the entirety of her seventh album, *Lover*. Although she acknowledges her uncontrollable reputation, she regains agency over it by relinquishing her control; instead of fighting back, she lets people say what they want and remains unbothered by criticism. She also displays multidimensionality on two axes: gender and image. She invokes both normative and deviant themes of femininity and therefore switches between the “Good Girl” and the “Temptress” which allows her to portray a fully fleshed out person instead of a one dimensional caricature. Lastly, she begins to define herself on her own terms, thereby gaining agency over her image.

NORMATIVE AND DEVIANT FEMININITY

Swift expresses both normative and deviant notions of femininity, thereby creating a multidimensional version of herself instead of someone who is trying to fit into a certain lifecycle phase. On her sixth album in “Delicate,” Swift asks her love interest “do the girls back home touch you like I do?” and telling him to “stay here honey, I don’t wanna share,” both of which allude to sexual acts and possessiveness. On the titular track of *Lover*, Swift juxtaposes normative and deviant forms of femininity; in the chorus, she says “take me out and take me home,” which references traditional dating culture, but in the bridge, as part of her vows to her

lover, she says “swear to be overdramatic and true.” Although Swift and her love interest do traditional things, like going out on dates, she is also free to play into deviant facets of herself. In “False God,” Swift writes about a tumultuous relationship that is centered around a sense of worship, where their relationship takes the place of religion. In the chorus, she says “religion is your lips” and “the altar is my hips,” invoking sexual imagery and positioning herself as a deviant woman. Additionally, the idea that they might be praying to a false god but continue to worship demonstrates her agency; she no longer cares what people say about the relationship because she will choose it anyway.

REPUTATION

Swift continues to reference her reputation generally as her albums progress. In “I Forgot That You Existed,” a song about moving forward from her previous feuds, she says “would’ve been right there front row, even if nobody came to your show.” Despite having a negative reputation herself, she would have supported the subject of the song, painting herself as a compassionate, supportive person in juxtaposition to the subject’s betrayal. In “London Boy,” a playful song about loving a man from the UK, she says “so I guess all the rumors are true.” The relationship she references in this song was quite private until this album, so she pokes fun at tabloids by referencing the rumors that swirled around her relationship. In “ME!,” she acknowledges that her reputation precedes her as well as playing up some deviant norms of femininity in the line “I know that I went psycho on the phone, I never leave well enough alone, and trouble’s gonna follow where I go.”

RESPONSE TO REPUTATION: AGENCY

Swift responds to media criticism, specifically surrounding her previous celebrity feuds, by taking the moral high ground, which gives her agency through her lack of fixation on what people say about her. In “You Need To Calm Down,” she sarcastically addresses her haters as well as bigots in general. The song marks her foray into the political world as she stands up for herself and for gay rights. In terms of her own image, she starts off by saying “say it in the street that’s a knockout, but you say it in a Tweet that’s a cop out.” She taunts her haters and invalidates them by saying that their words are cheapened by using Twitter. She also references her own past while championing herself as a strong, resilient person, saying “and I ain’t tryna mess with your self-expression but I’ve learned the lesson that stressing and obsessing ‘bout somebody else is no fun, and snakes and stones never broke my bones.” She co-opts the serpentine imagery that was used against her on Twitter, symbolizing her similarity to the snake in the Garden of Eden due to her alleged deceit of Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, by approaching the situation as a wizened figure, thereby placing herself above her haters. Lastly, she says “we figured you out,” aligning herself with others who have faced online criticism and demonstrating that she can now let the hate roll off of her because she understands it.

Swift writes about the secretive nature of her relationship throughout *reputation* and *Lover*; keeping her relationship private is a way to regain agency by not letting the media take it away, which was a fear she expressed earlier in her discography. In “King of My Heart,” she says “our love is a secret I’m hoping, dreaming, dying to keep” and in “Dress,” she says “our secret moments, in a crowded room, they got no idea, about me and you.” In both cases, she references secrets, which insulate her and her relationship from criticism. In “Cruel Summer,” she says “I don’t wanna keep secrets just to keep you, and I snuck in through the garden gate,” addressing

the private nature of her relationship while also discussing the difficulty of keeping her relationship out of the public eye.

