

2022

Long Live All the Magic She's Made: How Taylor Swift Became One of the Most Successful Artists of Her Time

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Long Live All the Magic She's Made: How
Taylor Swift Became One of The Most
Successful Artists of Her Time

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Fall 2022

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Abstract

Taylor Swift is one of the most celebrated and well-known artists of this generation and one of the media's favorite celebrities to talk about. Swift's strategic marketing techniques and her dedication to the relationship she has with her fans have helped shape the success of her career. Existing literature highlights marketing techniques of the music industry, such as fan engagement strategies and social media presence. Additionally, the literature focuses on the growing cultural obsession with celebrities and the fixation on their private lives. However, there are gaps in the literature regarding many of the artists who have shaped the music industry into what it is today and what strategies they used to be successful. I have analyzed Taylor Swift's career to determine what strategies she has implemented to find success, and if they have worked well enough to classify her as one of the most successful artists of her time. Swift's calculated marketing campaigns, connection to her fanbase, and dedication to developing as an artist are some of the strategies she used to become one of the most successful artists of her generation. Through textual and discourse analysis, I studied Swift's lyrics, her media presence/public image, marketing campaigns, fan engagement, and various metrics of success such as physical and digital sales, streaming statistics, touring profitability, and her award recognition. This study raises the question of what makes an artist successful and the implications of celebrity status. It also sheds light on wider topics, such as issues over privacy, ownership, and public scrutiny.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Westgate for jumping head-first, fearless into this project with me. When Professor Westgate shared with me that he watched *Miss Americana* to learn more and to be able to offer more assistance, that was the moment I knew that I was the lucky one that he agreed to advise me on this project. Thank you for all of your guidance and support throughout this entire process.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the soccer program for getting me to Johnson & Wales in the first place. While the story of us might have come to a close as I put on my jersey for the last time this past fall, I cannot put into words how much the support of my teammates and coaches has meant to me. There was a single thread of gold tying me to you for my whole career, and thank you for giving me the collegiate soccer experience of my wildest dreams.

It's nice to have a friend, and I have many. To Maddie and Kiley, for giving me a soon enough you're best friends experience at our first soccer practices when I was seven years old. To Madison and Emmy, it always leads to you two in our hometown. Thank you for your constant support and steady presence in my life; I'm only me when I'm with you two. The invisible string that tied me to the JWU soccer program led me to the best teammates and friends, who know all too well how much happiness they bring me. I've had the time of my life with you.

To my younger siblings, who proved to me that the best people in life are free. Our untouchable bond means everything to me, the three of you are the best thing that's ever been mine. To my parents, thank you for helping me find my place in this world, for your constant

support, and for making sure I knew I was never on my own. I'm shining just for you!

Lastly, thank you to the superstar herself, Taylor Swift. Thank you for being a summer sun forever, and for validating every feeling I've ever felt. Long live all the magic you've made!

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Business Strategy.....	6
Celebrity Status.....	8
Fandom.....	9
Politics.....	11
Literature Review Findings.....	12
Methods.....	13
Career Overview.....	14
Celebrity & Convergence Culture.....	19
Social Media Strategies.....	22
The Media's Portrayal of Swift	26
Lyrical References.....	28
Connection With Her Fans	32
Swifties in the Media	34
The Re-Recordings	37
Measurements of Success	40
Conclusion	45

Works Cited	49
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Introduction

Who will be remembered as the most successful artist of our time? In a few decades from now, who will be considered the Elvis Presley or the Madonna of our generation? Will anyone reach the level of prestige and success attained by The Beatles? Music has changed significantly throughout the past few decades, and the industry around it has adapted as well. Gone are the days of racing to purchase a CD to hear the new music your favorite artist puts out and burning a new mix CD afterwards. Now, new music gets dropped at midnight on its release date onto streaming platforms, and you can make your own playlists in the same app. Some of the music streaming platforms even make customized playlists for you, full of your favorite songs, artists, and maybe some new music you haven't yet discovered. With the current relevance of social media, up and coming music artists have the ability to spend a few minutes recording themselves making their music before they can upload their content and potentially reach an audience of thousands of people. However, before social media changed the way the music industry discovered new artists, artists would drop off their demo CDs to record labels in the hopes of landing a record deal. Many artists had their career launched by their demo CD, including one of the most successful and influential artists of our generation.

