

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Communication Theses

Department of Communication

5-13-2022

“Better Than We Found It”: A Persuasive Narrative & Its Impact

Alexandra Holzworth

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_theses

Recommended Citation

Holzworth, Alexandra, "“Better Than We Found It”: A Persuasive Narrative & Its Impact." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2022.

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_theses/124

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

“BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT”: A PERSUASIVE NARRATIVE & ITS IMPACT

by

ALEXANDRA HOLZWORTH

Under the Direction of Cynthia Hoffner, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

ABSTRACT

This study examined Maren Morris's music video for the country song "Better Than We Found It" and her audiences' response in 672 comments left on her Instagram post of the music video. The study focused on narrative persuasion throughout the video in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform/the DREAM Act, and the importance of being good stewards. A thematic analysis was conducted on the music video followed by qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Instagram comments. Results showed that overall commenters expressed support for Maren Morris as an artist and for her music video's message. Results also indicated signs of a parasocial relationship between Maren Morris and her fans and support for her arguments about the Black Lives Matter movement and good stewardship. Future research should be done on how other musicians are able to use their music and social media platforms to promote social issues.

INDEX WORDS: Country Music, Narrative Persuasion, Parasocial Bond, Social Issues

Copyright by
ALEXANDRA ELIZABETH HOLZWORTH
2022

“BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT”: A PERSUASIVE NARRATIVE AND ITS IMPACT

by

ALEXANDRA HOLZWORTH

Committee Chair: Cynthia Hoffner

Committee: Jaye Atkinson

Carrie Whitney

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have been able to conduct this research without my thesis advisor Cynthia Hoffner, PhD of the Department of Communication, College of Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University. Dr. Hoffner consistently challenged me to do my best work by thoroughly examining my research and made herself available to answer questions when I needed clarification. I would also like to thank the rest of my thesis committee, Jaye Atkinson, PhD and Carrie Whitney, PhD as they provided me with valuable instruction inside and outside of the classroom throughout my time at Georgia State University.

I need express my gratitude towards Yolanda Deida, a Department Specialist for the World Languages and Cultures division at Georgia State. She has made it feasible for me to graduate this semester. Thank you to Dr. Mandy Swygart-Hobaugh, the Data Services Librarian at Georgia State University. She always made herself available to answer (my many) questions about the NVivo software used to carry out this research. I want to thank my fellow graduate students (specifically Davia Lassiter and Akansha Sirohi) who never hesitated to help me navigate this overwhelming process. I want to thank Jacob Smith, my co-coder, for his support and assistance. Without him, proving reliability in my research would not have been possible. I also want to thank the employees at Krog Street Market who always met me with support, encouragement, and sometimes free food as they watched me tirelessly write my thesis. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank God.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		IV
1 INTRODUCTION		1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW		5
2.1 Themes Found Throughout Country Music		5
<i>2.1.1 Race</i>		<i>7</i>
<i>2.1.2 Patriotism</i>		<i>8</i>
<i>2.1.3 Stewardship</i>		<i>8</i>
2.2 Music and Social Change Overview		9
<i>2.2.1 How Musical Narratives Persuade</i>		<i>11</i>
2.3 Musicians and Social Change		12
<i>2.3.1 Parasocial Relationships with Artists</i>		<i>12</i>
<i>2.3.2 The Power of Female Country Musicians</i>		<i>14</i>
<i>2.3.3 The Power for Female Musicians: Lady Gaga as an Example</i>		<i>15</i>
2.4 Social Media, Celebrities, and Social Change		16
2.5 The Current Study		22
<i>2.5.1 Analysis of the Music Video</i>		<i>22</i>
<i>2.5.2 Analysis of the Instagram Comments</i>		<i>23</i>
<i>2.5.3 Research Questions</i>		<i>23</i>
3 METHOD		24

3.1	Overview	24
3.2	Data Selection Process	25
3.3	Music Video and Comments: Coding Process and Data Analysis.....	26
	<i>3.3.1 Music Video Analysis: Coding Process</i>	<i>26</i>
	<i>3.3.2 Music Video Analysis: Thematic Analysis</i>	<i>27</i>
	<i>3.3.3 Comment Analysis: Coding Scheme.....</i>	<i>28</i>
	<i>3.3.4 Comment Analysis: Coding Procedure</i>	<i>28</i>
	<i>3.3.5 Comment Analysis: Data Analysis.....</i>	<i>29</i>
4	RESULTS	30
4.1	Music Video Analysis.....	30
	<i>4.1.1 Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Social Bonds: Relatability</i>	<i>32</i>
	<i>4.1.2 Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Social Bonds: Vulnerability</i>	<i>35</i>
	<i>4.1.3 References to the Black Lives Matter Movement.....</i>	<i>38</i>
	<i>4.1.4 References to Immigration/The DREAM Act</i>	<i>41</i>
	<i>4.1.5 Good Stewardship.....</i>	<i>43</i>
	<i>4.1.6 Music Video Analysis Conclusion</i>	<i>45</i>
4.2	Comments Analysis.....	46
	4.2.1. RQ5: The Audience’s Parasocial Involvement with Maren Morris.....	49
	4.2.2. RQ6: Audience Response to Main Topics.....	50
	4.2.2.1 Black Lives Matter	51

4.2.2.2	Immigration/The DREAM Act	51
4.2.2.3	Good Stewardship	52
4.2.3	RQ7: Inspiration and Activation Among Audiences	53
5	DISCUSSION	56
5.1	Research Questions Results: Overview	56
5.2	Research Question Results by Theme	58
5.2.1	<i>Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Parasocial Bonds: Relatability and Vulnerability</i>	58
5.2.2	<i>References to the Black Lives Matter Movement</i>	60
5.2.3	<i>References to Immigration/The DREAM Act</i>	61
5.2.4	<i>Good Stewardship and Taking Collective Action</i>	62
5.3	Social and Research Implications	63
5.4	Limitations	65
5.6	Conclusion	68
	REFERENCES	69
	APPENDICES	76
	Appendix A: Original Code Book for Comments on Instagram Post of “Better Than We Found It” Music Video	76

1 INTRODUCTION

Maren Morris is a famous, Grammy award winning, singer-songwriter from Arlington, Texas. She is currently one of the most popular voices in country music at 31 years young and has already won one GRAMMY (she holds 11 nominations), five Country Music Awards, three Billboard Music Awards, and five Academy of Country Music Awards. Though many know her because of her collaboration with artist Zedd on the 2019 iHeart Music Award winning pop song “The Middle”, Morris started her career as a songwriter. During her time writing in Nashville, Tennessee, she authored songs sung by huge stars like Tim McGraw, Kelly Clarkson, and more. She was the first Columbia Nashville artist to have a first single (a song called “My Church”) debut at number one on the Billboard country music charts. “My Church” was played by over a hundred radio stations the week it was released and managed to go double platinum. Morris’ fanbase spans the globe and attracts lovers of all genres.

Though Maren Morris is known for her blunt feminism and wide-ranging ambition in the country music world, she attracts pop lovers because many of her melodies mirror popular music (Coscarelli, 2016). Maren Morris has released singles with artists in the pop genre yet the lyrics in her original songs reflect a country influence as many of her songs are structured like stories and are tight rhythmically. Morris has released five studio albums (*Walk On* (2005), *All That It Takes* (2007), *Live Wire* (2011), *Hero* (2016), and *Girl* (2019)) and eight singles (“Bigger Man”, “Chasing After You”, “Line By Line”, “Better Than We Found It”, “The Bones”, “Kingdom of One”, “The Middle”, and “Dear Hate”) (Songfacts, n.d.). Her song “The Bones” spent almost twenty weeks on Billboard’s Top 100 Chart. Though Maren Morris has a smaller following than other pop and country artists like Carrie Underwood (who has 10.5 million Instagram followers), Lady Gaga (who has 50.4 million Instagram followers) or Taylor Swift (who has 186 million

Instagram followers), she does have a large fanbase (including her 1.5 million Instagram followers). While she may have less GRAMMY nominations than Gaga (who has 29 nominations and 12 wins) or Underwood (who has 14 nominations and 7 wins), her music has a massive amount of reach among multiple audiences.

Maren Morris has used her influence to comment on the importance of voting and both local and national elections – and to comment on what patriotism means to her. Her music implies that she has a unique definition for what it means to be a good American, especially when compared to the stereotypically characterization of the world within the country music industry. Another hallmark of Morris’s music and music in general has been fostering identity and creating solidarity among groups—especially within the Black community. Spirituals, Freedom Songs, and Black Nationalist Protest Music have all been studied under an activism lens and have been core to moving movements like the Civil Rights movement forward (Dennis, 2016). Even during times of censorship and apartheid, protest music was produced (despite the being banned for airplay) (Drewett, 2008). Furthermore, music has been proven to positively shape how people act, feel, and behave (Rabinowitch, 2020). For example, studies have shown that group singing can lead to children sharing more information with one another (Good & Russo, 2016). They’ve also proven that singing and dancing can result in an increase in cooperation among children (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010). Not only has music been used to mobilize, it’s also been employed to frame specific events or concepts. Examples include the ways in which specific country songs framed the September 11th attacks or (Boulton, 2008) or how certain female country artists have used their music to comment on feminism (Wilson, 2000).

“Better Than We Found It” is just one of several country songs that promote the need for specific social change. As a result, it’s important to understand the impact it is having on audiences – not just as a song, but as a music video that has been promoted and garnered engagement on social media. The advent of streaming audio and video thanks to technological advances has transformed the entertainment industry, offering audiences a seemingly never-ending catalog of video programming to choose from for consumption. Because the combination of music and video imagery has the power to impact audiences’ emotions as well as how they perceive the world around them, it is important to understand the influence music videos have on viewers (Aikat, 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence that indicates increased media effects on audiences who have the ability interact with videos (by way of “liking or commenting on them on social media) and/or are highly involved with the medium through which they are absorbing content (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, etc.) (Aikat, 2004). As a result, other researchers have called for the need to examine the relationships celebrities have with their fans on social media and the way the identification audiences foster with celebrities impacts their view on politics and beyond (Click et al., 2017). Instagram specifically is regarded as one of the fastest growing social media platforms and is mainly used for sharing photos and videos (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). As a result, famous people use Instagram to connect with their fans. Often, the moving and still images they share on Instagram are enhanced by a filter (often meant to beautify the photo or video) (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). The fact that attractive visuals have been proven to be more salient and easier to recall than text-based information coupled with the influence already associated with celebrities makes influencers’ Instagram posts particularly powerful (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). Because the persuasive effects of an artifact shared by someone famous can increase over time, it is important

to understand exactly when and how certain arguments made by celebrities make an impact (Hoeken et al., 2016).

Scholars have called for the need to research in a more naturalistic environment (versus a laboratory setting) which is why I want to take a two-pronged approach to examining the impact of the music video for “Better Than We Found It” (Zwarun & Hall, 2012). First, this study will break down the music video to show how the following three narrative themes encompass persuasive messaging: Advocacy for racial equality and the Black Lives Matter movement, what patriotism means in present day America, and humanity’s role in being good stewards to the planet. Then, research will be conducted on the comments on Maren Morris’s Instagram post that features the music video in its entirety – and how engagement with the video reflects the themes found throughout the narrative of the video as well as indicate audience members’ response to some of her arguments.

Morris’ single “Better Than We Found It” was released in October 2020, one month before the 2020 United States Presidential election after early voting had started. Because of the song’s focus on highly debated social issues and the arguments made throughout, the content of the music video may have been surprising to fans. It is nominated for the 2022 GRAMMY Awards’ category Best Country Song and has received over 1,181,854 views and 17,000 likes on Maren Morris’s YouTube channel (that has over 399,000 subscribers). More importantly, “Better Than We Found It” has been described as a protest song that encourages humanity – Americans in particular – to take action and responsibility for making positive change. The song was written partly as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement. The music video for the song features several Nashvillians, including the uncle and mother of Daniel Hambrick, an African American man who was killed by the Nashville police. Jade Fuller and Emma Rose (two Nashville

teenagers who organized a Black Lives Matter protest for their high school) as well as Gustavo Flores (a young immigrant who was told he had to return to Mexico by early 2021 because of suspension of the DREAM Act) are a few others who shared their story in the music video for “Better Than We Found It”. Part of the proceeds for the music video for “Better Than We Found It” are being donated to the Black Women’s Health Imperative –a non-profit designed to “protect and advance the health and wellness of Black women and girls” (Toirac, 2021). Maren Morris co-wrote the song with Jessie Jo Dillon, Jimmy Robbins and Laura Veltz and the song was produced by Greg Kurstin – a few artists within the country music industry who are dedicated to using their talents and public attention to educate audiences about difficult social issues while advocating for love and equality (Songfacts, n.d.).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Themes Found Throughout Country Music

Maren Morris’s music video for “Better Than We Found It” serves as proof that country music has come a long way since its inception. Though every style in the music industry has been influenced by technological evolutions, different telecommunication advances molded certain genres more than others. For example, the development of the radio in the 1920s served as the impetus for country music. Music formally classified as folk was distributed to southern American radio stations and was soon broadcasted live. World War II caused country music’s popularity to expand as well as Southerners who doubled as country music fans were sent overseas to fight (Raines & Walker, 2008). The popularization of now “country” music inspired its own set of textual codes and social institutions that became so prevalent additional iterations and sub-genres of country music were established. For example, in the 1950s country music was split by some into two categories: “new country” and “traditional country” (Abramsom, 2002).

While “new country” bled into southern rock genres (think: Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, etc.), “traditional” country was classified as offering wholesome, family entertainment (Meier, 2019).

The split between “new” and “traditional” country as well as ‘hillbilly’ country music serves as an example of the genres multi-dimensionality as political and economic associations with working class rurality created differentiation between specific country songs/artists (Edgar & Holladay, 2019). Because country music distributes popular messages surrounding geopolitical and social issues to mass audiences, it’s important to understand themes within the genre (Bouton, 2008). Popular music indicates the changing attitudes within social spaces and more importantly has the ability to produce them (Abramson, 2002). As such, it’s important to analyze how both the collective and individuals use music (and music videos) to create and represent meaning within their lives (Wilson, 2000). A more complete effort is needed when it comes to understanding the lived experience of country music’s varying audiences as they come from diverse backgrounds as well as common experiences shared among country music fans that exist outside of religion, education, and geography. The impact context has on the construction of meaning as well as factors that mediate the creation of that structure should also be studied (Conrad, 1988). This is because of the many ways in which country music is being used by various media figures from Donald Trump (who used it to rally immigration, border patrol and customs enforcement officer recruits) to the Dixie Chicks (who used it to communicate opinions on America’s role in the War on Terror) (Boulton, 2008). There are complex intersectional ties and deviations within the country music genre that are vital to understand in order to truly study what makes up country’s identity (Edgar & Holladay, 2019). Though country music has narrowly been defined as music that expresses stereotypical messages about themes including

race, patriotism, race, the goodness of the common man, religion, nostalgia, and family values – there is much more dimension to the genre. This is true when it comes to the topics covered by country music as well as the diversity in messaging within songs exploring those topics (Meier, 2019).

