

Institute of Art and Design, Technology, Dún Laoghaire Faculty of Enterprise and
Humanities.

Celebrity Activism (Taylor's Version)

**Do Taylor Swift's performances of feminism and allyship challenge
structural powers or does she capitalise on inequality?**

A case study on her music videos *The Man* and *You Need To Calm Down*

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Statement of Academic Integrity / Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA [Hons] in New Media Studies DL 837. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted already for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Introduction

This video essay explores how Taylor Swift performs celebrity activism through her music videos *You Need to Calm Down* (2019) and *The Man* (2020). It situates these texts within the cultural and industrial context surrounding and leading up to the release of Swift's *Lover* album, a period marked by her transition from an apolitical figure to a visibly engaged public persona. The project examines how these videos construct ideas of LGBTQ+ allyship and feminism while operating within the commercial framework of contemporary pop culture. Through a semiotic analysis of visual elements such as costume, colour, and celebrity cameos, it considers how meaning is produced and circulated to audiences. Drawing on gender studies, the essay also explores how *The Man* critiques patriarchal norms through the performance of masculinity. Ultimately, the project asks whether Swift's activism constitutes genuine challenges to structural power or instead operates as strategic forms of visibility that capitalise on inequality through branding, image management, and audience expansion.

Neoliberalism can be understood as a governing logic that produces 'self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising' subjects, extending market principles into everyday life and making individuals responsible for their own success and failure.¹ Within this context, neoliberal feminism prioritises self-optimisation and individual empowerment while overlooking the structural conditions that produce gender inequality. As Catherine Rottenberg argues, it creates an 'individuated' subject focused on personal well-being rather than

¹ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 'Introduction', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 5.

collective change.² Post feminism similarly frames empowerment through choice and self-expression, shifting attention away from structural critique toward identity and lifestyle.³

Chapter 1

A feminist is born

2009 marked Taylor Swift's first win at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) for Best Female Video with her hit single *You Belong with Me*.⁴ A country-pop fusion that pushed her further into the music industry, having already broken into the mainstream with the release of *Fearless* in 2008. *You Belong with Me (YBWM)* peaked at number two on the Billboard Hot 100 for 50 weeks,⁵ setting Swift up to be a household name across America. The events of this night lead to a feminist shaped hole in Swift's heart. Kanye West, a well-established man in the music industry, used Swift's acceptance speech as a moment to highlight Beyoncé's music video for *Single Ladies*.⁶ Amidst this interruption, West grabbed the microphone off Swift and stated "Taylor, I'm really happy for you, and I'm gonna let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time".⁷ The moment exemplified Swift's already apparent 'girl next door' persona, portrayed in *YBWM*, by publicly positioning her as an innocent

² Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 14–15, 59.

³ Gill and Scharff, 'Introduction', p. 4–7.

⁴ Taylor Swift, 'You Belong with Me', from *Fearless* (Big Machine Records, 2008)

⁵ Taylor Swift Chart History', Billboard, n.d. <https://www.billboard.com/artist/taylor-swift/chart-history/csi/> [accessed 3 March 2026].

⁶ Beyoncé, 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)', from *I Am... Sasha Fierce* (Columbia Records, 2008)

⁷ 'Kanye West Interrupts Taylor Swift at VMAs', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/sep/14/kanye-west-taylor-swift-vm-as> [accessed 21 March 2026]

young white woman in opposition to a black man.⁸ Taylor Swift was backed by many celebrities such as Katy Perry and P!nk, who took to Twitter expressing their disapproval of West's dominance over her. Katy Perry's tweet "FUCK U KANYE. IT'S LIKE U STEPPED ON A KITTEN",⁹ illustrates the long-standing narrative of the white women needing protection and being cast as the victim against black men, reinforcing racialised stereotypes of black masculinity. Beyoncé, in an act of female solidarity, foreshadowing themes of her 2014 VMA performance, invited Swift on stage to finish her speech.

