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Distinctly Average: Analysis of the Musician Celebrity's Persona Shift

Abstract

Shifting genres is not an entirely new concept for any celebrity, however, it is something that can severely impact the connection that they share with their audience members who have formed parasocial relationships with them. This study which focuses on the uses and gratifications within the parasocial connection between audience members and musician celebrities sought out to better understand how negotiations are conducted when expectations placed on the relationship are violated during a shift in celebrity persona. During this time, there are competing ideologies at play which determine whether or not this change in the foundations of the relationship will be accepted or rejected. Data was collected through a corpus linguistic approach by using popular social media (e.g., reddit, YouTube, Metacritic) outlets that were open spaces for members to share their thoughts and opinions of the shifts as they were occurring. The results of this study identify specific concerns that are raised by audience members when there is a major shift in celebrity persona, and how these concerns are used to determine whether or not the relationship will be terminated. Results showed that one of the main concerns presented by those involved in the parasocial relationship during transition was the level of averageness that the celebrity figures continued to portray after the shift; specifically, how relatable and acceptable they were deemed by audience members based on personal preferences. Understanding these strategies may potentially offer celebrities of all types insight on how to better conduct an alternative career shift and retain more of their prior fanbases in the future.

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Distinctly Average: Analysis of the Musician

Celebrity's Persona Shift

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Department of Communication Studies

2023

Abstract:

Shifting genres is not an entirely new concept for any celebrity, however, it is something that can severely impact the connection that they share with their audience members who have formed parasocial relationships with them. This study which focuses on the uses and gratifications within the parasocial connection between audience members and musician celebrities sought out to better understand how negotiations are conducted when expectations placed on the relationship are violated during a shift in celebrity persona. During this time, there are competing ideologies at play which determine whether or not this change in the foundations of the relationship will be accepted or rejected. Data was collected through a corpus linguistic approach by using popular social media (e.g., reddit, YouTube, Metacritic) outlets that were open spaces for members to share their thoughts and opinions of the shifts as they were occurring. The results of this study identify specific concerns that are raised by audience members when there is a major shift in celebrity persona, and how these concerns are used to determine whether or not the relationship will be terminated. Results showed that one of the main concerns presented by those involved in the parasocial relationship during transition was the level of averageness that the celebrity figures continued to portray after the shift; specifically, how relatable and acceptable they were deemed by audience members based on personal preferences. Understanding these strategies may potentially offer celebrities of all types insight on how to better conduct an alternative career shift and retain more of their prior fanbases in the future.

Dedication

To my parents, “Jester” and Shelley, for teaching me how to overcome the daily challenges of life through laughter.

To my older sister, Allyson, for showing me how to turn stubbornness into determination, and for being the inspiration behind this study.

To my younger brother, Brodan, for being my strongest supporter throughout the last few years.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At 10 years old, I found myself making a decision that would lead me to ask the question that would set up the inspiration of this thesis 14 years later after spending two weeks in a hospital bed with a broken television remote. Not only did I have to deal with post operation pains for that period, but I also had to deal with one thing that I thought was embarrassing for a young boy like myself at the time, and that was choose between watching the Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana* marathon or deal with awkward talk with my dad for the duration of my stay. After two days of dealing with the latter, I decided to suck up my pride and give the show a chance. While I resented it at first – which was mainly because most Disney channel shows like it were perceived as “girl shows” or for little kids by the other kids in the small factory town I grew up in – as each day went on, I found myself starting to get involved with the show and the characters who gave me more comfortable company during my recovery.

After I was released, I got to spend another week at home doing nothing with my parents, and when they were not in the living room, I tuned back into the Disney channel to stay caught up with the show. Although I kept this hobby of mine secret for years in fear of what my friends would think – as being a boy in 7th grade watching that show was apparently socially unacceptable – I would keep watching the show weekly up until its finale in 2011, and occasionally tuned in for the reruns whenever I saw that they were on. I found myself enjoying the stories surrounding the secret double life of Miley Cyrus, the normal girl who had a double life as a tween country-pop star, but most importantly, how the characters grew through problems that I perceived to be like my own in some way.

Two years later though, this seemingly personal connection that I had with Miley Cyrus and her friends came to a halt with the premier of *Bangerz*; which was Miley's debut into the world outside of the control over her image that was created by the Disney corporation that officially started during her performance during the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. The music I heard and the performances that accompanied them came as a complete shock to me because a person who once performed songs about friendship, being yourself, and love was now performing near or fully nude, and singing songs that are much more 'mature' in their lyrics and nature – such as her song *#GETITRIGHT*, where the opening lyrics are;

I feel a surge coming over me
I feel it all around my thighs
And chills going up my legs
This is the worst coming out of me
When I came, felt like I could die
And it sends chills up my spine
(Cyrus, 2013, stanza 1).

I was aware that Miley had been trying to reinvent herself after the conclusion of her show on Disney by finding her own sound and accompanying image, but seeing her go through this change to something that was the exact opposite of what I had gotten to know over the last few years was shocking because I never would have expected the shift to be that drastic.

So what exactly was going on here? People in my life have gone through significant changes before, but for some reason, this time it was different because instead

of wanting to understand and accept the shift, I did what I could to distance myself from Cyrus. What really stood out to me here though was that while I pushed myself away from Cyrus and the new content she put out, others seemed to embrace this change, both previous fans and even new fans felt drawn to this ‘new-Miley’. In the moment, I just scoffed at the idea, but in reflection of it now, I noticed that there’s something going on here; how is it that people decide whether they accept or reject a celebrity’s decision to go through a persona change?

Theoretical Foundation

How we get attached to fictional characters is a rather interesting process, because it is something that is at the same time both forced and natural. We have to willingly opt into the media and continue returning to it, much like how we might in a traditional relationship/connection building process. In relationship/connection formations, we are limited to our surroundings, such as the family you are born into or raised in, those who you go to school with, the other people who work at a specific location with you, etc.. Prior to digital mass media platforms, you were limited to where you physically were and connections from those who existed in your realm of knowledge. However, due to digital media, whether it be interactive or one directional, our reach to establish connections with others on a larger scale has only grown due to the accessibility of it, but it is something we still have to willingly choose to get involved with. Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch (1974) identify this trait of audience members as active viewers, suggesting that audience members aren’t simply “beery, house-slipped, casual viewer[s] of television,” (p. 520) because the choice to tune in, once or even repeatedly requires them to make a conscious decision to do so, which calls for reasoning to do so being present.

Thus, this new way that we get involved with others to form meaningful or transactional relationships began to shift, and the study of parasocial relationships began to develop.

By the time this alternative style of relationship was acknowledged, we already knew that people used the media for their own personal reasons aside from just allowing their minds to go blank in order to tune out potentially troublesome realities of their lives. Uses and gratifications theory showed us that audiences will choose to engage with specific media to fill in gaps within their own unsatisfied needs, such as diversion, personal identity, and surveillance. It only makes sense that these needs would be able to be satisfied by the media, because not only does it allow audiences to be able to find answers on a more global level as opposed to what they were limited to in their personal environments, but the even if it is fictitious content, when media portrays itself as reality, audiences are more likely to view it as such (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011). With increased knowledge of the world around them came the burden of observing what they themselves are lacking, and a sort of dependability through observed consistency can be formed. However, what happens when what was consistent is no longer able to meet those standards and expectations? It is at this point that we have to begin internal negotiations to decide whether to continue opting into the relationship, either adjusting to the shift or rejecting the media all together.

The way we come to that decision is based off a variety of factors, such as our personal values and beliefs, and expectations placed on the subject matter. In this case, the focus is placed primarily on the celebrity because that is the observable shift occurring. What it means to be a celebrity is essentially a condition of fame and broad public recognition of a person or group due to the attention given to them by mass media,

thus their status is maintained primarily by their obtained audiences and the ability to maintain them. We can see this practice being conducted in multiple ways, such as through likeability, relatability, displays of uncommon skills, entertainability, controversy, or even shock factors. Rockwell and Giles (2009) state that “celebrities come to represent the hopes and dreams of the average citizen,” (p. 206) and in whatever way it is achieved is often what they become known for. It is through their ability to maintain that image of themselves that they are able to continue and grow their status if that is what they desire to do. However, change and growth is something that is often desired, either for self or for others, and can even be something that becomes an expectation that is placed on us from others. So the question then becomes what is acceptable change and how is that determined? Is it by the individual or by the society? For the celebrity, given the nature of how they are created, is it something they have a voice in, or is it something that their audiences have full control over?

Significance of Research

The practice of genre shifting is not something that is an entirely new concept, and it has been going on for years. Today, we can see this occur when a YouTube persona switches the type of content they publish (e.g., meme reviews to streaming gaming content), or when a TikTok persona switches from short dancing videos to full length vlogs on the application. Prior to that, celebrities would even seek out to dabble in a new genre in their field, or even a whole new field of entertainment. However, for some reason, this type of change still comes as a shock to many audience members and fans because it violates the expectations that can be formed through consistent viewing practices. For example, in a review of such celebrities that have made the decision to

make the change themselves, Conor Lochrie writes that “It used to be that an artist picked a genre and stuck at it, and it is why a change of genre has often been met with shock and surprise by the public” (2021, para. 2). The response that fans have can typically be seen as either acceptance of the change, an unaffected opinion, or complete rejection of the change. This is also not limited to musicians alone and extends to almost any celebrity figure from any sort of artistic genre. For example, when Robin Williams switching from primarily comedy work to some drama pieces. Or when Henri Matisse switched from representational art and began moving towards a modernist and abstract style. Even professional athletes such as Terry Crews and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson prematurely ended their careers to become actors. All of which were met with some hesitation by audiences, but soon these shifts were accepted; however, there are still some that are not accepted – such as Britney Spears, who attempted to switch from music to acting; Michael Jordan, who took a swing at adding success in major league baseball to his portfolio which was founded on his basketball career; or even Garth Brooks, who dropped the acoustic guitar to soon and tried rocking out under the new pseudonym, Chris Gaines.

It makes sense that after playing a character for years and having to mold that persona both on and off-camera to maintain a specific image, a person would want to explore other options for their career. So why was this change something that I did not want to accept while others I knew did? While my personal connection to the show developed later into its run, I still felt like I had grown up with the characters a bit, and most importantly, a growing and changing character is one of the main themes of the show. This, however, was not the first time I witnessed this change. Almost every day

when my sister and I would get off the bus, she would immediately take claim of the television remote and the two of us would watch all sorts of shows with ongoing plots with a recurring cast. On these shows which I had grown to tolerate, some of the actors who I had a more casual connection with than Cyrus went on to pursue alternative careers both during and after leaving the shows they were on, such as Selena Gomez (Alex Russo - *Wizards of Waverly Place*), Aubrey “Drake” Graham (Jimmy Brooks - *Degrassi*), and Taylor Momsen (Jenny Humphry - *Gossip Girl*). For some reason, seeing such a different persona from these characters off screen and on stage made them feel like completely different people. Unfortunately, such changes sometimes resulted in a feeling of disconnect because it was like these individuals, all of whom I have never met before off-screen, were no longer the people I thought they were.

Change is sometimes inevitable, as the artists might not find the success they are looking for within certain genres, or they feel as if they might want to escape the ties they have to the ones in which they are already established in. Take for example, Katy Perry, who originally started off creating Christian music as “Katy Hudson.” Ben Spiegel, a writer for the *Rolling Stone*, noted that while in her early musical career, this choice in genre was partially due to the fact that Perry’s parents were “both Pentecostal pastors, [and] prohibited her from listening to nearly all secular music growing up,” and had her begin her singing career by performing in churches (2014). However, this part of her career would not last too long, as while critical reception of the 2001 album *Katy Hudson* received slightly above average reviews from Christian music critics, the initial album sales (both CD and cassette) deemed her initial musical debut a failure with less than 200 CDs and cassettes (Summers, 2012).

