



THE TAYLOR SWIFT BUSINESS MODEL: A BRAND OF ADAPTABLE AUTHENTICITY

Crystal Haryanto

Six days before the release of the original version of *1989*, the highest charting song in Canada wasn't "Welcome To New York" (#2 on the Canadian iTunes chart), "Shake It Off" (#3), or "Out of the Woods" (#8), which were all out on iTunes in advance of the album drop. The coveted #1 spot was held by a cryptically titled "Track 3" that was in actuality eight seconds of white noise.¹ In multitudes, music listeners discernibly gravitated toward the mystery song, despite their only given information being who the singer was.

The success of the accidental release of static was no accident. It was the product of a homegrown, perfected-over-the-years recipe for the brand of Taylor Swift. Fundamentally, Swift had long established herself as a potent songwriter. Singing was almost secondary to her, her voice simply a medium of conveying her words.² Reflecting on the future in an interview with BBC Radio 1, she questioned whether she'd still be performing by the time she'd be 34 years old. Nevertheless, she emphasized her desire to still be writing songs, commenting that she'd even enjoy doing it for other artists.³ Much like the narrator of "Love Story," little did Swift know...that not only would she be on a stage at the age of 34, but she'd be on the stage of the most historic tour of her time, singing songs she'd released up until that year.

Beyond songwriting, the recipe's secret ingredients were artistic adaptability and audacious authenticity. The indispensable step was carefully mixing in the right amounts of each. It was evident that Swift had developed her trademark in *vulnerable* storytelling; what solidified her longevity was that Swift had derived her value in *versatile* storytelling.

These double features have made up the forefront of many of Swift's creative decisions, and they have never been quite as exemplified as when she was on the cusp of a genre switch.

Essential to Swift's brand is consistency. Swift's proficient exercise of quality control has helped prevent her from falling into the trap of one-hit-wonder stardom. As a country artist, Swift boldly detailed her personal life through music. During the making of *Red*, co-writing sessions would begin with "girl talk."⁴ In fact, its lead single, "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," was written after an unexpected run-in at the studio with a former flame's friend. Swift felt heated and went on chatting about the incident with collaborators Max Martin and Karl Johan Schuster (known professionally as Shellback). Then and there, with her guitar and her girl talk, she scored her first #1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100.⁵

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Swift has kept that core component with her, ensuring that the quality of her work remained constant no matter how she bent. So when she transitioned to pop, while her fan base exploded,⁶ she did not alienate her country fans. Balancing the pressure to be a well-liked pop hitmaker and the responsibility to stay true to her songwriting philosophy raised the stakes, only for her to conquer them. Eloquently and impressively, Swift brought a natural feature of the country genre—stories—to her next phase.

In an essay published in *ELLE* in 2019, Swift discussed the necessity to abandon generic pop writing for the purpose of creating timeless songs.⁷ She addressed her instinct of making pop unconventionally confessional:

“I want to remember the colour of the sweater, the temperature of the air, the creak of the floorboards, the time on the clock when your heart was stolen or shattered or healed or claimed forever. The fun challenge of writing a pop song is squeezing those evocative details into the catchiest melodic cadence [and] sprinkling personal mementos and shreds of reality into a genre of music that is universally known for being, well, universal ... [M]usic lovers want some biographical glimpse into the world of our narrator, a hole in the emotional walls people put up around themselves to survive.”

Speaking of survival, the next wave of Swift’s reach consisted of the mass of quarantine Swifties. In early 2020, full-fledged into the charming pastels of seventh studio record *Lover*, Swift intended to put out “Cruel Summer” as a single and embark on a festival tour called Lover Fest.⁸ Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. As the world locked down into a legitimately cruel period of time, Swift knew that a summer 2020 “Cruel Summer” single would not only be untimely but insensitive. Instead, she turned inward, seemingly taking her foot off the gas pedal of stardom. She immersed herself in books and movies until her calling to create poured out of her.⁹ On the verge of another major genre switch, Swift remembered to mix her secret ingredients. She leaned into her ability to be surprising for the rollout (or rather, the lack of a rollout) of her isolation project, *folklore*, and retained her signature rawness on the project itself.

Unpredictability, after all, is the younger sister of reinvention. She had already positioned herself as someone who could strategically reinvent, and the global pandemic's uncertainty offered her the opportunity to do so unpredictably. With no lead-in singles, music videos, or warning signs, Swift announced *folklore* via social media on July 23, 2020. Swift released *folklore* less than 24 hours later on July 24, 2020. From the same playbook, she surprise-dropped her first-ever sister album, *evermore*, a mere six months later on December 11, 2020. The unifying element across these sister rollouts was Swift's empathy.

In the *folklore* announcement, Swift opened up about her pattern of overthinking promotional timelines and how she was able to let go of that.¹⁰ Swift's *evermore* announcement framed the album as a birthday present to fans—even though it was her birthday, and a special birthday at that (she was turning 31, her self-proclaimed lucky number backwards).¹¹

Such empathy was woven through the intimate tales of not-country, not-pop, but indie folklore and evermore. They boasted the skills of the same songwriter, freshly wrapped in alternative hues, in a time where people needed a voice more than ever. Swift spun stories rooted in both fiction and truth, providing a heightened sense of her usual relatability to fans and yet-to-be-fans. She drew parallels between her paternal grandfather's involvement at the Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II and the healthcare workers' daily battles during COVID-19 in the tribute that is "epiphany."¹² Comparably, evermore's title track called back to 2016, fusing her personal difficulties that year with the broader societal event of the election.¹³ In "peace," she shared her struggle with paparazzi and the ensuing consequences on her relationships. Co-writer Aaron Dessner attributed the song to his own struggle with depression and the ensuing relational consequences,¹⁴ epitomizing the myriad of ways listeners interpret Swift's lyrics and apply them to their own lives.

