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## Platform Affordances, Producers, and the Attention Economy: From Red (Taylor's Version) to The Life of a Showgirl

Angela Rose Asuncion  
Auckland University of Technology, em12863@aut.ac.nz

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## Introduction

Taylor Swift occupies a unique position within contemporary popular culture, operating as a musician, storyteller, media strategist, and cultural phenomenon. Her influence extends beyond the music industry into politics, economics, digital fandom, and global cultural discourse, shaped by wider shifts in creative and cultural industries (Caves; Currid-Halkett and Scott). In an era where visibility has become both an economic asset and a cultural resource, Swift's ability to mobilise attention across platforms positions her as a defining case for understanding the evolving relationship between celebrity, audiences, and the socio-technical systems that mediate cultural participation (Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*; Fuchs; Dyer, *Stars*). Scholars increasingly examine how Swift navigates the convergences of digital culture, fandom, and platform logics (Bengtsson and Edlom; Whiteside; Zafina and Sinha).

This article examines Swift's approach to fandom and digital platform promotion across the 2021 re-release of *Red (Taylor's Version)* and the 2025 debut of *The Life of a Showgirl*. This comparison demonstrates how celebrity visibility is shaped by the affordances and participatory structures of social media (Abidin, *Mapping Internet Celebrity*; Kaye et al.; Ma and Hu). While existing scholarship has explored Swift's storytelling practices, literary skill, fandom, and re-recording (Bengtsson and Edlom; Tribulski; Yuvaraj), less attention has been paid to how her eras embody distinct visibility strategies in which intimacy, spectacle, affect, and narrative are operationalised within platform environments. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram do not simply distribute content; they structure the conditions that generate, circulate, and amplify visibility within fandoms (Fuchs; Podosokorsky).

Drawing on platform studies, participatory culture, and celebrity theory, Swift's recent eras illustrate the co-evolution of celebrity performance and platform infrastructures. The promotion of *Red (Taylor's Version)* displayed an intimacy-oriented visibility shaped by speculation, nostalgia, and fan-led participation (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Whiteside; Yahr). Conversely, *The Life of a Showgirl* demonstrates curated and choreographed forms of spectacle-driven visibility, through cinematic teasers, cross-platform reveals, and aesthetic coherence optimised for algorithmic and transmedia circulation (Abidin and Lee; Hernando Velasco et al.; Suriyapong). Through comparative analysis, these eras reflect broader transformations in platformed stardom, where artists strategically navigate aesthetic, affective, and algorithmic demands (Haynes and Marshall; Hesmondhalgh and Kaye; Whateley).

A configurational, comparative analysis drawing on principles of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is used. Two eras—*Red (Taylor's Version)* and *The Life of a Showgirl*—are compared according to platform affordances, aesthetic strategies, parasocial cues, and amplification patterns. Following Ragin's case-oriented logic, the analysis identifies how these conditions combine into distinct visibility configurations and how conjunctural mechanisms shape the production of intimacy-oriented versus spectacle-oriented visibility. This approach enables a structurally grounded comparison focused on the infrastructural and strategic dynamics through which celebrity visibility is generated.

## Literature Review

### Platformised Celebrity and Visibility

The contemporary media landscape is increasingly shaped by platformisation, where platform logics become embedded into cultural production, distribution, and consumption (Nieborg and Poell; van Dijck et al.). Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok function as cultural intermediaries that regulate visibility and participation through algorithmic governance (Gillespie). Visibility itself operates as a form of symbolic and economic power, determining which cultural objects gain traction (Banet-Weiser). Algorithmic infrastructures intensify these dynamics by prioritising content aligned with platform-specific patterns of novelty, affect, and engagement (Bucher).

Within this context, celebrity culture becomes increasingly tied to the ability to mobilise audience attention across platforms. Scholars note that contemporary celebrity operates through managed visibility, strategic self-presentation, and affective performance (Marshall; Marwick; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*). These dynamics are amplified on social media, where visibility is contingent upon sustained aesthetic consistency, narrative coherence, and responsiveness to audience expectations (Fuchs). Swift's digital presence exemplifies these transformations, demonstrating how celebrity identities are negotiated through platform affordances, fan expectations, and algorithmic systems.