Chapter 2

Swift's visibly invisible politics

The early 2010s is defined by the rise in neoliberal ideology in popular music. Success was framed through individualism and self-branding. Swift began to delve deeper into the pop genre with the release of her album *Red* in 2012. Swift's previous work heavily leaned on confessional lyrics and romance, she was passive in her own narration, things happened to her, not in her control. Her association with the country genre contributed to a sense of authenticity and relatability rooted in her embodiment, whether purposeful or not, of white middle class America. Her transition to pop was made easier via this connection to authenticity, thus making way for her 5th studio album *1989*. This moment marked a turning point where she not only fully embraced the genre of pop but also re-constructed her image.

⁸ Clementine Oberst, "'Shade Never Made Anybody Less Gay': Taylor Swift's Performance of Allyship and the Neoliberalization of Activism", *Popular Music and Society*, 47 (2024) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03007766.2024.2407998> [accessed 7 March 2026]. p. 491.

⁹ Katy Perry (@katyperry), 'FUCK U KANYE. IT'S LIKE U STEPPED ON A KITTEN.', Twitter, 14 September 2009 <https://x.com/katyperry/status/3969952493> [accessed 26 March 2026].

This reflects a wider shift in the music industry, where artists increasingly functioned as brands and performed different identities. Beyoncé at the 2014 VMAs performed with the word 'feminist' plastered on the stage backdrop. Using the word to align herself with, in this context, the idea of empowering women through their 'choice' and sexual liberation.¹⁰

Swift's musical voice at this time became reflective of her celebrity status and responses to criticism. She moved from being the passive subject to a self-aware producer. Beyoncé and Taylor Swift have echoes of the same commodified feminism, 'the way feminist ideas and icons are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form'.¹¹ However, it would be remiss to not discuss their inherent differences. Swift's whiteness is 'invisible and foundational,' underpinning her cultural and economic power. This 'performing-not-performing' whiteness allows her to move seamlessly between genres and speak on political issues without a significant impact on her bankability.¹² Her feminism relies on resilience while remaining silent on racial and class structures that have helped her gain stardom. It ignores the fact that women of her demographic have contributed to the oppression of other women. Beyoncé cannot inhabit a 'non-raced' identity, her performance of feminism is already viewed through the lens of race. Beyoncé cannot exist outside of her blackness. Her identity is not something that can be selectively minimised without significant cultural loss or political consequence.

Swift's success is partly rooted in a 'neutral star image' that allows her to appeal across conflicting audiences by avoiding fixed political positioning. Rather than conforming to a

¹⁰ Rottenberg, 'MAINSTREAM FEMINIST NARRATIVES', p. 10

¹¹ Rosalind Gill, 'Commodity Feminism', in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. by Wolfgang Donsbach, 2nd edn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). p. 583–85.

¹² Jessica Ford and Phoebe Macrossan, "'I Work Hard and I'm Nice to People": Taylor Swift, Miss Americana and the Limits of White Neoliberal Feminism', *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 38 (2024). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10304312.2024.2445312> [accessed 7 March 2026]. p. 943

‘colour-blind’¹³ ideal that rewards those who appear to transcend race, Beyoncé’s career actively resists this model by foregrounding black womanhood. This distinction highlights how neutrality itself is racialised: Swift’s whiteness enables her to move between positions without destabilising her brand, whereas Beyoncé’s blackness is already read as political. Such visibility disrupts dominant norms by demonstrating that black identity is not an obstacle to be removed but a central element of her artistry and cultural power.

Chapter 3

Swift vs. The world

Feminism from the 2010s to 2020s was widely characterised as neoliberal feminism or marketplace feminism. Ideas from the feminist movement were appropriated and used for commercial purposes. This also relates to rainbow capitalism, which I argue later that Swift uses heavily. It can be defined as - brands ‘exploit marginalised communities by turning them into markets, selling them back to them as a product’.¹⁴ It also is defined by post-feminist rhetoric in which gender equality had already been achieved¹⁵ and now women have the choice and empowerment to do anything and be anyone, no man will stop her, a focus on the individual rather than challenging the structural inequalities. Neoliberal feminism and post feminism coincide, with a focus on the individual market, framing empowerment as a matter

¹³ Gill and Scharff, ‘(M)Other-in-Chief: Michelle Obama and the Ideal of Republican Womanhood’, p. 71.

