

Conceptual Metaphors in Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU Commencement Speech

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the use of conceptual metaphor in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement address at New York University, focusing on how metaphor functions as a rhetorical tool in celebrity motivational discourse. Drawing on Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black, 2005), the research identifies four dominant conceptual metaphors including LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LIFE IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, IDENTITY IS A PATCHWORK, and CRINGE IS A COMPANION. These metaphors frame Swift's core messages to the audience such as self-discovery, emotional resilience, and personal authenticity. By metaphorically representing life, cringe, and identity through familiar and concrete domains such as travel, weight, fabric, and companion, Swift translates abstract life lessons into accessible and emotionally resonant insights. Her speech functions not only as personal storytelling but also as motivational discourse, which offers guidance and connection to a graduating audience facing an uncertain future. The metaphors serve both to clarify complex experiences and to establish Swift's credibility as a reflective and relatable figure. This study contributes to the growing literature on metaphor in celebrity and popular discourse, revealing how public figures use metaphorical framing to inspire, instruct, and connect with their audiences in culturally significant moments.

KEYWORDS: Conceptual metaphor theory, Taylor Swift, commencement speech, motivational rhetoric, celebrity discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

On May 18, 2022, global pop icon Taylor Swift delivered the commencement address for New York University's Class of 2022 after receiving an honorary doctorate in fine arts. As one of the most influential cultural figures of her generation, Swift's speech was met with widespread attention from both the media and the academic community. Beyond the surface of celebratory humor and personal anecdotes, the address presents a wide range of conceptual metaphors that shape her message and connect deeply with the graduating audience. These metaphors are not only stylistic devices but also cognitive structures through which Swift constructs meaning, motivates listeners, and negotiates her identity as both an artist and public speaker.

In the broader context of contemporary celebrity discourse, particularly in emotionally charged public speeches such as commencement addresses, the use of metaphor functions as a powerful rhetorical strategy. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), as introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament, but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. Metaphors allow speakers to understand abstract concepts such as life, identity, emotions, and failure through more concrete and familiar domains. In Swift's speech, metaphor enables her to articulate complex life experiences in accessible terms, fostering empathy and emotional engagement among listeners.

This study aims to explore the dominant conceptual metaphors employed in Taylor Swift's NYU 2022 commencement speech and examine how they contribute to the rhetorical effectiveness of her message. In particular, the study is guided by two key research questions:

- (1) *What are the dominant conceptual metaphors employed in Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech?*
- (2) *What rhetorical functions do these metaphors serve in motivating and connecting with the audience?*

By applying Conceptual metaphor theory and incorporating insights from Critical metaphor analysis (CMA) (Charteris-Black, 2005), this study contributes to the growing field of metaphor analysis in celebrity and popular discourse, offering insights into how language shapes public perception, inspires audiences, and constructs meaning in culturally significant moments.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual metaphor theory

The analysis in this study is grounded in CMT, initially developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. At its core, CMT suggests that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. According to this theory, our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, allowing us to understand abstract

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concepts (target domains) through more concrete, embodied experiences (source domains). This understanding is often expressed in the formula: TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN. For example, when we say "She's going through a rough time," we invoke the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, mapping the challenges of life (target) onto the physical terrain of a difficult path (source). Such metaphorical mappings help speakers to conceptualize complex life experiences by drawing from physical, familiar experiences like travel, warfare, light, or construction.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, these mappings are systematic and not random. A single conceptual metaphor can generate a range of metaphorical expressions. For example, expressions such as "I'm at a crossroads," "He's going nowhere," or "She's on the right path" are all grounded in the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. The metaphorical nature of these expressions often goes unnoticed, indicating the degree to which conceptual metaphors are entrenched in ordinary discourse.

Later scholars, including Zoltán Kövecses (2010), expanded CMT by exploring the cultural, emotional, and contextual dimensions of metaphor use. Kövecses emphasized that while conceptual metaphors may be universal in broad terms, their specific realizations can vary based on cultural background, genre, speaker identity, and communicative purpose. This extension is crucial for the present study, which considers metaphor use in a culturally rich and emotionally charged setting: a celebrity commencement speech.

To identify conceptual metaphors in discourse, researchers often use the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), discussed in Steen, G. J., Dorst, A. G., Herrmann, J. B., Kaal, A. A., & Krennmayr, T. (2010). MIP provides a systematic method for identifying metaphorically used words in context, by comparing their contextual meaning with their more basic, literal meaning. This approach ensures a consistent and rigorous analysis of metaphorical expressions, especially in multimodal or performative texts like speeches.

2.2. Rhetorical functions of metaphor: A critical metaphor analysis perspective

Metaphors in public discourse do far more than add stylistic flair – they serve essential rhetorical functions that influence how audiences process, feel about, and align with complex ideas. This study approaches these functions primarily through the lens of CMA a framework championed by scholars such as Charteris-Black (2005). CMA suggests that metaphor is not merely a reflection of thought but a fundamental mechanism in shaping understanding, evoking emotional responses, and embedding ideological perspectives within discourse. It emphasizes the strategic deployment of metaphors in persuasive communication to achieve specific rhetorical goals.

One primary rhetorical function of metaphor, as explored in CMA, is coherence. Metaphors help organize abstract or unfamiliar concepts into more accessible frameworks, making messages clearer and more memorable for broad audiences. A second key function is emotive impact. Metaphors evoke vivid imagery and strong emotions, enabling speakers to form affective bonds with their listeners and enhance engagement. Furthermore, metaphors play a legitimizing role in public discourse. They can normalize particular worldviews or value systems by framing them as commonsensical or inevitable. For example, describing progress as a path or growth as climbing subtly endorses specific worldviews and values perseverance. Finally, metaphor serves as a powerful tool of ideological framing. It does not merely reflect thought; it actively shapes it by selectively highlighting and hiding certain elements of reality, thereby influencing how issues are perceived and interpreted. According to Charteris-Black (2005), metaphor is often employed strategically to align audiences with specific ideologies or moral positions. In public addresses, metaphorical constructs can reinforce beliefs about individualism, meritocracy, resilience, or collective identity, depending on how experiences and challenges are conceptualized by the speaker. Thus, CMA provides the necessary framework to analyze how Taylor Swift's use of metaphor in her commencement speech goes beyond mere description to actively influence her audience's understanding and emotional connection.

3. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Commencement speeches are a ceremonial genre delivered at graduation events to inspire and advise new graduates as they transition into the next stage of life. These speeches typically combine personal anecdotes, life lessons, and motivational appeals, which aim to both celebrate academic achievement and offer guidance for the future.

Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech at New York University aligns with this tradition but is marked by her unique role as a globally recognized singer-songwriter, cultural icon, and self-made artist. Known for her introspective lyrics and strong connection with fans, Swift brings authenticity and relatability to her address. Her audience comprised primarily young adults - graduates from NYU's Class of 2022 - many of whom belong to the so-called digital-native generation familiar with her work and public narrative. Given this shared cultural context, Swift's use of conceptual metaphors functions not only to convey life advice but also to strengthen emotional resonance and identification with her listeners.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in CMT by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), supplemented by CMA as developed by Charteris-Black (2005). This integrated framework enables a systematic identification, categorization, and interpretation of

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conceptual metaphors embedded in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech at New York University, with particular attention to their rhetorical functions - how they motivate, inspire, and emotionally connect with the audience.

4.1. Data collection

The primary source of data is the full transcript of Taylor Swift's commencement address, delivered on May 18, 2022, at Yankee Stadium. The transcript was retrieved from *Billboard.com*. The speech was chosen due to its cultural significance and widespread public attention, making it a suitable artifact for metaphor analysis in public discourse.

4.2. Analytical approach

To identify metaphorical expressions, the study adopts the MIP developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). Each lexical item was assessed to determine whether its contextual meaning contrasts with a more basic, concrete meaning, which signals metaphorical usage.

Identified metaphors were then grouped into broader conceptual categories and analyzed for their rhetorical impact using Charteris-Black's (2005) model. This framework considers how metaphors influence audience understanding, construct identity, and convey ideological meaning.

For focus and depth, only metaphors that were frequent, thematically central, or emotionally resonant were selected for analysis.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In her 2022 NYU commencement address, Taylor Swift employs a range of conceptual metaphors that serve to make her speech accessible, emotionally resonant, and rhetorically effective. Drawing on the theoretical framework of CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Charteris-Black's (2005) CMA, four dominant metaphors emerge. Each metaphor plays a unique rhetorical role in motivating and connecting with the audience of young graduates.

5.1. Metaphor: LIFE IS A JOURNEY

One of the most dominant conceptual metaphors in Taylor Swift's NYU commencement address is LIFE IS A JOURNEY, a metaphor deeply embedded in both everyday language and public discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Swift uses this metaphor to shape her message of personal growth, resilience, and self-direction. Through expressions like "*all the steps and missteps that have led us to this common destination," "*chart your own path," "every choice you make leads to the next choice," and "you're on your own now," "Searching for what's next." Swift positions life as a process of movement through space - complete with decisions, directions, detours, and destinations.**

The source domain of this metaphor - travel or physical movement - maps onto the target domain of life and personal development. Elements such as "steps," "path," and "destination" suggest that living is like moving through a physical landscape, where each step forward represents a life decision and each fork in the road symbolizes a critical choice or turning point. The metaphor is both conceptual and evocative: it reflects how people structure their life experiences cognitively and emotionally.

In terms of rhetorical function, this metaphor serves multiple purposes. First, it fosters autonomy and agency, encouraging graduates to take control of their futures. "Chart your own path" places the graduates in the position of explorers or navigators of their own destinies. Second, it helps normalize setbacks. By referring to "missteps," Swift frames failure not as defeat but as part of the expected terrain of life - echoing the Charteris-Black (2005) view that metaphors can perform a persuasive function by legitimizing and moralizing life experiences. Third, the metaphor elevates the ceremony itself, casting the graduation as a **symbolic milestone** on a longer journey. This enhances the emotional and ceremonial significance of the moment.

5.2. Metaphor: LIFE IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN

Another salient metaphor in Taylor Swift's commencement speech is LIFE IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, in which the complexities of emotional and mental life are conceptualized as a physical weight that individuals carry. This metaphor appears in multiple expressions throughout the speech: "*Life can be heavy, especially if you try to carry it all at once," "*Decide what is yours to hold and let the rest go," "*The good things... are lighter anyway, so there's more room for them," and "One toxic relationship can outweigh so many simple joys."***

The metaphor maps elements from the source domain of physical weight and load onto the target domain of emotional and psychological experience. In this mapping, emotional responsibilities or traumas become "heavy" objects, while joyful or healthy experiences are "light." People are framed as carriers or lifters of these experiences, navigating through life by managing what they hold onto or release. The image of selectively choosing "what is yours to hold" and letting the rest go draws from both therapeutic discourse and common sense strategies for mental well-being.

This metaphor serves critical rhetorical functions. First, it legitimizes emotional struggles by giving them a physical presence. Audiences can identify with the sensation of being "weighed down," making abstract emotions more tangible. Second, it provides a clear and empowering coping mechanism: emotional resilience is not about carrying everything, but about making wise choices in what we hold. The metaphor aligns with contemporary discourses on mindfulness and mental health, promoting emotional clarity

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and boundaries. By presenting life as a burden to be selectively managed, Swift encourages listeners to embrace emotional agency and self-preservation.

5.3. Metaphor: IDENTITY IS A PATCHWORK

A distinct conceptual metaphor in Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech is IDENTITY IS A PATCHWORK, in which the formation of the self is likened to the assembly of a quilt or handcrafted textile. Metaphorical expressions include: *"We are each a patchwork quilt of those who have loved us,"* and *"Everything is connected by my love of the craft."* These expressions reflect the idea that identity is not monolithic or fixed, but rather a stitched-together creation, shaped over time by interpersonal bonds, values, and creative pursuits.

This metaphor draws from the source domain of quilt-making and fabric craft, projecting it onto the target domain of personal identity and memory. In this mapping, individuals are not born with fully formed identities but become who they are through the accumulation and integration of diverse "patches" - people, experiences, and influences. The process is creative, continuous, and inherently imperfect, just as handmade quilts often are. The term "craft" further reinforces identity as something actively made rather than passively received.

Rhetorically, this metaphor functions to personalize and humanize the process of self-construction. Rather than emphasizing rigid roles or singular origins, it celebrates multiplicity, adaptability, and vulnerability. It also aligns with Swift's public image as a storyteller and artist who often weaves personal and collective memory into her music. By invoking the imagery of a quilt, Swift frames identity as something intimate and soft - something that provides comfort and warmth, both to oneself and to others.

5.4. Metaphor: CRINGE IS A COMPANION

Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech also presents the metaphor CRINGE IS A COMPANION in which cringe is conceptualized as a companion. Metaphorical expressions supporting this mapping include: *"Learn to live alongside cringe. No matter how hard you try to avoid being cringe, you will look back on your life and cringe retrospectively."* The expression constructs cringe as something one cannot escape from, portraying it as a constant presence or companion in one's life journey. Instead of rejecting or erasing past moments of embarrassment, Swift encourages the audience to coexist with cringe, treating it not as an enemy but as a natural and even necessary part of self-growth.

The metaphor CRINGE IS A COMPANION suggests that feelings of awkwardness, regret, or self-consciousness accompany a person throughout different stages of life, just like a familiar presence. It frames these experiences as shared, survivable, and humanizing, helping normalize vulnerability. Cringe here is not a threat to one's identity, but something that walks *alongside* it - a source of humility and reflection.

Rhetorically, this metaphor serves to soften the discomfort often associated with self-doubt and youthful mistakes. It encourages emotional acceptance and self-forgiveness by inviting the audience to find humor and perspective in hindsight. Swift positions herself as someone who has also lived through cringe-worthy phases, which strengthens her authenticity and connection with the audience. This approach aligns with the overall ethos of the speech - embracing imperfection and owning one's narrative without shame.

By turning a typically negative emotion into a companion rather than an adversary, Swift reframes emotional discomfort as a meaningful and shared part of becoming an adult. In doing so, she offers reassurance to the graduates that they are not alone in their feelings, and that these moments, too, contribute to growth and self-understanding.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the rhetorical role of four dominant conceptual metaphors in Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech: LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LIFE IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, IDENTITY IS A PATCHWORK, and CRINGE IS A COMPANION. Drawing on the framework of CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and the perspective of CMA (Charteris-Black, 2005), the analysis has demonstrated how these metaphors shape Swift's message of self-awareness, emotional resilience, and empowerment. Each metaphor constructs a coherent understanding of life and identity, transforming complex abstract experiences into accessible, relatable images that connect deeply with the audience.

The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY provides a temporal and directional structure to Swift's narrative, emphasizing choice, progress, and personal growth. By presenting life as a path with twists, turns, and detours, Swift normalizes uncertainty and encourages embracing the unknown as part of one's development. This metaphor aligns with the audience's transitional moment and reinforces the value of perseverance and reflection. LIFE IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN brings attention to the emotional labor of modern life and offers a rhetoric of release and discernment. Swift acknowledges the invisible weight carried by individuals, especially young adults facing personal and societal expectations. Her use of this metaphor functions as a tool of empathy and solidarity, affirming the legitimacy of emotional challenges while suggesting that intentional choices can lighten the load. IDENTITY IS A PATCHWORK celebrates complexity and connectedness, resonating with themes of belonging and creative self-construction. Through this metaphor, Swift embraces the evolving nature of selfhood and encourages her audience to accept the multiplicity within themselves. It highlights the role of experience, relationships, and change in forming a dynamic, ever-unfolding

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identity. Finally, CRINGE IS A COMPANION reframes self-consciousness and past embarrassment as something to be accepted rather than avoided. Through this metaphor, Swift encourages graduates to treat cringe not as a threat but as a sign of personal evolution. By personifying cringe as a figure that walks beside us, the metaphor cultivates emotional resilience and growth, urging the audience to welcome discomfort as a natural and inevitable companion in the process of becoming.

Together, these metaphors serve as powerful rhetorical tools that resonate with a young audience poised to enter adulthood. They contribute not only to the motivational tone of the speech but also to its authenticity - helping Swift bridge her personal narrative with the collective experiences of the graduates. The metaphors also align with cultural values of autonomy, creativity, and emotional intelligence.

By examining the interplay between metaphor and rhetoric in this speech, the study reaffirms the significance of metaphor as more than a linguistic device - it is a cognitive and social resource for meaning-making. This small-scale analysis invites future research into metaphor use across other celebrity speeches and commencement genres to further investigate how public figures construct persuasive identities and offer life guidance through metaphorical framing.

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