It would not be until later that Perry would reinvent her image entirely in 2008 by releasing *One of the Boys*, which featured her first Billboard Hot 100 singles “I Kissed a Girl” and “Hot n Cold.” In this specific case, a genre shift was clearly welcomed by a new audience, as Perry’s pop rock/pop-punk music was trending at the time. However, the question I have is, how did this change affect those >200 people who purchased and enjoyed her earlier music? In Lochrie’s article, they touch on several artists that have gone through such a change, some of which are more recent (such as Colson Baker’s – i.e., MGK – switch from rap to alternative rock in 2021), and some from previous decades (Bob Dylan’s change from folk music to electric rock in 1965) (2021). In the case of Bob Dylan, Jim Farber of *The Guardian*, describes Dylan’s change as a leap of fate, due to many of those who were fans of the folk genre viewing his shift as an act of treason (2016). It seems fair to say that while it was perceived as a risky move for Dylan, given the success that he had with the former genre, however, he would go on to fare just as well in this new endeavor. Regarding Cyrus’ shift, to some it seemed like it was a big publicity stunt, and for others it was seen as a conspiracy to make her that year’s token ‘good girl gone bad’ that some occult elite wanted the public to constantly be in fear of (Citizen, 2013, para. 4). There was clearly unrest shared among audience members after this shift, but others were content with seeing her move away from the restrictions placed on her from the Walt Disney Corporation and their record company, Hollywood Records.

Eventually this would become a successful marketing strategy for individual musicians and bands to advertise themselves using the same connection that stand-alone show hosts would by getting involved with television shows (scripted or reality

television) and films themselves; such as *The Partridge Family: The Partridge Family* (1970-1974), *Ozzy Osbourne: The Osbournes* (2002-2005), *Tenacious D: Tenacious D* (1997-2000), *The Monkees: The Monkees* (1966-1968), *50 Cent: Power* (2014), *Jonas Brothers: Jonas* (2009-2010), and *Big Time Rush: Big Time Rush* (2009-2013). By getting involved with their audiences in alternative ways outside of recorded/live performances and publicity events (interviews/meet and greets), fans were welcomed to see a weekly ‘sneak peek’ of what went on ‘behind the scenes’ in the personal lives of their favorite musicians, even if they were strategically scripted. This would allow fans to develop a deeper connection to the celebrities in a way that could not necessarily be accomplished before, and in return, this connection would potentially bring more attention and preference to the content produced by the musicians.

It is through familiarity that many of us will go on to establish our relationships with others, especially through a parasocial connection, which can be for a variety of reasons; such as the connections we make between ourselves and the characters or even significant others in our own lives and the figures we see on screen. Russell and Schau (2014) note that “losing ‘live’ characters with whom viewers were attached and had parasocial relationships bears resemblance to mourning and grief,” as “parasocial relationships are especially likely when people lack access to ‘real’ relationships or when their social relations are perceived as deficient or limited in quality and quantity” (p. 1049). When I think of how I developed connections with the characters I saw on television, I think of the relationship that I had with my older sister while growing up. The two of us were close, and got along or fought just as any siblings might experience. However, there was a point in time where she – much like what many other teens in the

2000s did – went through an ‘emo’ stage. This persona shift, which was essentially a genre shift for her personality, impacted how I viewed her and how our relationship developed during this period of her life as I was no longer familiar with her or who she was becoming. With the similarities that are shared with interpersonal relationships and parasocial relationships, knowing how we respond to such shifts in a way that can be ethically observed which occurs in the same way but is experienced differently could lead to implications in additional areas within the studies of communication.

However, despite the fact that this is a common occurrence in celebrity culture, there are still a few pieces missing from the bigger picture. In previous studies, focus seems to be primarily on what happens after the shift (Wing, 2021), active behaviors such as narcissism or lewdness (Young & Pinsky, 2006), celebrity influence on consumer behaviors after controversy (Rai & Sharma, 2013), and endorsement strategies and evaluations based on characteristics of the celebrity and how they can be altered or reflect poorly on the brand (Abdolvand & Emam, 2014). Essentially, we know what celebrity image can do, but it seems that most research has neglected to identify how it is able to get to these points of acceptance or rejection, let alone identify any situational factors that might lead to that result.

The Study

In this study, I plan on focusing on how the acceptance or rejection of the parasocial relationship is negotiated when the core foundations of it are no longer present with the celebrity figure. Essentially, I am seeking to find out what happens when what has been a dependable source of need satisfaction no longer provides what has become expected of it. To do so, I set out to gather real-time audience feedback on the shifts as

they occurred to better understand the ideology of a violation in the uses and gratifications process of celebrity culture to identify the foundation of justification in the decision to either accept or reject an individual when there is a persona change.

Understanding how audiences come to these terms could shed light on how to effectively approach a image reworking for not only the celebrity, but for anyone who is actively thinking about transitioning the way they are portrayed to others. However, based off of my personal experience, and that of those who have been identified as rejecting violations they have experienced, there are clearly limits on what is acceptable and what is not. Being able to identify where the line is drawn by others is the goal of this study, as it could show potential to understanding not only how a shift in satisfaction with the parasocial relationship is maintained, but any other connection that might be dependent on image consistency. After conducting the study, one defining detail found for most of those included in the analysis was that the degree of averageness presented by the celebrity is a determining factor in how acceptable the shift was. Others who rejected the shift held concerns towards the overall acceptableness of the new persona, considering the perceived maturity of character, content, and the individual. Both of these concerns were also used in the negotiations of those who had accepted or were passive towards the shift, primarily focusing on how such behavior is typical of both former and modern celebrity personae.

Chapter 2: Review of literature

The current stage we are at in the never-ending development of media is one of transitioning perceptions. Change is something that is inevitable and can either pass by unnoticed or turned into a popular subject of public discourse. This is because a shift, whether it is minor or major, impacts the established connection that was made between two different parties and causes tension. Though, not all change is negative, as it can also be a necessary alteration that improves conditions and relationships as it unfolds.

However, while the processes used to reach the result is one that varies significantly in each situation where change occurs, by observing how mass groups develop discourse around similar shift, we can begin to better understand the intricacy of how the process works and adapts over time. While it would be wonderful to have the ability to have a series of predominant social figures that had established personal relationships between hundreds, or even thousands of other people, such a sample to observe a shift in progress is highly improbable. Fortunately, while the media is constantly evolving, it is much like the warning that parents and educators give children, once something is put on the internet, it is there forever.

Parasocial Relationships

It is for that reason that parasocial relationships will be the focus of this study. In the original studies on parasocial relationships by Horton and Wohl (1956), the main objects of focus were former radio broadcast show hosts, which were seen as persona that were essentially invited into the audiences' homes as personal guests. As broadcast evolved into the televisual, this connection of audience to character only grew stronger. Now that audiences could not only hear the hosts, but they could now see them as well.

Horton and Wohl (1956) also noted that the persona would do their best to establish this connection by blurring the line which divides them from their audience (the medium which they are viewing the media on) by creating a sense of ambiguity or casualness by doing things such as addressing supporting cast by their first names (removing formal tones).

From the moment the concept of celebrity was conceived, a special type of connection – or at least, a fascination with them – has been established. Originally focused on broadcast personas, such as recurring talk show hosts and news reporters, the concept has now grown with newer media, such as television, film, and social media. With that evolution, the way audiences view and interact with content changed as well, and the way we viewed the connection with the figures in our media consumption changed as well, thus the concept of the parasocial relationship was born. Horton and Wohl, credited with introducing the idea of the parasocial relationship, also referred to as ‘intimacy at a distance,’ in 1956 after observing audience interactions with radio broadcast show hosts, identified that one of the characteristics of the new mass media is that it can provide a relationship between the viewer and the mediated performer which has similar traits as an in person face-to-face one. This can be seen in viewers that feel some sort of obligation to ‘tune-in’ to a regularly scheduled programming in an almost ritualistic way, almost as if they do not there will be some sort of moral or social transgression implicated. While this was mainly in reference to newscasters on old radio and hosts of television shows, the number of people who will tune in weekly to watch the premiere of a new episode for their favorite shows, whether they are podcasts, television, or online videos, has continued to expand.

Rubin et. al. (1985) suggest that to best understand the parasocial relationship or interactions is to view the concept as an overarching long-term social involvement in which the viewer continues to willingly opt into content consumption. While some connections, whether they be personal or parasocial, may occur in an ‘instantaneous’ moment, the conscious choice to seek out interactions is what makes a relationship begin to form. This approach by Rubin et. al. (1985) contrasted from previous studies on the matter as they identified that parasocial relationships and interactions are two separate concepts to consider. The previous studies, specifically Horton and Wohl’s (1956), claimed that the parasocial interaction only existed throughout the duration of the viewing experience, however, Rubin et. al. (1985) claimed that it actually extended past the level of active consumption, and can be observed in how audience members will choose to seek out interpersonal involvement with the media they consume and the characters presented within it. This can be seen in how audience members will “seek guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world, and desiring to meet media performers” (Rubin, et. al., 1985, p. 156).

The way that we voluntarily set aside and dedicate our time to view the media content shared by individuals or corporations is no different than how we might set aside specific periods of time to spend with our significant others (i.e., family, friends, romantic partners, etc.). However, one of the distinguishing traits between a parasocial relationship and a social relationship that is identified by Horton and Wohl is that “The persona is ordinarily predictable and gives his adherents no unpleasant surprises” (1956, p.217), which can be due to motives and intentions being a tad bit clearer. It is one of the

many reasons we feel comfortable ‘inviting’ them into our homes frequently because unlike what might be expected at a family gathering, the behaviors and beliefs of the persona are often clearly displayed; it also helps that most media content is restricted by clear regulations outlined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Within the content being shared, the goal of the creator is to gain and maintain an audience, which in turn provides a financial or social status reward by providing entertainment of some sort. Thus, there is not much room for ulterior motives to be present that might be used to deceive audience members in the foundation of the relationship – or at least, there shouldn’t be.

The Celebrity

Much like how the media is constantly evolving, so is what it means to be famous; after all, both media and celebrity are both creations of humanity. As far back as our recorded history allows us to investigate, we have been looking up to significant figures who have impacted the world in some meaningful way. Educational history textbooks are riddled with information about Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Queen Elizabeth I, and Susan B. Anthony, as their actions and accomplishments were considered noteworthy. Much like those significant figures, the modern celebrity is well known for their work, whether it be civic, athletic, political, or artistic, and admired by the masses for it. However, in the modern world, where production of media and the disbursement of it is much more streamlined with mediums such as television and the various platforms available for anyone to use on the internet.

In the past, it was traditionally through heroic deeds that individuals reached great renown, but through Hollywood’s assembly line, a sense of ‘faux greatness’ is created

which allows individuals, such as actors, to “play the roles of characters, fictional or real, who performed heroic deeds” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 63). All the average person needs to do is post one single video on a platform such as TikTok, and with a little luck go viral, then capitalize on that moment to begin their journey into becoming a celebrity. However, for the everyday person, that’s easier said than done because of how complicated it is to navigate the intricacies of the social media algorithm. On the other hand, there are some who have the advantage of established corporations backing their media projects, either by providing a platform with an audience already actively tuning in daily or weekly to obtain content, or financially back the creation and publicity/marketing for the media/individual.

Using celebrities to satisfy needs

Due to the complications that come with reaching the coveted title that is ‘stardom’, many try but fall short on their path to achieving it, and others give up on it completely. So while it might not be something that every person will be able to accomplish, most will choose to accept and live their lives in the role of the audience member to fill the gaps created between what is desired. The uses and gratifications approach to mass communications research insists that media use is determined to a significant extent by active audiences seeking some form of satisfaction of a variety of psychological, social, and physical environment related needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Media provides us with the means to meet these needs vicariously from the comfort of our own homes in a multitude of ways, mainly by showing us a world or life that could be. Through a suspension of disbelief, which is reinforced by repeated tuning in to the media content, we can start to feel as if what we see is real, especially if a

snapshot of reality is what is being marketed (i.e., *The Real World*, *The Real Housewives*, or *The Real World*).

