

The Ideology of Commodification in the Music Industry, as Exemplified by Taylor Swift

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Taylor Alison Swift was born in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania and moved to Nashville with her parents and younger brother when she was fourteen years old to pursue a career in music and signed an artist development deal with RCA records. Swift began working with many seasoned songwriters and ended up leaving RCA records because she felt they would want her to record songs that other people had written, and that they would want her to wait until she was 18 to release an album. Swift performed at the legendary Bluebird Cafe in 2005 and caught the eye of Scott Borchetta, a DreamWorks Records executive who was preparing to form his own independent label, Big Machine Records. Swift then became one of the first artists to sign to the new label, and her first album entitled *Taylor Swift* was released in October of 2006 when she was just 16. Each of the four singles released from *Taylor Swift* saw immense success, with “Should’ve Said No” and “Our Song” both reaching number one on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart. “Our Song” made Swift the youngest person ever to single-handedly both write and perform a country song that reached number one.

Since her first album, Swift has released a new album about every two years, each of which she personally writes at least half of the songs; the others she co-writes with various writers and producers. Many of the lyrics of her debut album reflect the thoughts and feelings of teenage girls, since Swift penned them based on her own experiences and feelings as a teenage girl. Her music was instantly relatable to girls her age, and she thus became a representation and an icon for teens and preteens to look toward for both warning for experiences yet to come as well as advice on how to deal with painful experiences.

Swift became well-established as an artist extremely quickly, and as a result her fanbase swelled exponentially. Over the next few years her music style would begin to change little by little. Though even her debut album carried pop music entities with it in the background, each of

her consecutive albums to follow would showcase these pop-style elements more and more.

With the 2014 release of *1989*, Swift publicly announced her very first entirely pop album and thus rejected country as a genre from her music, despite the fact that those country roots initiated her career as a singer. It may seem understandable that Swift made a career change, considering it has now been ten years since she released her debut album as a 16-year-old country artist in Nashville. She has since moved to New York and cut her notoriously long, curly blonde hair — among other changes to her appearance — and has, quite simply, grown up. Age, however, does not exist as the sole factor at play in Swift's drastic metamorphosis because her persona has changed, too. Far above and beyond physical appearance and personality, Swift has undergone evolution on many deeper levels of her career, such as within marketing strategies and sound quality, hinting that this metamorphosis may be more of a mutation than a promising evolution.

Responses to Taylor Swift's "eliminating her twang" on *1989*, as Breeanna Hare of CNN Entertainment called it, were clearly mixed. It must be acknowledged that a great deal of the public actually responded to Taylor Swift's country-pop crossover in a decidedly positive way. *The New York Times* gave a raving review of *1989* upon its release in the Fall of 2014, praising Swift for creating a pop album that strays from the traditional-sounding pop songs of the day, in which most white artists emulate black hip-hop artists, or feature those artists on their tracks (Carimanic, 2014). Evidence of Swift's fans' approval of her new sound can be found in her album sales alone: a record-breaking 1.3 million copies sold just within the first week of its release, according to *Billboard*. Swift also received warm wishes from fellow artists during the 2014 Country Music Awards (CMAs) following her public announcement of her debut as a pop artist with that year's co-hosts and country music artists Carrie Underwood and Brad Paisley

joking about “Post Partum Taylor Swift Depression” and wishing her the best of luck on her newest endeavor (Leight, *Billboard* 2014).

These few examples of positive statistics and feedback pale in comparison, however, to the plethora of negative reactions and consumer questions regarding Swift’s *1989*. Following the release of Swift’s “Shake It Off” as the leading single from *1989*, a *Forbes* article published in August of 2014 entitled “The Dumbing Down Of Taylor Swift” heavily criticized her career move. The article’s author, Bobby Owsinski, wrote that Swift once stood out in a world where music on the radio sounded increasingly redundant and she was the last artist expected to fall into the “interchangeable” crowd of female pop vocalists, but that she was “dumbed down like the rest of them with her latest release.” Owsinski also brings up a fascinating point, crediting Swift with largely paving the way for success in the “new country” genre. This point has existed as a valid one for some time since modern country music exhibits large influence from rock and pop styles, and many would argue that Swift “has long had one foot in country and the other in pop” (Hare, 2014). Owsinski discusses the still rising popularity of the “new country” genre, and suggests that Swift would have continued to be a vital and successful artist in this genre had she not opted for the “overpopulated path” of pop music. In fact, when Swift first approached Scott Borchetta, the head of Big Machine Records, with her collection of pop songs, he begged her to incorporate country into the album in some way because he was doubtful of its potential for success. The article’s closing words sum up what many consumers of Swift’s music were undoubtedly wondering: “It’s fascinating that Swift would opt for this experiment, although not at all that shocking if you think about it. There’s bound to be some peer pressure at work here [...] country music wears well over time while pop music tends to have a short self-life” (Owsinski, 2014). In other words, Owsinski makes the point here that while it initially seems

unexpected that Swift would abandon her overwhelming success and roots as a country artist, this career move is actually not surprising at all due to the overwhelming popularity of pop music. “Pop” music gets its name from songs with musical elements that are likable amongst a wide majority of consumers in the public sphere; the general sound of these musical elements is *popular*. Because it is known within society that certain musical elements hold favorability among a wider group than others, it is not uncommon for music artists to “play it safe” by gravitating toward these elements in one way or another. In doing so, artists can guarantee at least some level of success for themselves because they are including elements that are known to be popular. As a result of this tactic, the amount of artists who are classified as “pop” in today’s society is so large that on some level it seems ridiculous each and every one of these artists could truly all belong to the same genre. Thus, as Owsinski asserts, Swift’s move into the pop genre is *not* surprising because it shows, quite simply, that she has “sold out” to the music industry. By sacrificing the niche she had made for herself in country music — which provided her ample success — in exchange for a spot in the sea of hundreds of “pop” artists, she becomes much less distinct as an artist.