REMNANTS OF VOLATILITY AND EMERGENCE OF STABILITY

Swift generally expresses a strong fear of losing her relationship, which reflects the volatility that she has experienced in the past. For example, the crux of “Delicate” is that the relationship is new and therefore fragile; Swift is afraid of making the wrong move and shattering it. Overall, she constantly asks if her behavior is okay in repeated lines like “is it cool that I said all that?,” “is it chill that you’re in my head?,” and “is it too soon to do this yet?,” in addition to her repetition of “I know that it’s delicate, isn’t it?” These repetitive lines demonstrate her deep anxiety that is rooted in the failings of her past relationships, both due to her personal actions and due to a surplus of media attention. She also says “we can’t make any promises now can we babe, but you can make me a drink,” showing how this relationship starts off very slowly with just a simple drink instead of an intense promise. In “New Years Day,” she asks her love interest to “please don’t ever become a stranger whose laugh I could recognize anywhere.” She is afraid of losing her love interest, who she knows so intimately. In “Cruel Summer,” she demonstrates a reluctance to showing her cards due to her tendency to play games in the past, shouting “I love you ain’t that the worst thing you ever heard.” Although her love interest may be emotionally distant, the line also reflects her own conception of love. Finally, “Cornelia Street” is an emotional song about a new relationship that Swift is scared to lose, so much so that she will never walk the titular street again if the relationship ends. In the chorus of the song, she says “and I hope I never lose you, hope this never ends,” expressing her desire that her

relationship stays strong. She proceeds to say “I’m so terrified of, if you ever walk away,” ramping up the emotional intensity of her fear.

Despite being in a stronger relationship than before, Swift still incorporates volatile imagery into *Lover*. She says that “devils roll their dice” in “Cruel Summer” and “you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes” in “Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince,” generally referencing the notion of playing games in the context of two love songs. Despite a general sense of stability throughout “Lover,” she still feels turbulence: “Have I known you twenty seconds or twenty years?” She also discusses her past tendencies in “Cornelia Street,” saying “back when we were card sharks, playing games.” In “Afterglow,” she acknowledges how her own insecurities and anxieties affect her relationship, telling her love interest “it’s on me, in my head, I’m the one who burned us down.” She also admits to her unhealthy behaviors in “False God,” referencing a time in her relationship where she was “daring you to leave me just so I can try and scare you.”

Despite these strong remnants of volatility, Swift also demonstrates that her new relationship is quite stable. In “New Years Day,” she tells her love interest that “I want your midnights, but I’ll be cleaning up bottles with you on New Years Day,” alluding to the idea that love is about the messy morning after as much as the grandiose champagne-filled party. In “Lover,” Swift finds agency through her partnership, opening with “this is our place, we make the rules.” By making rules together, Swift conveys that this is an equal partnership where they collaborate on decisions. In “Paper Rings,” she shows how genuine her love is by telling her love interest “I like shiny things but I’d marry you with paper rings.” The relationship is not about material goods but rather a true connection. After a career of focusing on what others say about her, she tells her love interest that “it’s you and me, that’s my whole world” in “Miss Americana

and the Heartbreak Prince,” showing that her relationship has allowed her to highlight what truly matters instead of what the media says. In “Cornelia Street,” she discusses the “sacred new beginnings that became my religion,” again demonstrating the gravity of this relationship in its ability to ground her.

HIGHLIGHTED SONGS

There are several songs on both *reputation* and *Lover* that synthesize the themes mentioned above as well as weaving in ideas from Swift’s previous albums, demonstrating her growth over time. “Call It What You Want” on *reputation* is a powerful statement on Swift’s lack of care about what the media says about her anymore, as now she is happy with her love interest. On her seventh album, “The Man” summarizes Swift’s experiences as a woman and points out many of the double standards women face. “The Archer” illustrates Swift’s view of herself as a volatile person who is still redeemable, demonstrating her newfound multidimensionality. Lastly, “Daylight” is Swift’s thesis on the lessons she has learned about love and how she wants to define herself moving forward.