For the most part, audiences are aware that the claim of ‘reality’ which these shows advertise is farfetched, what does feel real is the connection created between the media. Such a way of doing so is through audiences willingly opting into comfort TV. Comfort TV, which is also referred to as the ‘Martha Stewart phenomenon’, is the experience of watching media that soothes, lulls, and brings out a sense of meditative focus and calm (Martin, 1996). By observing familiar characters – whether it be because of our connection to the actor/character portrayed, or through personal connections made with the figure – we begin to form a parasocial relationship, which is for the most part, a rather one-sided connection in comparison to that of an interpersonal relationship. Once a parasocial relationship has been established, the celebrity figure is then incorporated into the audience member’s life as if they were a close friend or family member. This can be seen in practices such as the creation of fandoms, inclusion of decor which displays images or other merchandise that portray specific characters/represent accessories that accompany them in the specific media. Some content creators will even encourage this type of relationship, such as YouTuber Felix Kjellberg (also known as ‘PewDiePie’) referring to his loyal audience as ‘The Bros’.

For some celebrities, their fan bases extend far past the confines of their fans’ private lives and becomes a part of their personalities. Fans will wear merchandise displaying their passion, visit iconic areas – such as Elvis Presley’s Graceland or Dolly Paton’s Dollywood – get tattoos of images, quotes, or subtle references to their celebrity idols, and in some cases write fan mail/fiction. With the rise in popularity of virtual

communities, which is the formation of social collectivities via computer networks (Jones, 1997), fans can now get together in a more streamlined way to share their thoughts and feelings towards their favorite significant social figures, and build communities on their own time. This degree which audiences will involve themselves with the celebrity is what makes the parasocial relationship differ from that of just a casual enjoyment because they are dedicating their personal time to get involved with individuals or groups that are either fictitious or are only aware to the face image that the way they portray themselves as through the media which they are present in.

Musician as celebrity

This level of involvement can be observed in any genre which celebrity status can be established. One such genre that is often neglected in previous studies is that of the musical celebrity (Kurtin, et. Al., 2019), and as noted in a previous study on favored celebrities, it was found that only 20 percent of those who participated in the study selected a musician as their preferred social figure (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008). What makes the music celebrity unique, not only as a celebrity themselves, is that the content they produce is more utilized and accessible than that of the standard audio-visual celebrity. Consider how much more often music is present in the everyday life than that of television or streaming services. When you go shopping, stores have music playing over the intercom systems – and even on the way to these shopping centers people will have music playing in their vehicles; at the gym and during study sessions people have designated playlists to help themselves maintain focus; even in places of religious worship, music is a common tool used to display and share faith among the establishment's constituents. Not only can you find music outside of televisual media, but

within it as well. Televisual content will often include popular songs – both current and from the past – to highlight specific emotions and moments in its content.

Parasocial relationships can be clearly seen with musicians as much like with other modern and previous celebrities, there are established fandoms and individuals who take it upon themselves to openly display their passion for the groups and individuals. However, due to how televisual content has utilized music and musicians in shows, movies, etc., in previous research, the musician celebrity and the acting celebrity have often been grouped together (Kurtin, et. Al., 2019). For example, television shows such as *The Monkees* (1966-1968), *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013), *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011), and *Victorious* (2010-2013) all were centered around individual musicians and/or bands as the focus of the primary characters. However, because we mainly see these characters or personas on screen, they are considered to be actors first, despite the fact that many would still tour as a normal musical celebrity would. With that in mind though, what this creates is a hybrid of the two which can work with previous studies on both, despite the fact that one is focused on more than the other because the same applications put towards audiences that tune in weekly and establish parasocial connections between themselves and standard actors/characters/personas, can be applied to the actor-musicians that are created in this specific genre of televisual celebrity.

Expectancy Violation Theory

While it is often simpler than a traditional social relationship, we still use similar negotiation strategies when forming parasocial relationships because we can feel familiarity with celebrities in the same way that we feel it with a family member or another significant other. In the expectancy violation theory, it is suggested that

expectancies are what individual use as a tool to predict how others will act, and are formed by social norms, personal relationship expectations, and prior experiences (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), and if there is a deviation from the predetermined expectancy, a violation has occurred. After a show concludes, a celebrity figure could potentially stick with the persona/role they had played indefinitely, but a much more traversed path is to move on to a newer role – whether it remains in or travels out of media.

It is unfair to assume that all figures we see will last as they were forever, as with time, we grow and adapt to fill roles on our own terms and sometimes by the terms that our communities place onto us. If, however, we are introduced to events, behaviors, or emotions that go against our personal or social expectations, especially in more romantic relationships, negative expectancy violations can result in communication failure and eventually lead to relationship termination (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Therefore, if we have a strong connection to an individual or a figure, if there is some sort of behavior that we deem to be negative, we are placed into a position where negotiation of the acceptance of it begins. Parasocial relationships are not limited to assumed friendship but can also be more ‘romantic’ in their nature (Erickson, Harrison, & Dal Cin, 2018), thus it seems appropriate to view a shift in genre in the same way that we might view a change in behaviors within our personal relationships, especially if that shift is towards a significantly different direction than the path we ‘observed’ these media figures grow into throughout the runtime of the media in which they were present in.

When violations occur, there are three interchangeable aspects of how individuals tend to interpret the event: (a) *violation valence*, which measures how positive or negative the behavior is perceived, (b) *violation expectedness*, where the individual

compares the violation to previously displayed behaviors, and (c) *violation importance*, which is when the impact of the behavior on the relationship is assessed (Bevan, 2003). How we come to the point of reaching an answer to these questions that are posed when faced with a violation, whether it was expected or not is then determined by our own negotiation strategies, which vary based on personal ideologies and context. Regarding relationship construction through the usage of media platforms, Miller-Ott and Kelly (2015) found that some of the key factors in negotiating violated expectancies was the interpretation of context, norms, and the stage the relationship was currently at. While in the beginning of the relationship building process, expectations regarding behavior are significantly lower because there is less attachment placed on the other individual, thus there is less risk perceived in the event of failure. However, as time goes on and the relationship grows in a way that both parties find appealing, there is more risk perceived from a failed connection as intimate attachment develops.

Ideology as a means of negotiation

The meaning of the “philosophy of myth,” more commonly known as ideology, is one that has been long debated between scholars and philosophers over the years, however, most rhetors seem to follow similar approaches when seeking out a definition: operationalization, terminology reshuffling, intellectual history, etiology, and multivocality (Gerring, 1997). In Gerring’s (1997) collective analysis of the ideologic debate, they had also noted that other commonalities noticed between those who sought to define ideology were that the most common attributes were: location where it occurs (thought, language, and behavior), the subject matter (politics, power, or the world at-large), the subject itself (social class, any group, and any group or individual), position

(dominant or subordinate), the function (explaining, repressing, integrating, motivating, or legitimating), motivations (interest-based, non-interest based, non-expedient), the cognitive/affective structure (internal coherence, external coherence, abstraction, specificity, distortion, simplicity, etc.). While it may not seem like these areas are taken into consideration when making a decision for something as simple as picking a song to listen to, choose to order fast food or cook at home, it is typically the dominant value related to the subject at hand that is what we choose to follow in our decision making process. Take for example, a person who practices veganism; if they were to choose a place to go out with friends, their interest-based motivations will likely limit their suggested locations to places that either are entirely vegan based or offer vegan options.

Banas and Parks (2002) outline the taxonomy of ethical ideologies in a dichotomy, each side branching off differently based on the positionality of the individual's moral rules. For Banas and Parks (2002), people tend to fall into either relativistic or idealistic mindsets. For the relativists, ideology is seen as either being high or low levels in the decision-making process. Those who are seen with higher levels tend to view things in shades of gray with room for negotiation, while those who have lower levels are more likely to see things in terms of black and white. Idealistics on the other hand, fall under four different categories which are divided amongst high and low levels as well. Those with higher levels are categorized as situationists or absolutists. The situationist advocates individualistic analysis of whether each act is right or wrong, but varies in consideration of context. Absolutists presume that the best possible outcome is only achievable by adhering strictly to universal moral principles. On the lower end of idealism, the two categories are identified as subjectivists and exceptionists. The

subjectivist primarily considers personal values and perspectives as opposed to moral truths, and the exceptionist allows moral absolutes to guide judgments while allowing exceptions to be made when deemed necessary.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The goal of this study is to examine how a persona change impacts the parasocial relationship. To understand how a shift of persona through genre occurs and impacts the parasocial relationships between a celebrity and audience members who have a connection established through a long-term regularly scheduled release of media content, an analysis of ideologies used to negotiate the transition was conducted to understand how they came to the terms of the new relationship. To do so, discussions found in new media platforms created by individuals regarding celebrities that were formerly involved with a recurring and linear audio/visual media production within the last 20 years as their primary career but later transitioned their work to be more dedicated to music was the focus. Specifically, I had analyzed the ideologies used to negotiate their opinions on the celebrity figures which was generated by fans and other small content creators, excluding professional critics.

The reason new media was used is because it serves as a makeshift time capsule of personal thought expression, thus allowing a narrower search to be conducted in order to find discourse shared between commentators that display raw initial emotion surrounding the shift. Such sources that will be pulled from are Reddit, Metacritic, and YouTube – however, other online forums and free use platforms where open discussions that are not guided by any outside incentives aside from personal expression were used as well until there was saturation of discourses. These sources were used because it provided opportunity to locate documented discourses from willing participants within the time period that the persona shift was relevant. It was ideal to find information within 6-8 months after the shift due to the fast pace that pop culture moves at with shifting trends,

coupled with how long marketing lasts after to promote and elongate sales. Being able to narrow down the time frame to these parameters was ideal to find moments when the topic was still relevant, and opinions expressed were original and genuine. In doing so, I will be conducting a discourse analysis by examining word choices and rhetorical strategies used by internet users across a variety of online platforms, as it will assist me in identifying the way individual and community attitudes based on their language uses. In their discourse analysis, which focused on discussions held by internet users, Shi Min Chua (2022) identified that “Internet users’ comments in various digital spaces, such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, forums, commenting sections of news websites and YouTube, have provided researchers with new sources of data with which to explore people’s opinions, discursive construction of social issues and language practices online” (p. 40). Their study was not the first to pull research from singular or multiple online formats (Giaxoglou, 2017; MacKenzie, 2017; Peterson. 2019; & Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope 2017). These studies were conducted in what is referred to as a corpus linguistic approach, which is a large, principled collection of naturally occurring examples of language stored electronically which (a) can only show what is or is not present in the corpus, (b) show what is but not explain why, and (c) is unable to provide all possible language at one time (Bennett, 2010).

Sample

Celebrities

In this study, three celebrities were chosen due to their similar backgrounds and choice of career that they transitioned to when their personas went through a shift. Seeing as the celebrity persona change is a common occurrence, it was ideal to find a small

group that went through experiences which were similar to each other's to be able to find consistency in the degree of impact had on relatable relationships. For this reason, celebrities that found their careers beginning and further developing through family friendly media featured on channels that generated content aimed at younger audiences. Another factor that led to the three celebrities being selected was their long-term presence in episodic television series that featured the characters as they progressed through life and is not just an anthology series. One final consideration made when selecting the specific celebrities that would be used in this study was the gender. When critiquing another, especially a significant public figure, there is a significant difference in the language, tone, and themes used when discussing females in comparison to non-feminine individuals – thus using same sex identifying celebrities was ideal to avoid any gendered bias in the corpus. With these parameters for celebrity figures in mind, those selected as the focus for this study were Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande, and Olivia Rodrigo.

Miley Cyrus, the daughter of country singer and actor Billy Ray Cyrus and producer Tish Finley Cyrus, began her acting career at the age of 9, where she found a small role in the 2003 film *Big Fish*. Three years later, she was cast in her most well-known role as Hannah Montana – a typical tween living the secret life of a music superstar – on the Disney Channel show named the very same. Cyrus would have cameos in other shows and film. For the next several years, she would continue to work with the Disney corporation until they cut all ties with her after she began to alter her public image (Saunders, 2020). With her debut of *Bangerz* in 2013, shortly after the controversial performance of her song “We Can’t Stop” earlier that year, her personal career began to take off, and she has released multiple #1 singles since then.