Despite this seemingly enormous level of approval and acceptance from her fanbase and consumers, the question still remains as to *why* Taylor Swift made the high-risk jump from country music to pop in the first place. Swift emphatically stated that she needed a change, such as in a September 2014 interview with Josh Eells of *Rolling Stone* where she described her decision to make a “blatant” pop album, saying “at a certain point, if you chase two rabbits, you lose them both.” Swift said she had been straying toward creating a pop album for many years and finally felt it was time. The fact must be addressed, however, that the artist Taylor Swift has become differs drastically from the one she began her career as. While the obvious and

unavoidable factors of time and aging are partly at play, looking at the bigger picture mandates examining additional components that contributed to Swift's huge career-altering decision. In a society where she was experiencing tremendous success as a country artist, it seems unnecessary, suspicious, and perhaps even greedy to abandon those roots and attempt to pursue a career in the overpopulated and redundant genre of pop, which begs the question: why make the shift? I will begin to answer this question through an examination and discussion of Taylor Swift's many different representations of herself in her career as a musical artist, and the methods employed by the music industry designed to skyrocket artists to success in various ways. I will analyze and discuss the purpose, definition, and implementation of the concept of "personal branding" in the business world, and discuss how this concept plays out within the music industry for artists. I argue that "Taylor Swift" is, in fact, a brand, a commodity to be emulated and consumed, rather than a musical artist. Further, I will also identify the various components of Swift's personal brand and the ways in which she promotes it. In doing this, I hope to present the point that the music industry does not sell music; it sells artists by commodifying them into mere brands and items to be consumed by the public, and that this concept of branding and commodification has become so established and normalized within the public sphere that individuals no longer see the negative effect it has on them.

The concept of branding is not a new one, but the marketing techniques and practices of branding have undoubtedly reached new levels in recent decades. In her article entitled her article "Branded: The sister arts of rhetoric and design," scholar Susanna Kelly Engbers of the Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University makes the point that brands and the process of branding are linked extremely closely with *ethos*. Engbers defines a "brand," then, as "what an audience thinks and feels when it hears a name or sees a sign, product, and/or place of

activity; what customers expect when they select an offering over a competing one”(156). *Ethos* exists as a type of persuasive strategy that relies on emotional appeal combined with logical argument, which means that emotional appeal to consumers determines a brand’s strength and overall success. For the purposes of this paper, I will define the *act* of branding as “a programmatic approach to the selling of a product, service, organization, cause or person that is fashioned as proactive response to the emerging desires of a target audience or market” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). To brand something is to give it a stronger sense of emotional appeal than another brand, so that consumers are more persuaded by what it stands for than a differing brand.

In focusing on the “person” part of the definition of branding comes an entirely new term: “personal branding.” This concept focuses on using product development and promotion “to market persons for entry into or transition within the labor market” (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). The concept of personal branding serves as a sort of departure from previous movements of self-help, such as instructional books or step-by-step programs. Personal branding suggests that success is not merely found in self-improvement, but rather in self-packaging, in the sense that individuals succeed based on how effectively they are “arranged crystallized, and labeled — in other words, branded” (Lair et al, 2005). The business world benefits from encouraging personal branding because rather than merely being a business tactic, personal branding becomes a way to understand powerful business industries as an all-encompassing, ideological influence on an individual’s sense of self (Lair et al, 2005). In other words, personal branding becomes a powerful viewing lens through which a person sees his or herself. Through this lens of a personal brand, individuals have the opportunity to “create” themselves however they wish to be seen in the industrial world. With personal branding having become so much more commonplace in today’s society, the result is that individuals everywhere are creating new

“personas” for themselves specifically to gain success. They are recreating themselves time and time again to impress their superiors and climb the further up the ladder. The commonplace element of this practice becomes dangerous, then, because it means individuals in society have become attuned to recreating themselves, that they now see personal branding as an unnoticed, routine practice. By the definition of personal branding, then, this means that individuals are routinely recreating their self images for the purpose of selling themselves to the business market: they do this so often that his or her true, actual persona becomes lost in the mix of fabricated ones. The fact that personal branding surrounds us in society thus exists not merely as an ideological practice, but as a hegemonic one, since individuals everywhere buy into this practice of recreating and selling themselves without knowing that they are losing their true selves in the process.