Bringing together platform studies and celebrity studies provides a productive context for analysing contemporary music promotion. While celebrity scholarship has examined concepts such as star images, audience identification, and self-presentation, platform studies emphasises the systems that shape how cultural

visibility emerges and circulates. Examining Swift's promotional eras through both lenses highlights how celebrity visibility is simultaneously a cultural performance and a technologically mediated outcome structured by platform affordances.

### Participatory Culture, Fan Labour, and Producership

Jenkins emphasises how audiences contribute to meaning-making through interpretation, circulation, creative remixing, and community-based discourse (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*). Bruns extends this through producership, where users act simultaneously as producers and consumers. Swift's "SwiftTok" fandom embodies this by generating interpretations, edits, transitions, and speculative commentary that extend the cultural life of Swift's releases.

Participation within fandoms often centres around interpretive labour, Easter-egg decoding, and collaborative meaning-making (Whiteside; Hills). Abidin argues that digital fandoms operate within economies of attention and affect, where participation yields both cultural and promotional value. While these frameworks illuminate fan activity, they offer limited insight into how platform infrastructures shape and constrain the conditions under which participation becomes visible. This study therefore reframes participation through platform-mediated visibility, where algorithmic, aesthetic, and temporal factors determine which fan practices gain traction.

### Parasociality, Authenticity, and Affective Economies

Parasocial relationships exhibit long-distance feelings of intimacy between audiences and public figures, and remain a defining feature of celebrity culture (Horton and Wohl). In digital contexts, these dynamics intensify as platforms encourage emotional proximity and curated authenticity (Marwick). Swift relies on crafted intimacy, including confessional storytelling and emotionally resonant narratives that encourage identification and attachment (Zafina and Sinha).

Choreographed engagement evidenced in this context shows how participation may appear spontaneous yet is structured to serve commercial and narrative objectives (Bengtsson and Edlom). This reflects broader affective economies in which emotional labour and relational cues become key drivers of visibility.

## TikTok and Instagram as Affordances for Cultural Circulation

TikTok's short-form, remixable formats and algorithmically driven distribution demonstrate how affordances structure visibility. The platform privileges novelty, repetition, and emotive audiovisual content (Kaye et al.). This enables content and narratives to circulate rapidly through user-driven reinterpretation (Abidin, *Mapping Internet Celebrity*). Instagram, by contrast, emphasises visual coherence, curation, and shareability, making it effective for constructing narrative cohesiveness and iconic motifs (Suriyapong; Hernando Velasco et al.).

Swift's eras demonstrate how artists navigate these affordances to orchestrate narrative arcs, create aesthetic signatures, and cultivate spectacle or intimacy depending on strategic objectives. While research has examined TikTok's role in music promotion (Coulter; Whateley), fewer studies address how Swift's differing eras reveal shifts in visibility—from intimacy-driven speculation in *Red (Taylor's Version)* to spectacle-oriented, platform-calibrated choreography in *The Life of a Showgirl*.

## Methodology

This study employs a comparative analysis informed by the principles of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). Developed by Charles Ragin in *The Comparative Method*, QCA offers a way of studying how configurations of conditions—rather than single variables—produce social outcomes (Ragin, *Comparative Method*; Fiss). Ragin's case-oriented approach emphasises conjunctural causation and complexity, treating each case as a “complex constellation of elements” whose effects cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation (Ragin, *Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis* 122-23).

Rather than implementing QCA in its full set-theoretic form, this research adopts QCA's underlying configurational logic to examine how different combinations of conditions generate particular outcomes—such as modes of celebrity visibility—rather than to test variable-based relationships (Ragin, *Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis*; Fiss). QCA is often applied to intermediate-N research designs that typically involve approximately ten to fifty cases which may be too large for in-depth qualitative analysis but too small for conventional statistical analysis (Ragin, *Comparative Method*; Greckhamer et al.). In its full methodological form, QCA would involve analytical procedures such as calibration procedures, truth tables, or formal tests of necessity and sufficiency (Ragin, *Comparative Method*). However, these procedures are not applied in this study as

it only draws on QCA's underlying case-oriented logic to analyse how distinct constellations of conditions shape modes of celebrity visibility across platform environments.