2.1.1 Race

The ‘white, working-class roots’ and ‘association with Southern rural America’ can make it seem as though the country music industry has one collective view regarding race (Haynes, 2018). However, country music (especially newer country songs) varies when it comes to the intellect behind lyrics as well as the approach in covering race as a theme overall (Abramson, 2002). The music video for “Better Than We Found It” and the stories found within it are a perfect example of messaging associated with race within a country music song that challenges the idea that country music only shares stories about the white working class. As previously mentioned, the song directly addresses the importance of The Black Lives Matter movement – a movement that has been evolving for years. Musicians (including Maren Morris) got involved in the movement by using their voice to fight for civil rights and criminal justice resulting in an overwhelming wave of cultural activism (Dennis, 2016).

While some musicians did this by way of song, others used their social media platforms to promote the movement. Many artists, including country artists like Maren Morris, participated in sub-movements of the Black Lives Matter movement including those portrayed by hashtags like #SayHerName (Brown et al., 2017). One of the most powerful platforms for the Black Lives Matter movement is Twitter, as the social platform was able to amplify awareness for the movement by strategically seeking and sharing information as well as using network ties among users. The amplification of marginalized voices made possible by Twitter allowed for digital

allyship to take place in support of racial justice (Clark, 2019). Many antiracist efforts made by whites, including famous country music artists, to combat white supremacy by way of education and activism were inspired by content on social media (Clark, 2019). The value of Black lives was expressed by social media users behind screen (perhaps uninfluenced by group think) allowing for cloud protesting to take place. Counter public networks openly broadcasted discourse highlighting counter-narratives that made previously marginalized opinions salient (Clark, 2019).

2.1.2 Patriotism

Similar to stories about race, counter-narratives surrounding patriotism in country music are powerful because there are stereotypes associated with how country music as a genre addresses this theme. For example, often country music is associated with the American Republican party and conservative political values. There are also ways in which country music messages associate themselves with political motifs like the dangers of government or big business vs. the integrity of the underdog or the importance of religion and nostalgia when it comes to informing familial roles and what patriotism looks like (Meier, 2019). However, there are several different ways country songs define the American identity and what patriotism means by way of descriptions of everyday life scenes. In addition, there are country songs that incorporate views that may traditionally be considered “liberal” like speaking out against war or advocating for feminist values and female rights.

2.1.3 Stewardship

Like the patriotism theme, the importance of doing the right thing and contributing to society are widespread within country music. The need to be good stewards to the planet, to take care of our country and to watch out for one another serve as the bridge between popularizing

counter-narratives about race and patriotism. The value many country musicians place in being a common man who works hard and remains noble is the universal foundation many artists use to propel evolved narratives about patriotism or race that may contradict traditional country music (Meier, 2019). In addition, “work songs” in country music that focus on the importance of sacrifice and continuous toil and unite not just blue-collar individuals but the “working class” as a whole or anyone who considers themselves to have ideals associated with the working class (Conrad, 1988). Though stewardship and working hard to make change and to serve others is framed differently depending on the main message of the music, the underlying principle shows up in several songs including Maren Morris’s “Better Than We Found It” (a song practically named for the principle).

2.2 Music and Social Change Overview

Country music and music in general inspire everything from relationships, to culture, to social movements, to actual change. It has been used as a recruitment tool by multiple, sometimes opposing parties because of its ability create an environment full of collective identification, solidarity, and empowerment (Dennis, 2016). Music has been used to both create and reinforce thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and even action (Brigance, 2002). When audiences consume music and develop an attraction towards its content, music develops the ability to change listeners’ perception and representation of reality (Edgar & Holladay, 2019). The more consumption increases, the more a specific type of message has the opportunity to resonate, and the more audiences feel as though they are companions with the creator(s) of the message. Listeners start to have parasocial interactions with artists, and these interactions lead to relationships that result in perceived expectations. Musical artists become “real” in the eyes of their audiences, even if said artist is not so much as an acquaintance (Auter et al., 2008).

Though many listeners may think they are immune to persuasion, the loyalty people feel towards music allows it to seep into their attitudes towards faith, nation, and doctrine. This is especially true when it comes to the effects of protest music, as people tend to think other people are more likely than they are to be personally impacted by a musical message (Brigance, 2002). There are countless examples of past musicians who have established an identity as well as a collective mission for an entire group of people. For example, Black contemporary social movements are often powered by artists who engage in musical activism to further civil rights as a social cause. Within the movements, musical artists have mobilized people to participate by using song lyrics and have even faced backlash from the criminal justice system despite their elite status. Many musical artists have faced violence or have even been stalked by the media because of their commitment to use their musical gifts to promote social change. Though mobilization has been happening for centuries by way of African American spirituals, freedom songs, and Black nationalist protest music, advances in technology have enhanced the power musicians have to impact audiences (Dennis, 2016).

The arrival of music videos increased the amount of attention musicians were able to amass by adding to a song's context (Wilson, 2000). Music videos increased the means through which artists and audiences could parasocially interact – and thus made it even more possible for musicians to mold viewers' reality. Though music videos (a 1980s invention) did more than make waves, advanced streaming technology made possible via the internet completely changed the frequency and the way audiences consume music. Cell phones and iPods made music infinitely more accessible (Auter et al., 2008). As a result, the entertainment/social value, interpersonal feelings, willingness to sacrifice inspired by music gained even more strength than it originally carried.

2.2.1 How Musical Narratives Persuade

While the technological evolution associated with music (including the creation of music videos) increased the avenues through which music was able to persuade, lyrics, musicians, and stories found within songs are foundational elements when it comes to making music convincing. When audiences are engaged either with the musicians themselves or are distracted by the beauty of a song’s rhythm, melody, or lyrics, they are likely to be too distracted to fight ideas they may ordinarily oppose. Because resistance is one of the key obstacles of the persuasive process, the entertaining elements of songs and their ability to sidetrack listeners from their original beliefs make musical narratives compelling (Slater, 2002). When audiences are presented with an idea but do not quickly or easily access the rest of the information available on a certain subject, they are more likely to have thoughts based on recommendations made by the media they are consuming (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). In addition, if the sharer of the message taps into to audiences’ emotions, they are more likely to fully engage the listener in the musical narrative. This causes audiences to be more likely to develop attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs consistent with the story (Appel & Richter, 2010)

Studies have shown that the dimension of emotional engagement had a stronger correlation with attitude change than attentional focus (de Graaf, et al., 2012). This makes sense given the role empathy plays when it comes to establishing feelings of identification that lead to narrative engagement. Identification is especially powerful when it comes to reinforcing or furthering attitudes that already exist making it an important narrative persuasion mechanism (even when pitted against perspective). The persuasive impact that stems from identification with a story character is not fleeting – and instead can create consistent audience beliefs. Identification often stems from strategic use of language. This is because language can be used to

sway audiences to believe characters (who may be dissimilar to them in reality) have commonalities with them. This is especially true if the content focuses on themes like compassion or seeing things from another perspective (Hoeken et al., 2016).

2.3 Musicians and Social Change

2.3.1 Parasocial Relationships with Artists

Part of what contributes to the empathy artists inspire is the relationships they build with their audience. Because identification is such an important aspect of successful narrative persuasion, the relationships listeners form with musicians are also affective when it comes to impacting audience behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs using song. When fans listen to an artist regularly or engage with them on social media on a consistent basis, they’re likely to form a parasocial relationship or parasocial attachment with the artist. A parasocial attachment is the idea that a media figure can serve as an unreciprocated security source for an audience member or audiences (Stever, 2017). Audiences who are in a parasocial relationship can empathize with a media figure so much so that they feel a sense a pride when that individual is successful (like they would for their real-life friends). In addition, people in a parasocial relationship may not even realize they are involved and are in fact fulfilling some of their social needs with the parasocial bond and that it’s something they seek out when their social needs are depleted (Paravati et al., 2020). This parasocial bond intensifies when media figures adjust their performance based on the responses of their collective audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When audiences feel as though they have an enduring relationship with a media figure – and their exposure is extended beyond one show, interaction, or episode – they are more likely to view the media figure as more of an intimate, conversational partner (Dibble et al., 2016). In fact, individuals within the audience who are engaged in a parasocial bond with the media figure feel

as though they understand the media figure’s values and motives more intimately than others do (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

There are levels to media interactions – as some audiences only feel preoccupied with media characters, some feel connected enough to talk about the media figure with others, and some even become fully involved with the fate of the media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Many audiences involved in parasocial relationships even seek out advice from media personalities because they see them as friends who can provide guidance for them in real world situations. Because parasocial interactions can only occur when an audience is exposed to a media figure, the reach and frequency of media consumption plays a role – that is then increased by accessibility on social media (Dibble et al., 2016). That said, audiences respond to different media figures in nuanced ways (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, if characters in a story portray immoral behavior, it’s possible for parasocial relationships to weaken. However, studies have also shown that characters who come off as overly moral can be perceived by audiences as self-righteous (Bonus et al., 2021). Finally, other coverage or opinions expressed in the media about celebrities, actors, etc. can prime audiences to dislike media figures OR to make topics the media figure is known for more salient (Cohen et al., 2021).

It is possible to develop both positive and negative parasocial relationships especially when audiences form an intimate relationship with media figures in which they dislike them with a strong sense of relational connection (Cohen et al., 2021). Despite the polarity associated with the connection, media figures can persuade audiences to change their values or actions. It is important we understand imaginary social relationships and what leads people to abandon their own identities and social roles in an effort to mimic a media figure’s identity after observing qualities they admire (Click et al., 2017). Parasocial relationships can be used to make a positive

impact when celebrity influences are able to reduce stereotypes and prejudices towards stigmatized groups (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This can be accomplished in three specific ways: when parasocial relationships allow for intergroup contact between an ingroup and outgroup, when exposure to media presents a diverse depiction of outgroup, and when parasocial interactions lead to or exhibit positive opinions towards outgroup media figures (Wong et al., 2017). Thanks to social media, celebrities can have ongoing exchanges with their audiences, can easily depict their authenticity, and can be readily available to their public (Ellcessor, 2018). The salience of online activity has offline ramifications as salience in online audiences lead to an increase in engagement intention offline (Lavertu et al., 2020). While the power of parasocial relationships may initially seem innocuous – it can lead to huge attitude shifts that have serious consequences related to collective attitudes and behaviors (Paravati et al., 2020).

2.3.2 The Power of Female Country Musicians

Some of the most powerful parasocial relationships are those developed between country fans and female country artists. Why? For years, country music has been used by female country artists as a means for disseminating feminist themes to rural, working-class, southern audiences (Haynes, 2018). The emergence of references to feminism within country music even led to an increase in the genre’s popularity in the 1990s as artists like Reba, Dolly Parton, The Dixie Chicks, and more gained notoriety (Haynes, 2018). Though this brand of feminism dubbed “hillbilly feminism” is often overlooked by scholars, it has been suggested that 1990s country songs like Reba’s ‘Is There Life Out There’ have parallels to Betty Friedan’s’ *Feminine Mystique* (Haynes, 2018). Furthermore, the 1990s saw female solidarity and sisterhood among country performers as they often united to critique the idea of traditional domestic sphere (Haynes, 2018). Domestic violence and sexual harassment were also issues exposed by popular

90s country tunes like Garth Brook’s ‘The Thunder Rolls’, The Dixie Chick’s ‘Goodbye Earl’, and Martina McBride’s ‘Independence Day’ (Haynes, 2018). The many roles females play in creating contemporary country lyrics and music videos (and their anti-submissive nature) promote liberation for women. The way music videos allow female artists to challenge traditional American gender roles exists in stark contrast to stereotypes portray the genre overall (Wilson, 2000).

2.3.3 The Power for Female Musicians: Lady Gaga as an Example

Though famous musical artist Lady Gaga is not traditionally considered a country artist – she has dabbled in the genre. Furthermore, she’s used her platform as a musician to speak out against gender stereotypes, to give back to society, and to create social change (Williams, 2014). Because of the parasocial bonds Lady Gaga was able to form throughout the community, she was able to inspire social activism (Click et al., 2013). One research study interviewed 45 fans and found that audiences view Gaga as a role model for those who feel marginalized within mainstream culture. Gaga has made her beliefs towards social causes known by raising money for HIV/AIDS awareness, leading relief efforts for those suffering from natural disasters (like the earthquake that shook Haiti in 2010), by speaking out against bullying and bulimia, by supporting the repeal of the U.S. military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and by creating her Born This Way Fundraiser (an organization dedicated to fostering a society that embraces differences and individuality) (Click et al., 2017). Gaga’s fanbase, otherwise known as the “Little Monsters”, use social media to access Gaga and her views when it comes to key social issues. The “Little Monsters” have created supportive social networks online – taking advantage of Twitter as a social platform. Twitter allows fans to carry out authentic, two-way conversations with Lady Gaga that deepen their parasocial relationship with the media figure. Gaga uses the

platform to encourage her fans and in turn, they feel as though they know her personally. Gaga’s use of social platforms has demonstrated just how much social media has altered the nature of parasocial relationships. Thanks to social media, fans are afforded a completely new layer of access to her, thus increasing opportunities to form a media figure-audience connection (Bennett, 2014). This allows fans a front row seat when it comes to watching how Lady Gaga lives her life, but also the ways in which she gives back. Not only has Lady Gaga contributed to over 76 charities and foundations, but she has also inspired fans to complete over 30,000 hours of community service for over a hundred charities across the country by offering volunteers VIP tickets to her shows. Finally, helped raised over \$160 million for the M·A·C AIDS Fund (an organization dedicated to fighting AIDS and HIV) by participating in their VIVA Glam campaign (Lady Gaga: Charity Work & Causes, 2019).

2.4 Social Media, Celebrities, and Social Change

In addition to using their social media accounts and music videos to promote giving back, many famous female artists also use social media communicate other important ideals. Celebrities realize the power they have on and offline to make an impact. As a result, the media has witnessed the growing involvement of media figures when it comes to politics and political advocacy (Click et al., 2017). Media figures have influence over their fans. Because now celebrities can share their opinions on social media, consumers are more likely to be exposed to (and thus impacted by) celebrities’ persuasive messages (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). Musicians use their talent to inspire audiences to think and behave in a certain way and can also influence the frequency with which people act (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018).