Call It What You Want

This song serves as Swift’s message to the media: she tells them that she does not care what they say about her relationship anymore. Overall, she says to “call it what you want, yeah call it what you want to,” telling listeners that they can draw their own conclusions, but they do not matter to her anymore because her love interest “loves me like I’m brand new.” His love for her allows her to see past tabloid rumors and focus on their relationship. She also references her past, saying “I know I make the same mistakes, every time, bridges burned, I never learn, at least

I did one thing right.” Ultimately, these mistakes led her to this relationship. In the bridge, she says “I want to wear his initial on a chain ‘round my neck...not because he owns me, but ‘cause he really knows me, which is more than they can say.” Swift rebukes the normative notion of a man owning a woman, arguing that her love interest truly sees her for who she is and therefore takes precedence over those who slander her. Lastly, she references “Love Story” but reverses the lyrics: instead of “Romeo save me,” she says “you don’t need to save me, but would you run away with me.” She follows the line with “yes” which also references the iconic line in “Love Story,” “baby just say yes.” In this reversal of one of her most famous songs, she becomes agentic instead of waiting for a man to agree to save her.

The Man

In Swift’s feminist anthem, she expresses frustration at the double standards she’s faced throughout her career. Overall, she argues that she would be infinitely more successful and praised by the media if she were a man. She starts by addressing her dating habits, which have been heavily criticized over time, saying “they’d say I played the field before I found someone to commit to.” Instead of being judged for dating several men, her habits would be portrayed as logical and positive. She also references double standards in the workplace and in general, saying she would be “a fearless leader, I’d be an alpha type, when everyone believes you, what’s that like?” Instead of being seen as bossy, she would be seen as assertive and having credibility. In the chorus, she says “I’m so sick of them coming at me again, cause if I was a man, I’d be the man,” implying that her gender is why she gets attacked and criticized constantly. In the second verse, she continues arguing that she would have more credibility if she were a man, saying “they’d say I hustled, put in the work, they wouldn’t shake their heads and question how much of

this I deserved.” She also discusses the emphasis that society places on a woman’s appearance and her demeanor, saying “what I was wearing, if I was rude, could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves.” In the bridge, she expresses her frustration and validates her emotions by saying “if I was out flashing my dollars, I’d be a bitch not a baller, they’d paint me out to be bad, so it’s okay that I’m mad.” This line is the crux of the song: her actions themselves do not matter, but society receives and interprets them differently just because she is a woman. She also references how society constructs her image without her involvement, which relates to Schippers’ ideas about hegemonic femininity and how gender identity is a discursive process.

The Archer

Swift explores her own psyche in this song, realizing that she has been both the victim and the villain. The song is full of dichotomies, such as the archer and the prey, never growing up yet getting so old, and friends versus enemies. Overall, due to her experiences in life, she wants to be a good partner but ends up sabotaging the relationship. She starts by explaining her actions, saying “cruelty wins in the movies,” thereby demonstrating that she is inspired by popular media. She also expresses the feeling that she is difficult to stand by, saying “easy they come, easy they go” and “who could ever leave me darling, but who could stay.” These lines demonstrate her inner turmoil, as she feels that she is both easy and difficult to love. She desires help from her love interest, asking him to “help me hold onto you.” In the second verse, she reveals that she is the one who causes the demise of her relationships, saying “I search for your dark side.” She also acknowledges her self-sabotaging tendencies, saying “I cut off my nose just to spite my face, and I hate my reflection, for years and years.” She regrets her actions, but there is a sense that she will continue doing them anyway. As she does throughout *Lover*, she

references her internal anxieties, saying “I wake in the night, I pace like a ghost, the room is on fire, invisible smoke.” Her restlessness relates to her anxious state of mind, which is an internal experience, hence invisible smoke. The fire is real, but no one else can see it. The major theme of the bridge is the idea that people can see through her, which she repeats: “They see right through me.” She transitions into asking “do you see right through me?,” worrying that her love interest does too. And ultimately, she ends the bridge with “I see right through me.” Despite the pretenses she may have, she feels that everyone can view past them right to her core, seeing all of the negative parts of her. Swift goes on to express how helpless she feels, saying “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put me together again, ‘cause all of my enemies started out friends.” Not only does she reference her previous feuds, but she also uses a line from “Humpty Dumpty,” reflecting her inability to grow up or change. Instead of presenting herself as a mature woman like in her “Temptress” phase, she is allowing multidimensionality into her brand by acknowledging that there are parts of her that have never grown up.