Given the small number of cases examined, the study is best understood as a configurational comparative case study informed by QCA principles rather than a formal QCA model. This approach remains consistent with Ragin's emphasis on "casing" as a central step in comparative research, where cases are constructed as analytically meaningful rather than isolated observations (Ragin, *Casing and the Process of Social Research* 218-20). Within this framework, the goal is not statistical generalisation but analytical comparison between complex cases in order to identify recurring mechanisms and relational patterns (Fiss; Greckhamer et al.).

Configurational approaches emphasise causal complexity, recognising that social outcomes often emerge from combinations of interacting conditions rather than from single factors operating independently (Fiss 394–96; Ragin, *The Comparative Method*). From this perspective, conditions operate together, which means that the effect of any one element depends on how it interacts with others within a given case. This perspective also recognises the possibility of equifinality, where different combinations of conditions can produce similar outcomes (Fiss 397). When applied to celebrity visibility, it becomes possible to examine how platform affordances, aesthetic strategies, and parasocial cues interact to produce distinct modes of cultural visibility across Swift's promotional periods.

In contemporary music marketing, album release cycles—referred to as "eras" within fan and industry discourse—function as bounded promotional periods characterised by distinctive aesthetic identities, narrative arcs, and platform strategies. Treating these release cycles as cases therefore enables the analysis to examine how shifting platform affordances and promotional tactics interact within specific cultural moments.

Both eras considered here—*Red (Taylor's Version)* and *The Life of a Showgirl*—are treated as individual cases composed of interdependent conditions, including platform affordances, aesthetic strategies, parasocial techniques, and amplification patterns. Following configurational research traditions, each era is conceptualised as a visibility configuration composed of interacting cultural, technological, and aesthetic elements. This approach aligns with small-N configurational analysis, which examines how specific combinations of conditions shape outcomes (Greckhamer et al.). By adopting this framing, the analysis foregrounds how platform environments and celebrity strategies co-produce visibility. In this sense, QCA functions here as a configurational analytical lens for examining how platform affordances, celebrity strategies, and fan practices combine to produce distinct configurations of cultural visibility.

The analysis examines Swift-related TikToks, Instagram posts, key promotional appearances, and representative fan amplification patterns, treating fan content as contextual evidence rather than formal data. Only publicly available artefacts are referenced where they clarify the analysis and names have been altered where necessary for privacy. This follows platform studies conventions in which fan content evidences circulation rather than serving as a coded dataset (Gillespie; van Dijck et al.).

Analytically, the study proceeds in three configurational steps:

1. Case construction and condition identification: mapping platform affordances, aesthetics, narrative techniques, parasocial cues, and circulation patterns (Kaye et al.; Fuchs).
2. Configuration analysis: examining how these conditions combine within each era into recognisable visibility configurations and identifying the thematic mechanisms that animate them.
3. Comparative evaluation: identifying how differing conjunctures of conditions produce contrasting visibility regimes.

By drawing on QCA's configurational logic, this methodological design theorises Swift's platform evolution in terms of visibility infrastructures and strategic condition combinations rather than isolated variables or audience interpretations. It bridges case-oriented analysis with platform and celebrity studies in a manner appropriate for small-N media research.

To contextualise the comparative analysis, Table 1 summarises the key conditions, mechanisms, and platform dynamics associated with each visibility configuration.

Table 1. Comparative visibility configurations of *Red (Taylor's Version)* and *The Life of a Showgirl*, illustrating the conditions, mechanisms, and platform dynamics shaping each era's mode of visibility.