Ariana Grande started her musical career singing the national anthem for Florida Panthers games, but soon found her way to the Broadway theater scene in 2008, where she played the role of Charlotte in the production of *13*. Two years later, she began working with Nickelodeon on the show *Victorious*, as the supporting character, Cat Valentine, who would eventually be granted the spin off series *Sam and Cat*. In 2013, she would release her first debut album, *Yours Truly*, which was her first step in distancing herself from the ‘princess’ image that loomed over her after her time spent acting with Nickelodeon (Wood, 2016). Since then, she has become a multi-award winner in the industry, including two Grammy awards, and even the VMA artist of the year award in 2019.

Olivia Rodrigo may have started her acting career with Universal Studios in 2015 when she landed the lead role in *The American Girl: Grace Stirs Up Success*, but she soon found her way to the Walt Disney corporation where she co-starred in *Bizaardvark* in 2016, and eventually landed a role in *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* in 2019. After a breakup with a costar from the latter series, Olivia released her debut single, “Drivers License,” which became the new longest running No.1 hit on the global billboard charts (McIntyre, 2021). Shortly after, the remainder of her first original album *Sour* was released, achieving similar success.

For each of these celebrities, the original debut albums mentioned were the only topic discussions looked at. By focusing on the first original studio content released, any professional connection to their previous roles where the parasocial relationship had been established will be dissolved enough to establish the artist as their own celebrity entity. J. Rae, a writer for the celebrity and media news publication *TheThings*, states that “Disney

stars are contractually bound to make public appearances, participate in charitable causes, and uphold the Disney image at all times” (2020, para. 4). With that being the case for current Disney actors, it seemed only fair to assume that to find unbiased content to review a true persona change, the channels, and corporations that the celebrity figures were involved with cannot have any contractual obligations remaining to be fulfilled that might have some influence over their content created. While Ariana Grande was formerly associated with a different company prior to her shift, this was a standard that was also applied to her as well, given that Nickelodeon also has similar restrictions and guidelines set out for their employees.

Audience

When selecting who to use as the audience sample, a concern of consistency and reliability of the sources was considered. As two of the celebrities being focused on had gone through their persona shift around a decade ago, the issue that could have potentially caused some issues in the accuracy of perception was the chronological distance between moment of the shift and now. For the most accurate depiction of the violation experienced, it was ideal to include the questions of *where* and *when*.

Satisfying these questions, the answers were found when looking at various social media websites which served as public forums for any and all users to share their thoughts on any given topic. One of the other benefits of using these websites aside from free access to discourse shared was that it allowed data to be filtered and collected from the moment it occurred. Like how Jen Ang (1991) reviewed fan letters from viewers of Dallas after posting an advertisement to better understand the ideologies of mass culture, viewing testimonies that fans shared regarding the celebrity figures selected on social

media served as way to collect data from current and actively involved audiences, but due to easier access of involvement provided by the internet, in a slightly more efficient way. Doing so helped keep the content analyzed from being diluted from the passage of time, as well as verify that the expressed opinions were limited and relevant to the artists being discussed, while also keeping the collected discourse limited to non-professional contributors of the discussions.

Coding

Tagg (2009) identifies that in corpus-driven approaches the benefits are that it focuses primarily on textual traits, such as spelling variation and the ways in which typing/texting is like spoken language – and that it considers word frequency and consistency to delay human intervention or error to identify significant features not necessarily seen in other text-types or discussed in other areas of research. To get the most out of this approach, the main features of each piece of discourse looked at were (a.) the mode of feedback, (b.) an identifier of the parasocial relationship and sociopsychological need, (c.) clear gratifications sought/obtained from the relationship, (d.) expectations placed on the relationship to the celebrity, and (d.) ideologies used to negotiate the shift.

The mode in which the feedback occurred was significant, because it aided in validating that the author(s) were in fact posting on their own free accord, unbiased/unsponsored. Clearly identifying that a parasocial relationship (had) existed and that sociopsychological needs were at one point present was detrimental to the study, because while difficult to clearly associate the commentators with one, it showed that there was room for a significant impact of the shift to be possible. This was done

similarly to how Ang (1991) in their review of submissions regarding *Dallas*, identified fans and nonfans through an analysis of language used, and reflected on words and phrases used to justify their stances, such as ‘like,’ ‘hate,’ ‘people with no taste,’ etc., all of which contribute to the determination of the social image that TV programs have.

Once the relationship was apparent, and needs were identified, finding what sorts of gratifications sought and obtained, then eventually violated post-transition became much clearer, and the discourse became credible and relevant to the study. Finally, ideologies were analyzed to understand how audiences justified the stance they took in their reflections of the shift, which was the most significant part in understanding the negotiation of potential violations.

Plans for Analysis

In a similar way that Ang (1991) had reviewed the data collected from their survey by reviewing transcripts of commentary shared willingly by content creators and their own audience members that have some sort of opinion on the genre shift, and analyzing the defenses used by each participating individual. In their review of submissions regarding *Dallas*, they identified fans and nonfans through an analysis of language used and reflected on words and phrases used to justify their stances, such as ‘like,’ ‘hate,’ ‘people with no taste,’ etc., all of which contribute to the determination of the social image that TV programs have (Ang, 1991). Determining if there was a dominant ideology, as Ang had, aided in understanding how shared discourses might influence the negotiation of a parasocial relationship that is experiencing a genre shift.

This could be due to a ‘with us or against us’ mentality forming due to a variety of factors, such as perceived loyalty or acceptability of the transition. Once key terms

were identified, axial coding was conducted to find any sort of relationship shared between the various data collected informed by language used in commentators expressions of opinions. In review, those who participated in the online discussions were either all-for or all-against the shift, many of which shared similar views on the issues with or benefits of accepting the shift as an acceptable change in their relationship to the celebrity.

Verification/Validation of Results

In a corpus linguistic analysis, there is a constantly growing supply of data to pull from, however, while the limitation of time post-transition imposed on the data collected was useful, there was still the issue of how much information was available to sort through. It was at this point that data collection was concluded once theoretical saturation had occurred. A total of 43 different databases were used for analysis (Cyrus – 12.5, Grande – 11, Rodrigo – 12.5; additional .5 being a blended source where discussions focused on two of the celebrities included in the analysis), after which there no significantly varied takes on the shift, whether it be the stance they portrayed, or the main discussion points presented in their discussions. If any of the sources failed to meet the criteria of the coding or were comments made by the same users on different platforms, they were set aside from the total data collection. This limitation resulted in 13 potential sources being excluded, and an additional 3 being excluded due to duplicated discourse.

What was interesting about this study was that going into it, many of the answers did seem to be relatively predictable. Afterall, again, as identified by Reuben et. al. (1985) in the review of literature, the details of the parasocial relationship are similar to that of an interpersonal relationships because audiences involved in parasocial

relationships tend to actively seek them out to fill gaps that might otherwise not exist in their own personal lives or relationships, which was a trait that had been clearly featured throughout each discourse sample. However, it was through what was found in the negotiated ideologies and the needs created through the parasocial relationship that stood out the most with this specific group of celebrities. Specifically, the way that identity was formed throughout the parasocial relationship via projection of self on the celebrity figure, indicating that the shift was much more personal to some than predicted.

Chapter 4: Analysis

What was found in this analysis was roughly what had been expected, as the response to change is typically acceptance in the form of support or apathy, or complete rejection. However, there was a significant difference between the three celebrity figures despite their similar backgrounds prior to the shift in their presented persona. It was clear that a series of different needs were identified, such as the desire for experience, recognition and acceptance of averageness, and formation of meaningful connections, with each of these needs having been met prior to the change in persona. Through this process, the trait that seemed to be the biggest influence in the response that commentors had shared was the shift in presentation of averageness. Averageness was created through the presentation of weekly interactions with the media, whether it be through the initial airing of the shows, or through on demand streaming of the content.

What it means to be average is that which is acceptable and representative of the audience, and in the shift if that expectation was not met, a violation had occurred. However, if the shift was acceptable, such as an average sign of growth presented through mature but appropriate themes, acceptance of the shift was more likely to occur. Each of the traits that the persona displayed were established through branding from the corporations which they belonged to, but also through the way that the celebrities fit the roles that they acted in on and off screen. Of the three, only one was targeted with a balanced initial accept/reject reaction from those who shared some form of previously established parasocial connection to them, while the others were seemingly more accepted by their respective audiences. Factors that were noted in the responses to a violation in the gratifications sought and obtained were interpretations of the quality of

averageness/acceptability post transition, depth of connection they had with the celebrity persona prior to transition, nostalgic feelings, belief of actor-character fusion, and desire to see the celebrity figure express their individuality with their artistic freedom. For the most part, Grande and Rodrigo both met the expectations of their fan bases as each of the gratifications their audiences sought with them were met despite their alterations, but Cyrus' audience was divided on whether the new persona was able to meet their expectations held for her.

After such shifts occurred, the audience members who had a parasocial connection to the artist then had to be negotiated to determine whether or not their involvement with the celebrity would continue, accompanied with their rationale for making their decision. The ideological negotiations used to navigate the shifts between the celebrity figures were almost the exact same despite the differing outcomes of acceptance, which was particularly interesting because while two of the celebrity figures conducted their transitions during the same year (Cyrus and Grande), the third (Rodrigo) went through their transition just short of a decade later. Negotiation strategies included the potential influence the celebrity image has on audience members (specifically, younger audiences), reflection of previous branding images, how the character of the artist is reflected in their work, as well as the drawing of comparisons to previous figures who have gone through some form of persona transformation. Overall, themes that stood out the most were that of expected representations of averageness and acceptable behavior of celebrity. What makes this unique to this study is that it shows how much that which is fictitious influences reality, specifically, in media that seeks to represent the real world.

Sociopsychological Needs

After physiological and safety needs are met, Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies that having social needs covered is the next step to complete. In the communities we have built over time, sociopsychological needs are typically met when the individual strives to meet the needs of the society, and that same society helps them to attain their goals. The way that it's achieved is through the experience of love, intimacy, friendship, family, feedback, acceptance, and belonging. Due to the similarities in both traditional and parasocial relationships, all these characteristics of sociopsychological needs are just as capable of being met in either. However, for that reason, people who might struggle with the traditional style of connection formation and maintenance are more likely to seek out their satisfaction through media content instead.

The sociopsychological needs found in this study appeared to show that the needs emerged, form, and are able to be met in the process of communication with another person, even if there is not a direct interpersonal interaction. For those observed which participated in online discussions, this was primarily done so through intentional long-term exposure to the celebrity figures used in the analysis. Each of the characteristics mentioned of sociopsychological needs was identified throughout the corpus, with some only identifying a single trait, and others acknowledging several that were met in their personal connections to the celebrity figures that were the focus of their discussions, setting the standard expectations placed on the connection they formed on their own.

Secondhand experience

Throughout the corpus, a form of secondhand experience which is developed through parasocial interactions with the celebrity figures was shared by most

commentators. This can come in a variety of ways, such as the audience member viewing the content to fill in any gaps that they may have missing in their own lives (e.g., platonic/romantic relationships, talent discovery, fame, etc.), which allows them to live vicariously through the characters featured in the media they participate in. One of the reasons this may seem to be the case is that it portrays the averageness of the everyday person as being acceptable through the portrayal of media. Each of the celebrity figures in this study were featured in some form of media where they played the role of common people who were discovered for their talent and rewarded with recognition and opportunity in some way. The desire for fame, which is a trait all three characters have, not just as the celebrity figures themselves, but also the characters they play, is something often sought out by people. Fame is something sought out by many because of six intrinsic qualities that make it such a desirable state, which are ambition, meaning derived through comparison with others, vulnerability, attention seeking, conceitedness, and social access (Wood et.al., 2008). Unfortunately for most, while these traits of fame can be achieved by anyone, it's the degree of which those who have fame possess them that is not as easily accessible, so through a suspension of displacement of self onto the celebrity figures, such traits can feel as if their shared or even more likely to be obtained.