Daylight

This song is the thesis on Swift’s life, experiences, and past relationships. In a literal sense, she went dark on social media for a year, so the idea of daylight symbolizes her return to the limelight. In the metaphorical sense, however, she has been living in darkness until she realized the true meaning of love and trust. Swift starts off with how she used to be, saying “my love was as cruel as the cities I lived in.” She also explains why she had stayed in darkness for so long, saying “everyone looked worse in the light.” She reflects on her past, saying “there are so many lines that I’ve crossed unforgiven,” acknowledging that she has a tumultuous and unresolved history. She closes out the first verse by saying “I’ll tell you the truth but never

goodbye.” This line reflects her desire for stability, as she will be honest with her love interest and try her best to stay. In the chorus, she finds the stability that she seeks: “I don’t wanna look at anything else now that I saw you, I don’t wanna think of anything else now that I thought of you.” She agentively asserts her own desire to be with her love interest and demonstrates how grounded the relationship makes her feel, to the point that she does not need to look at or think about anything else now. Despite “sleeping so long in a 20 year dark night,” now, “I only see daylight.” Finally, her world is enveloped in light.

In the second verse, she moves into discussing her reputation, saying “I became the butt of the joke.” As a reaction, she says “I wounded the good and I trusted the wicked.” However, now she and her love interest are able to move past it, since they “threw out our cloaks and our daggers because it’s morning now.” Since the sun has risen, they are able to be honest and vulnerable with each other instead of constantly on guard. In the bridge, Swift references *Red* explicitly, saying “I once believed love would be burning red, but it’s golden, like daylight.” This line reflects her growth and new perspective; whereas she used to believe that love was a passionate, fiery affair, she knows now that it is consistent and steady, like the sun. She then says “you gotta step into the daylight, and let it go,” demonstrating her belief that the past should stay in the past. By relinquishing the past, she is demonstrating that she no longer feels bound by it, showing that she has gained agency.

An essential part of this song is the outro, which is a voice memo of Swift, which goes as follows: “I wanna be defined by the things that I love. Not the things I hate. Not the things that I’m afraid of...not the things that haunt me in the middle of the night. I just think that you are what you love.” Swift rewrites her narrative at the end of this album, moving from being defined

by her enemies and the mistakes she has made, to being defined by her love and therefore her artistry, something that has often been overshadowed by petty feuds and tabloid drama.

SUMMARY

Swift is finally able to define herself on her own terms during her “Comeback/Redemption” phase. She plays into both normative and deviant themes of femininity instead of picking one lifecycle phase to stick with. Additionally, she forfeits control over her reputation and focuses on her relationship, but eventually circles back to defining herself and therefore being agentic. Despite playing into normative ideas of femininity, she also displays agency over her reputation, making her a multidimensional woman who does not have to strictly identify with one phase of the celebrity lifecycle.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Implications

As I have shown in the previous three chapters, Taylor Swift's lyrics have changed over time on three main axes: gender, agency, and image. On her first four albums, she started out portraying herself as a hyper-feminine damsel in distress, relying on the "Good Girl" category to invoke images of innocence and dependency. She then transitioned into the "Temptress" phase during *1989* and parts of *reputation*, becoming sexually agentic while shedding normative notions of femininity in favor of deviance. Lastly, she entered the "Comeback/Redemption" phase on *reputation* and *Lover* by taking control over her image in the public and portraying herself as a multidimensional person who both possesses and lacks agency.

Swift's lyrics demonstrate how gender, agency, and image are intimately connected for female celebrities. The two main lifecycle phases female celebrities go through are the "Good Girl" and the "Temptress" which are inherently connected to emphasizing normative and deviant femininity, respectively (Lieb 2018). Normative femininity involves having less personal agency, which can lead to feelings of volatility (Bay-Cheng 2018), whereas deviant femininity involves having more personal agency, which can lead to disapproval from the public. Swift eventually faced a fall from grace, then entered the "Comeback/Redemption" phase, in which she defines herself on her own terms and allows for nuance in her gender identity and levels of agency.