Though the online world has added additional dimensions to how we understand this human behavior, people have always altered their actions when in the presence of others in line

with how they want their identity to be perceived. Before social media, people would regularly evaluate others' opinions of them to make sure they maintain a credible and consistent public persona as well as change their behavior based on others' perception (Lavertu et al., 2020). If a celebrity works to be positively perceived and stands up for a certain belief or cause, others start to adopt their viewpoint. This can start to change how audiences think of themselves and can even inspire self-efficacy which in turns makes them more likely to believe that if the celebrity can be positively perceived and stand up for an issue, they can too (Cohen et al., 2021). When used for good, celebrity influence has the power to alter behaviors in such a way that harm is minimized while personal acceptance (by way of aforementioned self-efficacy) is maximized (Cohen et al., 2021).

The texts, images, videos, and community networks made possible by social media have not just amplified media figures' ability to spread content, they have also allowed for user generated content to be easily spread (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). At its inception, social media provided an outlet for everyone to express their opinions freely, not only to a ready-made audience of their followers (likely family, friends, etc.) but also to a broader, more indirect network (based off of common friends and other connections) (Leong et al., 2019). While social media provides media figures and audiences with a medium for expression, the message also matters. Social media content that is most likely to persuade consists of a message that makes a quality, credible, attractive argument. The source of the message also plays an important role in changing attitudes via social media (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). This explains why ongoing, authentic connected celebrity activism has been so successful at inspiring community involvement in philanthropic projects, causes, and interactions with activist organizations (Ellcessor, 2018).

Instagram is one specific digital social media platform that is frequently used by media figures looking to share their opinions with their collective (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). Many express their support by “standing” for certain issues on the social network, tapping into the authority they possess thanks to their celebrity. Because of the nature of social media, these values expressed by media figures have the potential to reach disparate audiences, especially since celebrities are able to directly communicate with audiences (including formal organizations, loosely connected groups and individuals) on digital platforms (Elcessor, 2018). Direct communication (whether view Twitter, Instagram, etc.) can provide a window into the content creator’s mental state, thoughts, and behaviors – highlighting authenticity (a key component of persuasion) (Paravati et al., 2020). The frequency at which ideas are spread on social media as well as the frame in which they’re presented plays a huge role in an audience’s ability to recall messages which can lead to attitude change (Pavlova & Berkers, 2020). Personal meaning and relevance are often applied to messages put out by media figures on their social platforms – and if that message gets engagement and is frequently consumed, the more likely it is for a positive feedback loop to occur that further disseminates the idea (Pavlova & Berkers, 2020).

When this feedback loop takes place and audiences are exposed to messages—there are several ways for audiences to interact. For example, they may process the information emotionally, they may feel a need to jump on the bandwagon, or they may take a cognitive approach and logically think through what’s being suggested (Pavlova & Berkers, 2020). Celebrity activism via social media, while not always successful, can be used to manage suspicion around certain social causes (Kwon, 2019). Social media activism is more likely to impact individuals who have social media heavily ingrained in their lives because the extent to

which they associate social media with their self-concept (Lavertu et al., 2020). The use of specific language and cultural references can be particularly impactful, especially if celebrities appear to be directly responding and acknowledging their fans (Click et al., 2017). This can create a ‘participatory culture’ in which fans and audiences are encouraged to actively participate in a narrative perpetuated by a media figure (Hou, 2018) Examples of celebrities that have taken part in social media activism include Marlee Matlin, Lee Hyori, and Demi Lovato.

Marlee Matlin is a deaf American actor who used social media to advocate for media reform. She acted as a spokesperson to draw attention to the need for closed captioning in the digital space. In addition, she used her own Twitter to informally demand change, not as a celebrity but as someone who is disabled. Both are examples of social media activism though one takes advantage of the connected celebrity concept (Elcessor, 2018). Similar to Marlee Matlin, Lee Hyori, known by some as the “Beyonce of South Korea” used social media to transition from being a global superstar to an animal rights activist. She also used Twitter to garner attention for social issues and joined others in advocating for the Yellow Envelope campaign (a protest/relief campaign advocating those who suffered from mass layoffs made by one of South Korea’s biggest car companies) (Kwon, 2019). Speaking up via social media was especially brave of Hyori because of the prevalence of conservative media in South Korea and the power of online spaces (like Twitter) to reach South Korean voters. While Matlin and Hyori focused on advocating for the disabled, animals, and those adversely impacted by economic circumstances, American singer Demi Lovato used her celebrity influence to advocate for mental health awareness. Specifically, she used publicity and her social platforms to combat negative stereotypes surrounding bipolar disorder. Lovato disclosed that she herself has bipolar disorder which is meaningful because of the power celebrity health disclosures have in reducing stigma

(Wong et al., 2017). When audiences identify with celebrities, the impact of their health disclosure increases and the ability to correct misconceptions or spread truths about the issue becomes more prevalent. Furthermore, when celebrities come forward to advocate for a health issue (or to reveal that they have a certain health problem), the likelihood that others will be inspired to do the same increases (Wong et al., 2017).

Though many have used social media for good, there is also a dark side to social media as it can be a breeding ground for stigma, hate speech, and cyber bullying. For this reason, it's important that celebrities stay dedicated to creating a safe place for their followers, so marginalized communities can find a place ripe for solidarity and cultural change (Pavlova & Berkers, 2020). Many social media users – especially online opinion leaders – may be tempted to share messages that are relevant to their followers to garner increased engagement (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). However, studies have shown that there is a direct, positive relationship between how convincing a message is and whether it's accepted. There is also a connection between message persuasiveness and attitude change. As a result, media figures need to be mindful of what they share on social (and the power they possess) (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). This is even more crucial if activists are using social media as an organizing tool, something that has become more and more common, particularly on Facebook (Hensby, 2017).

One of the most unique aspects about social media is the way it tracks, publicizes, and archives conversations between users, whether they happen via posts, comments, or direct message. The content of the discussion can be indicative of changes in beliefs. As such, different measurements have been used by scholars to assess attitude change including continuums that examine positive and negative characteristics surrounding the knowledge and personal relevance of certain meanings and beliefs (Huhn Nunes et al., 2018). In addition, emojis have also become

indicative of attitude. According to Oxford Dictionary, an emoji is a digital image or icon that expresses an idea or emotion. Emojis have also been described as ideograms or graphic symbols that encompass concepts (such as food, animals, feelings, activities, nature, weather, etc.).

Emojis originally surfaced in Japan in the 1990s and according to a 2018 emoji report, they are used by over ninety percent of the world’s online population. To put this in perspective, over sixty million emojis are used on Facebook daily, and over half of all Instagram accounts use emojis (Moussa, 2019). Many scholars have worked to classify emojis into categories including “afraid”, “angry”, “disgusted”, “happy”, “neutral”, “sad”, and “surprised”.

Though it is clear (by emojis’ extreme popularity alone) that audiences use social media as an outlet for their feelings and beliefs, more research needs to be done on if and how social media can mobilize a larger public. Facebook groups, for example, have been used to organize activists in several social movements efficiently while creating a collective identity. However, in certain situations this collective action created problems including accidental hierarchies and the unintentional creation of walls when it comes to social participation (Hensby, 2017). This despite the benefits including increased online discussion, public attention, real world changes and on and offline mobilization (Kwon, 2019). Specific examples of social movements that have taken advantage of the power of digital activism include Arab Spring, the Spanish Los Indignados, the Umbrella Revolution, Occupy Wall Street, and the Black Lives Matter movement (Leong et al., 2019). These movements were supported by social media in large part because of connective action – or the creation of an unrestrained route to concerted actions by way of the self-motivated social media sharing of content pertinent to the social movement’s mission (Leong et al., 2019). The common thread between these diverse audiences created by the social movement allows for the creation of a collective identity despite differences in other aspects of ideology. One recent,

powerful example of the way social movement theory intersects with social media pertains to civil rights, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement (Kwon, 2019).

2.5 The Current Study

This study will analyze how Maren Morris’s music video “Better Than We Found It” addressed not only the Black Lives Matter Movement, but also the DREAM Act suspension, and the importance of being good stewards to each other, America, and our communities. It will also examine response to the music video by way of the comments on the video Morris posted on Instagram. The examination of the video will explore the themes throughout the narrative, and the different tactics Morris used to persuade her audience (many of whom likely have opposing beliefs). Themes found in the music video analysis will be compared with themes throughout the comments. For example, comments on the Instagram post for the music video will be categorized based on those that directly address the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement/race, the DREAM Act/American patriotism, and good stewardship. This case study analysis will focus specifically on the way Morris employs narratives throughout her music video along with the parasocial ties she has with her audience to persuade viewers. Secondly, it will uncover users’ engagement and reaction to social policies featured in the music video. Indication of support (or rejection) for the attention Morris is bringing to issues featured in the video like police brutality, immigration reform, and the United States’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be examined.

2.5.1 Analysis of the Music Video

The first section of the study will focus on the themes and persuasion tactics used by Morris to push for support of the Black Lives Matter movement, the DREAM Act, and the need for empathy in the United States during a global pandemic. It is also important to note that

proceeds from "Better Than We Found It" will be donated to the Black Women's Health Imperative, a nonprofit organization "created by Black women to help protect and advance the health and wellness of Black women and girls" (<https://bwhi.org/>).

2.5.2 Analysis of the Instagram Comments

After analyzing the ways in which Morris' music video attempted to persuade audiences, their unprompted reactions will be examined. The 672 Instagram comments left on Morris' Instagram post promoting the music video were downloaded via instaloadgram.com. While many comments praise Morris for speaking out, others are scathing and criticize her for the lyric about the justice system in her song (example: "when the wolves at the door are covered in blue / shouldn't we try something new"). This study will show how these comments can demonstrate users' response themes like the Black Lives Matter movement addressed in the video – and how/what we can infer from the content of the comments (Is she supported? Is she inspiring audiences to act?).

2.5.3 Research Questions

The research questions this study will address are as follows:

RQ1: How does Maren Morris present herself in a way that connects her with her audience?

How does she develop connections with them and relate to them?

RQ2: What arguments does Maren Morris make in the song "Better Than We Found It"?

RQ3: How does Maren Morris use stories to in music video and how are they related to song's overall message? How does Maren Morris use stories told in the music video to emphasize and expand "Better Than We Found It" (the song)'s message?

RQ4: How does Maren Morris attempt to motivate people to engage in activity in alignment with messages in "Better Than We Found It"?

RQ5: To what extent do the comments reflect the nature of Maren Morris's parasocial relationship/involvement with her audience?

RQ6: How do comments indicate how audiences respond to the themes (Black Lives Matter, DREAM Act, being good stewards) embedded in the music video?

RQ7: To what extent do comments indicate audiences were inspired or activated by her message?

3 METHOD

3.1 Overview

The following research consists of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The first half of the study features an in-depth thematic analysis on Maren Morris's music video for the song "Better Than We Found It" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second half of the study examines the comments on the Instagram post Maren Morris created to share the music video both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. This part of the study includes coding categories and multiple coders to process numerical data. Connections between themes found throughout the music video analysis and themes uncovered throughout comment analysis are drawn. Specifically, themes related to the Black Lives Matter storyline, the immigration storyline (suspension of the DREAM Act) and being a good American/kind global citizen are identified.

The purpose of conducting a thematic analysis on the music video analysis is to examine if and how Maren Morris was able to make persuasive arguments by way of the lyrics, storylines, and visuals used in "Better Than We Found It" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Themes related to way Maren Morris employed narrative persuasion tactics both in her songs and the music video are discussed. In addition, the way she presented herself to viewers of the video along with the way she was able to relate to or resonate with the audience are examined. Finally, the analysis

explores how Maren Morris framed messages in the video to make certain claims that have potential impact on audiences. Finally, the stories in the music video are compared to the song/video’s overall message/arguments.

In addition to understanding the video “Better Than We Found It”, this study also investigates how audiences engaged with the music video based on what was said in their comments on the Instagram post. The themes that emerge in the comments (whether or not they align with some of the narrative arguments Morris made in the video) are considered along with if her message positively or negatively received. Comments expressing connection or a feeling of closeness that shed light on the nature of the parasocial bonds/relationship Morris has cultivated with her audience are identified. Finally, any comments indicating that audiences were inspired or activated because of the message in “Better Than We Found It” are explored.

3.2 Data Selection Process

In the first section of the study, the data analyzed consists solely of the 5:04 minute long music video “Better Than We Found It”. The music video was licensed to SME on behalf of Columbia Nashville. The official music video is housed in several places, but I will be looking at the Vevo music video on Maren Morris’s official YouTube channel. As previously mentioned, the official YouTube video has received 1,160,263 views as of September 21, 2021 and was posted on October 2020. It has received 17,000 likes, 2,200 dislikes, and 1,084 comments on YouTube. Here’s a link to the official video: <https://youtu.be/U4rr6LewdIU>. Though those comments, likes, and dislikes were not taken into consideration during analysis, it is relevant to mention the level of engagement the video received. In addition, examination of social media engagement on YouTube (comments, etc.) could make for an interesting follow up study.

In the second section of the study, the 672 comments published as of June 26, 2021 on Maren Morris’s Instagram post from October 2, 2020 are analyzed. It is important to note that only original comments were examined (not replies to comments on the Instagram post). Because most comments were published shortly after Maren Morris created the post (October of 2020), and the most recent comment was posted in mid-June of 2021, there is no reason to pull a more recent download of the comments. In addition, some of the comments have been hidden or deleted and those comments will not be a part of this study’s data sample. The music video was shared on Instagram here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF07ReBAoSp>. The caption for the post read as follows: “Better Than We Found It, the video. Grateful for everyone in the video who told their story & for @g.wood.land for sharing them so beautifully. 🌟❤️ Link in bio.” The Instagram post she used to share the video received 221,462 views and 28,533 likes as of September 21, 2021. The comments analyzed were downloaded from Instagloadgram.com on June 28, 2021. This study will not include other Instagram posts about the music video (like this one: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFzVdsNg7Q5>) or comments on any other social platform posts about the video (i.e., YouTube comments mentioned above, etc.).