One of the reasons noted by those involved in the online discussions is that there is a sense of shared experience held when partaking in their media, stating that "She makes it easy to imagine what it would be like to be friends with her – or at least dress like her. Which you can do because, you know, there's also a Hannah Montana clothing line" (Miley 6). While we may see these celebrity/character figures as *friends, role*

models, or even as *romantic figures*, they're simply brands. Becoming a brand is nothing new, as corporations have used popular or familiar figures to represent their companies for years, and of course actors fall into the same category – after all, they are the face of the media they're in. However, becoming a brand is something that is much more common in the wake of mass influencer culture in the current stage that online culture is in, which is essentially the creation of micro-celebrities with the sole purpose of direct endorsement. The way this works is brands use influencers and market them as 'everyday people' who command a huge follower base on social media to engage with their audiences (TapInfluence, 2017). Even before influencer culture became a mainstream practice, companies would do additional promos that audiences could interact with when the show concluded its scheduled segment, such as the Miley Cyrus webcam series, which was a series of seemingly impromptu home videos in which she and her friends (typically other Disney actors) appeared out of character, in what were stereotypical tween-themed sleepovers where they communicated through the computer's webcam. These type of strategies have been utilized for years, and one of the many reasons this works is because it helps the audience imagine what *could* be, and by participating in the content and buying into the images or products presented to them, they could also be in the same position – whether it be famous, content, desired, or have a sense of belonging.

Another way that secondhand experience was mentioned was in the way that it allows audience members to have their emotions expressed openly in ways that they desire to while they lack the means to. The claim was that "it's authentic, but she's only able to do so because she has the sources to do what [the audience] can't" (Olivia 5), implying that anyone could do what the celebrity does, however, due to shortcomings in

financial backing and access to a platform to do so, they cannot. One thing that seemed to be eluded in this claim was that *talent* or ability to perform and perform well didn't seem to have influence on the success of the artist. While we may currently live in a world where technology can make it so any person can carry a tune, there is still a fair amount of skill required to be an effective and successful performer – thus why not *everyone* can do it. It is for that reason why vagueness and generalities are a useful way to connect with audiences, because by using words like 'you', 'our', or basic descriptions of behaviors/physical traits is utilized, as it helps the listener place themselves in the position of the musician while experiencing the song, or even as the individual the song was written for. For example, comedian and musician Bo Burnham jests this modern practice in his song, "Repeat Stuff," by stating;

So I describe my dream girl as really really vague, like
'I love your hands 'cause your fingerprints are like no other'
'I love your eyes and their blueish brownish greenish color'
'I love it when you smile, that you smile wide'
'And I love how your torso has an arm on either side'

Burnham, 2013, Stanza 9.

Through this generic scripting of lyrics, a sense of mutually shared experiences, whether they be physical or emotional can be shared seamlessly through the music and allow a deeper connection to be formed to not only the song, but to the artist sharing the experience.

Recognition/Representation of the average

Having a sense of belonging is a common reason for why an individual might involve themselves with various media outlets. Users from various forums shared in their discussions regarding changes claimed the style of the music – specifically, within the lyrics presented in the new music – satisfied this need. One online user stated that "It's just so validating to know someone else feels like that and we see it expressed in song" (Olivia 2), and in a similar discussion, another had added on that reasoning for this is because "It's relatable, it's real, it's from the heart" (Olivia 3). There's no denying that relatability is a key component in marketing entertainment content, as;

“Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives. Such a fusion of imaginative fantasy and bodily practice marks also the integration of aesthetics and ethics,” (Frith, 1996, p. 124) and through that validation of identity, we can see how the content produced can have a deeper meaning to audiences. When seeing the characters that Miley, Ariana and Olivia play go through every on screen vaguely similar situations that the viewer experiences, a sense of relatability is provided. Such scenes include stressing over complicated school assignments with partners that they might not get along with, relationship issues, facing social pressures and finding loopholes with strict rules given to them by their parents. Then, when such problems that are presented are summarized or even solved through the expression of music on these shows, a form of sense making is then provided for the viewer. However, in the form of only music, while it may be implied based on knowledge of the musician's personal life who or what the song is about, without a physical image

presented before the audience (e.g., a character who is named and shown to be the antagonist/protagonist the musician is singing about), the listener is required to place themselves in the position of the singer and create their own images – thus creating a deeper connection to the song.

The phrase that sticks out here is that ‘it’s from the heart’ - implying that what is being displayed is a genuine representation of what the celebrity figure is experiencing. On the albums, *Sour*, *Bangerz*, and *Yours Truly*, while each of the musicians had a role in most of the lyrical creations, each had credits allotted towards other writers – such as other musicians, producers, and even other professional writers. While their experiences likely play a role in the composition of the lyrics or even the melodies used to emphasize the emotions, it is not entirely their own work. Even on the television shows, multiple writers encode a variety of messages to be presented, all of which has an ideal impact on their target audience, and by making it seem relatable they allow the viewer to reflect on the message in their own way. This can be seen through the usage of generalities and vagueness. The same online user that expressed their opinion on why they enjoyed the content as being ‘relatable’, ‘real’ and ‘from the heart’ states that one of the many things that they enjoyed about the debut album they listened to was that “she hasn’t said his name” (Olivia 3). One of the many benefits that music has over audio-visual media is that it only has to *tell*, while television has to *show*. Again, in standalone music, with no visual references, the listener has to craft their own images with the context provided within the song, whereas in television, the characters are already created and displayed on screen for them. While connections can still be established with the fictional characters, music on the other hand, requires the audience to use their own frameworks of

knowledge to make sense of the meanings – thus allowing opportunities for a deeper connection to the content to be made.

This idea of their music being ‘from the heart’ also implies another point of interest – which is that it is pure emotion on display as opposed to being from the mind. As most of the songs featured in all three of the albums reviewed had each musician’s name on the writing credits, not every song was written solely by them. Not only that, but each of these albums wasn’t produced solely by the musician as well. With that in mind, some things to consider here are (a.) what influence did the others involved in the production have on the creation of the music, (b.) did that influence impact anything included or omitted, and (c.) if there was outside influence and alternative motives, can it truly be considered ‘from the heart’? According to Midgley, “The heart is the center of concern, the mind is the center of purpose or attention, and these cannot be dissociated” (2003, p. 3). Midgley also refers to the heart as being the *core* of one’s being, that is, it represents the true character of a person, whereas the mind is something that is something that is influenceable and disconnected from the core that makes us our own unique individuals. With that being the case, if there were others involved in the creation of the music, who held their own motives for getting involved with the content created, is it truly something from the heart? All forms of entertainment media have already proven throughout the years that it is easy to make relatable content through the usage of generalized experience portrayal, and that’s because it sells, thus making it more so creation of the mind which acknowledges the heart. In doing so, it acknowledges the average and through validation of the experiences of it becomes an effective tool.

Parasocial Connection

While the information sources used in this analysis were all on open platforms where anyone who visited the varying websites to participate in could engage in the discussions, some form of parasocial connection was established. A need for connection is not always something that can be met in traditional ways, such as face-to-face interactions, and one-sided interactions through media is a way for people to fill this gap. Sometimes, much like with in-person interactions, a relationship can develop unintentionally – such as a parent becoming involved in a series and with the characters’ stories while monitoring the content their children watch (Ariana 2), personal experiences such as a user that stated “the fact that she grew up ten miles away from where I was raised, in south Florida, is an added bonus, as well as the fact that she is a vegan and a dog lover” (Ariana 1), or by promoted recommendations through the specific channels they watch regularly. Sharing this type of information is significant because it shows how these comments made on the shift aren’t just that of a paid journalist – although it is important to note that some creators (specifically, those who shared their opinions through audio podcasts or audio-visual modes) had their content monetized per view or featured a sponsor – but are instead of their own free will and interest. While it might be possible that they were seeking validation of opinions through the upvotes/likes of others, it was clear that there was some long-term connection between the poster and the celebrity in discussion.

Romantic Desires

Other areas found in the analysis of the corpus that showed specific connections to the celebrity figures that was of note was the inclusion of romantic desires held

towards the actresses/musicians. One individual in their video response to Ariana Grande's *Yours Truly* subtly mentioned that they have had a long term crush on the celebrity, and that the style of this album in comparison to her previous work only added to emotions held due to the 'mystery' it added to her image (Ariana 3), while another was more bold with their feelings, dedicating a specific segment of their video to state that "She could get away with some sexual stuff, she could, but she is fine, that is a fine girl. I'm telling you give me one date with that girl, I would treat her like a princess. I don't have no money, but I'd find it" (Ariana 4). This additional emotion shared within the parasocial relationship could lead to various outcomes in how the persona shift is negotiated, because of the differing attachment present in the one-sided relationship in comparison to those who might have a connection that is more platonic.

Even the claim of princess leads to areas of concern, especially because the same individual that made this claim, after establishing himself as an adult of legal age to consent, asked "Why are they marketing Ariana as a 14 year old girl" (Arianna 4). This specific comment highlights a criticism that companies such as Nickelodeon and Disney have been facing for the last few years, which is the topic of objectification of young female cast members as well as the general sexualization of minors. While the celebrities playing the teenagers are around the age, such imagery will occasionally find its way into the media content. For example, in the show, *Victorious*, there are multiple scenes where the cast are performing bits, such as their side series on 'The Slap' where Grande's character is in her bed, sticking her fingers or feet into her mouth, and on one occasion was laying on her back, partially off the bed, pouring a bottle of water on her chest and face. While this get be chalked down to goofy-teen behaviors, it added nothing to the

progression of the series. It is also important to note that the inclusion of scenes like this and many others of a similar type were promoted by the director of the series, Dan Schneider, who has worked on multiple Nickelodeon series, and has several accusations placed against him for inappropriate behavior both on and off the set.

Established connections with brand

Nearly every discussion observed had some mention of previous work, most of which specially had referred to previous images that were created by the brands that they were associated with (Disney/Nickelodeon) in more ways than just simply stating ‘the former “x” actress’. For example, one commenter posted that “She was forced into this pretty innocent Disney girl persona for so long, I'm not surprised that this is the aftermath” and another in the same thread stated that “I also think it's risky to take on ALL THE SEX when you've barely made it out your Disney jammies” (Miley 8). All three artists had similar comments made regarding their transition, such as a fan of Olivia Rodrigo, who stated that “They’re letting the girls curse young? They would not let them do this in the Taylor Swift days” (Olivia 3), which is a reference to the rather strict brand image control that the Walt Disney corporation is well known for; and a fan of Ariana Grande stated that “Expectations were at low as possible seeing as how Ariana is a product of Nickelodeon” (Ariana 1), which is a claim based on the significantly lower post-acting musician career path of Nickelodeon artists in comparison to those who worked for Disney. The image of the main brand, as well as the connection to the brand seems to play a significant role in how audiences interpret the shift, as it seems to serve as a means to negotiate the actions of the celebrity figure in either a justifying or discrediting factor.

One of the primary themes presented throughout the identification of needs that were created through the connections formed was a sense of averageness. For commentators, this averageness is presented as the personas they present themselves as are both real and normal people. Of course, this makes sense because each of the media that the celebrities appeared on were designed to represent seemingly real-life people who were given opportunities to achieve stardom that most people will only ever dream of having. All three of the celebrities were portrayed as typical teenagers that had some sort of exceptional musical talent, with the only significant difference between the two was that Cyrus' character, which was portrayed as her actual self who just so happened to be a secret celebrity.

Despite that single difference, the three were all seemingly normal people who would go through somewhat relatable experiences that people their ages go through, but with the social capital to make it interesting enough to engage with for those who might lack those opportunities in their own lives. These scenarios which are documented and aired on repeat then create the expectation of what their characters are like, but the issue that seems to come from that is there is limited room for change because of the dependable familiarity that is placed on the celebrity persona presented. On their respective shows, the types of character flaws that were presented to audiences were typically harmless in nature, such as the occasional lie to their parents or friends due to embarrassment or to avoid conflict. Thus, when there is a significant change to the severity of deviation from their core characteristics, there is a violation made against the terms of the relationship created by the audience members based on what was expected and is determined to be acceptable behaviors.