While my thesis focuses primarily on song lyrics, it is important to consider that there are many potential reasons for the changes I have observed throughout my data analysis beyond her shifting levels of agency and her specific lifecycle phase at the time, which I want to cover here because they may directly affect my findings. The most important is the fact that as people grow older, their perspective and self-expression fluctuates and develops based on their experiences.

Beyond that factor, there are three main influential variables I will explore: the media, Swift's romantic and interpersonal relationships, and celebrity branding.

What the media says about Swift may have a strong influence on what she writes in her songs, as seen by many of my previous findings. At the start of her career, she was a vulnerable target of media attacks. She then attempted to defend herself but she eventually acquiesced to the image the media portrayed of her, before pivoting back to her initial state with a bit more gusto than before. These transitions may have been in response to several media campaigns against her, such as claims that she dates too many men, as she references in "Shake It Off." While outside the scope of this project, analyzing the media's precise critique of Swift would shed light on the interplay between the media's comments and her shifting image in response.

Swift's personal relationships also may have influenced her music beyond the bounds of which lifecycle phase she was in at the time. Assuming that she writes songs about events in her life, which she most likely does, the people she has been romantically and platonically involved with have a direct effect on what she writes. For example, her relationship with John Mayer, much of which is documented on *Speak Now*, may have influenced her feeling like she lacked agency because he was significantly older than her. Perhaps her relationship with Harry Styles, which inspired much of *1989*, felt more vulnerable to being shattered by the media because of her history in the limelight, which led to her exploring these themes on the album. Her feud with Kanye West and the eventual blowup in 2016 on Twitter could have led to many of the themes on *reputation*, especially the sentiment that she was tricked into making herself a villain.

Lastly, as I explored in my literature review, celebrities are public figures and therefore brand themselves in certain ways. Although I certainly think Swift's music is an authentic representation of her experiences and emotions, it is also important to consider that there is a

certain level of marketing strategy behind her words, at least in the context of her singles. Therefore, certain lyrical choices cannot be attributed solely to her own conceptions of her gender identity and personal power but rather could be the result of a certain branding strategy. The success of a celebrity depends on how they portray themselves and how the public receives that portrayal (Lieb 2018: 109). As Swift's popularity rose and declined in cycles over the years, perhaps her songs (along with her physical image) were meant to change public opinion of her or rectify certain misconceptions.

FUTURE RESEARCH

One avenue of future research would be conducting the same study that I did but with all ten of her albums instead of just the first seven, which would allow for a broader assessment of change over time. Her most recent three albums have been released during the height of her career and public popularity, so it would be interesting to understand how she brands herself now that she has a certain sense of immunity from criticism while also considering if any new findings arise when comparing the recent three albums to her older discography. Another potential study could be analyzing the themes in her singles versus her B-side tracks to investigate what the general public receives about her image and life versus what her dedicated fans receive. Perhaps she depicts a different image on her singles to appeal to the public and gain general popularity. In the current study, I have already demonstrated the level of nuance throughout her entire discography as even within specific albums she presents different conceptions of her own femininity and agency, so perhaps this nuance is related to her singles versus her B-side tracks. As I mentioned earlier, Swift's songs are only one part (albeit a major one) of her celebrity image, so another future study could be analyzing other factors such as

music videos, social media presence, and awards acceptance speeches to build out a more robust understanding of how Swift brands herself.

In a more general sense, this model of analyzing one artist's entire discography could be applied to other artists, especially women but perhaps men to see the differences in their content. Some pertinent examples of women artists are Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj, and Beyonce, all of whom have had lasting careers and changing branding over time. It would be especially important to consider women artists of color because intersectionality is a crucial factor in considering how the public views certain celebrities, as Lieb (2018) covers when discussing the "Exotic" lifecycle phase in which female celebrities must capitalize on their unique ethnic backgrounds (Lieb 2018: 140). Some men artists to study are Ed Sheeran, Harry Styles, and Elton John, who have also had lasting careers and rebrands but have remained generally popular. Harry Styles and Elton John are especially interesting due to their proximity to the queer community, which may affect how they are received by the public. This typology allows sociologists to uncover how gender, agency, and image may operate for women of color or men, which sheds light onto the gendered and racial differences in society.