	<b>Red (Taylor’s Version)</b>	<b>The Life of a Showgirl</b>
<b>Core Visibility Logic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational</li> <li>• Participatory</li> <li>• Affective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orchestrated</li> <li>• Aesthetic</li> <li>• Algorithmic</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgic affective anchor.</li> <li>• Interpretive labour.</li> <li>• Easter-egg decoding.</li> <li>• TikTok personal storytelling affordances.</li> <li>• Algorithmic amplification of emotional content.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unified theatrical aesthetic.</li> <li>• High-production micro-events.</li> <li>• Parasocial intimacy.</li> <li>• Cross-platform visibility loops.</li> </ul>
<b>Illustrative Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “All Too Well (10-Minute Version)” reactions.</li> <li>• Easter egg decoding.</li> <li>• Fan-led trends: “Wildest Dreams,” “Mama Said,” “The Assignment”.</li> <li>• Nostalgic edits and personalised narrative videos.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instagram visuals showcasing album branding (spotlight motifs, sequins, teal–gold/orange).</li> <li>• Cinematic teasers.</li> <li>• Podcast micro-events: Pinocchio toy in background, three-fingers gesture, “47,” “morse code”, etc.</li> <li>• TikTok remixes: Backstreet Boys’ “Everybody”/“Elizabeth Taylor”; Flo Rida’s “Low”/“Opalite”.</li> </ul>
<b>Interaction Pathways</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretive.</li> <li>• Affective.</li> <li>• Platform-affordance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spectacle.</li> <li>• Parasocial orchestration.</li> <li>• Cross-platform amplification.</li> </ul>
<b>Dominant Platform Affordances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remixing.</li> <li>• Personalised algorithmic feeds.</li> <li>• Fan-generated content and discourse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instagram grid design.</li> <li>• TikTok editing culture—remixing and overlay reacts.</li> <li>• Podcast virality.</li> </ul>
<b>Aesthetic Strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgia</li> <li>• Symbolic ambiguity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theatrical maximalism.</li> <li>• Cinematic coherence.</li> </ul>

	<b>Red (Taylor’s Version)</b>	<b>The Life of a Showgirl</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretive openness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinated visuals.</li> </ul>
<b>Parasocial Orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational closeness.</li> <li>• Participatory decoding.</li> <li>• Encouraging trend culture.</li> <li>• Sense of being “just like you”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineered intimacy.</li> <li>• Staged spontaneity.</li> <li>• Micro-events.</li> </ul>
<b>Circulation Pattern Loop</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fan-led: fans initiate trends → algorithm amplifies → Swift responds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artist-led: Swift content → fans remix → algorithm amplifies → cross-platform spillover.</li> </ul>
<b>Visibility Outcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intimacy-oriented.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spectacle-oriented.</li> </ul>

This outlines the structural differences between the two eras; the case studies that follow examine how these conditions materialise within platform environments. Each case demonstrates how affective, aesthetic, and infrastructural dynamics combine to produce the visibility regimes associated with *Red (Taylor’s Version)* and *The Life of a Showgirl*. The first case focuses on *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, showing how participatory speculation, personalised storytelling, and affective engagement converge to form an intimacy-oriented configuration.

## Case Study 1

### *Red (Taylor’s Version)—Intimacy-Oriented Visibility Configuration*

*Red (Taylor’s Version)* exemplifies an intimacy-oriented visibility configuration, in which visibility emerges from a conjuncture of affective, narrative, and platform-level conditions. This aligns with scholarship emphasising how digital celebrity often hinges on emotional resonance, authenticity cues, and relational closeness (Marwick; Marshall). Drawing on configurational logic, the era can be understood as shaped by four interdependent conditions, each contributing to how cultural visibility was produced and sustained:

### **Nostalgia as an affective anchor**

The re-release functioned as a nostalgic anchor, as the songs on *Red (Taylor's Version)* have been familiar to fans since 2012. Across TikTok, fans shared emotional reactions, such as live reactions to the long-awaited "All Too Well (10-Minute Version)". Creators such as Michelle filmed group reaction videos with friends while watching the "All Too Well (10-Minute Version)" short film, capturing moments of surprise, laughter, and emotional commentary as the narrative unfolded. Spencer similarly posted first-listen reactions using on-screen text that gave audiences the category of "Literally amazing wow what how did she do that" on the left side of the screen and "Still so good just might need some time with it" on the right then, physically stepping to the left or right of the screen under the words that indicated his reaction to each track played. These formats tie Swift's re-release to users' own coming-of-age narratives, reinforcing a shared affective register. Collectively, they sustain emotional memory, supporting research on nostalgia and cultural engagement (Weingarten and Wei; Langaro et al.).