3.3 Music Video and Comments: Coding Process and Data Analysis

3.3.1 Music Video Analysis: Coding Process

The first stage of research for the thematic analysis of the music video included watching the music video several times to identify patterns within not just the song, but the visuals and storylines within the video. Copious notes were taken on various identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A coding scheme was created inductively and included analysis of each storyline. For example, for the Black Lives Matter storyline, examples of things coded included how the Black Lives Matter movement is mentioned throughout the video, the framing of police brutality,

other allusions to the harm caused (ex. images of memorials, etc.). Examples of codes highlighting the DREAM Act suspension storyline include how many times the family in danger of being removed that Morris spotlighted in the video is scene. Finally, examples of codes associated with Maren Morris’s storyline about her commitment to being a good American and global citizen could be instances in the video where Morris promises to do better, makes specific pledges related to being an American, or talks about what she’s learned. Other aspects of the coding scheme include examples of how Maren Morris attempted to draw her audiences closer to her by sharing intimate details of her life (examples include times her son appeared in the music video, examples of her talking directly to the viewer, etc.).

Codes for the music video analysis were created inductively following an initial analysis of the music video to ensure nothing was overlooked. These codes consist of themes found throughout the video. Music video analysis results provide specific examples of indications of themes found throughout “Better Than We Found It”. The themes that emerged include 1. Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Social Bonds with subthemes Relatability and Vulnerability 2. References to the Black Lives Matter Movement, 3. References to Immigration/The DREAM Act, and 4. Good Stewardship.

3.3.2 Music Video Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The themes were analyzed to identify the ways in which Morris uses “Better Than We Found It” to connect with her audience, make arguments related to main themes found throughout the video, and inspire/activate the public towards taking action to create change (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Expected themes were determined from this initial analysis – though others materialized throughout more in-depth evaluation (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). During inductive analysis, written accounts of each theme were then compared/contrasted so

final themes have limited duplicity. Once the final list of themes was identified, examples of specific indications of each theme are described in detail. As previously mentioned, themes such as how Morris addresses race/The Black Lives Matter movement, American patriotism’s current state (and how the suspension of the DREAM Act impacted that), as well as the importance of being good stewards to the United States, the world, and to each other are examples of some themes that arose. The written analysis of the video discusses each of themes identified and includes detailed examples from the video.

3.3.3 Comment Analysis: Coding Scheme

Similar to the music video analysis, the first stage for analyzing the comments on the Morris’s Instagram post of the music video was to review the content of each comment and identify similarities and differences found throughout. Trends regarding what sentiments or emojis were expressed within the comments were examined. Other themes that are directly related to the themes in the music video were addressed. Finally, the comments that seem to be garnering the most engagement were identified. Once themes were solidified, a codebook was created for coding the comments (Neuendorf, 2017).

3.3.4 Comment Analysis: Coding Procedure

There were two coders performing analysis to ensure reliability. The comment coding was carried out using NVivo software. Both coders used their individual NVivo profiles and software. After training on the initial codebook, both coders coded 50 comments as part of a pilot test. Revisions to the codebook were made based on the results of the pilot test. The full sample of comments was then coded by the main coder, and a subset of 20% of the comments (138 comments that were not used in the pilot test) was coded by the reliability coder.

After both coders were finished, interrater reliability was determined by way of a Coding Comparison Query. It is important to note that the formula used by Nvivo to calculate Cohen’s Kappa coefficients differs from the traditional formula based on present/absence coding. Because Nvivo uses text characters (including letters, spaces, and punctuation) as the unit of comparison, the percentage agreement used to calculate Cohen’s Kappa coefficients consists of the percentage of file content (which is measured in characters, pixels, or tenths of seconds). Furthermore, when calculating Cohen’s Kappa coefficients, Nvivo does not simply account for presence or absence of each code per comment, but instead looks at the number of coded characters “present” and the number of coded characters “absent” in the data sample overall.

NVivo was used to report on frequency and percentages for coding categories. The official codebook with full definitions can be found in the Appendix, but the categories of codes consist of the following: Category A: Parasocial Bond with Maren Morris, Category B: Approval of Morris’s Overall Message (including codes for approval and disapproval of her message), Category C: Black Lives Matter (including codes for approval and disapproval of Morris’s message about Black Lives Matter), Category D: Immigration/The DREAM Act (including codes for approval and disapproval of Morris’s message about immigration/The DREAM Act), Category E: Good Stewardship (including codes for approval and disapproval of Morris’s message about good stewardship), and Category F: Motivation to Change or Act In Response to the Music Video (including codes for comments where users express a change in perspective, inspiration, as well as the intention to act in alignment or opposition of the music video).

3.3.5 *Comment Analysis: Data Analysis*

Since one of the main questions involved in this study involves whether or not Maren Morris is able to connect with her fans, analysis on comments indicating that audiences

identified or bonded with Morris was conducted. This includes comments where users talked about how they related to her or to personal anecdotes she shared. In order to judge how users engaged with the song, comments indicating support (or a lack thereof) of the social issues that Morris addressed were examined. Finally, comments that indicated that users were inspired or motivated to action by the song were analyzed.

Ultimately, both parts of the study – analysis of the music video and analysis of the comments, were compared to see how much of what Maren Morris said resonated. Engagement with the music video found throughout the comments shed additional light on what audiences took away from viewing the video for “Better Than We Found It”.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Music Video Analysis

The first step in the thematic analysis of Maren Morris’s music video for “Better Than We Found It” included continuous viewing of the video. After watching it several times, certain tiers of analysis presented themselves along with themes throughout the music video’s message. The three tiers identified include 1. the visuals in the music video including subtitles and still images that tell stories not encompassed solely by the song itself, 2. Additional audio not found in the song itself and b-roll (i.e., supplemental intercut with main shots and main video), and 3. The song and the lyrics themselves. Each one of these tiers was analyzed individually as each factor was isolated and individually analyzed for each theme found throughout the message.

Core themes found throughout the “Better Than We Found It” music video that addressed research questions one through four were identified. The themes found throughout the music video indicate how Maren Morris presents herself to her audience. They also uncover the ways in which Maren Morris’s message is set up to help her develop connections with and relate to her

audience. In addition, these themes will uncover the aspects of Morris’s self-presentation that led to parasocial bonds – including how she portrays relatability and vulnerability. These themes provide answers for the following two-pronged Research Question 1 (RQ1): How does Maren Morris present herself in a way that connects her with her audience? How does she develop connections with them and relate to them?

The thematic analysis also examines three topics related to research questions 1-4 that Maren Morris addressed in the song "Better Than We Found It" – specifically about the Black Lives Matter movement, the DREAM Act/immigration reform, as well as the importance of good stewardship. Four research questions will be addressed in the analysis of each of these topics. Research Question 2 (RQ2) asks: What arguments does Maren Morris make in the song "Better Than We Found It"? To address RQ2, the arguments Maren Morris develops related to each topic – the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform/the DREAM Act, and good stewardship – will be examined. The two-prong Research Question 3 (RQ3) asks: How does Maren Morris use stories told in the music video and how are they related to song's overall message? How does Maren Morris use stories told in the music video to emphasize and expand on the message of the song, "Better Than We Found It"? To address RQ3, the thematic analysis will distinguish how Maren Morris uses story telling in the music video to emphasize and expand upon the song’s overall message, as well as the arguments she used to convey her positions on the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform/the DREAM Act, and good stewardship. Finally, Research Question 4 (RQ4) asked: How does Maren Morris attempt to motivate people to engage in activity in alignment with messages in "Better Than We Found It"? To address RQ4, the analysis will examine the way the music video addressed the topics mentioned above

(the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform/the DREAM Act, and good stewardship) in a way that motivated audiences.

4.1.1 Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Social Bonds: Relatability

To understand Maren Morris’s self-presentation within “Better Than We Found It” and how that led to connection between her and her audience, it’s important to see how she was able to relate to her audience – a question directly asked by the first research question. The theme relatability was identified inductively after viewing the video several times. A huge part of being relatable to an audience is displaying an awareness of what they’re going through – then connecting that back to personal experience. There are several examples within the music video for “Better Than We Found It” where Maren Morris, displays an awareness of what’s happening beyond her own person, fame, and celebrity bubble. The video told several stories featuring plights of the everyday life of an immigrant, teenagers, a Black person in America. Examples of instances where Morris implies and/or indicates through her message that she is paying attention to what other people are going through will be included under this theme. Maren Morris displays that she is aware of what others (who are likely in her audience for the music video) are going through her song lyrics and the stories told within the music video. She talks about wanting to understand other’s stories not just in the lyrics in her song but also within the interviews featured in the music video. In the music video for “Better Than We Found It”, Maren Morris allows the characters featured (Gustavo Flores, Jade and Emma Rose, as well as Daniel Hambrick’s family Sam and Vickie) to be seen and to tell their own stories, again showing her willingness to listen and put others into the spotlight.

The visuals used throughout the music video make Maren Morris seem relatable because they focus on everyday aspects of life and people. For example, one example of how the music

video displays Maren Morris’s awareness of the world around her are the captured images of nature (and the world around her) included in the b-roll. Instead of opting for a highly produced setting in a warehouse or professional illumination to enhance visuals in the music video (as many artists do), she chose a more documentary-like, natural environment featuring real scenes in the Nashville community. This framed the scenes and characters in the music video (including Morris) in a way that made them seem approachable. Throughout the video there are shots panning up to show the sky and the sun coming through the trees. Most of the music video is shot outside. Finally, the small number of shots that are captured inside feature ample natural lighting. Maren Morris’s choice to include these elements instead of more artificial features are a testament to her down-to-earth character and approach.

In addition to featuring nature, Maren Morris makes sure to focus the video mostly on people. First, the music video tells the story of Gustavo and his family who immigrated from Mexico and were protected under the DREAM Act until January of 2020, when they were threatened to be sent back after building a home in the United States. Part of how Maren Morris told this story included showing everyday images of Gustavo playing his guitar, spending time with his adorable little brother, cutting tomatoes, and cooking dinner with his family. This imagery shows that Maren Morris is aware of how others live. Finally, the fact that she chooses to feature aspects of their home life that are commonly experienced by other families (children hanging around the kitchen, making meals together, etc.) adds to the relatability of the music video.

After we see footage of Gustavo and his family, the music video introduces characters Emma and Jade Rose – two Nashville teenagers who organized a Black Lives Matter protest in conjunction with Teens4Equality. She introduces them by picturing them doing everyday teen

things like just sitting next to each other on their front stoop. She also shows them writing and drawing a poster for the protest. The subtitles that accompany the b-roll of them say “This is Jade and Emma Rose. They worked with Teens4Equality to organize a protest where more than 10,000 showed up”. She shows the girls throughout the video – even at the end when she’s speaking to her son. Specifically, she shows b-roll of Emma and Jade and their sign on the front porch during the part of her speech to her son Hayes where she talks about trying to see the world through his (her infant son’s) eyes. She also flashes to b-roll of them again as she gets to the part in her speech to Hayes where she tells him he is “kind and curious”.

The last story Maren Morris tells involves Daniel Hambrick (a young man who was shot by a Nashville police officer) and his family. As they’re being introduced via b-roll, the subtitles “On July 26th, 2018, Daniel Hambrick was shot and killed by a Nashville police officer. This is Daniel’s uncle Sam and mom Vickie.” Are shown on screen. A close up of the street where Daniel was shot (17th Ave N) is shown and pictures of Daniel are also featured. These photos show Daniel as a teenager, an adolescent, and even as baby dressed up for Christmas wearing a Santa hat. Maren Morris herself is also featured – but instead of being dressed to the nines like many celebrities who perform in music videos, Maren Morris is featured performing her song in an oversized white button-down shirt (with no pants) in a church.

Though examples of the awareness themes were found mostly throughout the visuals in the music video, there is some audio outside of the song of Maren Morris talking to her son. She’s seen playing with her son in the grass (a very normal, motherly thing to do). She’s seen reading to him and trying to distract him with a squeaky toy. This display makes her seem relatable and implies that she is aware of what it’s like to be a mother just spending time with her

child. She’s telling him how fascinating he finds the world and vowing to him to “[leave] this world that [he] finds so fascinating better than [she] found it”.

The biggest example of Maren Morris displaying awareness for the world around her within the music video for “Better Than We Found It” occurs at the beginning of the song. She sings, “A stick is a stick / A stone is a stone / But who’s gonna care if I don’t? / Who’s gonna change if I won’t”. This lyric alone shows that she is not only aware of the major issues within the United States that were illuminated in the year 2020 (systemic racism, police brutality, immigration reform issues, the fear that accompanied the global Covid-19 pandemic). It also shows that she wants to and is committed to doing something about and to use her platform to further illuminate the issues. In sum, Maren Morris uses visuals, audio, and lyrics to establish and develop her connections with audiences through portraying herself as relatable. These elements of the music video contribute to findings for research question 1, as they are examples of how Morris is able to relate to and develop connections with her audience.

4.1.2 Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Social Bonds: Vulnerability

In addition to displaying awareness for the world around her within the music video for “Better Than We Found It”, Maren Morris also shows great vulnerability. The fact that she was willing to open herself up to her audience throughout the music video helped her create the opportunity to develop a deeper connection with them. In the music video for “Better Than We Found It”, Maren Morris allows viewers to see how she feels judged and how she is judging herself and her own character. By exposing internal conversations she’s had with herself, she allows audience to see that even she has doubts she has to overcome within, and these internal worries make her extremely open to sharing her innermost thoughts. She reveals inner contemplation and even admits that she is overwhelmed by the state of the world. She also tells

audiences how she'd like to do better not just as an artist or as a mom but as a human being. In the music video for “Better Than We Found It”, Maren Morris makes a conscious effort to let her guard down as she shares intimate details about her personal journey. She goes so far as to let viewers meet her newborn and listen in on a one-sided conversation she has with him. The access audiences have to inner dialogue as well as the personal narrative she shares are a huge reason why her fans have the opportunity to form parasocial bonds with her. Specific examples of her vulnerability come in the form of music video visuals, audio and video separate from the song, as well as the song and its lyrics.

There are not many examples of music video visuals that represent the vulnerability theme. However, one example of a tactic Maren Morris uses in the music video for “Better Than We Found It” is allowing the producer to begin the video with a behind the scenes peek at the director's process. The video starts with the director saying “106 mark” while clacking a clapperboard together to indicate the start of a take of the music video. This sets the tone for the rest of the music video and its theme of vulnerability because it makes it clear that Maren Morris wants people to feel like they're not just watching the video itself and instead are a part of the making of the video and telling of the stories featured.