SIGNIFICANCE

Lastly, this study has important implications for gender in everyday life that should be explored. Music surrounds us everywhere, whether it plays on the radio, in a store, or at a party; we are constantly absorbing whatever messaging it contains and therefore it is essential to understand what is molding or influencing us on a daily basis. Although it may seem harmless to passively hear songs playing on the radio, these lyrics can shape our conceptions of what it means to be a woman. Additionally, Swift's conceptions of her identity over time reflect what

many women experience whether they are famous or not. Many women feel intimately connected to Swift's songs because they reflect personal experiences, such as facing double standards in the workplace, like in "The Man," or being in an unbalanced and volatile relationship, like in "Dear John." It is also important to note how static Swift's reputation as a boy-crazy serial dater has remained despite her obvious departure from this image. Why do so many people insist that she is still that same person? What is at stake if we admit she is more than the men she dates? As evidenced by many of the themes that arose during her "Redemption/Comeback" phase, the stakes are admitting that a woman can be multidimensional and nuanced, instead of fitting neatly into normative or deviant notions of femininity and having static levels of agency as a result. It is easy to embrace a woman who conforms to normative notions of femininity or to alienate a woman who conforms to deviant notions of femininity, but it is difficult and potentially dangerous to accept that a woman can do both.

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Appendix A: Coding Sheet

Album: ___ *Taylor Swift* (2006) ___ *Fearless* (2008) ___ *Speak Now* (2010) ___ *Red* (2012)
___ *1989* (2014) ___ *reputation* (2017) ___ *Lover* (2019)

Song title: _____ Track Number: _____

Single: ___ Yes ___ No

Primary Focus:

___ Love song

___ Breakup song

___ Reputation song

Themes:

___ 1. Normative femininity (delicate, innocent, etc.) _____

___ 2. Deviant femininity (sexual, dominant, etc.) _____

___ 3. Normative masculinity (chivalrous, powerful, etc.) _____

___ 4. Lack of sexual agency (Slut/Loser archetypes) _____

___ 5. Presence of sexual agency (Agent/Virgin archetypes) _____

___ 6. Cultural tropes (fairy tales, recognizable social roles) _____

Appendix B: Lifecycle Model from Lieb (2018: 112)

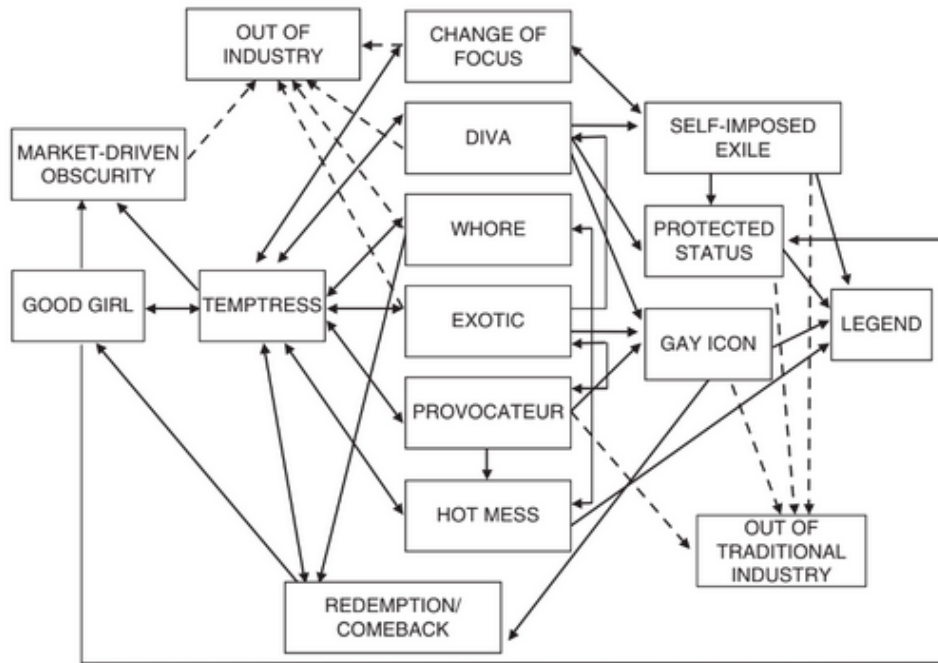


Figure 4.1 Lifecycle Model for Female Popular Music Stars.