### **Interpretive labour and clue-based participation**

Swift is known for embedding Easter eggs in her content. A #SwiftTok search shows fans analysing visual motifs, numerical patterns, and continuity across Swift's media, positioning themselves as co-investigators within a collective decoding. Creators such as Alex analyse symbolic details within the "I Bet You Think About Me" music video highlighting props used, use of symbols such as an apple, numerical motifs and costuming that could signal hidden messages. Joseph further extends this interpretive process by stitching another fan's video—created by another popular SwiftTok creator by the name of Tessa—to compare imagery from the original Red era with the Taylor's Version album artwork and related visuals. This collaborative practice expands the interpretive thread across multiple posts and fosters communal anticipation and sustain speculation, exemplifying participatory culture and interpretive fandom (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Whiteside). This also demonstrates produsage, where audiences actively interact with the intention of producing content extending the artists' promotional ecosystem (Bruns).

### **Alignment with TikTok's personal storytelling affordances**

TikTok's short-form, remixable structure enables fans to integrate Swift's music into personalised narratives, demonstrating platform logic (Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*; Kaye et al.). Fan-led trends such as the "Wildest Dreams" transition illustrate how users employ Swift's songs as narrative devices for identity-driven content, often beginning with a simple, everyday moment before transitioning—in a way that is synchronised with the song's beat—into a stylised outfit, romantic

imagery, or nostalgic memory that visually echo the song's lyrical themes. This type of example reveals how affordances enable highly individual yet culturally shared interpretations. Swift's occasional participation in these trends—such as using the “Mama Said” and “Assignment” sounds—blurs boundaries between artist and audience, reinforcing her engagements with fan vernaculars.

### **Algorithmic amplification of emotionally expressive content**

TikTok's For You Page prioritises affectively charged, personalised content—a dynamic central to platform-structured visibility and emotional virality (Fuchs; Podosokorsky). Reaction videos, nostalgic edits, and commentary were repeatedly surfaced and recirculated, enabling emotionally resonant *Red (Taylor's Version)* content to reach broad audiences and extend the era's cultural lifespan beyond traditional promotional cycles.

### **Conjunctural interactions**

These conditions interacted through several conjunctural mechanisms:

- Interpretive conjuncture: narrative ambiguity, fan speculation, and TikTok formats align to produce iterative discovery within a multisocial, affective fandom (Hills).
- Affective conjuncture: nostalgia, parasocial closeness, and expressive fan-generated videos, reflecting Horton and Wohl's parasocial intimacy.
- Platform-affordance conjuncture: TikTok's audio reuse and remixability enable continuous reinterpretation and circulation (Kaye et al.).

Together, these mechanisms illustrate how fans became co-creators of visibility, amplifying Swift's promotional materials through interpretive labour, emotional expression, and platform-native creativity.

Ultimately, *Red (Taylor's Version)* demonstrates how intimacy-oriented visibility emerges not from spectacle but from relationality, emotional resonance, and participatory storytelling—conditions amplified by platform infrastructures and fan interpretive practices.

## **Case Study 2**

### *The Life of a Showgirl—Spectacle-Oriented Visibility Configuration*

*The Life of a Showgirl* represents a shift toward a spectacle-oriented visibility configuration, where visibility emerges through artist-led orchestration, aesthetic coherence, and cross-platform sequencing. This reflects broader digital platform dynamics in which cultural visibility is increasingly shaped by strategic self-

presentation and algorithmically optimised media forms (Nieborg and Poell; van Dijk et al.). This is structured by four key conditions:

### **A unified theatrical aesthetic, optimised for Instagram**

Instagram's grid aesthetic encourages coherent, recognisable visual identities and supports aesthetic strategies across TikTok and Instagram subcultures (Hansen; Suriyapong). Swift's "showgirl" aesthetic—spotlight silhouettes, sequined costuming, feathered motifs, and a consistent orange/gold-teal palette—was immediately visible in Swift's posts leading up to the October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025 release of the album. The striking aesthetic spread through fan content and brand appropriations such as Spotify's New York installation, Krispy Kreme promotions, and New Zealand Police safety messaging. Its rapid uptake underscores its built-in recognisability.