¹⁴ ‘Rainbow Capitalism Explained’, Refinery29, 2021

<https://www.refinery29.com/en-ca/2021/06/10528328/rainbow-capitalism-explained-memes> [accessed 23 March 2026].

¹⁵ Rottenberg, The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. p.7

of personal choice and self-management while obscuring broader structural inequalities and the unequal positioning of different social groups.

Taylor Swift played a pivotal role in mainstreaming neoliberal feminist discourse, particularly in 2014 when she publicly identified as a feminist during the promotion of *1989*, saying “I’ve been taking a feminist stance without actually saying so”.¹⁶ She performed her song *Shake It Off* at the 2014 VMAs, a music video that highlights the interplay between whiteness and zanianness¹⁷ while raising issues around the sexualisation of black women. Zanianness is characterised by quirky and often infantilising femininity. Swift attempts various dance styles but fails, reinforcing a quirky, desexualised form of normative white femininity, while in contrast, black dancers perform competently. This failed imitation of otherness ultimately reaffirms her authentic, non-performed whiteness.

Within this framework, structural gender inequalities are reframed as matters of personal resilience, positioning Swift herself as the central subject. This strategy also enabled her to repair her public image following intense media scrutiny of her dating life, recasting narrative control as a feminist act. Her 2017 album *Reputation* marked a darker turn in her persona and lyricism. The catalyst for this was yet another conflict with Kanye West. In his song *Famous* he stated “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex,”¹⁸ after asserting that he made her famous from the publicity of his 2009 stunt. A phone call between Swift and West was published by Kim Kardashian, asserting that Swift approved of his lyrics.¹⁹ Trending on

¹⁶ ‘How Taylor Swift Took on the Media with Shake It Off’, The Guardian, 23 August 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/23/taylor-swift-shake-it-off> [accessed 20 March 2026].

¹⁷ Oberst, *Shade Never Made Anybody Less Gay*, p. 498.

¹⁸ Kanye West, ‘Famous’, from *The Life of Pablo* (GOOD Music, 2016).

¹⁹ ‘#TaylorSwiftIsOverParty Explained’, Moment Magazine, n.d. <https://momentmag.com/twitter-explained-isoverparty/> [accessed 27 March 2026].

twitter was the viral #TaylorSwiftIsOverParty. Her song *Look What You Made Me Do*²⁰ is a reaction to this, where she takes on the villain persona that the media had given her. In the music video she is standing atop of a throne made of her past selves, kicking each of them down as she sings “the old Taylor can’t come to the phone\why? \cause she's dead”, signalling a rebirth.

Two years later, Taylor Swift returned with the album *Lover*.²¹ Pastel colours and expressions of love showed a move back to softness. It is important to note this album came out in 2019 and subsequently the music video in 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Donald Trump's first term of US presidency. A certain branch of feminism prevailed in society – white feminism. Koa Beck explains ‘white feminism isn't new, but it has found a new life.’²² White women dominated the mainstream representation of feminism; the word ‘woman’ was used as a catch all term but really was only used to refer to white women. This in turn allowed white women to linguistically appear as though they have no alliance with white men and as though they have an alliance with all women. In doing this they deflected attention away from their own racism and classism. With the republican ideology vastly re-emerging across the US, Swift’s *The Man* and *You Need To Calm Down* rebuked this new era of male domination and vitriolic speech.

²⁰ Taylor Swift, ‘Look What You Made Me Do’, from *Reputation* (Big Machine Records, 2017).

²¹ Taylor Swift, *Lover*, (Republic Records, 2019)

²² Koa Beck, *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind* (Simon & Schuster, 2022). p. 11.

Analysis 1

The Man – If you can't beat them, join them!