While this appears to be beneficial on the surface, personal branding demands a deeper investigation because there exists an extremely fine line between personal branding and self-commodification. This connection poses a potentially troublesome outlook for individuals in the business world because traditionally in the world of corporate communication, branding represents an attempt to make direct and persistent bonds with symbols and products, especially consumer products. Thus, if an individual should veer too far in one direction in creating their personal brand, they may literally be selling themselves as a product rather than a person. This trend is becoming increasingly more evident in the business world, particularly in the music industry. Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney write that “celebrities are cashing in on name recognition to brand themselves” which contributes to the maturing of the marketing culture and the simultaneous explosion of communication in today’s society (313-314). Our society has become so full of symbols and products, and having so many different signs, all with different meanings

and associations, results in an extremely overwhelming atmosphere. In this way, the main aim of most media, advertising, or public relations campaigns in today's society are solely focused on existing as a sheer cry for attention (Lair et al, 314). When combined with an ideology of individual identity, the movement of branding, and more specifically personal branding, encourages an individual to create and recreate themselves as many times as they please, and in this way individuals are truly masters not only of their identities but also their destinies. In looking at personal branding in this way, it promotes "hyper-individuality based on a lack of deeper identity and self-awareness" (Lair et al, 314). Personal branding begins to reveal a negative effect here, in the sense that by recreating one's self so many times and seemingly having control over their individuality and identity, an individual actually loses sight of his or her truer, deeper identity and becomes increasingly less and less self-aware. The more faces a person attempts to put on themselves, the more his or her own face becomes lost and indistinguishable beneath the surface, even though the person believes they are actually refining their identity rather than losing it.

This discussion of hyper-individuality and the hypothetical potential to control one's destiny through personal branding leads to a discussion of the rhetoric of personal branding in modern society. Most generally, "the rhetoric of personal branding encourage and endorses the process of turning oneself into a product — in effect, engaging in self-commodification" (Lair et al, 319). Essentially, individuals are encouraged to focus on their qualities as products, and then to use those qualities ("products") as selling points, making that individual one collective product or entity to be sold. Because personal branding encourages individuals to consent to their own "self-packaging," it cannot be said that personal branding exists as part of Marx's commodification-as-domination thesis, but it *can* be seen as part of a hegemonic process:

although participants in personal branding are in fact aware of the branding process, they are also not as free as the concept of “self-packaging” makes them appear to be. The rhetoric of personal branding uses a cycle of inevitability to encourage individuals to participate in the branding process: economic turmoil is *inevitable*, and personal branding is the solution because others will brand themselves, therefore you too *must* brand yourself in order to succeed (Lair et al, 322).

Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney suggest that this use of inevitability in the rhetoric of personal branding goes hand in hand with the “by-your-own-bootstraps American mythos,” in the sense that by creating one’s own personal brand, one is creating success for themselves, without any outside help. To question or attack this mentality or process would be cynical, and being cynical reflects a lack of desire to try or to create success for oneself (Lair et al, 323). To not want success for one’s self, especially created entirely *by* one’s self, suggests an “un-American” mentality. Simultaneously, the rhetoric of personal branding suggests that creating success by and for one’s self exists as the only solution to inevitable economic hardship, thus encouraging the American *mythos* and not allowing for any “un-American” cynicism. Personal branding makes success seem necessary for survival, and in addition, personal branding frames success as aligning with one’s pre-existing values and ideologies, which makes individuals less likely to question it. Peter Montoya, Financial Services public speaker and author of *The Brand Called You*, effectively sums up the purpose of personal branding through his statement: “A personal brand is not you; it’s the public projection of your personality and abilities. That doesn’t mean you are losing ‘you the person’; it does mean you are shaping the perception people have of ‘you the person.’” To Montoya, there exists only one “you the person,” one version of a person’s self; however, individuals have the opportunity to enhance, change, and entirely recreate this one version of themselves to obtain desirable perceptions from others.

I find this definition of a personal brand from Montoya quite intriguing, particularly because of his choosing to use the word “perception.” This is an important aspect of the personal brand, especially in its relevance to the music and entertainment industry, because everything that ever gets presented to the public sphere in today’s society is designed to manipulate individuals into leaning towards a certain perception of something. Montoya’s definition of personal branding reassures individuals that they can create whatever kind of persona they desire for themselves, because it will not *actually* be “them,” it will be what everyone else *thinks* is “them.” The music industry works precisely in this way. By creating “personal brands” for music artists, record labels are literally controlling *who* those artists become to the rest of the world and *how* they are perceived. Part of the reason this tactic is largely successful is due to the fact that most individuals within the public sphere will never build a relationship with a musical artist, especially one on the level of superstardom like Taylor Swift, well enough to know how they really are as a person. In addition, by Montoya’s definition, an individual does not lose themselves when developing a personal brand; however, the question that must be raised is to what extent an individual loses sight of “you the person” through their efforts in shaping others’ mere *perception* of “you the person.” In other words, are individuals becoming so concerned with how others perceive them and how they are represented in society that they are completely disregarding their true selves? This concern gains prevalence when looking at the personal brands that celebrities exude toward the public sphere, especially because of the heavy focus on associating celebrities with consumer products in order to attract revenue. In today’s media culture, however, it is not uncommon at all for a single celebrity to endorse several different brand names or specific products at once, which brings about the danger of those celebrities become products themselves, as Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney suggest.

With these ideas and concepts surrounding personal branding in mind, I will now attempt to connect and apply them to Taylor Swift and her career as a musical artist in today's business world. It can perhaps be argued that the first image of Swift presented to the public — the young and carefree teenage girl from Pennsylvania who became a sort of “big sister” to girls across the United States through her detailed and emotional writing of her songs — exists as her first personal brand as a musician. Whether this persona of Swift's existed inherently in her nature or was manufactured and shaped by the music industry upon discovery of Swift's potential, it must be addressed because it will forever exist as the very first image of Taylor Swift that the public sphere received. In just her physical appearance alone, the 2008 version of Swift making her debut in the music world appears natural and approachable: the cover art for her debut album, *Taylor Swift*, depicts a photo of a young Swift from only the chest up with long, wild blonde curls and seemingly non-existent makeup. She looks, for all intents and purposes, like a “normal” American teenage girl, which reflects the image her music and lyrics also convey. This version of Swift represents a personal brand that the public sphere does not question because of its apparent normalcy and relatable nature. Like her music, however, Swift's personal brand begins to grow and change over the years. One of the first endorsements that Swift underwent was the widely known and recognized “got milk?” ad campaign in 2008, shortly following the release of *Taylor Swift*. The ad features the heading “Swift pick” and shows Swift sitting casually on a stool in a cream-colored lace sundress with her curly hair down, holding her guitar across one knee. Additionally, the ad's discussion of the benefits milk brings to teenagers again strengthens the wholesome, “normal teenage girl” image Swift has begun to build. In the words of Susanna Kelly Engber, part of the definition of a brand consists of the added total of all use experiences with a certain product or service, which builds a