### **High-production micro-spectacles designed for short-form circulation**

The content and micro-events creating the showgirl-era was markedly more produced than *Red (Taylor's Version)*. A high-quality audio-visual podcast, cinematic release and theatrical imagery exemplify integrated entertainment marketing strategies (Hennig-Thurau and Houston). This meets platform expectations for high-impact, visually coded media (Hernando Velasco et al.). Short-form clips from podcasts, photoshoots, and teasers circulated widely as TikTok transitions, commentary, and remixes, functioning as modular promotional assets optimised for algorithmic recognition.

### **Parasocial micro-events engineered for virality**

Promotion relied on micro-events designed to generate closeness and perceived spontaneity. The *New Heights* podcast announcement leveraged the dynamics of parasocial authenticity and "choreographed engagement" (Marwick; Bengtsson and Edlom). Fans extracted and circulated clips—including reference to a Pinocchio figurine that is visible in the background of their studio set, Swift's three-fingers gesture, repeated references being made to the number "47", and Swift rhythmically tapping in a way fans may interpret as "Morse code"—treating these moments as potential Easter eggs embedded within the podcast interview. Viral clips of Swift offering relationship advice reinforced a sense of unscripted intimacy despite the polished framing. Ancillary events, such as the limited cinema screenings, heightened exclusivity and parasocial closeness.

### **Cross-platform visibility loops**

Instagram content catalysed edits on TikTok and Instagram, demonstrating how platforms act as cultural intermediaries shaping circulation (Gillespie). Posts were rapidly reused in TikTok stitches and reactions, evidencing its growing influence

over music visibility cycles (Whateley). Swift's Instagram content often seeds TikTok trends that generate compilations, remixes, mashups, or reposts that re-circulate across Instagram Reels. These cyclical flows form a cross-platform visibility loop driven by iterative remixing. These circulation patterns reflect cross-platform circulation within platform ecosystems, where content migrates across platforms through iterative remixing and reinterpretation (van Dijck et al.; Nieborg and Poell). In this process, artist-generated media functions as an initial trigger, while fan practices extend the lifecycle of promotional content across algorithmically distinct environments (Kaye et al.). The resulting visibility loops blur the distinction between promotional messaging and participatory culture, as fan reinterpretations amplify and transform the aesthetic cues within Swift's original posts. Audio remixes—such as the mashup of Backstreet Boys' 'Everybody'/'Elizabeth Taylor' or Flo Rida's 'Low'/'Opalite'—are examples that further demonstrate how the Showgirl motifs travelled across platforms through fan-led practices sparked by artist-led cues.

### **Conjunctural interactions**

These conditions interact through several mechanisms:

- Spectacle conjuncture: cinematic visuals combine with algorithm-optimised formats to produce immediate recognisability, reflecting Banet-Weiser's account of structured visibility.
- Cross-platform amplification conjuncture: platform coupling producing cyclical media flows (Kaye et al.).
- Parasocial orchestration conjuncture: curated "authenticity moments" produce viral engagement despite their strategic construction (Bengtsson and Edlom 70).

Together, these dynamics produce a visibility configuration marked by aesthetic maximalism, narrative control, and algorithmic orientation. Unlike *Red (Taylor's Version)*, this configuration privileges orchestration over interpretation and spectacle over intimacy.

## **Discussion**

### **Configuring Visibility in a Platform-Based Media Environment**

This comparative analysis reveals how Swift's two eras are shaped by distinct visibility configurations that emerge from the interaction of multiple structural conditions within platform-based media environments. Viewed through a

configurational lens, these differences do not arise from single platform features but from the interaction of multiple conditions that together produce distinct modes of visibility. As platform studies scholarship argues, visibility is no longer simply a function of audience interest but of infrastructural design—algorithmic curation, affordance structures, and cross-platform data flows (Nieborg and Poell; van Dijck et al.). *Red (Taylor’s Version)* incited emotional fan reactions to “All Too Well (10-Minute Version)” which were amplified through TikTok’s intimacy-oriented algorithm. By contrast, the aesthetic of *The Life of a Showgirl* spread rapidly due to its visual recognisability optimisation for Instagram’s grid-based affordances with more staged and polished content. Both album releases exemplify how these infrastructural dynamics are mobilised in different ways: participant-led storytelling in the former and artist-led, aesthetically orchestrated spectacle in the latter.