While Maren Morris does feature others' stories, one of the most telling tales featured in the video is the one she tells firsthand about motherhood. The audio and video where Maren Morris is sitting in the grass talking to her baby is extremely touching. She says to her newborn baby Hayes,

“Hayes, you were born the year the world stopped turning. The moment I first held you, we stared at each other for the longest time. I knew that very moment that you were special. My heart grew and would never be the same. You've been my precious

silver living these dark last few months. People are dying. A global pandemic has shut our world down and people are more afraid, angry, and distant than ever. I don't know how it got like this but I will acknowledge my part in it. I have to do better. I will do better for you. Our education must grow alongside our empathy. Anytime I get overwhelmed by the mess we've created I try to see the world through your eyes. Negative, fear, and bitterness haven't yet touched you. You are kind and curious. I want to rekindle that in me. It reminds me of pointillism, the art technique of random tiny dots linked together to create a meaningful, bigger picture once you step back. I promise to you that I will step back to let you someday lead the way. I will, like you, never stop being kind and curious. And I will spend the rest of my waking days leaving this world that you find so fascinating better than I found it. Love, Mom”

There's nothing more vulnerable than exposing a love letter written specifically for one person – which is what Maren does in this video. She is so open about her emotional experience, not just during post-partum, but mid-pandemic. The only thing that may be more unguarded than expressing raw feelings is admitting wrong. In her speech to her son, Maren Morris admits to the world that she has played a part in why people feel “more afraid, angry, and distant than ever”. She also vows to do better (again implying that she is flawed, just like the rest of humanity). She makes some of her most personal resolutions on camera in this music video when she says that she will “never stop being kind and curious” and will spend the rest of her waking days “leaving this world... better than [she] found it”. Essentially, she uses this speech to share, acknowledge, and manifest her own journey. By doing this, she allows audiences to feel like they're walking alongside with her, whether it is because they can relate to what she's saying, they feel the same desires, or they feel as though she is allowing them to watch her walk through life.

Maren Morris’s conversation with her son is the perfect accompaniment to the lyric in her song that reads, “When time turns this moment to dust / I just hope my son’s proud of the woman I was”. This lyric is in one of the iterations of the chorus and follows the lyric “When time turns this moment to dust / I just hope that I’m proud of the woman I was / When lines of tomorrow are drawn / Can I live with the side that I chose to be on”. These lines show her questioning herself and what she feels she can condone when it comes to her own moral compass. The fact that she’s exposing her thought process when it comes to topics as sensitive and defining as right and wrong proves that she’s not afraid to be vulnerable in front her audiences. In addition, she begins the song “Better Than We Found It” with the lyric “If you don’t like it / Then get the hell out / That’s what they yell / When I open my mouth”. This is another instance of her vulnerability as it shows her willingness to let audiences inside her world. Not only does it exhibit what she has to deal with when it comes to backlash from audiences, but it also implies her sensitivity and the attention she pays to those who dislike or disagree with her opinion. So, in answer to RQ1, this analysis has demonstrated that Morris shows vulnerability in ways that strengthen connections with her audience.

4.1.3 References to the Black Lives Matter Movement

Though the song “Better Than We Found It” never directly uses the term Black Lives Matter, however it does imply that there a systemic problem with the law enforcement system in one of her lyrics. There are also several references throughout the music video to BLM. For example, the music video features the already mentioned stories about Jade and Emma Rose as well as Daniel Hambrick and his family. Also, the video features several visuals and video footage of civil rights protests that have happened both recently and during the civil rights movement. The combination of Maren Morris’s subtle references within her lyrics to the police,

along with the featured interviews, stories and protest b-roll make for a persuasive narrative. They are also evidence that one of the arguments Maren Morris makes in her music video is in favor of the Black Lives Matter movement as she works to convey the movement’s importance to audiences by telling stories that suggest why it is important people take action to leave the world “better than they found it”. Thus, as explained further in the analysis below, Maren Morris develops a number of arguments in support of BLM (RQ2), and these arguments are primarily made through her use of stories (RQ3). In addition, her calls to action throughout the music video attempt to motivate people to take action (RQ4).

Within the featured story of Jade and Emma Rose organizing a protest in tandem with the Teens4Equality, we see several references to the Black Lives Matter movement including the posters previously mentioned that highlight victims of police brutality. Their poster has terms like “no justice, no peace” on it, and there are even shots of them holding up the sign for Black power. The music video also shows the following quote from Emma and Jade Rose in the subtitles (even though they do not actually say it in the audio for the video). It reads, “the only way to make change is to keep asking for it. It’s not a sprint. It’s a marathon.”. There are also subtitles associated with Daniel Hambrick and his family’s story. The following subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen when we see Daniel Hambrick’s family: “We don’t have bad feelings towards police officers. Just one police officer made a bad decision that day. We just want justice for our son.” In addition, there are several images of his memorial and within some of the b-roll audiences see a sign next to his memorial that spells out the hashtag “#LLDD”. Finally, other visuals referencing systemic racism include the signs featured in the protests previously mentioned that read “I can’t breathe”, “A riot is a language of the universe”, “how many more”, and “end police brutality”.

Though the b-roll of the civil rights and Black Lives Matter protests are not overlaid with audio, Maren Morris does take time out from the actual song in her music video to allow the main characters in it to speak. For example, you hear Jade and Emma Rose say the words, “Just because you’re not seeing it around you doesn’t mean it’s not happening”. In addition, at another point the song is paused so audiences can hear from Daniel Hambrick’s uncle. In the audio he is describing how Daniel Hambrick died. He says, “he was shot down like an animal. An animal. This officer said well okay I guess I can’t catch him, I know what I’ll do. Just took aim. Just took aim. Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow. And this stuff, it needs to stop somewhere, you know? It needs to stop somewhere.” These additions are so important because they show Maren Morris’s commitment to ensuring that voices in support for the Black Lives Matter movement are heard. Though her traditional country music audience may have mixed views towards the Black Lives Matter movement, she makes it a point to draw attention to these stories of systemic racism and police brutality that have taken place in her hometown, Nashville, Tennessee.

While there was only one reference related to the Black Lives Matter movement within the body of Maren Morris’s actual song “Better Than We Found It”, the lyric powerfully underscores the problems the United States faces as far as corruption within the police force goes. Morris sings “Over and under / And above the law / My neighbor’s in danger / Who does he call? / When the wolves at the door / Are covered in blue / Shouldn’t we try something new? / We’re over a barrel / At the end of one too”. This is clear reference to tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Hambrick, and many more that happened by the hands of police officers. Maren Morris had been vocal on her Instagram about how she felt regarding what happened to both George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. She posted tributes to both of them on her actual feed and her Instagram story. In this song, she implies that there are some police officers

that go around the law. She suggests that this leaves the community feeling helpless and as if they have nowhere to turn because the people who are supposed to protect the community are the same ones wreaking havoc among it. She calls for a change, though she doesn't specify exactly what that change looks like. She seems to state that as a society, if we keep things the way they are, we will continue to find ourselves “over a barrel” and “at the end of one too”.

4.1.4 References to Immigration/The DREAM Act

Like the Black Lives Matter movement theme, most of the references to the immigration/The DREAM Act theme occur thanks to the stories told throughout the music video. The narratives in the music video for “Better Than We Found It” argue for support for the DREAM Act and immigration reform (addressing RQ2). Unlike the Black Lives Matter theme, there are no song lyrics that even imply that this theme is addressed in the song itself. DACA, immigration, or the DREAM Act is not explicitly mentioned anywhere within the lyrics. However, the music video tells the story of Gustavo Flores and his youngest brother (along with the rest of his family) who lived in the United States under the DREAM Act their entire lives. The story explains that in January 2020, they were told that they were going to be sent back to Mexico. The music video does a wonderful job of supporting the argument that Gustavo and his family deserve to stay in America. Through the narratives told in the music video, Maren Morris argues that Dreamers are an important part of our society and should be able to continue living in their homes. Gustavo and his family's stories are used to argue that change needs—and that by supporting families like Gustavo's, it's possible to leave world “better than we found it” (addressing RQ2 and RQ3). In addition, showing the potential adverse effects the suspension of the DREAM Act could have on Gustavo and his family is an example of one of Morris's attempts to motivate audiences to act (addressing RQ4).

The visuals and images that tell Gustavo’s story start with the subtitles that open the music video for “Better Than We Found It”. The subtitles read, “This is Gustavo Flores. Gustavo and his youngest brother have lived in the US most of their lives under the Dream Act. January they were told they’d be sent back to Mexico”. In addition, a quote from Gustavo within the music video reads “‘This is our house. This is our home.’ – Gustavo”. Finally, there are several examples of b-roll that show audiences that Gustavo and his family are just like any other American family. For example, during Maren Morris’s speech to her son, we see video of Gustavo and his family at Gustavo’s graduation. We also see b-roll of Gustavo and his family praying before a meal at their table as Maren Morris tells her son “Our education must grow alongside our empathy”. Finally, there are several shots of Gustavo’s adorable little brother playing with little toy cars that’s overlaid with the part of Maren Morris’s speech to her son that reads, “anytime I get overwhelmed at the mess we’ve created”. Most importantly, the first character shown in the music video is Gustavo as he’s shown dressed up in traditional mariachi attire as he’s preparing to play guitar.

The visuals do the most to tell Gustavo’s story, however, there is one point where the song “Better Than We Found It” pauses to allow for some additional audio. Gustavo is being interviewed. You see a visual of him as he says, “My little brother and are I afraid. All of our life has been here.”. This is one way that Maren Morris inspires empathy and sympathy among her audience. Thanks to Gustavo’s willingness to be vulnerable, she is able to show audiences what he is going through as an innocent teenager (as well as his even younger little brother). This is powerful because it could reframe the arguments for immigration/the DREAM Act in a way that her traditional audience is not used to seeing.

4.1.5 Good Stewardship

Not only does Maren Morris admit that she is aware of what her audience has to say about her, she also frames the music video for “Better Than We Found It” around the idea of “we” (as evident by her title). She infers an understanding that she and her audience are both experiencing something similar (living through a pandemic, through social unrest, etc.). She also expresses that the only way some of the world’s greatest problems are going to be solved is through people working together to be good stewards and to take action to make social change – the main argument and title of the music video. Through highlighting social issues and offering up a potential solution (i.e., audiences coming together to leave the world ‘better than they found it’, she is attempting to motivate listeners to take action (RQ4)). Every story discussed supports, emphasizes, and expands on Maren Morris’s message that people should aspire to leave the world “better than we found it” (addressing RQ2 and RQ3). The use of the term “we” helps Maren Morris develop connections with her audience – and she uses it not only in the lyrics for her song but also through the visuals shown in the video. However, for this particular topic, there were not any crucial examples supplemental audio/video outside of the song itself that were representative of the topic. Other terms she uses to symbolize her commitment to addressing a collective audience (and in turn working as one) include the words “all”, “we’re”, and “us”.

The first visual of the term “we” is seen when Emma and Jade Rose are seen creating their posters for their protest. You see them writing “we are” several times, writing victims of police brutality down on their posters, and the of course other terms related to the Black Lives Matter movement. Towards the end of the video, the entire poster Emma and Jade created is shown and the sentence that started with “We are” is completed to read “We are stolen land”. Like Emma and Jade Rose’s story – the other stories also feature visuals of characters holding up

signs that reference the term “we”. For example, Gustavo and his family are featured holding up signs that have the words “I am” crossed out and say “Somos Sonadores” which translates to “We Are Dreamers”. In addition, this is followed up with his family holding the same “I AM” poster, however instead of seeing the term crossed out, we see the word “valiente” written underneath so the sign reads “I am valiente” which translates to “I am brave” in English. Finally, Daniel Hambrick’s family – Vickie and Sam – are also captured holding the I AM sign. In the signs they hold up, the term “I AM” is crossed out and the words “He Was Human” is replaced. The same sign is then seen again at a memorial for Daniel. Video of his family blowing kisses at his memorial followed by more images of him as a teenager is shown – and is voiced over by part of Maren Morris’s speech to her son. She says, “the art technique of random tiny dots linked together to create a meaningful, bigger picture once you step back. I promise to you that I will step back to let you someday lead the way. I will, like you, never stop being kind and curious. And I will spend the rest of my waking days”. Finally, perhaps the most powerful visual of the entire music video is shown at the end and consists only of the word “Vote” typed out in Maren Morris’s signature font on top of an all-black background. The idea of voting for change that is implied by this visual is a huge representation of the good stewardship theme because it directly references the fact that both she and her audience have the power to work together to create positive change.

Though the title of the song is probably the biggest example of the theme good stewardship at work throughout the music video, there are several other examples found throughout the verses, bridge, and chorus of the song. The song itself is a call to action for the collective, as Maren Morris repeats the lyrics “Will we sit on hands / Do nothing about it? / Or will we leave this world / Better than we found it?”. This is a plea to her audience to contemplate

not just the state of the world when she wrote this song but also what they plan to do about it. As previously mentioned, it's also implied that she's asking herself these same questions – again adding to the narrative that she doesn't view her audience as a “them” but rather she considers herself one with them, especially when it comes to fighting for social change. She sings “America, America, divided we fall / America, America, God save us all / From ourselves / And the hell that we've built for our kids / America, America, we're better than this”. This is a direct reference to the importance of being good stewards and staying united as a country. These lyrics skew towards inciting fear as they expose just how much division is currently hurting the nation and implies that if something is not done about it, the future is bleak for the next generation. She almost sounds as if she's parenting or coaching the country as she lets her audience know that she does still believe they are better than their current actions. Her words express a hesitant belief in the country while simultaneously sharing strong disappointment.

4.1.6 Music Video Analysis Conclusion

The music video for “Better Than We Found It” is extremely powerful not just because of how many layers there are to it from a narrative perspective (visuals that go alongside the music, visuals/audio outside of the song, the song lyrics itself) but also because of the several themes found throughout. The music video is balanced as most every story has a subtitle, a quote, and an equal amount of b-roll. The style throughout the music video is consistent. The fact that the techniques used to feature each story have so many similarities, but at the same time are tailored and tweaked to each individual messages are a testament to the producer, director, and most importantly Maren Morris's ability to mirror each narrative in order to connect with her audience. The music video for “Better Than We Found It” allows Maren Morris to present herself in a way that makes her relatable to audiences because of the way it features everyday

peoples’ stories and how the overall community is impacted by the social policies mentioned. Morris presents herself in a way that allows her to connect with audiences by being vulnerable as she shares audio and video of internal and intimate conversations (answering RQ1). Morris uses relatability and vulnerability to strengthen her arguments regarding the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement, the need for immigration reform, support for the DREAM Act, and the need for the community to work together to make the world a better place (answering RQ2). The stories about Jade and Emma Rose and Daniel Hambrick illustrate how systemic racism directly impacts Americans, while Gustavo Flores and his family’s story serve as an example of the heartbreaking repercussions the suspension of the DREAM Act would have on immigrants and their families. These stories and Morris’s personal narrative all emphasize and expand on the overall message of “Better Than We Found It” (answering RQ3). The emotion and passion with which each character in the music video (including Morris) tells their story as well as the discussions surrounding what could potentially happen if nothing is done is clearly an attempt to motivate audiences to align with Morris’s arguments and to take action to further the social issues mentioned (RQ4).