reputation as well as future expectations for a consumer's benefit from said brand (156).

Consumers consciously choose certain brands over others, and they come to be loyal to and hold certain expectations of those brands. Thus, if the brand suddenly changes, the emotional appeal and attachment previously established between the consumer and the brand is shaken and potentially becomes lost.

Fast forward to present day, 2016, and Swift has become the face of several more equally notable and recognizable products including CoverGirl cosmetics, L.E.I. Jeans, Keds shoes, Diet Coke, and most recently, a series of commercials for Apple Music, as well as having created and endorsed several different lines of her own perfume. Each of these advertisements feature Swift — who most would agree is not hard on the eyes — looking attractive and poised, though she appears more made-up in some ads than others. That Swift endorses simpler, “natural” products earlier in her career reflects her initial personal brand of the “normal American teenage girl,” wanting to be just like everyone else and remaining under the radar while later ads for the same company become bolder, encouraging consumers, primarily young women like herself, to stand out and be their own person. For example, CoverGirl ads featuring Swift in her earlier career days take on a simple approach: in these, Swift serves as the face for CoverGirl's “Nature Luxe” product line, which, as one may assume from the name, is CoverGirl's “natural” line of cosmetics. An advertisement for L.E.I. Jeans also presents Swift in a simple, natural-looking setting in which she is shown lying beside her acoustic guitar on a pile of denim, wearing jeans and a neutral colored shirt and gazing away from the camera. The image represented here is again meant to give the impression that despite her celebrity status, Taylor Swift too lies around casually in simple jeans and a tank top, contemplating her thoughts and playing guitar like the “average” American teenage girl. Advertising campaigns featuring Swift escalate to a new level

as her career advances, such as one Diet Coke ad that bears the caption “Stay Extraordinary” and depicts Swift in heavy makeup and costume jewelry, including a dramatic headpiece, while holding a rhinestone-covered guitar with one hand and a can of Diet Coke in the other. A similarly glamorous effect is seen in one of her many CoverGirl spots, in which she dons a brunette wig with blunt bangs and is shown wearing several shades of brightly colored eyeshadow, with the caption, evidently meant to be a quote from Swift herself, reading “Don’t live in someone else’s shadow!” These particular advertisements reflect Swift’s already changing career, because at this point in time she begins drifting slightly away from her country sound and incorporating more pop elements into her music. In other words, she has begun stepping out of “someone else’s shadow” — perhaps that of the country music genre — and building her own personal brand to make herself stand out more prominently among fellow artists in the music industry.

As this gradual integration of pop elements to Swift’s so-called “country” albums continues and eventually manifests into the public announcement that her most recent album *1989* is officially categorized in the pop genre, it becomes a bit more difficult to decipher which of two factors is a result of the other: is Swift being featured in advertisements for top brands like Apple due to her already established success as an artist, or is she choosing to market herself in certain ways, with certain products and images, because she *desires* further success in a new genre? The answer to this question goes hand in hand with answering the fundamental query of why Swift would make the switch from country music to pop in the first place, when she was already experiencing such overwhelming success within the former genre. The answer, I believe, lies in the concept of commodification. To commodify something means, on the simplest level, to transform a good, service, idea or person into an object of economic value

(Apadurai, 1986). From the most fundamental level, then, it can be argued that to commodify something is to render it inanimate, a mere object. In reference to a human individual in particular, the act of becoming a commodity would clearly, then, be a reduction in quality: a downgrade from a unique, individual person to a mere entity, a product, a thing.

Degrading though it may seem, this act of human commodification occurs regularly in today's society, particularly within the music industry. On the surface, the obvious entity being commodified in this industry is the actual music itself, since economic exchange allows consumers to purchase physical CD albums and downloads of songs; however, the deeper issue at hand lies in *why* consumers desire to purchase those albums and songs in the first place. It comes down to the same reason consumers desire to purchase any sort of product, whether it be shampoo or a type of beverage: to successfully commodify something and make it sell, a successful image or brand must be created for it. In her research, Susanna Kelly Engbers asserts that successful branding strongly results from utilizing *ethos*, an essential component of a brand because it exists as one kind of persuasive strategy "[...] that works in collaboration with appealing to audience's emotions and constructing logical arguments" (151). In personal branding, then, the concept of *ethos* also exists, since an individual's purpose in creating his or her personal brand is to persuade and appeal to other individuals' emotions based on the "version of you" he or she exhibits. While the music industry's main commodity is indeed the physical music itself, the industry has become wise to the concept of personal branding in recent years. In creating personal brands for musical artists, the music industry works to establish more personal connections with consumers by making ordinary individuals feel some sense of emotional bond with a given artist. Developing an emotional connection with a musical artist on some level effectively persuades consumers to purchase the artists' music. There are numerous ways in

which this emotional connection and thus the successful selling of an artist's personal brand can come about, including marketing campaigns, featured advertisement spots, and even something as personal as an artist's own songs. Each of these outlets are manipulated by the industry for the artists as part of an overarching sales and marketing plan, unbeknownst to the artist himself. This is to ensure that the artist believes they are in control of their own career. In this way, artists too become commodified entities for consumption along with their music because they are reduced to mere entities, altered versions of themselves that are designed solely for the purpose of generating revenue for the music industry.