This supports Gillespie’s argument that platforms act as cultural intermediaries shaping not only distribution but the logic of cultural visibility itself. In each case, visibility emerges not merely from content but from the interplay between content, platform architecture, and user engagement patterns. This dynamic highlights a shifting balance between celebrity agency and platform power. While Swift’s promotional strategies demonstrate a high degree of aesthetic orchestration and narrative control, the visibility of these strategies remains dependent on algorithmic structures that shape discoverability and engagement. TikTok’s personalised recommendation system and Instagram’s visually ordered grid create distinct conditions that can help or hinder the traction of promotional content. In this context, celebrity visibility becomes not only a matter of artistic intention but of strategic alignment with platform-specific logics of circulation.

Platforms therefore function not only as channels for cultural distribution but as infrastructures that actively shape the conditions under which visibility can emerge. In attention-driven media environments, cultural visibility is increasingly organised through algorithmic systems that prioritise content according to patterns of engagement, novelty, and affective resonance. In this context, celebrity promotion becomes inseparable from the strategic management of platform affordances. Artists must create promotional materials that are legible within platform-specific logics of circulation. This means to account for the possibility of platform features including remixing of short-form video, creating visual coherence within grid-based feeds, and rapid amplification through emotionally expressive content. Swift’s contrasting eras illustrate how celebrity strategies are recalibrated to operate within these infrastructures. The participatory intimacy of *Red (Taylor’s Version)* aligns with TikTok’s algorithmic preference for affective storytelling and personalised narrative formats. On the other hand, the orchestrated spectacle of *The Life of a Showgirl* reflects a strategy optimised for cross-platform visibility,

aesthetic recognisability, and algorithmic amplification. Visibility in this sense, emerges not simply from fan engagement or celebrity performance but from the alignment between cultural production and platform architectures that govern attention in the contemporary media ecosystem.

### Shifts from Participatory Intimacy to Choreographed Spectacle

The findings extend existing scholarship on participatory culture and fan labour. The case studies demonstrate participatory culture through interpretive, circulatory, and community-driven forms of fan labour (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*). This is strongly reflected in *Red (Taylor's Version)*'s reliance on clue-based speculation, affective resonance, and fan-led amplification. TikTok trends such as the "Wildest Dreams" transition trend highlight how fans mobilised Swift's music as scaffolding for personalised narratives, acting as interpretive co-producers, performing "visibility labour" (Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*). Further aligning with Hills's emphasis on affective and interpretive digital fandom.

However, *The Life of a Showgirl* demonstrates the limits of traditional participatory culture frameworks. Instead of inviting interpretive labour, the era exemplifies "choreographed engagement," where participation is structured—if not pre-scripted—through the aesthetic cues, parasocial prompts, and platform-calibrated media (Bengtsson and Edlom 67-70). The podcast micro-events are illustrative: fans' analyses of the Pinocchio in the background, the three-fingers gesture, and repeated "47" references indicate interpretive activity, yet the visibility remains dictated by Swift's orchestrated timing and algorithmic processing. This echoes authenticity as a cultivated, not spontaneous, persona (Marwick; Dyer, *Stars*).

This shift marks a transition from participatory visibility to orchestrated visibility, where affect remains central but is channelled through precise aesthetic and temporal choices rather than open-ended interpretation. The contrast between fan-led TikTok trends in *Red (Taylor's Version)* and artist-seeded content loops in *The Life of a Showgirl* underscores this distinction. The two eras therefore demonstrate how celebrity presence is not static but responsive to evolving affordances and audience expectations.

### Visibility Configurations as a Framework for Understanding Digital Celebrity

By conceptualising the two eras as visibility configurations, this study offers an analytical framework that connects celebrity strategy with platform infrastructures.

Rather than examining visibility as a singular condition, the configurational approach recognises that it emerges from combinations of factors— affective cues, aesthetic strategies, affordances, parasocial mechanisms, and algorithmic rhythms—that interact to produce distinct outcomes. The case studies reveal how condition clusters—such as nostalgia + interpretive labour + TikTok’s personalised algorithm in *Red (Taylor’s Version)* or theatrical aesthetics + cinematic teasers + cross-platform loops in *The Life of a Showgirl*—form coherent pathways to visibility.