*'The Man'*²³ articulates the sexist double standards that have permeated Swift's successful career'.²⁴ The music video features Taylor Swift as a CEO in male drag (Tyler Swift) acting out inappropriate behaviours such as shouting at employees, dancing with scantily clad women, and gawking at women in the park while he sits with his young daughter, all whilst being celebrated for it. The song has two thematic focuses; her accumulation of money and inability to brag about it and dating around without judgement. The first of which is exemplified by these lyrics "If I was a man, they'd say I hustled, put in the work. They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much I deserved." The lyrics insight Taylor Swift's mindset around these men's hyper-capitalist aims and aggressive acts of domination. "I'm so sick of running as fast as I can, wondering if I'd get there quicker, If I was a man." This isn't a disavowing of hyper capitalism and anti-feminist capitalist patriarchy. It's an expression of her desire to do it too without critique. The critique remains internal to the system it addresses. Power is not questioned as a structure but reimagined as something to be accessed on equal terms. What is striking is that the video requires the system it critiques to remain intact. The performance of 'Tyler Swift' depends on the continued existence of the very structures it claims to expose. Without them, the satire collapses. Critique here ends up feeding off the system rather than changing it.

This articulation of feminist consciousness is heavily focused on Swift's own issues. If she were a white wealthy man, these acts of aggression would be deemed as powerful and

²³ Taylor Swift, 'The Man', from *Lover* (Republic Records, 2019)

²⁴ Oberst, *Shade Never Made Anybody Less Gay*, p. 496.

capitalist conquests would be seen as assertive leadership and not a vindictive kind of manipulation that is disproportionately pushed onto women and particularly women of colour. Swift's desire to be 'the man' points to a neoliberal vision of feminism where power and wealth signify progress. Her focus on financial success suggests a stronger alignment with post feminism, than with movements aimed at ending gender oppression.

In *The Man*, her lyrics give an honourable mention to Leonardo DiCaprio, in reference to his partying in Saint Tropez. She draws attention to the freedoms and indulgences afforded to men but often denied to women, clearly illustrating gender inequality in a way that is easily accessible to the public. In her music video, 'Tyler Swift' is on the train, sitting legs spread, smoking a cigar, all signifiers of a 'powerful' man. The walls have two posters on them, one of which has an infographic of him with the caption 'Bo\$\$ Scotch\ Capitalise on the feeling.' The cigar symbolises a phallic object, one of which holds power in essence by being related to historically powerful men. He embodies the hyper masculine prototype Taylor Swift is trying to criticise, though it is Taylor herself capitalising off of your feelings of oppression. Perhaps Swift dressing in drag subverts conventional ideas around gender. By stripping away her feminine 'layer' and performing masculinity, she highlights the constructed nature of gender itself, suggesting that perceived differences between men and women are socially fabricated²⁵ rather than rooted in inherent differences in ability or character. However, feminism does not operate solely to reach this conclusion. Exposing gender as performative is only one part of a broader political project concerned with power structures and their reproduction.

This limitation becomes clearer in the conclusion of the video. It is realised that Swift herself

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2002). p. 174

is in the director's chair, directing her male persona, played by her but voiced by Dwayne Johnson, to be 'sexier' and 'more likable.' This visualises, extremely literally, the type of reversal feminism Swift is pushing. It does not dismantle the system but instead reinforces it; Swift's inability to overcome the oppressor ultimately leads to her alignment with them.

Analysis 2

You Need To Calm Down – The only straight in the village

Another example of Swift's very literal displays of politics is in her song and music video for *You Need To Calm Down*.²⁶ The song and video place Swift within a form of celebrity activism that relies on visibility and brand identity. Rather than activism grounded in structural critique, this is advocacy mediated through persona. The video opens with Swift presenting herself in a candy-coloured array inside her trailer. 'Mom, I am a rich man', a framed Cher quote is displayed on her pink trailer wall. It is through this Cher quote (Cher widely considered a Gay Icon) that Swift starts off symbolically declaring her allyship. The reference invokes female independence and pop-icon lineage, but it also frames empowerment through celebrity wealth and recognisable cultural capital. This is important because the song's politics are organised through personal feelings. The opening lyrics, "You are somebody that I don't know \ But you're taking shots at me like it's Patrón", are clearly about the online hate Swift has received. The song then pivots to "Why are you mad / When you could be GLAAD?", invoking the LGBTQ+ advocacy organisation and shifting from

²⁶ Taylor Swift, 'You Need to Calm Down', from *Lover* (Republic Records, 2019)

Swift's own experience to queer politics. This framing risks conflating two fundamentally different forms of hostility into a single emotional category. Individual criticism aimed at a wealthy celebrity is rhetorically positioned alongside the structural marginalisation experienced by LGBTQ+ communities.

Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism recasts women's progress in individualised terms, especially through the ideal of self-management and the 'happy work-family balance', and in doing so pushes structural inequality into the background.²⁷ In this framework, political problems are no longer understood primarily as systemic, but as matters of personal conduct, *You Need to Calm Down* does something similar. It frames oppression as less of a legal or institutional issue but rather as a matter of interpersonal negativity. Swift's implied solution is on a behavioural level, 'control your urges to scream about all the people you hate', this weakens the specificity of LGBTQ+ struggles, reducing them to matters of tone and attitude.

Neoliberalism as described by Gill is 'a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising.'²⁸ This formulation is highly relevant to Swift's performance here. The song's politics depend on a self-managing subject who responds to hostility by converting it into confidence. Swift does not step outside branding to become political but rather, politics becomes one more dimension of her self-construction. Allyship is folded into her persona.

²⁷ Rottenberg, 'MAINSTREAM FEMINIST NARRATIVES', p. 15

²⁸ Gill and Scharff, 'Introduction', p.5

The video has a huge amount of celebrity cameos with figures such as Laverne Cox and RuPaul providing legitimacy and cultural authority. Their presence broadens the video's queer symbolic field and helps code Swift as an ally. Yet the video still centres Swift as the main narrative and affective focus. Queer identities function partly as signs that authenticate her political image. While queer causes are amplified it is simultaneously mediated through Swift's star persona. Celebrity power operates through the way a public figure embodies an audience and circulates as a site of identification. In popular music especially, that power rests on authenticity, intimacy, and a felt solidarity between performer and audience.²⁹ Swift's activism therefore works through emotional recognisability and public persona rather than structural intervention. In her virtual world, drag queens dress as pop stars such as Beyoncé and Lady Gaga and rainbow flags hang everywhere, producing a bright and playful spectacle of queerness and femininity. On one hand, this celebrates queer culture and camp aesthetics. On the other, it turns drag and queerness into a consumable image. Drag's history is far more politically disruptive than the softened spectacle it is turned into here.

The song concludes with Taylor Swift and Katy Perry reconciling after their long-standing feud.³⁰ This exemplifies the song's individualised politics as their embrace represents a resolution through personal harmony. A full circle moment as politics is recast as reconciliation between individuals rather than the transformation of institutions.

²⁹ David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). p. 66.

³⁰ 'Taylor Swift Urges Equality in You Need to Calm Down', BBC News, 17 June 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-48666143> [accessed 28 March 2026].

Conclusion

Taylor Swift's activism in *The Man* and *You Need to Calm Down* ultimately reveals the possibilities and limits of celebrity politics in a neoliberal culture. Across both videos, Swift adopts the language of feminism and allyship, but these politics are repeatedly filtered through individual experience, personal branding, and visual spectacle.

The Man frames sexism through Swift's desire to occupy the same space of power, wealth, and authority as elite men, rather than questioning the structures that make that power possible in the first place. Likewise, *You Need to Calm Down* translates queer politics into a colourful and highly consumable aesthetic, where celebrity cameos, camp imagery, and reconciliatory gestures privilege visibility over structural critique. In both cases, politics becomes less about collective struggle and institutional change and more about Swift's own reconstruction and recognition. This does not mean Swift's videos are politically empty. They do participate in the mainstream circulation of feminist and LGBTQ+ discourse, and they may encourage audiences to think sympathetically about sexism and homophobia. However, the form that politics takes here is deeply constrained by celebrity culture itself.

Swift's activism is a negotiation between critique and commodification. It is both enabled by and profitable within existing power structures, demonstrating how contemporary pop feminism and rainbow capitalism can transform political discourse into consumable performance without necessarily producing structural transformation.

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