Record labels weren't normally greeted by 11-year-olds dropping off their demo CDs and asking for a record label, but Taylor Swift has proven time and time again that she is determined to

achieve her goals, even if it means going above and beyond standard practices. It took her a few years, but Swift managed to secure a record deal after becoming the youngest artist to ever sign as a songwriter with Sony-owned RCA Records. Swift signed with Big Machine Records, a label with which she would go on to make her first six albums. Throughout her career, Swift has released ten studio albums and two re-recorded albums and shows no signs of slowing down. Her success so far can be linked to many factors, but her strategic planning has allowed her to excel in the music industry. From her efficient marketing techniques to the maintenance of her relationship with her fans, Swift's ownership and treatment of her career as a business entity is what has set her above other artists in her generation. Along with her celebrated songwriting skills and her ability to produce top album after top album, Swift has set herself up to be remembered as one of the best artists of all time. Her willingness to take a stand for industry injustices and her commitment to leaving the music industry better than she found it, paired with her celebrated songwriting skills and her ability to continue producing number one albums, are a few reasons why she will go down as one of the best and most influential artists of all time. When one considers the awards Swift has won, the records she has set, and the high-volume of sales she has continued to generate, it is easy to understand why she is one of the most successful artists of her generation. Significant research has been done regarding the music industry, and some research has even been done on Swift herself.

Literature Review

Business Strategy

As a whole, the music industry implements a range of business strategies in order for individual songs and the artists to be successful. There are various marketing techniques used to

showcase an artist in a positive light, strategies to increase song/album streams, and practices to engage the audience and existing fans. Fans of Swift's are commonly referred to as "Swifties" and are frequently the target of marketing campaigns created by her team. In the current day and age, the use of social media is crucial as a marketing technique, especially in a fan-driven industry like music. In their study "The Use of Social Media for Artist Marketing: Music Industry Perspectives and Consumer Motivations," Jaro Sali et al. analyze the various marketing strategies used on a range of social media platforms. The study states, "Record labels and independent artists upload artists' music videos and other audiovisual content to YouTube and share content links in other communities such as Facebook and artists' websites. The advantage is communication with fans on a short-term frequency" (Sali 32). Particularly for independent artists, taking advantage of social media platforms can be crucial for gaining exposure. Many artists have been discovered from videos that have blown up on various social media platforms, with the prevalent one today being TikTok. What gets posted or uploaded onto various social media platforms also shapes an artist's image and potentially how connected their fans feel to them. In the case of Taylor Swift, her image has shifted several times throughout her career, with the most noticeable shift following her genre change from country to pop. Following the change in genre, she backed it up with a reinvention of her image and brand. She moved from Nashville to New York. Her music videos no longer featured her running through grass fields in the South, but were now extravagant productions that reflected her pop sounds. Her commitment to reinventing her image and her dedication to creating a new brand that still felt authentic to her fanbase, but reflected her new sounds, allowed the transition to be so successful (Sloan 14; Wilkinson 442). Throughout the transition, Swift's fans still felt connected to her because what she was sharing still felt authentic to her brand, even if the

content had changed. The ability to communicate with fans is crucial. For a musician or band, their marketing cycles go in waves, depending on if they're in a promotional cycle or not. When an artist is promoting a song, a high volume of communication will be seen, but it will be on a short-term frequency since a song is not always being promoted. By using social media platforms, artists and their labels are able to promote their music and engage with fans in order to have successful releases. As artists gain success in the industry by establishing a solid fanbase and promoting their work, society gains an interest in their personal lives and their celebrity status.