4.2 Comments Analysis

To better understand how audiences responded to “Better Than We Found It”, the arguments made within the music video, as well as the relationship Morris’s social media followers have with Morris, an analysis of the comments on her Instagram post about the music video was conducted. The comments analysis and the research questions addressed mirror the analysis and questions related to the music video. The comment analysis addresses the same topics (Black Lives Matter, immigration reform/the DREAM Act, and good stewardship) along with Morris’s connection to her audience and her influence when it comes to getting listeners to

take action, The complete coding scheme used to classify the 672 comments on the Instagram post of the music video for “Better Than We Found It” appears in Appendix A. See the coding scheme for detailed definitions of each code.

Table 4.1. Coded Instagram Comments

	Frequency	Percent of Sample	Cohen's Kappa coefficient
A – Parasocial Bond with Maren Morris	82	12.20%	0.81
B – Support for Maren Morris’s Overall Message			
Approval of Morris’ Overall Message	178	26.49%	0.99
Disapproval of Morris’ Overall Message	3	0.45%	1
C - Black Lives Matter			
Approval of Morris’ Message About Black Lives Matter	18	2.68%	1
Disapproval of Morris’ Message About Black Lives Matter	5	0.74%	1
D - Immigration / The DREAM Act			
Approval of Morris’ Message About Immigration/the DREAM Act	14	2.08%	1
Disapproval of Morris’ Message About Immigration/the DREAM Act	0	0.00%	1
E - Good Stewardship			
Approval of Morris’ Message About Good Stewardship	27	4.02%	1
Disapproval of Morris’ Message About Good Stewardship	0	0.00%	1
F- Motivation to Change or Act In Response to the Music Video			
Expressing a Change in Perspective	4	0.60%	1
Expressing Being Inspired	25	3.72%	1
Expressing Intention to Act in Alignment with the Music Video	9	1.34%	1
Expressing Intention to Act in Opposition of the Music Video	1	0.15%	1

Note. The total number of comments in the sample was 672. A subset of 138 comments was used as the basis for Cohen’s Kappa calculations.

There were thirteen codes that were used to answer research questions 5-7: 1. Category A indicated a parasocial relationship with Maren Morris, 2. Categories B-E addressed support (or not) for Maren Morris’s message, and 3. Category F indicated motivation to change or act in response to the music video. The first category, Category A – Parasocial Bond with Maren

Morris – only included one code, defined as comments that expressed a deep feeling of love, affection, admiration, connection and/or emotional bond with Maren Morris. To be coded as reflecting a parasocial bond, the commenter had to have made some reference to Maren Morris herself.

Categories B through E addressed approval or disapproval of Maren Morris’s message in the music video for “Better Than We Found It.” The remaining three categories (C, D, and E) took a deeper look at the specific issues referenced in her message: the Black Lives Matter Movement, Immigration/The DREAM Act, and Good Stewardship. Codes referencing the Black Lives Matter Movement were defined as mentioning Black Lives Matter and/or any issues related police brutality, systemic racism, the Daniel Hambrick/Emma and Jade storyline, Blue Lives Matter, etc. Codes referencing Immigration/The DREAM Act were defined as mentioning Dreamers, The DREAM Act, DACA, and/or any issues related to immigration, the Gustavo Flores storyline from the music video, etc. Finally, codes referencing good stewardship were defined as mentioning the idea of leaving the world, the planet, the community, the nation, etc. “better than we found it”, and/or Maren Morris’s specific call in the music video to leave the world better than we found it.

The last category (Category F) – Motivation to Change/Act in Response to Music Video—was defined as comments indicating a change or shift in opinion/intention. There were four comments associated with this category: 1. Comments indicating a change in perspective 2. Comments expressing being inspired by the video 3. Comments expressing an intention to act alignment with the music video, and 4. Comments expressing an intention to act in opposition with the music video. The results of the coding of the 672 comments – including the number and

percentage of each coding category – are reported in Table 4.1. Cohen’s Kappas (based on coding of 138 comments) are also reported in Table 4.1. All Cohen’s Kappas were over .8.

4.2.1. RQ5: The Audience’s Parasocial Involvement with Maren Morris

The code Parasocial Bond with Maren Morris was defined as “expressing a deep feeling love, affection, admiration, connection and or emotional bond with Maren Morris.” This code was used only for comments where the artist herself was directly referenced by the commenter. This code directly reflects evidence of a parasocial relationship and was found in 82 comments (or 12.2%). Examples of comments coded for code include: “This is beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Hayes is already proud of the woman you are. As we all are”; “Your best song yet. Thank you @marenmorris. Thank you for showing up and speaking up and speaking out. You’re an angel ❤️”; and “@marenmorrisjust know your true fans will show love and support and will never doubt you or @ryanhurd in any way. I hate anyone who doesn’t believe in y’all. I know hate is a strong word but people who hate just don’t know real nurture and love....if they did...they wouldn’t hate 🍷. Excited to watch your family nourish and grow 🍷👶”.

Several commenters spoke to Morris like they knew her, saying things like “I love you”, “I am so proud of you”, “Your son is proud of you”, etc. despite the fact that they’ve never met Maren Morris. This correlates with the display of awareness of her audience found throughout the music video and the vulnerability she shows as the comments reflect the connection audiences felt to her. Many felt so strongly about her character that they said things like, “You are a good human being” and several called her a “queen”.

Overall, the fact that there were so many examples coded for Parasocial Bond with Maren Morris show that the comments did, to a great degree, reflect the nature of Maren Morris’s parasocial relationship and involvement with her audience. This addresses research

question 5: To what extent do the comments reflect the nature of Maren Morris's parasocial relationship/involvement with her audience?

4.2.2. RQ6: Audience Response to Main Topics

RQ6 asked: How do comments indicate how audiences respond to the themes (Black Lives Matter, DREAM Act, being good stewards) embedded in the music video? In order to capture the reaction to main themes highlighted in Maren Morris's music video for “Better Than We Found It”, the comments were coded for support (or not) for the overall message that Maren Morris shared in the music video, and also for their support (or not) for each of the three main topics found in her video: The Black Lives Matter movement, Immigration/The DREAM Act, and the importance of being good stewards (and leaving the world better than we found it).



Code Section B – Support for Maren Morris's Overall Message – included codes representing disapproving and approving responses to the music video's message. There were 3 comments coded as general disapproval for the message (0.45% of the sample), but nearly all the comments that addressed the overall message of the music video expressed approval. Fully 178 comments (26.49% of the sample) expressed approval of Maren Morris's overall message. Examples of comments that expressed overall approval include: “Love this song, this message, and your heart. Thank you for sharing. ❤️” and “Such a beautiful song and message! Thank you for standing up and being a light in such a dark and weird time ❤️”.

It's important to note that there were some comments where users expressed having mixed feelings. Here's one example: “Love the song, but really hope you stand for all women, conservative, liberal, any race or religion. Just because someone is conservative does not make them a racist or bigot”. However, the very high number of positive comments about Maren

Morris’s message indicates that audiences positively responded to the themes in the video overall.

4.2.2.1 Black Lives Matter

Code section C was dedicated to identifying comments alluding to the Black Lives Matter Movement and whether or not audiences expressed disapproval or approval towards what Maren Morris had to say in her music video. Overall, there were many more positive comments (18; 2.68%) than negative comments (5; 0.74%) related to the Black Lives Matter movement, which is in alignment with the arguments Maren Morris made throughout her music video.

Comments expressing positive sentiments towards Morris’s message about the Black Lives Matter Movement included: “” (the symbol for Black power); “Anyone who doesn't agree with Maren's sentiment I ask that you watch the documentary The 13th to better understand the BLM movement.”; and “Beautiful!  #blm”. That said, comments expressing negative sentiments were pointed. For example, one person expressed disapproval by stating: “Bye-bye B!tch. BACK THE BLUE!”.

Overall, these results show that in regard to the theme related to Black Lives Matter found throughout Morris’s video, audiences’ response were in alignment with Morris’s arguments. Furthermore, audiences not only approved but applauded the fact that she spoke up for the Black Lives Matter movement.

4.2.2.2 Immigration/The DREAM Act

Code section D, Immigration/The DREAM Act, occurred least often in the comments. There were not any direct examples of the use of the word “immigration” or “DREAM” act. There were some references to Gustavo’s mariachi outfit, but many comments that were coded under this category were general messages implying support. Here is one example: “Thankful you’re

able to tell their stories. So beautiful to see that mariachi suit. To have hope. My heart breaks for those in pain right now. THANK YOU. 🙏”. There were 14 comments (2.08% of the sample) coded as expressing general approval towards what Maren Morris has to say about Immigration/The DREAM Act in her music video. Thus, audiences commented rarely on the immigration/DREAM Act theme, but what little they did say about it indicated support for Gustavo, his family, and Maren Morris’s message.

4.2.2.3 Good Stewardship

Code section E, Good Stewardship, was the coding category that most coincided with the overall message in the music video for “Better Than We Found It”. There were no comments expressing disapproving attitudes towards what Maren Morris said in her video about being good stewards to each other, the planet, and the nation. However, there were 27 instances (4.02%) in which commenters did express approval towards the good stewardship message.

From a qualitative perspective, the references commenters made to good stewardship seemed particularly heartfelt, as they included messages of gratitude, reiterated the song’s title (“Better Than We Found It”), included several emojis and highlighted the importance of Morris’s call to action in the video. Here are a few examples of the heartfelt positive comments that were left:

Example Comment 1: “Maren, THANK YOU for your heart, your honesty, and your LOVE! We are ALL blessed for your delivery of yet another song which matters to humanity! A beautiful song which holds emotions and allows the soul to move forward. The right side of history is walking forward and it’s the ONLY WAY to leave the World ‘Better Than We Found It.’ ❤️❤️❤️”

Example Comment 2: “Thank you for this. ❤️ One of our company’s core values is “Leave it better than you found it,” which we apply to people, places, and things with the hope that the ripple effect makes the world a better place. Thank you for turning that sentiment into a beautiful song that hits the heart. ❤️”



4.2.2.4 Summary of Response to the Three Main Topics in the Music Video

Overall, the results of the comment analysis for the code category Good Stewardship show along with the overall message and the Black Lives Matter theme, audiences responded positively and with approval towards what Maren Morris had to say about good stewardship in her music video (RQ6). As mentioned, quantitative data indicates that responses to the message overall were more likely to show up in the comments. Consistent with this finding is the fact that comments about being good stewards (a more general concept) were more common than comments about the Black Lives Matter movement or immigration reform/the DREAM Act. Furthermore, the references to immigration reform/the DREAM Act were mostly indirect. For example, people would reference Gustavo’s mariachi suit and imply support for the family (and thus the issue), but no comments directly said immigration reform or the DREAM Act were needed in the United States.


4.2.3 RQ7: Inspiration and Activation Among Audiences

While understanding how people relate to Maren Morris as an artist, her music video, and the messages she shares in her songs is important to understanding how she’s able to impact social change – comments where audiences directly express being inspired or motivated to take actions serve as the most powerful evidence that music can truly move people. RQ7 asked: “To what extent do comments indicate audiences were inspired or activated by Maren Morris’s message”? To address this research question, code section F includes four codes: Expressing a Change in

Perspective; Expressing Being Inspired; Expressing Intention Act in Alignment with the Music Video; and Expressing Intention Act in Opposition of the Music Video.

There were only 39 instances of comments coded under code category F (making up 5.81% of the sample). Overall, there was a substantial showing of people who explained that they were inspired by Maren Morris’s message, and there were also a handful of comments where commenters vowed to act in alignment with the song’s message. The code that appeared most often in this category was Expressing Being Inspired, which had a frequency of 25 and made up 3.72% of the sample. Both famous artists and unverified Instagram users expressed that they were inspired by Maren Morris’s music video. One artist said, “Every gig I play, I say that you are my favourite artist. I don’t even need to explain why. You show us in everything you do ”. This comment also indicates an intention to take action to spread the reach of Maren Morris’s messages. Other examples of comments where audiences expressed feeling inspired include the comments like “...You are a priceless role model. Thank you for giving this old girl hope for future generations. ”.

The second most common code found in this category was Expressing Intention to Act in Alignment with the Music Video, a code with a frequency of 9 (1.34% of the sample). This indicates that a small number of commenters expressed motivation to take action. As noted in the music video analysis, the call to action at the end of “Better Than We Found It” was a message on a black screen that simply read “Vote”. Of the instances in which comments were coded for expressing an intention to act, most talked about their plans to make their voice heard on Election Day. The comments that explicitly referred to voting include the following:

Example Comment 1: “...I vow to leave this world better than I found it (and to vote!). Thank you, @marenmorris. So much love to you and yours. ”

Example Comment 2: “gut-wrenching, gorgeous and brave - thank you Maren and company ❤️🙌#vote”

Example Comment 3: “...Thank you for shining a light and not letting these issues get swept under the rug in the country music world! ✨ VOTE!...”

Example Comment 4: “...We need to vote for change and a better future”

Example Comment 5: “...Thank you for shining the light on humans who have suffered at the hands of the systemic oppression of this country. We will vote for a change and leave behind a place our kids will be proud of. ❤️”

While some comment coded for Expressing Intention Act in Alignment with the Music Video were vows to vote, others were examples of commenters expressing an intention to act in alignment with her message but did not directly mention voting. For example, one user said, “Just listened to this. So incredibly moving and inspirational. I will also try to do more/ better. Thank you.”.

The other two codes in this category appeared rarely. Only 4 comments (0.60%) were coded as “Expressing a Change in Perspective.” This was not substantial enough to demonstrate that minds were changed or that commenters walked away from seeing “Better Than We Found It” with new beliefs. Finally, only one comment was coded for Expressing Intention Act in Opposition of the Music Video. In the comment, the user pledged to ‘back the blue’, called Morris a profanity, and said ‘bye-bye’, suggesting she would no longer be supporting Morris as an artist. Though this was a pointed response, the fact that there was only one comment of this nature underscores the positive reception of Morris’s message as well as the arguments she made throughout the music video.

In sum, the results of the codes in this section showed that some members of the audience of the music video were both inspired and activated by Maren Morris’s message (RQ7). There are several comments that directly say they found inspiration from either Maren Morris, her “Better Than We Found It” music video or both. There are also examples of commenters saying they will vote, will do their part to leave the world better than they found it, and will make an effort to support the causes she references (like the Black Lives Matter movement).