It may appear shocking to some that even "global superstar" Taylor Swift has fallen victim to this undermining practice of the music industry. Though many sources, including *Forbes*, praise Swift for her "genius" marketing campaigns, much more exists than appears on the surface of Swift's big-name brand advertisements. First, in applying the concepts I have discussed previously regarding idea of personal branding, one can see Swift's jump from country music to pop and the resulting alterations in her physical image are in and of themselves components of Swift's newly created personal brand. Gone is the image of wild, curly hair, sundresses, cowboy boots, and carefree teenage girl songs with straight-from-her-diary lyrics. In its place lies a new and improved pop diva version of Swift, one with hair chopped short who wears dramatic and sexualized outfits and sings rather redundant lyrics set to a generic pop beat. Even if we delved no further than Swift's music and her physical appearance, still, there would exist the creation of a new and different personal brand. With this fact in mind, I suggest that although Swift repeatedly reports to the public that this change in her sound stems solely from wishing to do something new as an artist and individual, it is actually a result of the commodifying tactics of the music industry. The key concept about the music industry

commodifying artists, including Swift, lies in the fact that the artists do not realize or understand what is happening to them. Further, consumers do not realize the emotional connections or expectations they have come to form with these “brands” that are musical artists, and therein lies the hegemonic quality of the ideology of commodification within the music industry.

In focusing on Taylor Swift, there exist several ways in which she falls victim to becoming a commodified entity by the music industry, and of which I will address. The first being, perhaps obviously, through commercialization and production promotion; second, through depiction of herself in hyper-sexualized ways in her music videos; third, in the adoption of a female empowerment or feminist facade; and finally, in the inherent lack of quality that her most recent album, *1989*, exhibits. I have already touched on the many different advertising campaigns that Taylor Swift has become a face for over the ten years that span her professional career, but a recent addition to that list of product names is worth noting. A series of three promotional videos for the launch of Apple Music in April of 2016 depict Swift lip-syncing to a song and performing some action inside her house in each video. These videos include Swift running on the treadmill while listening to Drake, lip-syncing to Jimmy Eat World in front of her bathroom mirror, and dancing around her living room to *The Darkness*. Each depicts Swift using Apple Music on her iPhone to select playlists and individual songs to fit her mood or activity she engages in.

The significance of these videos lies in the fact that they are meant to show Swift doing “everyday” activities, just like a “normal” individual who was not a celebrity would also do. In fact, in the video featuring Swift listening to Drake on the treadmill, she actually trips and flies off of the treadmill, a comedic element which Apple uses to describe Apple Music as “Distractingly good.” The act of falling off the treadmill, while obviously meant to add humor to

the advertisement, also serves a dual purpose of humanizing Swift and allows the audience to relate to Swift as she appears in the video. Similarly, the second promotional video depicting Swift getting ready to go out while lip-syncing into her lipstick in front of the mirror to “The Middle” by Jimmy Eat World provides humor as well as a human element; it is very likely that most audience members can relate to behaving in precisely the same way. There is also the irony of Swift, who is known for singing, lip-syncing in the commercial. The third video demonstrates consistency in this humanizing depiction of Swift as she twirls, slides and dances all over her living room, all the while lip-syncing to yet another song.

On the surface level, it seems Swift benefits from these promotional videos for Apple Music. The videos clearly present Swift’s image as a “normal,” everyday individual who enjoys listening to music and goofing around in the comfort of her own home, an image that is incredibly relatable to audience members. Interestingly enough, this “relatable” image ties back to Swift’s initial image or personal brand upon her debut into society as a young country artist; thus, the conclusion can be drawn that despite Swift’s departure from country music to pursue a career in pop and the fact that she has grown older, she continues to desire being seen as relatable to her fans. The negative side to this created image or personal brand, however, lies in the fact that the music and entertainment industry is the driving force that allow Swift to be depicted in this way. Whether Swift’s success results from the success of the marketing campaigns she is part of or whether the marketing campaigns bring Swift this success is impossible to determine absolutely, but this question becomes irrelevant because the two factors now exist in a cycle of mutual exclusivity. Swift believes she benefits from being depicted in a relatable, humanized way in such advertisements as the Apple Music promotional videos because this image shapes a more likable and positive audience perception of her, and both

Apple Music's sales and Swift's sales as an artist benefit from her presence in the videos because the advertisement is effective in attracting audience members. This reveals Swift's commodification by the industry — unbeknownst to her — because as long as Swift truly believes she personally earns success from the various marketing campaigns she takes part in, the music industry will continue to use her as a product to be sold. In other words, by placing Swift in advertisements such as Apple Music or CoverGirl, the music industry uses her as product to generate sales for themselves. Swift receives more attention in the public sphere when she becomes the face of ad campaigns and thus thinks her presence in these ads help her gain more following as an artist, when in actuality the industry places her in these advertisements so that her music, which is the industry's product, will sell. In the process, Swift becomes a product as well.