Celebrity Status

The existing scholarly literature on Swift ranges in topics including her recent success with rerecording her albums and her frequent shifting of personae upon the release of a new album. Most of the literature points to her success largely being due to her continued growth as an artist, her established connection with her fanbase, and her willingness to use her celebrity platform to address larger issues in the music industry. In the article "Are you Ready For It? Re-Evaluating Taylor Swift", Swift's ability to represent herself as the focal point of each of her works is addressed.

Fogarty and Arnold write:

"A telling insight into Taylor Swift's personas is found at the Grammy Museum in 2015, where she performs 'Blank Space' dressed in a black turtleneck, like a serious 1960s woman poet. Although not her first attempt to distance herself from a tween persona, there is a moment, when she introduces the song while holding her acoustic guitar, that profoundly shows her crafting of personas. She explains that she took the media's personification of the dumb blond, boy-crazy, gorgeous/desperate 'Taylor Swift' and turned

it on its head for the song's source material" (Fogarty and Arnold 5).

Fogarty and Arnold's description of a single Swift performance showcases an example of how she has been able to maintain such a high level of success throughout her lengthy career. The performer had been labeled as boy crazy and the media painted her as the crazy ex-girlfriend, and she took that image of herself and spun it, which resulted in arguably one of her greatest hits: "Blank Space."

As invested as society is in Swift's music, it is equally, if not more, interested in her personal life. Her dating life, friend group, and other celebrity feuds have been constant media headlines throughout the duration of her career. The hyper-fixation society has on celebrities is not a new topic, but it is one that is constantly developing, particularly the focus on celebrities' personal lives. As the interest spikes, celebrities must adjust and treat each day like a performance that will be witnessed by millions, because in 2022, it will be. Celebrities are photographed, followed, and analyzed every time they're in the public view. Swift has always had a constant media presence, largely because there is such a spike in the interest around her personal life. Since every public outing will be scrutinized, each one can become a performance of its own. Barry King writes, "But whereas the display of the self in everyday life is a broad sociological process, the self-display of an actor or performer is a highly focused, scripted, and rehearsed activity that is functional (i.e., exchangeable) within a specific and singular performance environment" (King 11). Every appearance of Swift's can be analyzed as a performance. She chooses with whom she is seen, where she is seen, what she is wearing, and other details that can affect her public "performance" on any given day. Part of why she has managed to stay so successful throughout her career is because she has maintained such a pristine public image by controlling how she's seen. By

preserving her image throughout her career and by remaining out of scandals to the best of her ability, she's been able to not only maintain her fanbase, but managed to grow it.

Fandom

Swift has accumulated a massive base of Swifties on an international level and has used this relationship to her advantage. She stays connected to her fans through social media and has even gone as far as to have private listening parties known as secret sessions where she invites some of her most dedicated fans to her houses to listen to a new album prior to its release. She uses this established connection and the support her fans give her to fight some of the legal battles she faces. In the article "Love and Business: Taylor Swift as Celebrity, Businesswoman, and Advocate", an example is given of how Taylor Swift mobilizes the dedication of her fanbase in order to help her fight her personal battles.

Paul Theberge writes:

“ But for the moment, it is worth noting how Swift, rather than simply resolving the conflict through legal negotiations behind closed doors, or publicizing her discontent in a more limited way via the trade press, chose to enlist her fans, en masse, transforming a dispute over a relatively obscure case of rights management into an issue of artistic integrity, ownership, gender, and morality. In doing so, Swift signaled that she knows her celebrity, and in particular, the attendant devotion of her fans, is a form of ‘power’ (Theberge 42).

This anecdote about the ongoing dispute over ownership of her back catalog demonstrates how aware Swift is of her relationship to her fans, and her understanding of her power through them. She believed that it would be more effective to enlist her millions of fans to help fight her dispute over her ability to perform her old albums than it would be for her to take any legal action. The

dedication of her massive fanbase, and her knowledge of that dedication, has led to her ability to maintain success throughout her career.