This evidences social phenomena being shaped by configurations rather than linear, isolated variables (Ragin, *Comparative Method*). In *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, visibility arises from the conjuncture of nostalgia, interpretive labour, and emotionally expressive platform logics. In *The Life of a Showgirl*, it emerges from spectacle, orchestrated parasociality, cross-platform sequencing, and aesthetic coherence.

The framework also contributes to visibility studies by demonstrating how different modes of visibility—relational, interpretive, affective, or spectacular—are not inherent to the artist but constructed through platform-specific strategies and technological infrastructures. This illustrates visibility as structured cultural power (Banet-Weiser). Further, underscores the role of mediated self-presentation (Marshall; Dyer, *Stars*). The evidence from both case studies highlights how Swift recalibrates her strategy to align with shifting platform affordances and attention dynamics.

Ultimately, the two configurations reflect broader transformations in platform-based stardom, where artists navigate affordances and algorithmic pressures to produce visibility that resonates within distinct cultural and technological environments. Swift’s eras exemplify visibility as a strategic, infrastructurally mediated accomplishment, shaped by aesthetic, affective, and algorithmic forces.

While this study gives insight into the visibility dynamics of two distinct promotional periods—rather “eras” in this specific study—it focuses on a single artist with over two decades of experience and time to build a strong fan base in addition to well-developed platform strategies that are uniquely sophisticated. Future research could apply configurational approaches to additional artists, genres, or platform environments to test the broader applicability of this framework. This study focuses on analysing publicly observable promotional materials and circulation patterns rather than direct examination of audience discourse. Incorporating systematic analysis of fan discussions and community interactions could provide deeper insight into how these visibility strategies are interpreted and negotiated within fan communities.

## Conclusion

This article examines how Taylor Swift's *Red (Taylor's Version)* and *The Life of a Showgirl* articulate two distinct visibility configurations shaped by platform affordances, aesthetic strategies, and the interactional dynamics of digital culture. Through a comparative case-based analysis, the research reveals that visibility in platform-based media environments is not a singular or stable phenomenon but the outcome of shifting combinations of affective, aesthetic, and algorithmic forces. This extends platform studies by demonstrating how celebrity visibility emerges from platform-strategy interactions rather than content alone.

The *Red (Taylor's Version)* era illustrates a mode of visibility in which attention is anchored in intimacy, nostalgia, and participatory meaning-making. Here, fan interpretive labour, personalised video narratives, and TikTok's affect-driven algorithm combine into a relational visibility regime. Conversely, *The Life of a Showgirl* exemplifies a spectacle-driven visibility pattern defined by aesthetic orchestration, cross-platform sequencing, and strategic parasocial micro-events. In this regime, visibility becomes a strategic performance calibrated to platform infrastructures and the attention economy.

Together, these contrasting visibility dynamics reveal how contemporary celebrity practice operates as an adaptive negotiation with platform logics. Swift's eras demonstrate the dynamic interplay between artist agency and infrastructural constraint, showing how celebrities mobilise different combinations of conditions to produce visibility that resonates within particular cultural and technological contexts. This contributes to broader debates in platform and celebrity studies by illustrating visibility as a strategic, multi-platform assemblage rather than a discrete promotional moment. The comparison also demonstrates that effective promotion relies on strategic curation and responsiveness to platform affordances and fan behaviours.

These findings offer a framework for analysing how celebrity visibility is produced within platform-mediated media environments. Such visibility configurations help explain how artists navigate algorithmic environments, manage audience expectations, and choreograph aesthetic and affective cues. Future research can expand this framework by applying configurational approaches to additional Swift eras or to other artists whose work spans multiple genres and platforms. In doing so, the framework offers an adaptable account of how visibility is generated, sustained, and transformed within the contemporary attention economy. More broadly, this study highlights how contemporary cultural visibility increasingly emerges from the interaction between creative strategy and platform affordances. As artists, fans, and algorithms operate within a shared digital ecosystem, visibility becomes less the product of individual promotional acts and

more the outcome of dynamic socio-technical configurations that shape how cultural attention circulates and endures.

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## Discography

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