The second way in which Taylor Swift's commodification by the music industry can be shown is through the hyper-sexual depiction of herself and other women in some of her most recent music videos. Popular culture utilizes the sexualization of individuals, especially women, to glamorize content and attract audiences because, to put it bluntly, sex sells. In particular, the music video for "Bad Blood," a track from *1989*, very clearly exemplifies this hyper-sexualization as an aspect of commodification. In addition to Swift herself, the "Bad Blood" video features at least a dozen other women of varied ages who are either established or up-and-coming figures within the entertainment industry. These women merely make second-long cameo appearances throughout the video, and Swift naturally has a scene with each and every one of them, which, on a sidebar, subtly furthers the music industry's commodification of Swift by associating her with "famous" individuals. It can be argued that the most significant aspect of these associations lies in the fact that all of the women, Swift included, are clad in tight,

revealing, black leather warrior-like outfits, which suggests an underlying theme of desirability or sexiness. While I suspect that, ironically, these depictions are meant to portray Swift and the others as “strong, independent women” ready to stand up for themselves, it has the opposite effect of marketing Swift as the ultimate female commodity: a sex symbol.

This concept of depicting women in the media as strong and successful while independent of a partner or family is what Diana Damean calls “the emancipated women.” Emancipated women are independent, successful, ambitious, talented, and “are endowed with so called ‘masculine’ features”(Damean, 92), in contrast to the “traditional” women who find fulfillment within the private sphere. According to Damean, however, media “presents a distorted model of the emancipated femininity [...] media creates ‘the perfect woman,’ setting standards very difficult to reach” rather than “liberating women from their status of objects and instead placing them on an equal position with men”(Damean, 93). Swift’s presentation in the “Bad Blood” video matches Damean’s definition of the “emancipated woman” because it exists as a facade. In wearing such hyper-sexualized, tightly-clad and revealing clothing while surrounding herself with a “squad” of strong, brave female women, Swift believes she represents an image of strength and independence as a woman in society, when in actuality the image she puts forth is extremely out of reach for the average young woman in society. Swift also attempts to employ the idea of feminism and the liberated woman within a futuristic fantasy setting created in a studio that quite literally does not exist in reality. The importance of a woman’s image has grown immensely and media suggests that women should look good in order to attract men, and the circulation of this “perfect woman” image throughout media, including “Bad Blood,” reinforces an unrealistic image and identity for women to emulate. By allowing herself to be portrayed in such a way, Swift becomes a voluntary symbol for this unrealistic

“emancipated woman” image, and thus markets herself with this identity as well as perpetuating and encouraging other women to conform to this supposed ideal as well. This fact is extremely disconcerting, because it reveals that Swift either does not appear to realize she has become a symbol for this commodified, idealistic image, or worse, that she *has* realized this and that she accepts the identity willingly. It may be difficult to comprehend why Swift would willingly accept association with such a negative image, especially given her origins as a relatable and role model-like figure for young girls upon her outbreak into the music scene ten years ago. If Swift indeed does realize the ways in which the music industry has commodified her into a branded entity, perhaps she accepts this oppression as a kind of necessary evil in the process of truly building her own personal brand in the long run.

Swift’s hyper-sexualized image transitions into the third way in which she is commodified by the music industry: through displays of female empowerment and support for feminism. Once notorious for constantly seeming to be romantically involved with someone new, Swift, who feels “[...] watching [her] dating life has become somewhat of a national pastime,” has recently begun putting the fervor she once had for pursuing romantic relationships into pursuing friendships. (*Rolling Stone*, 2014) These days, her notoriousness results from her “squad” of fellow female celebrities with whom she can be seen doing nearly anything and everything with. Intrigue with these friendships of Swift’s lies in the fact that they are all fairly recent in their formation, and that they are all women Swift previously admired from afar and merely daydreamed about being friends with. For example, Swift told *Vogue* in 2012 that she wanted to be friends with Victoria’s Secret model Karlie Kloss, and two years later she casually tells *Rolling Stone* that Kloss has basically taken over one of her four guest bedrooms in her million-dollar New York penthouse apartment. (Eells, 2014). Similar stories can be told for

several of Swift's other "squad" members, including *Girls* creator, writer, and actress Lena Dunham — whose boyfriend co-wrote most of the songs on *1989* — singer Lorde, model Gigi Hadid, and singer and actress Selena Gomez, to name a few. Almost more painfully obvious than the fact that each of these women are successful within the entertainment industry is that the members of her "squad" are predominantly thin and white. Many feminists have criticized Swift for flaunting her group of female friends, asserting that even though Swift utilizes her clique to emphasize female empowerment strength, she actually exemplifies an extreme form of feminism: White Feminism. White Feminism can be generally defined as a narrow-minded perspective of feminism that focuses solely on the oppression of white females in society and tends to ignore white privilege. Some felt that Swift's acceptance speech for Album of the Year at the 2016 Grammy Awards exemplified this White Feminism. Swift clearly attempted to revolve her speech around women empowerment, saying "[...] to all the young women out there, there are going to be people along the way who will try to undercut your success or take credit for your accomplishments [...]" (Billboard, 2016). Her words exemplify White Feminism in the sense that she wrongly assumes everyone who hears her has the same opportunities and privileges in life, which is far from being the case. Though all women in general are indeed often not considered equals to men, white women have far more opportunities available to them by default. Swift especially, whose entire family moved from Pennsylvania to Nashville so she could pursue music at the young age of 14; whose mother drove her to voice and theater lessons in New York City at a very young age; and whose father is an extremely successful financial advisor does not represent the large portion of women in society who live with no support and truly have to fend for themselves. Thus, criticism arises from the fact that Swift constantly depicts herself as an outsider, once a victim of oppression in society who has since reached

success in the face of her adversaries, when in reality her background and upbringing were quite comfortable.