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Research Questions Results: Overview

The analysis of the music video indicates that Maren Morris used tactics like relatability and vulnerability to develop connections with her audience (RQ1). She developed arguments related the social issues in the music video (RQ2) and used storytelling (both others’ and her own, through the song and additional footage within the music video) (RQ3) to get her points across and to further link herself with her fanbase. The content of the music video exhibits her awareness of social issues like systemic racism, flaws in America’s immigration policy, and division within the United States (versus taking collective action to be good stewards to one another and the community). Through framing the narratives found throughout the video as common, everyday situations the audience can relate to (showing scenes of a family making dinner and eating together or teenage girls hanging out on the front porch, etc.), Maren Morris displays inclusivity. In the music video, Maren Morris brilliantly connects the main message – to leave the world “better than we found it” – to stories like Gustavo’s, Daniel Hambrick and his family’s, Emma and Jade Rose’s, and even her own. She uses the concept of the importance of working together to do the right thing as thread to weave together each narrative while simultaneously sharing her opinion with audiences (RQ3). By avoiding taking an aggressive

approach, and instead sharing her and the characters’ stories in her video’s perspective, she is able to keep listeners’ guard down and capture their more open minds. The music video urges the need to make the world a better place, but she waits until the end of the music video to encourage people to vote (RQ4). She allows the chorus of the song to remain the only other main call to action for the audience as any other advocacy she makes for change is by way of sharing her personal dedication towards making a difference (without saying what other people should or should not do).

The analysis of the comments on the Instagram post of “Better Than We Found It” examines how responses to the music video (at least those captured in the comments) reflected a connection with Maren Morris (RQ5), the music video, the messages/social issues within the video (RQ6), as well as inspiration and/or desire to act (RQ7). One of the most powerful tools Maren Morris has when it comes to influence is the parasocial relationships she has built with fans. Per RQ5, fully 12% of the comments included references to “loving” Maren Morris or feeling a sense of deep “affection, admiration, and connection” to her as an artist. Thus, there was ample evidence of strong emotional and parasocial bonds between Morris and her audience. When it comes to responses to the social issues addressed in the music video (RQ6), some issues were addressed more than others, but overall, those who commented tended to indicate support for the views Morris expressed. In alignment with this support, most of the comments were positive. However, it is possible that those who had negative responses shared their feedback by way of Instagram direct message (which was not analyzed in this study). In addition, immigration was the least mentioned issue in the policy, whereas the idea of being good stewards and the Black Lives Matter movement were mentioned more often. Though not every comment aligned with the opinions expressed in the music video, most of them did. Finally, some

comments described being inspired by her message, but only a few alluded to getting up and doing something because of the music video (RQ7). That said, there were at least five direct references to voting, and many comments where people vowed to work towards leaving the world “better than they found it”.

The following sections will discuss how both the music video for “Better Than We Found It” as well as the comments on the Instagram post Morris made featuring the music video indicate aspects of self-presentation that lead to parasocial bonds (by way of relatability and vulnerability). In addition, arguments within the music video and audiences’ responses surrounding social issues will be discoursed. Examples include themes like the Black Lives Movement, immigration/the DREAM Act (and how those have colored ideas about patriotism in the United States) as well as good stewardship and the importance of taking action. Through connecting the music video analysis with the response from viewers of the music video by way of Instagram comments, the study will identify the arguments that people responded to that were found throughout the music video. By examining how the music video and comments mirror one another (or do not), this research will uncover how viewers replied to specific themes as well.

5.2 Research Question Results by Theme

5.2.1 Aspects of Self Presentation Leading to Parasocial Bonds: Relatability and Vulnerability

The parasocial bonds that audience members have with Maren Morris – in large part due to her ability to seem relatable and her willingness to be vulnerable – impact commenters’ responses to her music video. The stories told in “Better Than We Found It” about her being a mother as well as the fact that she used her platform to illuminate other characters’ stories and social issues add to her relatability. The way she exposed internal conversations that express her

own worries and self-doubt, intimate conversations with her son, admittance of wrongdoing and a vow to do better proved that she is not scared to be vulnerable. The comments indicating a parasocial bond are revealing of the influence the presence of relatability and vulnerability had on response to the music video. Maren Morris taps into her own and others' feelings and that makes her listener more likely to connect with her and her message.

When it comes to narrative persuasion, there is a higher likelihood of garnering engagement and inspiring story-consistent attitudes and beliefs among the audience if the sharer of the message taps into the audience's emotions (Appel & Richter, 2010). The love letter she wrote and recited to her son at the end of the music video, as well as the conversations she has with herself about being overwhelmed, questioning if she is doing a good enough job, and admitting where she has made mistakes allow her to pull on viewers' heart strings. All these examples also make audiences feel as though they know Maren Morris which leads to a stronger parasocial bond (Dibble et al., 2016). Because parasocial relationships have the power to shift attitudes and behaviors, it is important to understand the tactics Maren Morris has deployed to build a parasocial bond with her fan base (Paravati et al., 2020). Over 12% suggested the presence of parasocial involvement.

When parasocial relationships are met with persuasive messages, the potential for behavioral and attitude shift increases. She shows that she can identify with her listeners (as shown in examples of the theme relatability in the music video), and this contributed to her ability to persuade her listeners to align with her views on the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform/the DREAM Act and the importance of being good stewards. Identification is a powerful tool when it comes to narrative persuasion (Hoeken et al., 2016). Many even commenters thanked Maren Morris for using her voice and platform (in line with research on the

power of female musicians). This is especially true when it comes to the Black Lives Matter theme.

5.2.2 References to the Black Lives Matter Movement

When it comes to race, many tend to associate country music mostly with white men, and the industry overall has been accused of perpetuating racism in the past (Haynes, 2018). However, Maren Morris’s video does not tell any stories about white men, and instead focuses on sharing marginalized voices. She provides a different perspective to country audiences as one of the most powerful lines comes from the uncle of a victim of systemic racism. In one of the most powerful quotes from the music video, the man tells the story of how his nephew Daniel Hambrick died, saying “he was shot down like an animal. An animal. This officer said well okay I guess I can’t catch him, I know what I’ll do. Just took aim. Just took aim. Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow. And this stuff, it needs to stop somewhere, you know? It needs to stop somewhere.” In addition, the music video makes a point to share quotes from the family about the incident implying that they do not blame all police officers for what happened to Daniel, just that “one police officer made a bad decision that day”.

It is not common to see protest signs that read “no justice, no peace” or civil rights or Black Lives Matter protest footage in a country music video. This lyric surprised some listeners: “Over and under / And above the law / My neighbor’s in danger / Who does he call? / When the wolves at the door / Are covered in blue / Shouldn’t we try something new? / We’re over a barrel / At the end of one too.” Their surprise was made evident by the fact that three users pulled out that line explicitly and said things like “Nice of you to condemn all law enforcement” or called the line “hurtful”. While some expressed that they liked the song and the overall message, but disliked that line, others applauded her for standing up for the issue. In addition, a few people


mentioned up and coming African American female country artist Mickey Guyton and suggested that Maren Morris should collaborate with her. These varying responses shine a light not only on how race is viewed in country music industry, but how the way it is framed is changing. These comments also align with the overall discord and controversy within the industry about the subject.

5.2.3 References to Immigration/The DREAM Act

Other themes that have been addressed by country music in the past include patriotism which is often brought up in conjunction with immigration and immigration reform. This is important because often being loyal to certain music leads to being persuaded to also be loyal to the nation and doctrine the music promotes (Brigance, 2002). Country music is typically associated with American music or music that is aligned with conservative, Republican values and warns against the dangers of big government and big business (Meier, 2019).

In the music video for “Better Than We Found It”, Maren Morris does the opposite of what many country songs typically do in that she does not glorify America and instead speaks out against some of the problems she’s seeing within the country. She says, “America, America, divided we fall / America, America, God save us all / From ourselves / And the hell that we’ve built for our kids / America, America, we’re better than this”. Though lyric does read a bit like a pep talk, it also highlights the problems America is experiencing and goes against how patriotism has traditionally been framed in country music as it calls for union (versus autonomy and independence). She further implicates America when she spotlights how decisions the government has made about immigration and the DREAM Act in 2020 have led to fear. The music video sets up Gustavo’s story saying, “This is Gustavo Flores. Gustavo and his youngest brother have lived in the US most of their lives under the Dream Act. January they were told

they’d be sent back to Mexico”. Then, the music video follows up with a quote from Gustavo as he says, “My little brother and I are afraid. All of our life has been here.”

What is particularly interesting is how audiences responded in the comments to this new framing of what it means to talk about patriotism in country music. Maren Morris is not just asking the American government to step up their game, she also calls upon citizens in the line, “Will we sit on our hands / Do nothing about it? / Or will we leave this world / Better than we found it?”. She also goes against the traditional country music theme patriotism when she shows several characters in the music video holding up posters that have the words “I AM” scratched out and replaced with variations of “we”. This is important because self-reliance, freedom, and self-governing are potent tropes within how being American is framed in country music. By focusing on the collective, and not the individual, she is altering how patriotism within in country music is viewed. This is made even more evident by one commenter’s response that reads, “Seeing this makes me so proud to be an American Thank you ! ”. This feedback shows how the new this new framing of what it means to be an American according to country music is accepted and revered at least by one fan.

5.2.4 Good Stewardship and Taking Collective Action

Many commenters mentioned how much the music video for “Better Than We Found It” was needed. This is a testament to how listeners contextualize the messages found within “Better Than We Found It”. Commenters viewed it as more than just a country song. They saw it as a call for justice. The call to action in Maren Morris’s music video for “Better Than We Found It” is one that stands out when compared to other country songs while simultaneously leading with the idea of taking care of one another that is so prevalent in country music. The way Maren Morris was able to incorporate good stewardship (something that often shows up in the lyrics of

classic country songs) alongside new arguments like the importance of fighting against systemic racism and unfair immigration reform allows her to take a real shot at changing audience perceptions not just towards the issues she addresses, but toward the country music industry in general. Commenters expressed that Maren Morris’s music video is the embodiment of what country music should be, which is interesting when compared to another related theme that appeared in qualitative analysis of the comments: How the country music industry is not ready for Maren Morris’s message.

“Better Than We Found It” goes against several stereotypes associated with country music, as it features a strong feminine voice, pro-immigration sentiments, support for the Black Lives Matter movement, and support for law enforcement reform. The music video has the potential to reducing generalizations about and prejudice towards stigmatized groups because of the parasocial bonds audiences feel towards Morris. In addition to supporting Maren Morris, many comments also called out the need for other musicians to follow her lead. Finally, another comment mentioned not just Morris’s courage, but also other artists who are not afraid to make bold statements within the industry. Up and coming African American female country artist Mickey Guyton and members of The Highwomen (an all-girl country music band in which Morris also a member) are specifically mentioned in the comments. The emphasis on the future of country music found throughout the comments imply that the country music industry and its fanbase are evolving – and that Maren Morris is at least one factor contributing to that change.

5.3 Social and Research Implications

The music video for “Better Than We Found It” and the impact it has had on audiences have several layers of implications, starting with how the music video reframes issues like race, patriotism, and stewardship that already have traditional connotations within the country music

genre (Abramson, 2002). Not only is Maren Morris exposing traditional country audiences to new viewpoints on social issues like the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform, and the DREAM Act, she is also contributing to a rebranding of the country music industry overall. Furthermore, she is using narratives within the entertainment she produces (her songs and music videos) to motivate social action. Music has been used to empower, recruit, create group identities, and to push movements forward by artists in the past (Dennis, 2016). “Better Than We Found It” is another example of how music can create solidarity and lead to action. What makes this song unique though is the genre within which it was shared as well as platform on which it was released. Instagram as a platform for sharing music videos is fairly new and is only made possible by advanced streaming technology (Auter et al., 2008). Maren Morris has used Instagram not just to share her music, but to share intimate details about her life, family, and career journey. It is important to understand how sharing music within this context adds to the potential for parasocial bonds to lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors (Auter et al., 2008).

This study creates a framework for which the promotion of other social issues via music videos shared on social media can be examined. There are other artists, within and outside of the country music genre, who use their social media accounts to create relationships with their audiences. There are also several other artists who use social platforms to promote and release their music video. The ability to comment or respond to social media posts allows audiences to respond back to artists and their posts (Aikat, 2004). Continuing to examine responses to artists’ varying viewpoints and musical creations under differing and dynamic contexts could help researchers understand when, why, and how certain messages make a bigger impact than others. In addition, this study could be used as a framework for looking at several different types of

audiences who may have established different levels of parasocial bonds with artists to see if there is any variation in response.

5.4 Limitations

This study included a music video analysis and an analysis of comments on an Instagram post of the video to draw parallels between what was said in “Better Than We Found It” and how audiences responded. One limitation of an analysis of comments on social media is that it is not possible to determine the intention behind each comment. Instead, the intention must be inferred based on the explicit contents of each comment. In addition, thousands (perhaps even millions) were likely exposed to the music video and may have even watched it or interacted with it on Instagram, but who did not respond. Because reactions of many in the audience were not captured in the comments, the sample of comments from which this study inferred audience response is skewed. Because it is not possible to measure the responses of every person who was exposed to the message of “Better Than We Found It”, we do not really have a full picture of how people reacted to the message. Finally, those who did see Morris’s Instagram post were likely already followers and fans of Maren Morris since she shared it in an organic post on her page, which increases their likelihood of reacting positively.

Another limitation is that in addition to sharing words in the comments, people also shared emojis. Because there are several meanings associated with emojis (one image can mean several different things), it is impossible to know what exactly was meant by users simply by reading the string of text and emojis they posted. Finally, because the details about each Instagram user are limited and were not considered within this study, it is difficult to know how race, background, age, status, etc. impacted how they received the music video and what they had to say about it.

We have no way of knowing for sure if the Instagram user who commented was an immigrant, a participant in the Black Lives Matter movement, a mother, etc.