Gratifications Sought and Obtained

Once needs are consistently met, such as through weekly presentations of new stories or the frequent reruns of content, a stable source of satisfaction is developed. With on-demand streaming becoming more popular during the times that the shows each celebrity became well known for were being aired, viewers who had parasocial connections established with them could easily access the content whenever they desired, making it much easier to obtain that which they sought out from the content – especially if there was something such as a specific episode that they found to be more related to a specific need they wished to have met. However, if there was a significant change to the characters that were once consistent and almost completely predictable, a decision must be made to determine whether the parasocial relationship is worth continuing.

During that period where a negotiation is being conducted, the values of the offended party are then presented and used as arguing points to weigh the pros and cons of continuing their involvement. Similarly to the traditional relationship, this is where a line will be drawn and the lengths that it can be crossed by the other is established and enforced. After all, if you are able to depend on a person for fulfillment of any needs set, if that were to suddenly change, there would be some sort of conflict present. For the most part, Grande and Rodrigo's fans seemed to continue to have those needs met despite alterations of persona presentation, however, Cyrus' fans were split between denial and acceptance of the change due to the excessive difference in presentation she displayed.

Seeing the average.

Identifying self and others through their actions is just another way that we project our own beliefs onto the world as we experience it. However, through tuning-in in

a ritualistic way, such as once a week for the release of a new episode, new connections to the material are formed in a much more personal way. Once an attachment is formed, such as a parasocial connection, the viewer becomes more invested in the characters, either on or off screen, or in some cases, both. One commenter, in response to Cyrus' transition that "You just pray that she'll turn out all right and not get swept away by the insanity of pop-star celebrity" (Miley 6). What this seems to be a sign of is that this commenter is projecting success, failures, and behaviors onto themselves. Another commenter had stated that "It doesn't matter if you have talent if people never see it. So, I hope she continues to try and break the mold as well as discover her own style. She should keep pushing forward, even if she makes a few mistakes" (Miley 8). It almost seems as if there is some sort of stake held specifically with the perception of the artist. This would make some sense, as with a connection to identity through projecting self onto the characters and scenarios presented both in televisual media and music, when a once reflected image changes drastically, feelings towards the mirrored image may cause conflicting internal dialogue when navigating the interpretation of what is seen.

Relatable and Static Characters.

One of the main gratifications identified in the corpus was that of finding a static core – essentially, consistency of personal character. While these figures obviously play characters that present pre-determined and controlled characteristics for marketing purposes, there seems to be a type of responsibility and expectations placed on them to stay true to that image, regardless of if they're on or off camera. Regarding Cyrus' shift in persona, one online commenter states that "She says she's glad fans have stuck with her. But the lifestyle she's peddling to them now, Pied Piper-style, is one of unadulterated

hedonism: No limits on sex or drugs or drinking or anything, it seems. That's the 'good life' according to Miss Cyrus these days" (Miley 7). On her show, Cyrus played a character that was essentially herself, and the story lines she went through were that of the assumed average-everyday teenage girl. Despite each episode being scripted and filled with essential Disney tropes, it was marked as this was Cyrus' real story, and the audience got to observe the secret-double life of the musical superstar. While Rodrigo and Grande both played characters that had no direct relationship to their 'real' characteristics, the content that they were featured in follows a similar track, as they aren't portrayed as completely fictitious characters, but instead as representations of what an average person who has acceptable talent can achieve when provided with an opportunity (specifically, musical talent). However, acceptable talent does not seem to be the only requirement to be accepted by audience members, as the character they appear as on and off screen doesn't seem to be allotted any space for variation.

Acceptable and Relatable Characters.

All three celebrities had commenters refer to the expected image that they should have to carry with them from the companies they were associated with prior to their persona shift, and this seems to be where the standard of what is acceptable is. Due to this association, which is created and consistent with other content created by the corporations, a sense of reliability can be placed on their characters – traits such as compassionate, responsible, boldness, braveness, quick wittedness, respectful, etc.. After all, these are attributes that are often promoted to younger audiences both on screen and through their personal relationships. However, a drastic shift was seen more so with Cyrus, as her shift into primarily the music industry included a significant image change

as opposed to a content change as noted by those found in the current corpus. One commenter states, “So where exactly is she? She’s at a party where everyone is drinking, taking E, snorting coke, dancing like strippers, looking for a casual hook up and generally raising their fists in the face of curmudgeons who might question the wisdom of those choices” (Miley 7). At the time of her shift, Cyrus was only 20 years old when her album *Bangerz* debuted. With that in mind, the legal activities, such as drinking, which she promoted in her music were not so legal. Referring back to the commenter who claimed that Cyrus had barely made it out of her ‘Disney jammies’, she was still a young celebrity, who still had her connection to the image created by Disney, and the associations that accompanied that persona.

Expectations Violated

The average and acceptable.

What it means to be average and acceptable is defined solely by the individual who passing judgment. However, while we may have our own personal expectations on what is such, through repeated exposure to specific images and figures we begin to expect a certain type of consistency that generates feelings of familiarity. As the process continues, a sense of dependency or expectations begins to form around the image or figure that we assume will stay consistent – thus a static core is developed. For those found and analyzed in the corpus, averageness operated as a way of implying the degree to which they were relatable while still being admirable and unique. The main issue that stems from this form of comfort is that there is not much room for growth to take place. Of the three celebrities focused on in this study, Cyrus’ debut persona change was seemingly the only one that had a heavy criticism placed on her transition, at least,

regarding her as a celebrity musician and not just the content released. Again, of the three, Cyrus was the only one to do so completely free of her former corporation (Disney) ties, so perhaps it could have been due to this additional space for expression that she had received such harsh criticism, but another potential area that might have influenced perceptions from former and current fans at the time's opinions was the available space for discourse to be held around what was considered to be acceptable for an individual in her position. Such discussions focused on;

Sex: One issue frequently mentioned by commenters in the corpus was the overt sexual imagery and display in her transition. A commenter argued that their issue was “with the way she uses her sexuality is that it doesn't seem like a genuine statement. It seems like a strategic marketing ploy and I can easily imagine her being handled by record execs. Her behavior doesn't say ‘powerful woman’ to me. It says ‘young woman being used by people to make them money’” (Miley 9). This seems to imply that there is a specific way that sexuality or the act of intercourse should be discussed or presented.

Appropriation: In her debut performance at the VMAs, Cyrus showed the world for the first time that she was finally breaking free from her prior image in a performance that left many people with mixed feelings. Aside from the overt displays of sexual imagery used, one of the main criticisms she had faced was her usage of black female bodies for her performance. One commenter stated that;

“the issue with her performance had nothing to do with her ‘sluttiness’ (I am a professional gogo dancer – sluttiness in dancing is only ever a plus in my book) and everything to do with her insane amounts of cultural appropriation and objectification of black women’s bodies... I watched

that performance and that lily white girl looked *ridiculous* trying to perform ‘thug’/‘ratchet’ femininity when she does not have to live black femininity and experience its oppressions ever” (Miley 3).

Aside from these two specific areas of discourse surrounding the debut performance, most other comments that were dismissing of the transition primarily seemed to focus on her physical image – such as her new hair cut, the overt usage of twerking, and excessive displays of sticking her tongue out – diminishing her no longer ‘family-friendly’ branding.

Such characteristics and features of her transition were even mentioned by other commentators in discussion on the other two artists focused on in this study. Commenters stated things like “Glad she wasn’t Miley 2.0” (Ariana 1), “I had a similar experience with Miley Cyrus (cough, cough – shame)” (Ariana 2), “She has good-girl innocent vibes... not in your face sexuality forced like previous pop stars” (Ariana 3), “I have to say, I think people would be shocked if Olivia Rodrigo did something Wrecking Ball-esc” (Olivia and Miley 1), and “The song and accompanying visuals are still pretty risqué, but wouldn’t be shocking today. I think it’s even more risqué than ‘We Can’t Stop’, but like someone else mentioned context matters. Miley’s squeaky clean Disney image was totally subverted by ‘We Can’t Stop’” (Olivia and Miley 1). It seems clear here that the expectations violated were specifically that the image of a family-friendly figure was completely removed from the celebrity, and now is replaced by an unfamiliar/unrecognizable figure that is using the platform that was previously created and maintained by what is now a ghost in the past.

Established connections with artists. For some of those who shared an established connection with the artist, it was made apparent that it was more than just a fan of the content posted previously. While it would have been ideal to have access to a log of each users' entire internet activity to validate that this was just not their first post made that discussed the featured celebrity, however, that is not something that would be entirely practical. However, in many of the discussions held, there were references made to active engagement in previous work, as well as to the celebrity as a public entertainment figure. One user (Ariana 5), even identified her connection to Ariana Grande and the previous content she had interacted with as the primary reason for why she decided to check out her debut album and even create a video response to this new transition in her career. For many of those involved in the varying discussion topics, this seemed to be the case. While there were many short, opinionated comments that focused on the potential implications that controversy or scandal could hold, long-term fans who had parasocial connections with the artists had a need to establish it as some form of credibility – either directly or indirectly. Perhaps this was done so without ulterior motive, or even to validate their opinions for themselves and others involved in the discourse, or establish some sort of dominance of their take on the transitions that were actively occurring.

Nostalgia. In the discussions held, comparisons to *what was* and *what is now* were drawn between each of the celebrity figures, which seemed to display a sense of nostalgia being sought out by viewers when getting involved with the newer content. Such a gratification was found with most of Grande's audience, where the content she was producing now was noted by some as being 'vintage' sounding (Ariana 6), and by one as 'transportive' due to the experience of "flashbacks to Mariah Carey and Christina

Aguilera songs in the car with my mom” (Ariana 5). Nostalgia based on style was also mentioned by those discussing Rodrigo’s transition, one of which made heavy reference to how the debut album gave off similar themes, tones, and sounds as older musicians they used to listen to when they were younger (Olivia 1). For these two artists, the nostalgia-factor being met was a more acceptable one, as it did not seem to violate any major expectations set by prior/current brand associations, or the image they chose to market themselves as at the time the transition occurred.

However, for Cyrus, the nostalgia factor was not met as her transition was perceived as being a ‘breaking of chains’ to her past, shown in one user’s comments that “The album shows us that she is ‘Hannah Montana no more’ and she has a place in the music industry despite her raunchy image for *Bangerz*” (Miley 1). While nostalgia was found in a variety of different ways, a factor that could play into why discourses surrounding the first original debut albums regarding the nostalgic element of the content is because ties between Grande and Rodrigo and the media corporations they were originally associated with were not completely cut – Grande would in the same year star in the series *Sam and Cat*, and Rodrigo is still currently involved with the *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* – while Cyrus’ debut album was conducted while completely free of ties with the Walt Disney corporation. While this study is focusing specifically on the time period in which the debut album was released, it is also important to note that post-involvement with Nickelodeon, Grande would become subject to negative discourse surrounding her image alteration; specifically for cultural appropriation after altering her physical characteristics.

Actor/Character Fusion.

Also noted in the corpus was that there seems to be some fusion of the actor and character(s) they play. While limited comments were made about this trait for Grande and Rodrigo, many commentators referred to Cyrus' former character 'Hannah Montana' - after all, she did play a role as herself with a double identity, so this comparison was highly likely to be drawn in comparison to her new image. That specific image was torn apart completely during the transition, and in disapproval one commentor stated "You're not Hannah Montana anymore, we get that." This sort of response seems to indicate a major violation of trust seems to have occurred as this commenter felt it was necessary to clearly point out the destruction of the persona Cyrus used to play on her show, almost as if that character was a real person. It's unique, that is, how we can view characters on screen as if they are real life people. Perhaps in the process of allowing the suspension of disbelief to occur while watching these characters on a weekly basis, audience members who develop a parasocial relationship may begin to actually believe that these characters exist materially; which is ironically a common trope used in media where the characters are celebrity figures, and their obsessed fans abduct them to spend time with their character persona.

Artistic freedom/individual expression.