Swift has engaged in several now infamous Twitter feuds regarding feminism with other female artists, most notably female rapper Nicki Minaj and singer Demi Lovato. Additionally, Swift publicly donated \$250,000 to female singer Ke\$ha as a show of support for the artist who recently lost a legal battle for emancipation from her contract with her producer, Dr. Luke, whom she accused of sexual and emotional abuse. Lovato, who had also tweeted about her love and support for Ke\$ha, appeared to criticize Swift's actions in further tweets centered around female empowerment, saying "Women empowerment is leading other women to make actual changes in our society" and "Take something to Capitol Hill or actually speak out about something and then I'll be impressed." These messages not-so-subtly reveal Lovato's apparent disapproval of Swift's financial donation to Ke\$ha, which does not qualify as real "action" for female empowerment. With feminism currently existing as such a popular topic of discussion and debate in society, it may seem natural that Swift, who has continuously been a voice for young girls throughout her musical career, would want to contribute to the movement. The ways in which she attempts to contribute, however, have been criticized thus far, which reveals Swift's commodification once more: Swift believes she is remaining relevant in society by contributing her opinions on the popular topic of women empowerment and feminism, but her efforts are fruitless and somewhat controversial rather than beneficial or inspiring. In other words, commodification of Swift lies evident in the fact that she attempts to contribute to the discussion and fight for feminism in society without seeming to be thoroughly or appropriately educated on the subject matter. Swift seems to think that bold financial contributions and featuring revealing clothing and dozens of young, beautiful females carrying weapons in her music video are

accurate and powerful statements of feminism, but she is mistaken. To truly fight for equality between men and women, as the most fundamental principle of feminism suggests, action must be taken toward real change, not creating new physical images or personal brands to be sold that merely appeal to the idea of feminism.

The fourth and final way that marks Taylor Swift's commodification from a human artist to a mere objectified entity by the music industry lies in the lack of quality in her most recent music compared to her previous albums. From the beginning of her musical career as a young country artist, Swift's talent for songwriting set her apart from many others in her genre. Her heartfelt and detailed lyrics resonated quickly and easily within the hearts and minds of young girls everywhere because of their extreme relevance to that age group. Especially relatable to teenage girls across America were those songs off Swift's first two albums, *Taylor Swift* (2006) and *Fearless* (2008), whose lyrics perfectly illustrate the dozens of emotions and experiences of the American "girl-next-door." Most notable are "Teardrops On My Guitar," one of Swift's very first singles, which contains the lyrics "He's the reason for the teardrops on my guitar / the only wish that keeps me wishing on my wishing star / he's a song in the car, I keep singing, don't know why I do," and 2008's "Fifteen," in which Swift croons "'Cause when you're fifteen and somebody tells you they love you, you're gonna believe them" and "And then you're on your very first date and he's got a car and you're feelin like flyin'." The vivid picture that these songs and lyrics paint for Swift's fans allow them to feel a deeply rooted connection with her because the images Swift conjures with her music represent experiences fans have already had or are curious about. The genuine, heartfelt lyrics Swift pens in her early albums paired with the homegrown and bona fide sound of country music instrumentation create a much more relatable backdrop for a song than an over-produced, synthesized pop song does. These qualities thus

strengthened and reinforced the genuine quality of Swift's music. Today's pop songs recycle cliché lyrics, subjects, and rhythmic patterns, which instantly makes them sound weaker and more generic than lyrics that sound like they may have come from one's own diary.

This veritable song quality is definitely lacking on Swift's newest album, the collection of bona-fide pop anthems that is *1989*. Though Swift still co-wrote or contributed in some way to each of the songs on *1989*, only one song on the album, "This Love," credits her as the sole author. At least five additional writers are credited on every single other track on *1989*, which comes as a drastic change from Swift's previous albums, particularly her debut *Taylor Swift* which cites Swift as the sole writer for nearly every song apart from some aid and guidance from songwriter Liz Rose. This shift in the writing quality of Swift's songs exists as ample evidence on its own in showing how she has become commodified or "sold out" to the music industry because a great deal of musical artists do not write their own songs to begin with. Instead, they simply become the voice for lyrics that come from a label's group of hired writers. This obviously creates potential for a strong lack of personal connection between an artist and the words he or she sings. Even greater than Swift "selling out" to the music industry in the aspect of writing, however, exists the blatant fact that the literal sound quality of her music has undergone dramatic alteration with the birth of her latest album. The distinct and cheerful sounds of fiddles and banjos — not to mention Swift's own southern twang — have been replaced by all-too-familiar synthesizers, traces of dubstep, and generic, perhaps even empty-sounding pop music beats. This vast contrast in Swift's sound makes it nearly impossible to recognize that the twangy crooning voice featured on *Taylor Swift* and the heavily edited and processed one heard on *1989* come from the same female artist. James Reed of *Boston Globe* comments that while Swift's *1989* sound does not resemble any other major female popstar's

sound, such as Miley Cyrus or Katy Perry, “It’s a cruel irony that in Swift’s quest to sound like no one else, she doesn’t sound like herself either.” (*Boston Globe*, 2014) When Taylor Swift announced that her 2014 album *1989* was “my very first official, documented pop album” (*People*, 2014), it sparked an outrage in some and confirmed suspicions of others. Swift’s previous album, 2012’s *Red*, had shown many glimmers of the style and sound stereotypical to modern pop music, despite Swift’s half-hearted efforts to include a few tracks that passed as containing country elements by a hair. Even so, the crossover from country to pop is an endeavor taken on by many a musician but accomplished only by few, and Swift’s motives, or rather the motives of the music industry, seemed transparent: transforming Swift into a pop star in order to gain even more stardom and make even more money. In other words, it appeared Swift had been officially and publicly commodified by the music industry.