One of the benefits of social media marketing strategies is the new level of fan engagement. Whether it be between artists themselves and the fans or the fans interacting with themselves, social media accounts on different platforms allow for new ways and levels of connecting. In her article “Music’s Powers: Embodiment and Flourishing with Taylor Swift”, Mila Volpe discusses the different ways music can affect those who sing it and those who hear it. Volpe states, “Whether one identifies as a fan or not, Swift’s music has likely and sensibly infiltrated one’s ‘sonic territory’ as popular music scholar Simon Frith calls it, and produced some embodied effect, pleasurable or averse” (61). Even if someone would not identify as a Taylor Swift fan, the chances are that that individual has heard a song of Swift’s at one point in time—whether a song was playing on the radio, or in the grocery store, or she was trending in the media. However, the effect this music can have on an individual depends on the time and space in which the song was heard. In this sense, a song may receive either a positive or a negative association in a listener’s mind. A song that is playing during someone’s proposal could receive a positive association, while one playing during a car crash could receive a negative association. Taylor Swift has established herself as a household name, and even if an individual is not a fan, anyone who lived through the 2010s has heard a song of hers at some point. For fans of Swift’s, they might have many memories associated with songs of hers. The most dedicated swifties could also have memories associated with major moments in her career, like when she broke her political silence.

Politics

Throughout the majority of her career, Swift did not make her political opinions public. In

2017, the artist was featured as one of the faces for *Time Magazine*'s Person of the Year cover, which highlighted some of the leaders of the #MeToo movement. Then, in 2018, she publicly announced her support for Democrat Phil Bredesen for the Tennessee Senate Election. This was her first time publicly sharing her support for the Democratic party. Following this reveal, she started publicly supporting other social movements such as the feminist movement and LGBTQ+ allyship. In the article "The Fashionable New Face of Feminism? Constructions of celebrity feminism in online media," Emma Tennent states, "Celebrities are an influential source of feminism, especially for young women who are competent cultural consumers of internet media. Celebrity feminism offers the potential to bridge popular culture and academia. Yet, it is in the debate surrounding the meaning and relevance of celebrity feminism online that long-standing feminist debates are reinvigorated" (132). Taylor Swift's fanbase is largely made up of young women who are the cultural consumers of internet media, as described by Tennent. This scholar's statement about celebrity feminism potentially bridging the gap between academia and popular culture is also very applicable to Swift communicating her own beliefs with her fans. The performer's statements could count as the first political ideologies some of her young fans are exposed to, and that also ties into the debate over the relevance of a celebrity's online presence. Swift was criticized by many over her newly public LGBTQ+ allyship, particularly over her music video for her single "You Need to Calm Down", which urged potential haters of the LGBTQ+ community to move on and to literally calm down. Many argued that Swift's allyship was calculated and performative—the negative responses largely came from consumers who would not identify as fans, while swifties had much more of a positive response (Avdeeff 80; Driessen 2; Smialek 100). There could be a large portion of Taylor Swift's fanbase that does not agree with her

political beliefs or her expressing them to millions of fans. Fans who disagree may no longer identify as swifties following the publicization of her beliefs, which is likely the reason why Swift avoided the topic of politics for the first twenty years of her career.

Literature Review Findings

There was minimal research published about the music industry and what makes an artist successful, and there was even less published about Swift herself. However, the existing research did discuss social media as a business strategy within the music industry, and what artists can do to capitalize on it. Additionally, there was research completed describing how Swift was able to successfully switch genres without decreasing her fanbase. There have been several studies done on celebrity culture and society's fixation on the personal lives of celebrities, and specifically about how Swift was able to take advantage of society's obsession with her personal life and turn it into hit singles. Swift's relationship with her fans has also been researched, focusing on how Swift utilizes the dedication of her fanbase to her own advantage. Another heavily researched topic is sonic territory, which explores how the most successful musicians have been able to affect a high percentage of society's opinions and beliefs towards music and what it sounds like. Lastly, Swift's avoidance and eventual discussion of her own political beliefs and its effects have been studied. While the existing literature discusses the music industry as a whole and even certain elements of Swift's career, the defining factors for what makes an artist successful have not been studied. There has been no research done on what strategies and campaigns an artist should partake in to achieve success. Throughout this study, the factors that make an artist successful were studied, with Swift's career being an example. Swift's use of various marketing techniques and her ability to change her sound while staying true to herself and her brand is what has led her to be one of the highest-