For an artist who overcomes writer's block by being inspired from living her life,¹⁵ this is more than an individual dream come true. This is what breathes collective meaning into every one of Swift's songs. Because she finds new ways to tell classic human stories, fans can find pieces of themselves in the crevices of her vulnerable, versatile discography. It's an unwavering gift she passes along, since she, too, seeks personal enlightenment in this manner. The star-crossed lovers of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* weren't only characters that she thought deserved a better fate; they were characters that she understood after her own family and friends disapproved of a romantic prospect.¹⁶ With "Love Story," the result of 20 minutes alone in her teenage bedroom, she inserted herself in the writing that came before her. As an adult facing backlash for virtually the same thing, she turned to another fable, albeit more subtly. Swift might have dressed up as Ariel at her childhood-hero-themed party to ring in the 2019 New Year, but the titular reference to Disney's animated film *The Little Mermaid* (which came out in 1989!) in "But Daddy I Love Him" five years later makes it clear: great stories beget great introspection, and vice versa, in a glorious endless cycle.¹⁷ Swift related to classic protagonists, and she emerged as a verbose modern protagonist. Because of her authenticity and adaptability, fans of any and all backgrounds can insert themselves in the writing that comes before them on a Taylor Swift song or album.

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The most interesting thematic concept that has prevailed throughout Swift's career just might be her complex relationship with fame. Situated against the backdrop of the music industry, these tracks merit a category all on their own, and tracing them offers a comprehensive look at Swift's genre evolution.¹⁸ All three genres—country, pop, and alternative/indie folk—reflect on Swift's existence within a wider context: written at 13, country's "A Place In This World" explores a desire to sculpt a musical legacy for herself; written right after Lover Fest was canceled, indie's "mirrorball" grapples with the duty of maintaining that musical legacy; written on society's bitter treatment of creative minds, pop's "Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?" displays the ramifications of excelling in that musical legacy. All three genres delve into Swift's observations and resulting fears of the path she'd chosen: pop's "Clara Bow" and country's "Nothing New" comment on the transience of working in entertainment as a female; indie's "the lakes" fantasizes about escaping societal constructs; country's "The Lucky One" pays homage to unspecified musical heroes who underwent both experiences. But the flip side of terror is wonder, and Swift has taken care to memorialize those feelings as well. Through the story of Rebekah Harkness, the previous owner of Swift's Rhode Island home, she celebrates her own defiance in indie's "the last great american dynasty." Country's "Change" and "Long Live" illustrate the triumphs of everyone on her side, from the recording team to the stage crew to the fans. The journey to success culminates in pop's "You're On Your Own, Kid," a coming-of-age narrative reminding us that the lesson of loss is to embrace more, not less. The essence of this collection is that it more closely follows Swift's evolving perspective with respect to her industry trajectory, rather than depend on her current identified genre. These songs encapsulate Swift's earnestness and humility, which underscore her success.

Swift's adaptable authenticity not only has granted her a committed fan base, but has also made her the first person to win Album of the Year at the Grammy Awards four times.¹⁹ The winning records of *Fearless* (country), *1989* (pop), *folklore* (alternative), and *Midnights* (pop) spanned the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s. (Don't worry, this *1989* had the produced-to-perfection tune "Style" as its Track 3, not a cut of white noise.) Notably, each of these wins were culturally distinct. Accompanied by nostalgia, *Fearless* catapulted Swift to the beginnings of mainstream prestige; accompanied by novelty, *1989* secured her spot there while launching her to the beginnings of industry advocacy.²⁰ Accompanied by imagination, *folklore* was the soundtrack to the world's musings of stillness during quarantine; accompanied by contemplation, *Midnights* was the score to the record-smashing Eras Tour that had taken over the world. Without a consistently strong brand, these achievements would not have been possible.

Swift, however, is careful to curate that brand and disassociate herself from corporate language. "The bigger your career gets, the more you struggle with the idea that a lot of people see you the same way they see an iPhone or a Starbucks," Swift told *Variety* in early 2020.²¹ "They've been inundated with your name in the media, and you become a brand. That's inevitable for me, but I do think that it's really necessary to feel like I can still communicate with people. And as a songwriter, it's really important to still feel human and process things in a human way." She must reconcile a personal aversion to becoming a brand with the requisite of becoming a brand in order to do what she loves for as long as she can. The solution is clear: build a brand revolving around communication and humanity. And by finding the equilibrium between fulfilling her creative needs and meeting the demands of an ever-changing industry, she is unprecedentedly adept at it.

Whether it originates from our personalities, beliefs, or experiences, we all have an innate brand. Your brand is what your friends unconsciously consider when introducing you to potential suitors, what your family unconsciously assesses when choosing the perfect gift for you, and what your managers unconsciously evaluate when assigning you specific projects. If your goal is to establish a profitable entity, mindfully expanding upon that brand would bring you closer. Swift certainly knew this, setting up a brand of adaptable authenticity as her North Star in creating music. In the songwriter's own words from 2010: **"I think it's important that you know that I will never change. But I'll never stay the same either. Must be a Sagittarius thing."**²² 📖

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