An additional limitation is the fact that there was no measurement of each users’ actual behavior. First, not every action or behavior or attitude change is going to be recorded in the comments. As for the ones that are, there is no way to know if what users expressed in the comments about intentions to change their mind or carry out a certain behavior were brought to fruition (or if commenters were merely saying so without any intention to follow up their words with action). Though there are several examples of comments where an Instagram user alluded to carrying out a specific action, or even said that they had plans to behave in a certain way – there is no way to know if they actually did what they said they would. Also, there is no way to know if the broader influence of the music video was significant enough to create real social change. There are several people who may have never been exposed to the music video at all. Because of the music video’s limited reach, people who may have been persuaded by the messages in the video may never be exposed to the song. Since this study aims to look at music’s impact on social change, it is important to mention those that never even have the opportunity to be influenced. This study cannot detect responses or parasocial relationships that were not implied in the comments and cannot account for those who were never reached.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

While there are several limitations to this study, additional future research could provide answers to remaining questions. Though it will never be possible to analyze or reach every person, suggested future studies could expand the sample examined to paint a larger picture regarding music’s implications. One way to do this could be to conduct an examination of what was said on other social media platforms could add additional context to the study. While

Instagram comments were explored in this case study—the music video was also released on other social platforms. What was said in response to the video on YouTube, or Twitter, or Facebook, or Snapchat, or TikTok? Adding in a layer that examined social listening not just on this platform but on Instagram too (versus just looking at the comments on her Instagram post about the video) could yield additional insight. Another factor that contributed to the comments left on Maren Morris’s post is undoubtedly the Instagram presence she has built for herself with past posts. More research could be done on her overall social presence and how that has led to the parasocial relationships she has built with audiences that influenced the way they interacted with this post. For example, what types of stories has she posted in the past and how often has she engaged with her followers? What types of conversations typically take place in the comments of her Instagram posts?

Because this study aimed to understand how Maren Morris was able to use the music video for “Better Than We Found It” to influence audience perception towards the social issues mentioned throughout—an interesting addition to the case study would be looking at actual actions taken. For example, how much money did the music video raise for the Black Women’s Health Imperative organization? How many people voted in accordance with the social policies brought up in the music video? Were there any other actions taken by the music video’s audiences? These would all be interesting things to investigate. Finally, future research could also examine other case studies in which female country artists have used Instagram to speak out for or against social issues. Furthermore, it could be interesting to look at other artists outside of the country music genre that have used social media to share their music that advocates for certain social policies, and how their audiences responded. Identifying if there is a pattern between artists associated with specific genres speaking out about certain issues could be

powerful – especially if their messages show an impact on attitudes or behaviors. It could be interesting to see if some issues garner more response than others, or if changes in context have an impact. For example, are artists who are more vulnerable or post more relatable content to their social media accounts able to inspire more change than artists who hardly post or keep their accounts professional? Is there a relationship between how frequently they post and how many people they are able to reach (as well as how effectively)? Future studies could uncover any pertinent patterns.

5.6 Conclusion

Famous musical artists have so much power to influence the masses. This especially true for those who write, produce, and direct their own music and videos. Maren Morris is just one performer who is using her voice to stand up for what she believes. Her message has the capacity to emphasize already held beliefs among her audiences, inspire listeners to approach issues from a new perspective, or to completely change opinions when it comes to important social issues. Because of the strength of the parasocial bonds fans build with artists, fame can be used a tool to motivate behavior. Celebrity can be used as a weapon or as a shield from dangerous ideologies. Furthermore, the interaction fans crave is made even more accessible by social media. Social platforms can make audiences feel like they have access to every part of a person’s life, provide a platform for two-way communication that previously did not exist, and makes possible a sense of friendship and companionship between people who have never met in person. Thanks to constant technological advancement, the features available to social media users are continuously evolving. As a result, research on technology’s impact on communication must progress at the same pace.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, B. D. (2002). Country music and cultural industry: mediating structures in transnational media flow. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 255-274.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/016344370202400206>
- Aikat, D. (2004, May). Violent content in online music videos: Characteristics of violence in online videos on BET.com, Country.com, MTV.com, and VH1.com. Conference paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, New Orleans, LA.
- Appel, M., & Richter, T. (2010). Transportation and need for affect in narrative persuasion: A mediated moderation model. *Media Psychology*, 13(2), 101–135.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213261003799847>
- Auter, P. J., Ashton, E., & Soliman, M. R. (2008). A study of Egyptian and American young adult parasocial “relationships” with music video personae. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 1(2), 131–144. https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr.1.2.131_1
- Bennett, L. (2014). ‘If we stick together we can do anything’: Lady Gaga fandom, philanthropy and activism through social media. *Celebrity Studies*, 5(1/2), 138–152.
- Bonus, J. A., Matthews, N. L., & Wulf, T. (2021). The impact of moral expectancy violations on audiences’ parasocial relationships with movie heroes and villains. *Communication Research*, 48(4), 550–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219886516>
- Boulton, A. (2008). The popular geopolitical wor(l)ds of post-9/11 country music. *Popular Music & Society*, 31(3), 373–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760701563518>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa).
- Brigance, L. C. (2002). Persuasion and protest music. *Communication Teacher*, 16(3), 7–9.

- Brown, M., Ray, R., Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). #SayHerName: A case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1831–1846.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334934>
- Clark, M. D. (2019). White folks’ work: digital allyship praxis in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(5), 519–534.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1603104>
- Click, M., Lee, H., & Holladay, H. (2013). Making monsters: Lady Gaga, fan identification, and social media. *Popular Music & Society*, 36(3), 360–379.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2013.798546>
- Click, M. A., Lee, H., & Holladay, H. W. (2017). ‘You’re born to be brave’: Lady Gaga’s use of social media to inspire fans’ political awareness. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 603–619.
- Cohen, E. L., Myrick, J. G., & Hoffner, C. A. (2021). The effects of celebrity silence breakers: Liking and parasocial relationship strength interact to predict the social influence of celebrities’ sexual harassment allegations. *Mass Communication and Society*, 24, 288–313.
- Conrad, C. (1988). Work songs, hegemony, and illusions of self. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5(3), 179–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038809366702>
- Coscarelli, J. (2016, December 13). For Maren Morris, the year everything came together. *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/arts/music/maren-morris-hero-grammy-interview.html>

- Dennis, A. L. (2016). Black contemporary social Movements, resource mobilization Black Musical Activism. *Law & Contemporary Problems*, 79(3), 29–51.
- de Graaf, A., Hoeken, H., Sanders, J., & Beentjes, J. W. J. (2012). Identification as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. *Communication Research*, 39(6), 802–823.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650211408594>
- Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016). Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship: Conceptual clarification and a critical assessment of measures. *Human Communication Research*, 42(1), 21–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12063>
- Drewett, M. (2008). Developing a retro brand community: Re-releasing and marketing anti-apartheid protest music in post-apartheid South Africa. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 11(4), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253860802391292>
- Edgar, A. N., & Holladay, H. W. (2019). “Everybody’s hard times are different”: Country as a political investment in white masculine precarity. *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, 16(2), 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.163895>
- Elcessor, E. (2018). “One tweet to make so much noise”: Connected celebrity activism in the case of Marlee Matlin. *New Media & Society*, 20(1), 255–271.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444816661551>
- Good, A., & Russo, F. A. (2016). Singing promotes cooperation in a diverse group of children. *Social Psychology*, 47, 340–344.
- Haynes, J. (2018). Looking for (women’s) rights in all the wrong places? Country music and hillbilly feminism in the 1990s. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(2), 315–318.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1436900>

- Hensby, A. (2017). Open networks and secret Facebook groups: Exploring cycle effects on activists' social media use in the 2010/11 UK student protests. *Social Movement Studies*, 16(4), 466–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1201421>
- Hoeken, H., Kolthoff, M., & Sanders, J. (2016). Story perspective and character similarity as drivers of identification and narrative persuasion. *Human Communication Research*, 42(2), 292–311. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12076>
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 19, 215–229. doi:10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049
- Hou, M. (2018). Participatory consumption of celebrity products: Gangnam style and its parodies. *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries*, 99, 57–80.
- Huhn Nunes, R., Sabino de Freitas, A., & Leão Ramos, F. (2018). The effects of social media opinion leaders' recommendations on followers' intention to buy. *Revista Brasileira De Gestão De Negócios*, 20(1), 57-73.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322185775_The_effects_of_social_media_opinion_leaders'_recommendations_on_followers'_intention_to_buy
- Jiang, S., & Ngien, A. (2020). The effects of Instagram use, social comparison, and self-esteem on social anxiety: A survey study in Singapore. *Social Media + Society*, 1, 1-10
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120912488>
- Kirschner, S., & Tomasello, M. (2010). Joint music making promotes prosocial behavior in 4-year-old children. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 31, 354–364.
- Kwon, J. (2019). Between Hyorish and Hyorism: A Korean TV star and social media activism. *Television & New Media*, 20(3), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417742519>

Lady Gaga: Charity Work & Causes. (2021). Look to the Stars; Look to the Stars.

<https://www.looktothestars.org/celebrity/lady-gaga>

Lavertu, L., Marder, B., Erz, A., & Angell, R. (2020). The extended warming effect of social media: Examining whether the cognition of online audiences offline drives prosocial behavior in ‘real life.’ *Computers in Human Behavior, 110*.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106389>

Leong, C., Pan, S. L., Bahri, S., & Fauzi, A. (2019). Social media empowerment in social movements: Power activation and power accrual in digital activism. *European Journal of Information Systems, 28*(2), 173–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2018.1512944>

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *AISHE-J: The All Ireland Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 9*(3), Article 335.

Meier, K. J. (2019). Looking for meaning in all the wrong places: Country music and the politics of identity. *Social Science Quarterly, 100*(1), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.1255>

Moussa, S. (2019). An emoji-based metric for monitoring consumers’ emotions toward brands on social media. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 37*, 211-225.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Paravati, E., Naidu, E., Gabriel, S., & Wiedemann, C. (2020). More than just a tweet: The unconscious impact of forming parasocial relationships through social media. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice, 7*(4), 388–403.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/cns0000214>

- Pavlova, A., & Berkers, P. (2020). Mental health discourse and social media: Which mechanisms of cultural power drive discourse on Twitter. *Social Science & Medicine*, 263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113250>
- Rabinowitch, T.-C. (2020). The potential of music to effect social change. *Music & Science*. Advanced Online Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204320939772>
- Raines, D., & Walker, T. (2008). Poetry for the people: Country music and American social change. *Southern Quarterly*, 45(2), 44–52.
- Scharp, K. M., & Sanders, M. L. (2019). What is a theme? Teaching thematic analysis in qualitative communication research methods. *Communication Teacher*, 33(2), 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2018.1536794>
- Slater, M. D. (2002). Entertainment-education and elaboration likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion. *Communication Theory*, 12(2), 173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00265.x>
- Songfacts. (n.d.). Better than we found it by Maren Morris - Songfacts. Song Meanings at Songfacts. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/maren-morris/better-than-we-found-it>
- Stever, G. (2017). Parasocial theory: Concepts and measures. In P. Rössler (Ed.), C. A. Hoffner, & L. van Zoonen (Associate Eds.), *International encyclopedia of media effects*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0069>
- Toirac, J. (2021, September 22). Home. Black Women's Health Imperative. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <https://bwhi.org/>.

- Williams, J. (2014). “Same DNA, but born this way”: Lady Gaga and the possibilities of postessentialist feminisms. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 26(1), 28–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12058>
- Wilson, J. (2000). Women in country music videos. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 57(3), 290–303. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42578019>
- Wong, N. C., Lookadoo, K. L., & Nisbett, G. S. (2017). “I’m Demi and I have bipolar disorder”: Effect of parasocial contact on reducing stigma toward people with bipolar disorder. *Communication Studies*, 68, 314-333. doi:10.1080/10510974.2017.133192
- Zwarun, L., & Hall, A. (2012). Narrative persuasion, transportation, and the role of need for cognition in online viewing of fantastical films. *Media Psychology*, 15(3), 327–355.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.700592>

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Codebook for Comments on Instagram Post of “Better Than We Found It”

Music Video

CODING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read the whole comment once.
2. Then reread the comment and identify which codes (below) are represented in the comment.
 - Note that the comments listed under each code are just examples of responses that might fit the code; other responses will fit as well.
3. The same phrase/statement can receive multiple codes. For example the following comment would be coded for affinity for artist and approval of the message: “Truly beautiful piece 🎵🇺🇸 country music and the world needs more artists like you 🙏xx”
4. Read the coding sheet as it is the same codebook loaded to NVivo. Then right click on the appropriate comment and select “Code Selection”. Then select the appropriate code(s).

CODEBOOK

PARASOCIAL BOND WITH MAREN MORRIS

1 Expressing a deep feeling of love, affection, admiration, connection and/or emotional bond with Maren Morris (ex. I love you so much). The commenter must make some reference to Maren Morris herself (artist, you, your, Maren, MM, etc.)

SUPPORT FOR MAREN MORRIS’S MESSAGE

Comments that inform support/opposition for Maren Morris’s message in the music video for “Better Than We Found It” [Code all that apply]

2 Expressing general disapproval for what Maren Morris has to say in the music video for “Better Than We Found It” (ex. I do not believe in this message)

3 Expressing general approval towards the overall message in the music video for “Better Than We Found It”. There must a reference to the message in the music video itself.

Black Lives Matter

Response mentions Black Lives Matter and/or any issues related police brutality, systemic racism, the Daniel Hambrick/Emma and Jade storyline, Blue Lives Matter, etc.

4 Expressing general disapproval for what Maren Morris has to say about anything related to the Black Lives Matter movement (ex. Blue Lives Matter, Back The Blue, etc.)

5 Expressing general approval towards what Maren Morris has to say about anything related to the Black Lives Matter movement (ex. Blue Lives Matter, Back The Blue, etc.)

Immigration/The DREAM Act

Response mentions Dreamers, The DREAM Act, DACA, and/or any issues related to immigration, the Gustavo Flores storyline from the music video, etc.

6 Expressing general disapproval for what Maren Morris has to say about immigration/the DREAM Act

7 Expressing general approval towards what Maren Morris has to say about immigration/the DREAM Act

Good Stewardship

Response mentions the idea of leaving the world, the planet, the community, the nation, etc. “better than we found it”, and/or Maren Morris’s specific call in the music video to leave the world better than we found it.

8 Expressing general disapproval for what Maren Morris has to say about being good stewards to each other/the planet/the nation

9 Expressing general approval towards what Maren Morris has to say about being good stewards to each other/the planet/the nation

MOTIVATION TO CHANGE OR ACT IN RESPONSE TO THE MUSIC VIDEO

Response must indicate a change or shift in opinion/intention

10 Expressing a change in perspective, a change of heart, and/or thinking twice about previously held beliefs

11 Expressing being inspired by the music video and/or the message

12 Expressing an intention to do something and/or did something in alignment with Maren Morris’s message

13 Expressing an intention to do something and/or did something in direct opposition to Maren Morris’s message

References to Other Social Issues

**If there are any other social issues mentions, please make a note so they can be mentioned in the analysis*