The next need identified in the corpus was a desire to have free expression of self. This was especially prevalent in the R/AskWomen forum discussion, which focused specifically on the debut of Miley Cyrus' music transition at the MTV – VMAs. Many users were happy to see Cyrus perform in a non-traditional way, especially in light of her previous work with the Walt Disney corporation - which has been known for their

presentation of ‘family-friendly’ content. However, while comments focused on how some audience members were happy with how Cyrus was “assuming creative control over all her career aspects, including her image and music,” but others found issues with the performance, stating that “I’m all for self-expression of artists, but that just doesn’t seem to be what is going on in her situation” and another replied that;

“My thoughts exactly. I can’t help but feel sad for her. Her ego is being fed, but at the expense of people who are using her for their gain. And if she is into drugs as heavily as her music would lead us to believe, she is even more at risk for being manipulated, and strategically coerced into doing things that she would most likely not do in a more sound state”

(Miley 8).

Others who mentioned this performance discussed things like how she displayed herself as being ‘tough’ and ‘mature’ (Miley 9), which were traits that were present in the character she performed as while with Disney, but under the corporation’s image of how those features were to be displayed as. Perhaps what could be causing the issue here is a form of dissonance, as the image that is being portrayed by Cyrus now is still the same, but presented under her own definition of what it means to have the traits she promoted previously. Regardless, it is apparent that there is a desire for self-expression to be displayed, but it seems as if there is a line drawn and held as far as how that expression is expressed.

Altogether, if there were any at all from each source of discourse analyzed, the violations that were apparent for the celebrities were relatively similar. In the process, the changes which were identified as a violation of the expectations placed on the celebrity

figures typically were centered around the character of their persona. For some, minor shifts that are often seen as signs of maturity, such as usage of explicit language were more understandable, but anything that was seen as outright immoral behavior was the last straw for those who dismissed their relationships. Despite the fact that the celebrity figures exist in a relationship that is one sided relationship, their persona shift is rationalized not only in the way that is through the ideology of celebrity, but also as one might justify the behaviors of a significant other.

What's important to remember here is that in the parasocial relationship, the participation of the celebrity persona is much more limited than perceived by their fan bases who fill in the alternative role. In reality, the only time there is a truly direct interaction between the celebrity and the fan is during conventions or through occasional acknowledgments on social media. Otherwise, there is no mutual genuine connection ever shared. As mentioned above, celebrities will often create content that is rather generic to make it more relatable to their audiences, which a strategic marketing technique used to aid in creating content that represents the averageness of the audience members. However, it appears that this technique is one that also adds to the issue of celebrity expectations because through creating relatable material, they don't just represent themselves in their work, but their audiences as well start to feel that it is also a reflection of themselves.

Ideologies Utilized

Ideologies used to make sense of each transition were seemingly similar for all three celebrity fan bases. With the musicians both being treated as celebrity and as average, there was a blend of the two noticed in the rationales analyzed. In using a blend

of interpersonal and parasocial negotiating strategies, the examples used to create comparisons were presented in a way that displayed personal offenses to the values of the commentors, which suggests that there is some kind of projection of self on to the celebrity present in their parasocial relationships.

For those who did experience some sort of violation, it seemed as if the individual celebrity's behavior had a direct impact on not only themselves but the world around them as well. It was interesting to see the extent of which they felt that one celebrity might have on the world, because while they do carry influence, the insecurities shared within the corpus were rather extreme. However, with trend culture becoming more widespread, it is understandable that some concerns were raised with the new images presented by Cyrus, Grande, and Rodrigo.

Celebrity Influence of Presentation.

One of the most common concerns with media over the years is the impressionableness of what is presented within it. Many studies have been done on imitation practices with both media and figures presented in it, some of which have even found that such practices can show signs of potential psychological maladies, or even potential risky behaviors encouraged from it (Sansone & Sansone, 2014). A commentor on Cyrus' persona transition that seemed to believe that this would be an area of concern claims that "Miley has a 'far greater impact than hardcore porn'" (Miley 10). While not much context was shared on how this would be a potential concern, it seems fair to assume that it was in reference to the explicit content featured in Cyrus' lyrics, live performances, and music videos – such as heavy references to drinking, drug usage, nudity, and sexual behaviors that were 'glorified' in her songs (Miley 7). Having things

such as a 'Hannah Montana' clothing brand, which provides fans (specifically younger ones) with the opportunity to dress like Cyrus' Disney character, we can see how there is already a group of people that are willing to impersonate her.

This isn't the first time fear of imitation has popped up in pop culture. It seems as if each generation has its own 'Cyrus'. For example, the band KISS and before them, Elvis Presley received criticisms for their image as presented in performance and the potential negative influences they had over younger minds, which resulted in various protests from concerned parents. In their podcast, one respondent to Miley's persona change claimed that there is a respectable way to change your image, and that this simply felt like it was a race to bottom in our society, but also stated that they don't believe that this is the 'end of *this*' as well as also making reference to porn cultures effects on society (Miley 5). Despite previous research showing that emulation of celebrity behaviors after a deep bond is made between audience and celebrity, such as that which is formed in a parasocial relationship, is unlikely to occur (see; Boon & Lomore, 2001), it seems celebrity figures are held to a higher standard because of their social position. Perhaps with the drastic shift in accessibility to media consumption and creation, such studies should be revisited to reflect 'viral' culture, but for the most part the reactions seen after the persona shifts were rather limited to short lived trends and discussion as opposed to a world altering change.

Branding's Influence

Another ideology used in negotiations that was noticed was reference to the brands which the celebrities were associated with during the formation of the parasocial relationships established. As mentioned several times above, Cyrus' work with the Walt

Disney corporation was referenced heavily in criticisms. Comments such as “Miley is trying too hard to burn her prior Disney image” (Miley 9) were flooded throughout each source regarding her shift in this analysis, which is not without reason. Statements much like the one which stated that she has barely made it out of her ‘Disney jammies’ all seem to imply that her image should be, much like that which Disney prides itself on, is a ‘family friendly’ one – which obviously was not what her newer image took form of. However, one commenter claimed that what happened with Cyrus is “the same s*** that always happens to child stars” (Miley 8), which for the most part is true, because for many actors, shaking ties to previous roles/branding can be a rather troublesome task; such as with the ‘Superman’ curse, which implies that any actor who plays superman is cursed in some way, with one likely being that their career will suffer afterwards due to branding issues. Although, considering the feedback found for Grande and Rodrigo, that doesn’t quite seem to be the case for them.

It seems that the other two celebrities faced no branding related issues, despite the companies they were associated with still being referred to. For Grande, one commentor stated that “Expectations were at low as possible seeing as how Ariana is a product of Nickelodeon,” (Arianna 1) referring to how there is a significant difference between the success of former Disney celebrities and those who come from Nickelodeon; another commentor on the same forum even stated that “she should cancel her current Nick show before it damages her singing career.” Rodrigo faced similar treatment in feedback from those who held parasocial connections to her with the only difference being that there was some shock noted due to her usage of adult language in *Sour*. Perhaps still having loose connections to their work with the companies that provided them with the platforms

that allowed them to establish the parasocial relationships which were observed could have influenced their albums and the degree to which they shifted personas in some way, but these were still each celebrity's original debut release. Regardless, each celebrity was still connected to their prior and current branding as a means of justifying the acceptance or rejection of the persona shift, implying that a small shift from the familiar branding they held as created by their associated corporations does have some impact on the negotiations.

Musician as Celebrity

Reflection of art on the artist. The debate on whether we can separate art from the artist has been a long running one, especially in moment we exist in currently where celebrity careers are 'canceled' due to controversies they get involved with. When a situation like that occurs, audiences, regardless of if they are/were parasocially involved or not, have to decide whether or not to reject the artist's work. Fortunately, the persona shift Cyrus, Grande, and Rodrigo went through did not result in their careers being up for debate of cancellation, but it still put listeners in a spot where they had to decide whether to continue their relationships with them. That is because based on responses, there is a reflection of the music on the artist in the same way that their prior branding has on them, but is more so related to the lyrics present in their music and accompanying features. In comparison to Grande and Rodrigo, Cyrus clearly had the more drastic shift in both appearance and content in her debut album, so much so that one commentor stated that the issue held with her new content was the "Risky behaviors she glorifies," and another on the same thread stated that there are "No limits on sex or drugs or drinking or anything, it seems. That's the 'good life' according to Miley Cyrus these days" (Miley 7).

It's not necessarily a stretch to make that assumption after all considering the fact that Cyrus is credited on the lyrics and altered her image to fit the new genre she transitioned to, however, it does pose the question of where does the celebrity persona end?

Along the lines of this question, one commentator jests "Here's a look a look back at a gentler, simpler time when she was just bein' Miley, and not trying so hard to shock us" (Miley 6). This seems to suggest that the version of her that was seen on television was a true and arguably authentic version of who she is. With that being the logic in practice, it appears that there is no separation of character and actor for this specific individual. It is for that reason that many celebrities will intentionally avoid accepting certain types of roles – take for example, Robert Pattinson, who played a series of popular roles in a variety of films, but was constantly referred to as Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* series. When rumors of his involvement in *The Batman* emerged, chat forums and other social media platforms were flooded with jokes and various memes which mocked his potential casting due to the role he played as the angst-ridden teenage vampire. However, those specific criticisms soon faded away after the release of the movie in 2022. Unfortunately, such success isn't common for all of those who become niche cast actors/actresses, and many celebrities can find themselves locked into constantly playing the same character types for the duration of their careers, and face blacklisting if they attempt to venture away from it. Perhaps that was the risk Cyrus was willing to take, but nine years later it has become a distant memory, as she has once again reached the top of the music charts with her newest hit, *Flowers* (2023).

What is truly unique about the ideologies identified throughout the corpus is that the celebrity figures, whether a violation has occurred or not within the parasocial

relationship, are treated as both an average person and as a persona. As mentioned above, for some audience members, a fusion of persona and person occurs at some point in their relationship with the celebrity. The reason this is intriguing is because when that process occurs, the fictional becomes representative of reality. Many scholars have made that claim for literary and media works throughout time that fall under the category of fiction, but here it is much more apparent to see in real-time action.

The character personas which the celebrities play are presented as real and average people, despite their entire lives being fictitiously scripted. With this being the case, it makes sense that the shift would come across as a threat to not only the relationship between the audience and the celebrity. If the art is representative of the artist, the artist is representative of the audience, and the artist is representative of averageness, then if a drastic shift occurs, there could be potential for implications of similar shifts to have potential to occur in the lives of the audience. If such a shift occurs and it goes against the values and expectations of the audience, of course there could be potential for a negative response resulting in the rejection of the persona to occur.

Summary

In the corpus, several discussions regarding the persona shifts of three celebrities with similar backgrounds were analyzed, and the results were rather consistent based on the degree to which they occurred. What this might indicate is that in the parasocial connection that exists in the modern world is becoming more personal to the audience members which form them. However, what stood out to me the most was the constant implication of reflection of self seen in the relationships that experienced a violation or validation after the shift in persona presented.

The theme that constantly recurred within the corpus was that while the persona are acknowledged as celebrity, they are still held to the same expectations as an average person, even though the persona that is celebrity is itself fictional. This is unique because it is not something that is necessarily shared for all celebrity figures. It is through the representation of average reality that this is possible, which is why someone such as Grant Gustin, who plays the role of Barry Allen on the series *The Flash*, might be acknowledged as his persona by fans, but nobody places expectations on him that require him to be the embodiment of his character off screen because it is clearly acknowledged that his role is that of a completely fictional character, with nothing average about him.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Limitations

In this study, there were a few limitations that may have influenced the data collection. First, all figures used for focus in this study were female celebrity figures. The reason this was the route pursued was because consistency based on background was prioritized, and while there are other gendered celebrities that have gone through persona changes, using a sample that focused on three closely related figures allowed for less variance in gendered language to be present and lead to skewed results solely on that difference. Future research should focus on the other gendered figures to note any key differences between how persona shift is negotiated before there is a blend of the two together to clearly identify key characteristics that may be present in the process of interpreting the violation of expectancies.