That the music industry is so powerful in its commodification of individual, human artists into brands and products that the artists themselves would not notice the effects is utterly startling, to say the very least. It seems a nearly impossible concept to grasp that an intelligent human being would fail to notice him or herself being oppressed and controlled by an industry, yet if every single music artist in society was truly in total control of their career, there would ironically be no control within the industry. To think that an artist as acclaimed and established as Taylor Swift fails to be controlling the outcome of her own musical career is unsettling, yet Swift is just one example of hundreds of artists who have become mere pawns in the music industry’s hunger for success. It becomes crucial to examine this idea of commodification of artists within the music industry because it primarily affects consumers in the public sphere. The most absolute concept of this commodification ideology lies not only in the fact that the artists themselves are blind to their powerlessness; we as consumers are even more unaware because we

do not realize the advertisements we see and the music we hear are carefully crafted to lead us into thinking and feeling certain ways.

Returning to the discussion of the personal brand and *ethos*, scholars have asserted that the two go hand in hand. As with the branding for any type of product, such as shampoo, for example, there exists some level of emotional appeal for consumers to be encouraged to purchase one brand over another. In this way, consumers pick and choose which brands of products they become loyal to, and thus develop expectations for those brands over time. It can be disappointing or angering if one should have to switch brands of a product at any given moment in time, due to a lack of deliverance on the expectations one has come to hold for the brand. There exists a sense of betrayal and frustration when a brand fails to meet expectations because we as consumers have invested our trust, and when our trust is betrayed due to lack of expectations being met, emotional connections are ruined. The same holds true for the concept of personal branding among individual people. A person may create a self-image, or brand, for themselves that appeals greatly to many other individuals. Thus, this person's success level will be high as long as they continue to meet expectations others have of them, based on the personal brand they have put out. The music industry capitalizes on this concept of personal branding by creating self-images *for* the artists rather than the artists deciding how they want to be perceived; however, the music industry manipulates these artists so seamlessly that they have no awareness that their new self-images were not, in fact, their own idea. The sole concern within the music industry is selling music, but in today's society artists are not relied upon to sell their own records based on sheer talent alone. Instead, the industry has reached the conclusion that in order to sell an artist's songs, the artist too must be sold.

Knowing this about the music industry and looking at Taylor Swift as an example of this exploitation, the dangers of this hegemonic ideology of commodification begin to surface. For one, there lies a great irony in the fact that Swift credits herself for her switch from country music to pop because this is precisely what the industry aims toward. Though Swift has arguably always had pop influence in her music, making the switch between genres was definitely not imperative for Swift as far as maintaining success as an artist because she was enjoying great accomplishments and achievements as a country singer. The decision to produce a full-blown pop album without any traces of country sound — and to declare herself officially as a pop artist — was a carefully planned and manipulated career move from the industry in order to attempt to harness even more wealth from Swift. Pop sells, sex sells, and Swift had already proven to sell, so the music industry decided to fuse her together with the two former elements.

Seeing how effortlessly Swift's commodification has occurred begs the question of how many additional artists have fallen prey to the music industry's power. More concerning than the artists' commodification, however, is that consumers are completely unaware that they are buying into a brand, an image, that holds no true value. In listening to Swift's music, purchasing her albums, taking interest in products she promotes, and contributing to the viral reception of her music videos, consumers feed the hegemony of the music industry and further contribute to the ideology of commodification. As much as Swift perpetuates her own commodification by having willingly sold out to the music industry by making the jump to pop music, consumers perpetuate this hegemonic commodification even further by buying into the personal brand that is "Taylor Swift": she is Coke; she is CoverGirl; she is Apple Music; she is Keds; she is a ninja warrior dressed in skimpy leather and lugging a huge grenade launcher. "Taylor Swift" consists

of *things*, all the products and brands and commodities we as consumers are drawn to. Thus, “Taylor Swift” ceases to be a human musical artist and instead becomes nothing more than a product, a brand, a *thing*, herself.

Music will always be something all people can relate to in some way, shape, or form because it is, and always has been, an inherent part of human culture for thousands of years. The dawn and rise of technology has greatly altered the way we consume music in today’s society, but this does not have to take on negative meaning. Brands will continue to form and exist in society, including within the music industry, and although the industry will likely not change the way in which it treats its artists as products, we as consumers do not have to continue to perpetuate this commodification. The music industry has chosen to cross the fine line between personal branding and self-commodification, but by acknowledging that the latter occurs unwillingly and unknowingly for music artists, consumers can heed better judgement in consumption methods and thus help liberate artists little by little.

The first words anonymously written in the ‘About’ section of Taylor Swift’s official web page are as follows: “She is, quite simply, a global superstar.” Though the truth of these words is debatable, perhaps one day Taylor Swift and artists everywhere can experience the freedom of seeking superstardom on their own, without the oppressive force of the music industry commodifying their every move.

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