streamed, in-demand, and most awarded artists. Her streaming and sales records, demand for live performances, and the awards she has won has made her one of the most successful and influential artists of her time. In order to conduct the research necessary to defend this claim, several different methods were used.

Methods

In order to answer the proposed research question, I conducted both textual and discourse analysis. I analyzed primary sources relating to the business strategies utilized within the music industry, the idolization of musicians, and the overall interest in the life of celebrities. Specifically relating to Swift, I analyzed research done on the business strategies she has used, different methods she has used to stay connected to her fanbase, society's fixation on her personal life as a public figure, and the responses to her public political stances. Additionally, I studied direct quotes from Swift and statements that her fans, the general public, and the media made about her.

To measure and compare her success, I looked at her award nominations and wins, her digital streams across streaming platforms, both physical and digital sales, and the amount that each of her tours grossed. I also viewed and compared her following on various social media platforms and studied the likes, comments, and responses different posts received. Several of her songs were analyzed in order to study how her messaging may or may not have changed throughout the course of her career. Lastly, I drew on the theory of celebrity and Henry Jenkins convergence culture theory in order to determine how Swift's celebrity status and the public opinion of her affected her success thus far. However, an understanding of Swift's career is conducive to forming an opinion on her successes.

Career Overview

Swift's self-titled debut album came out in 2006, which catapulted her career in the country music world and would go on to become the longest-charting album of the 2000s decade on the *Billboard* 200 chart. Several singles from this album landed on the *Billboard* 100 Chart, such as "Teardrops on My Guitar", "Tim McGraw," and "Our Song". Swift followed her debut album with 2008's *Fearless*, which went on to become the most awarded country music album of all time. The success of *Fearless* launched Swift into stardom, where she was quickly becoming a household name, with hits like "Love Story" and "You Belong with Me" dominating the charts. *Fearless* went on to earn Swift her first Album of the Year award from the Grammy Awards, making her the youngest person at that time to ever receive the honor (Forman). In 2010, Swift released her album *Speak Now*, which she wrote completely by herself after facing criticism claiming she was incapable of writing her own music. The "Speak Now World Tour" was Swift's first experience headlining at stadiums. At this point in her career, she had established herself as one of the most promising artists of the generation. Her 2012 album *Red* marked her last album in country music, and hits like "I Knew You Were Trouble" and "We are Never Ever Getting Back Together" sparked Swift's transition to star status. "We are Never Ever Getting Back Together" held the top spot on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs Chart for nine weeks straight, which set the record for most consecutive weeks in the top spot. *Red* marked the end of Swift's time in country music and the first phase of her career, before she took pop music by storm in 2014.

Swift's *1989* was one of the most successful pop albums from the 2010s decade. *1989* was the best-selling album of 2014 with 3.66 million copies sold, and went on to become the third best-selling album of the decade, behind Adele's *21* and *25* (Hautman). Singles from *1989* dominated the charts, with hits such as "Shake it Off", "Blank Space", "Bad Blood", "Style" and "Wildest