An additional limitation to this study is that when using a corpus linguistic approach, it can be difficult to pinpoint the longevity of involvement that the authors of each posting have had with the celebrity figures. Fortunately, many of the commentors or content creators had mentioned their relationship in their discourse or have had additional comments/videos/podcasts featuring discussions on the celebrity figures prior to the discussions analyzed. Also, when using this approach, it can be difficult to determine whether or not some commentors are repeat posters, as individuals can create multiple accounts on single platforms or use alternative online usernames for different platforms, so biased flooding of opinions has the potential to occur within the corpus. With that in mind, considerations were made, and once theoretical saturation was achieved, data collection concluded and focused primarily on qualitative analysis as opposed to a

quantitative approach in order to focus primarily on the way the negotiation was structured. However, the corpus linguistic approach was necessary for this study due to the limitation of some of the figures going through their persona change short of a decade ago, and future work, while it may prove to be difficult to determine when it might occur, could benefit from capitalizing on a persona shift as it occurs, and could use this study as a starting point to develop a method to approach it with.

Implications

Expectations on what is acceptable and average were themes that reoccurred throughout the analysis of this study, arguing that those which stray too far from the values of the current society are causing a great offense. Perhaps it is because the celebrity figure in the parasocial relationship can take on the role of a significant other or as a figure for the audience member to vicariously live through experiences that they'll never have the opportunity to have themselves that diverging from the path of what they deem to be exceptional is can be perceived as such. After all, in the wake of cancel culture, we've seen how fast a celebrity's career can fall apart due to factual or false accusations when their behavior is no longer deemed fit for someone of their social status. Privacy is not something that is afforded to the celebrity, and that is something they either embrace or must learn how to avoid, and even even if they do, that won't stop the public from discussing their lives in person or online. However, this study wasn't an analysis of celebrity gossip, but instead found significant information about how perception of how the art is reflected on the artist through the ideology of averageness as well as how that image is used to negotiate shifts during periods of transition.

Theoretical Uses

Ideology of Averageness. The main standout of this study was how the ideology of averageness is utilized by the audience members when negotiating through this shift. To be 'average' seems to be a highly desirable trait for us to see in ourselves and those around us because it promotes the representation of mutual mediocrity. In celebrity culture, uniqueness is something that is highly desirable, however having some sort of gimmick is no longer enough to make some celebrity figures stand out. As the culture developed, the extravagant lifestyles which those with social fame had become more visible to the public eye, and it seems that it had struck a sour chord with audiences as figures that portrayed themselves as humble and respectable figures on camera were not as 'authentic' off camera.

When there is a fusion of celebrity and the character(s) they portray themselves as, there can be some feelings of confusion developed when observing the alternative persona. This was especially apparent in the case of Cyrus, who portrayed herself in her media, almost as if the show *Hannah Montana* was a documentary of her real life. While her character in the show still had (secret) celebrity status, one of the consistent struggles she dealt with was wanting to just live a 'normal' life while balancing her multiple personae. This seemed to become the expectation placed on her by some audience members who experienced a negative violation during the shift as her behavior deviated from the average traits and behaviors they had become accustomed to.

The issue presented in the ideology of averageness is that it seems to stifle creative freedom and recognize diversity. What is average and acceptable is relative to the individual, as it is entirely centered around their personal beliefs and values. What

this study has shown is that there is still more to learn about the way we come to terms with changes in persona, both with the celebrity persona and the everyday person.

Averageness and acceptability are shown to be linked together based on the findings in this study, indicating potential for a deeper understanding on what is the values of the current society. As noted in the commentary featured in the reddit discussion forum that touched on both Cyrus and Rodrigo, it was clear that as time went on, certain behaviors that Cyrus originally displayed in her individual debut became more acceptable in later reflection, but there was still an expression of relief from some commentors that touched on characteristics of Cyrus' persona shift that were less desirable that were not apparent in Rodrigo's shift. Going forward, research into the way that other characteristics of celebrity figures that diverge from traditional expectations of average could shed more light on limitations on how much a persona can express their individuality before they stray from the communities exceptionalism.

Linkage of EVT and Uses and Gratifications. It is clear that we use media to fill in gaps in our personal lives that are not met in our everyday lives, thus why we develop parasocial relationships to begin with. However, this is where familiarity truly comes into play, which is a feature of these types of relationships that is highlighted in most prior research on the nature of these connections. Familiarity is established through consistency, which is apparent in both interpersonal and parasocial relationships and is possible due to the observation of characteristics and behaviors in repetition. It is then that we begin to form expectations and place them on the other individuals involved in the relationship, with sets a baseline for what the exchange will consist of; (time spent engaging with content = gratifications being met). It is when that dynamic change occurs

that a violation that occurs because while one end of the exchange is still being met, the outcome that has been standard changes. In the case of the celebrity in a parasocial relationship, that expectation is the portrayal of a familiar character, representative of the character they portray both on and off camera.

When this dynamic is changed, it creates a space where a negotiation is required to be made by the audience to either continue or conclude the relationship. What was found to be unique in this study was specifically the choice to voice this negotiation in a public space, and what was found was that the expectation of averageness for these celebrities specifically was essential to the maintenance and reception of gratifications in the parasocial relationships. This could imply that the connection isn't solely with the celebrity as a persona, but specifically with the content they are involved with and the credibility that they have within it. As mentioned in the analysis, such violations occurred were when Cyrus had crossed the line with cultural appropriation in her live performance debut of her new persona at the 2013 VMAs as well as with the overtly sexual themes featured in the content itself – both of which were significant changes to the family-friendly average girl that audiences and the public had known her to be throughout the prior years. However, in the cases of Rodrigo and Grande, their shift was deemed to be more on character; Rodrigo currently going through a rather public breakup in which audiences sided with her (having been deemed the 'victim') and Grande moving towards more a more RnB style of music which had been an expressed interest of hers throughout the years prior to the shift. Thus, when the shift occurred, averageness was not necessarily a concern for their audiences, but instead their changes were seen as acceptable and average character growth. Future studies could use this information to

further understand how consistency and repetition of familiarity or the violation of those expectations created influence the process of seeking and obtaining gratifications through media and specific persona.

Parasocial Relationships. What this study has shown is that further research into parasocial relationships is worthy of pursuing further. There is often a bias held towards some of those often considered when the theory is discussed as thoughts towards those involved in the relationships are hard-core fanatics or ‘simps’ (an internet slang term used to describe someone that shows excessive attention, sexual desire, and sympathy toward another person who often does not reciprocate the same feelings). However, what this study shows is that it is not only those who are openly and excessively obsessed with a specific individual in media, but even the average fan. With how easily accessible media featuring celebrity personae has become since the foundation of the theory, with things such as the television and the internet being introduced, the potential for parasocial relationships to grow has increased, whether the audience member is aware of it being formed or not. Musicians, actors, influencers, and anyone who has access to the internet can amass a following that has the potential to fill the unsatisfied needs audience members are looking for any time they turn on their televisions or pick up their phones. When they find one that satisfies these needs, they can begin to follow the work of the persona and develop a deep connection to them. With these developments in media creation and consumption that are still constantly growing and altering, the theory that started out focusing on radio personalities has shown to have a significant impact on the individual because of how the parasocial relationship influences behaviors and emotions.

Future Research

Public Relations. Image and persona change is of course, not only a practice conducted by the celebrity. Companies and other organizations all can go through a type of rebranding to either change. This isn't simply just companies, such as Caterpillar Inc. going from making steam tractor machines to military earth moving equipment and power generators, but can be something such as a change of a well-known, but rather controversial mascot such as the imagery of Aunt Jemima used on Pepsi co. products, or even the change of professional athletic team mascots like the transition of the Washinton Redskins to the Washington Commanders. In these situations, similar discussions of violations to averageness can be seen due to the sudden change of an image that consumers and audiences have grown used to because what was once normal and acceptable is no longer acceptable in a more aware society.

In the same way, organizations such as law enforcement departments might also under similar circumstances where a sense of rebranding is something that becomes necessary, which has become much more common over the last few decades as while their purpose is to maintain law and order in their jurisdictions to protect its inhabitants, there is a significant divide between those who believe in the face value of that mission and those who are fearful of those who enforce it. This study showed how both positive and negative changes are negotiated by audiences who are directly involved with specific celebrity figures, but the same negotiation strategies could also be applied to how larger brands or organizations can better navigate the transition to a new persona with their communities, as those who are involved with them come to expect a certain sense of comfortability with them seeing as they have an active role in their lives, especially if

there is a certain set of expectations placed on them for what is average and acceptable. More so often now, discussions on what the role of law enforcement agencies play and the way they are perceived are a popular topic for all people, as situations of excessive force vs. necessary force and racial profiling present when enforcing the law are becoming more present to the public eye. While more than a persona change is needed, it is still a step that will need to be taken because once done it will have to be addressed to show efforts are being made. In that process, knowing how to become more average and acceptable to the public which they are there to protect could show to be beneficial.

Of course, the next area of public relations this study could reap benefits for is that which was the focus of this study; the celebrity. It's not always child stars wanting to take on more adult themes in their work, but actors /actresses who always play the hero/heroine may want to move towards playing the antagonist, athletes may want to even try their hand at a different sport or even venture towards the screen or stage. Essentially, not everyone is content with playing the same role for the entirety of their career, just like how the average-everyday person won't always be content with sitting in a cubical from 9-5 throughout their time in the workforce. However, while an accountant might receive a few likes on their Facebook page when they announce via posting that they're closed their laptop to repurpose a van to travel around the country with their dog to start a vlog, the celebrity is already under public surveillance where they've established credibility and familiarity with their audiences. Knowing how to effectively navigate this potential violation could help them maintain their image more effectively moving forward with their interests, especially if they are the kind that requires an audience for validation. In additional studies, identifying specific traits of averageness

that are the expectation for the celebrity would be beneficial to outlining ways to plan out a successful transition of persona for essentially any individual or entity that is consistently under public observation.

Interpersonal Relationships. This study primarily focuses on how the dynamic of the parasocial relationship is impacted by a persona shift when there is an expectation of familiarity that is violated. However, due to the similar nature of the parasocial relationship and the interpersonal relationship, this study and similar future work could have potential to help us understand how a shift in familiarity or the averageness of significant others is navigated. For example, consider a parent going through a midlife crisis, an older sibling going through a rebellious phase, or a romantic partner showing interest in moving from a monogamy structured relationship to a polyamorous one. The individuals that have become familiar to use due to our repeated voluntary or involuntary exposure to them is being altered and an expectation that is being violated now needs to be negotiated. Unfortunately, an issue that is present with studying these specific changes is that being able to study them requires us to be able to observe and analyze them as they occur, which can happen at any point in time, making it highly unpredictable.

Thus, due to the similarities between parasocial and interpersonal relationships, we are able to have access to information that can be related to the persona which is documented more thoroughly because a part of celebrity culture is the active documentation of the relationship people have with their persona of interest. Another benefit of using internet documented expressions is that due to the checks and balances of social medias when it comes to making claims, statements shared within communities tend to be more genuine to the author's beliefs and values because the likelihood of

encountering others who would challenge their claims is much higher, leading most people to find that their online messages are more honest than their face-to-face interactions or phone calls (Aguilera, 2018). That's not to say that nobody has ever lied on the internet to 'stir the pot' or gain attention/'clout,' but honest expression is much easier for some with the mask of a virtual screen to protect their identity, allowing them to even distance themselves from connection to their own truths in the event that there is any negative perception of their claims. Moving forward, this study can be used to analyze potential factors in how we navigate persona changes in our own interpersonal relationships because of how it bypasses specific barriers that aren't present in the parasocial relationship.

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Appendix

Coding Sheet

NAME:

Mode of Feedback: Typed Feedback – Forum (TF), Audio Recording (AR), Audio-Visual Recording (VR)

Identifier of parasocial relationship – Prior Engagement (PE)

Sociopsychological need identified:

Gratifications Sought/Gratifications Obtained/Expectancy Violation:

Celebrity Ideology:

Musician Ideology: