

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Modern popular culture primarily functions as a space for aesthetic expression, the search for meaning, or freedom of thought. As part of this system, popular music, particularly pop songs, becomes an essential part of the system. Pop music is one of the most commercially successful genres, producing a high number of chart hits, with its modern form beginning around the mid-1950s in the United States and the United Kingdom (Frith et al., 2001).

The music industry today operates as a multi-billion-dollar global system, driven by album sales, streaming platforms, live performances, and branding strategies. According to reports by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), the global music industry continues to grow rapidly, with streaming and live tours becoming major sources of revenue (Murray, 2026). Within this context, popular music functions not only as art but also as a highly profitable cultural commodity; a condition in which the figures who dominate this system become as significant to study as the music itself.

One of the most prominent figures within this global music economy is Taylor Swift. Swift represents an exceptional case in contemporary popular music, as she became a self-made billionaire primarily through her musical production, touring, and ownership of her music catalog. As of early 2026, her estimated net worth

reached approximately USD 1.6 billion, derived largely from album sales, streaming royalties, and record-breaking concert tours (Murray, 2026).

Beyond this economic success, Swift is also a carefully constructed public figure; part of a large cultural and commercial system involving branding, multiple album versions, merchandise, and marketing strategies aimed at achieving high chart positions and industry recognition (López-López, 2025). She is widely cited as not only a singer but also a global economic figure and a powerful example of celebrity branding in popular culture (Heidari, 2025). It is this dual position, as a commercially dominant artist and as a public persona built around fame, wealth, and success, that makes her an especially productive case for examining how such a persona is represented in language. Her fans, commonly known as Swifties, do not merely listen to her music; they actively invest in the narratives, identities, and values presented in her songs. Within her lyrics, references to fame, wealth, luxury, and life as a performer appear both directly and indirectly through imagery and figurative language, suggesting that the figure of the successful, famous performer is not simply reported in her songs but actively built through specific linguistic choices.

The release of her 2025 album *The Life of a Showgirl* further strengthened her public image as a dominant figure in the global music industry. The album achieved unprecedented commercial success, selling nearly 3.5 million copies in its first week and surpassing four million total consumption units, including streaming (Caulfield, 2025). It became the fastest-selling album in the United States and broke comparable records worldwide. In addition, the album's lead single, "*The Fate of*

Ophelia”, topped the Billboard Hot 100 for ten consecutive weeks and reached number one positions in multiple countries (Murray, 2026). These achievements demonstrate that *The Life of a Showgirl* album functions not only as an artistic text but also as a highly visible cultural product through which Swift’s image as a figure defined by fame, wealth, and success is continually reinforced.

The impact of Taylor Swift extends beyond album sales. Her tours, particularly *The Eras Tour*, generated more than USD 2 billion in ticket sales and produced significant economic effects in cities where concerts were held. Scholars have referred to this phenomenon as the “Taylor effect,” highlighting how music consumption can stimulate tourism, hospitality, and local business revenue (Palmer, 2023). Such figures illustrate the scale of the persona surrounding Swift, one in which wealth, prestige, and cultural influence are inseparable from her public identity as a performer.

Song lyrics play an important role in shaping how such a persona is understood. Lyrics are not merely personal expressions or storytelling devices; they are cultural texts that circulate values, aspirations, and ideas of success, and also function as cultural texts that reflect and normalize certain values (Yuliasari et al., 2025). In many pop songs, including those on *The Life of a Showgirl*, lyrics frequently construct images of fame, prestige, and personal worth through symbols of wealth, luxury, and high-status lifestyles; specific cars, branded fashion items, luxury accessories, or lifestyles associated with celebrity culture (Bellezza, 2023). These linguistic choices do not simply describe a lifestyle; they actively construct the figure of the showgirl as someone defined by recognition, glamour, and material

success. The album's commercial success therefore raises an important question about how such a figure is built at the level of language itself, rather than assumed to exist as a natural or given identity.

Despite this commercial dominance, the album's reception was not straightforwardly celebratory. *The Life of a Showgirl* album quickly became a major cultural and commercial event, breaking numerous records in sales, chart performance, and streaming, including 1.2 million vinyl copies sold in the United States in its first week alone (McIntyre, 2025). Yet even as it achieved these results, the album provoked disappointment among Swift's own fanbase and sparked broader public debate about the relationship between art, fame, and commercial success. A widely circulated video, "*taylor swift & art under capitalism*," which reached over five hundred thousand views, illustrates the range of ways audiences read and evaluated the album, and encouraged further discussion of how celebrity, art, and audience expectations intersect (Raya, 2025). This divided reception suggests that the meaning of *The Life of a Showgirl*, and of the showgirl figure it presents, is not fixed or self-evident but actively negotiated and interpreted by different audiences, a condition that points directly to the constructed and ideological nature of representation.

This observation resonates with Stuart Hall's theory of representation: language does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it, and meaning is produced and exchanged through language and other signifying practices (Hall, 1997). Song lyrics, therefore, function as representational sites where identities, values, and ideologies are shaped and communicated. In the case of *The Life of a*

Showgirl album, the lyrics do not merely report Swift's fame, wealth, or success as pre-existing facts; they actively construct a particular version of the showgirl, a figure whose identity and experiences are built through specific linguistic choices.

Considering Taylor Swift's dominant position in the global music industry and the significant public attention surrounding *The Life of a Showgirl*, it is important to examine how the showgirl (in *The Life of a Showgirl*), as a figure marked by fame, wealth, reputation, and prestige is linguistically constructed in the album's lyrics. Rather than treating the songs only as artistic expressions; therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how the showgirl is linguistically constructed in the album's lyrics and what identity, experience, and ideology are represented through that construction, drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as the analytical framework and Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation as the interpretive framework.

Several previous studies have analyzed song lyrics, particularly those of Taylor Swift, using linguistic approaches, especially Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). A number of studies focus on the ideational meaning of her lyrics by examining transitivity processes to reveal emotional experience, memory, and identity construction, such as studies on *All Too Well*, *Midnights*, and *Folklore* albums. These studies show that mental, relational, and material processes are commonly used to represent inner feelings, personal reflection, and experiential viewpoints in Swift's songs (Khayla et al., 2026; Dewi Max et al., 2023; Max, 2022). Other studies apply SFL to examine emotional expression and interpersonal meaning: research on *Back to December* demonstrates how ideational,

interpersonal, and textual metafunctions work together to construct regret and emotional intimacy (Salsabila & Fidiyanti, 2024), and similar approaches appear in studies of Ed Sheeran's *Perfect* and Coldplay's *Fix You*, which focus on how linguistic choices construct love, reassurance, and emotional connection between singers and listeners (Amalia et al., 2026; Amelia Godina et al., 2025). Comparative studies further show that different audiences experience emotions differently, as reflected in variations of transitivity processes (Liztiawati & Nurhayati, 2021).

Beyond linguistic analysis, some studies approach song lyrics from a social and ideological perspective. Putra et al. (2025) analyze social criticism and resistance in song lyrics, while Subhash (2025) examines commodification practices in the music industry, including cases involving Taylor Swift. Neither study, however, analyzes song lyrics as linguistic texts; both address ideology at the level of social critique or industry practice rather than through the language of the lyrics themselves.

Overall, while previous research has extensively explored emotional meaning, stylistic patterns, and interpersonal relations in pop lyrics, and other studies have examined celebrity and the music industry from a social perspective, there remains limited research connecting linguistic analysis with a theory of representation to examine how a specific celebrity identity is constructed through language. In particular, no study has focused on the representation of the showgirl in Taylor Swift's *The Life of a Showgirl* album through the transitivity system of Systemic Functional Linguistics interpreted through Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how the showgirl is

linguistically constructed in the album's lyrics, drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as the analytical framework and Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation as the interpretive framework.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is guided by research questions that focus on the main issues of the research and provide clear direction. Based on the background discussed above, the research questions are:

1. How do transitivity choices construct the representation of the showgirl in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*?
2. What identity, experience, and ideology are represented through these linguistic constructions?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine how the showgirl is represented through language in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly the transitivity system (ideational metafunction), this study identifies how experiences, actions, and identities are linguistically constructed through different process types such as, material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). These linguistic patterns are then interpreted through Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation to explain what identity, experience, and ideology are represented, and how such representation is culturally and socially produced (Hall, 1997).

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the analysis of song lyrics from Taylor Swift's 2025 album *The Life of a Showgirl*, which consists of twelve tracks. All songs in the album are included as the data of this research. The scope of the research is limited to the lyrical texts of all songs included in the album, which serve as the primary data of the study. The songs analyzed are "The Fate of Ophelia," "Elizabeth Taylor," "Opalite," "Father Figure," "Eldest Daughter," "Ruin The Friendship," "Actually Romantic," "Wi\$h Li\$t," "Wood," "CANCELLED!," "Honey," and "The Life of a Showgirl (Ft. Sabrina Carpenter)."

The analysis is limited to the representation of the showgirl as reflected in these lyrics, examined through the transitivity system and interpreted through Stuart Hall's concept of representation, in order to identify the identity, experience, and ideology constructed around this figure. It focuses on the lyrics as textual data and analyzes how the showgirl, an identity marked by fame, wealth, reputation, and prestige is constructed through language. It does not examine musical elements, vocal performance, audience reception, fandom activities, or visual elements such as music videos and live performances. Limited background information about the singer is used only to support the interpretation of the lyrics, not as the main focus of analysis.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research contributes to the application of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation in the analysis of song lyrics, extending existing research on song lyrics beyond narrative

and emotional analysis toward how a specific celebrity's identity, experience, and ideology are linguistically constructed and represented.

Practically, this research offers insight into how popular music functions as a site where identities such as fame, wealth, and prestige are constructed through language. It is expected to serve as a reference for future research combining linguistic analysis with theories of representation, and may interest Swift's fanbase by offering an account of how meaning is constructed in *The Life of a Showgirl* album, encouraging a deeper appreciation of the album's lyrical content.

1.6 State of the Art

Studies on popular song lyrics have widely applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine how meaning is constructed through language. Most of these studies focus on emotional expression, identity construction, and interpersonal meaning in lyrics. Research on Taylor Swift's songs, for example, commonly uses the transitivity system to analyze mental, relational, and material processes to reveal themes such as heartbreak, memory, revenge, and self-reflection (Khayla et al., 2026; Dewi Max et al., 2023; Max, 2022). These studies show that transitivity analysis is effective in uncovering how emotions and personal experiences are represented in song lyrics, establishing SFL as a reliable framework for identifying how identity and experience are linguistically constructed in Swift's discography specifically.

Other researchers expand this analysis to include multiple metafunctions of SFL, demonstrating how linguistic choices shape emotional storytelling and

interpersonal relations in songs more broadly. Research on *Back to December* shows how ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions work together to construct regret and emotional intimacy (Salsabila & Fidiyanti, 2024), while comparable work on Ed Sheeran's *Perfect* and Coldplay's *Fix You* demonstrates how linguistic choices construct reassurance and emotional connection between singer and listener (Amalia et al., 2026; Amelia Godina et al., 2025). Overall, this body of research confirms that song lyrics constitute rich textual data, and that SFL particularly the transitivity system provides a systematic and reliable framework for analyzing how meaning is linguistically constructed within them.

Studies on popular song lyrics have engaged with questions of celebrity, ideology, and social meaning from perspectives outside linguistics. Putra et al. (2025), for instance, apply concepts of habitus and capital to analyze social criticism and resistance in song lyrics, but do not include detailed linguistic analysis of the texts themselves. Similarly, Subhash (2025) examines music commodification within the recording industry, using Taylor Swift as a case example, but likewise does not treat song lyrics as linguistic data. Both studies demonstrate that celebrity and popular music can be productively read as sites of social and ideological meaning, yet neither offers an account of how such meaning is constructed at the level of language.

However, most SFL-based studies of song lyrics, including those on Taylor Swift, remain centered on personal emotion, memory, and narrative perspective, with limited attention to how lyrics might construct a public or celebrity identity beyond individual feeling. Even where Swift's own discography has been

extensively studied through transitivity analysis, the analytical focus has consistently been inward-facing heartbreak, reflection, regret, rather than directed at how her lyrics might construct a specific persona, such as the showgirl, that carries social and ideological weight beyond individual experience.

This reveals a clear research gap. While linguistic studies explain how emotions and personal identities are constructed in lyrics, and separate social or industry-focused studies explain how celebrity and commodification operate around popular music, very few studies bring linguistic analysis together with a theory of representation to examine how a specific public identity, experience, and ideology are constructed through language. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by applying the transitivity system of Systemic Functional Linguistics as the analytical framework and Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation as the interpretive framework, to examine how the showgirl as an identity marked by fame, wealth, reputation, and prestige is linguistically constructed and ideologically represented in Taylor Swift's *The Life of a Showgirl* album.