Dreams”. The singles “Blank Space”, “Shake it Off”, and “Bad Blood” made their way to the top of the *Billboard* 100 chart, resulting in Swift being the artist to spend the most time in the number one spot for 2014. In their review of Swift’s *1989*, the *New York Times* states “By making pop with almost no contemporary references, Miss Swift is aiming somewhere higher, a mode of timelessness few pop stars even bother aspiring to” (Caramanica). The article continues, “On this new stage, Ms. Swift is thriving. And crucially, she is more or less alone, not part of any pop movement of the day. She has set herself apart and, implicitly, above” (Caramanica). Additionally, with the success of *1989*, “Taylor Swift has done something only The Beatles have done: an album at number one for six weeks for four consecutive albums” (Grein). The success of *1989* changed the trajectory of Swift’s career, and she collected her second Album of the Year Award at the Grammy Awards. She became the face of pop music and a household-recognized name. Her shift from country to pop established her as an artist with the ability to dominate more than once genre, and this shift is one of the reasons Swift will go down as the one of the greatest of all time for this generation. The performer carried this momentum into her 2017 album *Reputation*, which is considered one of the best comeback albums of all time by critics and the media. Her public image had fallen due to media scrutiny following her *1989* success and public feuds with celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, so Swift removed herself from the public for several months leading up to her album’s release. She wiped her social media platforms and delivered her comeback single “Look What You Made Me Do” which beat Spotify’s record for the biggest opening day for any song (McIntyre). The music video broke YouTube’s record for the most views in 24 hours at that time, and is one of the most viewed music videos of the decade. “Look What You Made Me Do” was Swift’s comeback anthem on her comeback album and proved that even

when her public image suffers, Swift is still able to dominate the charts and accumulate massive success.

In late 2018, she signed a new record deal with Republic Records at Universal Music Group, following disputes with her former label Big Machine Records. Swift's first album with Republic Records, *Lover*, was released in 2019. In contrast to the dark imagery and sounds that Swift characterized her *Reputation* album, *Lover* paints a happy, bright picture through Swift's promotion strategies for the album. When promoting the *Reputation* album, Swift only wore dark clothing, typically black, to events. In contrast, Swift wore brightly colored clothing, like pastels and floral prints, when promoting the *Lover* album. Madeline Merinuk writes "For example, Swift surprised fans with her slinky, fierce attitude on "Reputation" in 2017, conveyed through lyrics and imagery (specifically, snake imagery). The subsequent album "Lover," out in 2019, explored a more romantic side of Swift, in which butterflies, rainbows and happiness reigned supreme" (Merinuk). Additionally, the musical production on *Reputation* is much darker, with songs frequently including loud sounds overshadowing the lyrics. However, *Lover* consists of more acoustic sounds, with piano melodies prevailing and creating a much softer-sounding album. When discussing the difference in themes for the two albums and being asked if *Lover* was a bright and happy album, Swift stated "Yeah, it definitely is. I'm in a much better mood" (Swift). The *Lover* album was the only album of 2019 to sell more than one million copies and was the year's most successful album (Rolli). Swift had planned on touring her *Lover* album in 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the live music industry completely shutting down.

While many artists paused their work during the pandemic, Swift went into overdrive. In July 2020, Swift surprise-dropped her eighth studio album, *Folklore*, which turned out to be

another shift in her career. The term “folklore” is typically used to reference a community’s stories and beliefs that have been verbally passed down through generations. Swift’s *Folklore* is an alternative, indie album which can best be described as a collection of stories, both personal and fictionalized, whose lyrics proved yet again that she is one of the best songwriters of her generation. In their review, *The Guardian* stated, “Folklore proves that she can thrive away from the noise: if you interpret “classmates” as pop peers, Swift is no longer competing” (Snapes). Although *Folklore* wasn’t the pop album expected from Swift, its genre had no impact on its charting success. *Folklore* spent eight weeks atop the *Billboard* 200 chart and became the best-selling album of 2020 (Unterberger). Swift dropped the song “cardigan” as the lead single from the album and became the first artist to ever debut a song on top of the *Billboard* 100 chart and debut an album on top of the *Billboard* 200 in the same week. *Folklore* also won Swift her third Album of the Year Award at the Grammy Awards.