

Emerging Adulthood in Taylor Swift's Folklore: A Lyrical and Semiotic Interpretation

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine how Taylor Swift's Folklore represents the psychological and emotional dimensions of emerging adulthood. Focusing on six selected songs "The 1," "Exile," "Cardigan," "Mirrorball," "This Is Me Trying," and "August". The study analyses how metaphors, narrative imagery, and lyrical symbols construct meanings related to identity exploration, instability, emotional vulnerability, nostalgia, feeling in-between, and sense of possibilities.

The research employs qualitative descriptive using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, examining denotative and connotative meanings within six selected songs from Folklore. The interpretation is guided by Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood Theory. The analysis is also supported by Miles and Huberman's interactive data analysis model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The findings demonstrated that Folklore constructs emerging adulthood as a period of emotional turbulence, fragile self-concept, nostalgia, coping behaviour, and identity negotiation. Symbols such as Mirrorball, cardigan, and seasonal imagery reflect vulnerability, memory, and transition. These findings demonstrate that contemporary song lyrics function not only as artistic expression but also as cultural texts that reflect psychological development during emerging adulthood. This study contributes to literary and cultural studies by showing how popular music articulates emotional meanings connected to life transitions and identity formations.

Introduction Section

Literature serves as a reflection, expression, and exploration of human experience, delivering messages and insight about life. Ahamed (2025) emphasized that literature is a written art form that reflects human experiences, shapes thought, and influences emotional and moral development through storytelling, character portrayal, and cultural representation. Similarly, according to Khan (2021), literature reflects life and society by presenting human emotions, ideas, and social realities through artistic expression, for example, lyrical. According to Pascua (2024) lyrics can function similarly to poetry, lyrical songs use poetic-style language, metaphor, imagery, and emotional or interpersonal meaning to express love, feelings, social contexts, or identity. In other words, the lyric text is treated as a literary mode embedded in music. The complexity and diversity in literary works often lead to multiple interpretations, necessitating a robust analytical framework like semiotic (Widhayanti & Amalia, 2025). Semiotics, according to Barthes (1991), views language images, and texts as a system of sign that convey meaning at literal (denotation) and symbolic (connotation) levels. This study is positioned within English education by demonstrating how literary-semiotic analysis of song lyric can enhance ELT learners' critical reading abilities. The analysis of denotation and connotation in Folklore provides practical relevance for teaching students to interpret figurative language, identify deeper thematic layers, and evaluate implicit messages in contemporary texts. Although the core of this research remains a lyrical and semiotic interpretation, the findings highlight how such analytical practices can support ELT instruction, especially in developing student's skills in reading between the lines, understanding metaphorical expressions, and engaging with multimodal texts as part of modern literacy pedagogy.

Taylor Swift's (Folklore, 2020) marks a significant artistic turn in her musical career, shifting from mainstream pop toward an introspective folk-pop aesthetic characterized by subdued instrumentation, symbolic lyricism, and multi-voiced narrative storytelling. Released during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the album resonated strongly with young adults navigating psychological turbulence, emotional uncertainty, and quicker life transitions. Its exploration of regret, nostalgia, relational fragility, and shifting identity aligns closely with the developmental stage known as emerging adulthood, a period between ages 18 and 29 defined by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a persistent feeling of being "in-between" adolescence and adulthood

(Arnett et al., 2014). Previous studies highlight those emotional challenges experienced by emerging adults strengthened significantly during the pandemic. Research shows increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and identity confusion among young people facing protracted stress and social disruption (Jabbari et al., 2024). In Indonesia, similar patterns were identified, with young adults reporting heightened depression, anxiety, and stress levels, highlighting the growing need for emotional regulation tools during this developmental stage (Izzatika et al., 2021). Widhayanti & Amalia (2025) state that, music plays a crucial role in emotional processing and meaning-making among emerging adults. Research from the past five years, young listeners progressively rely on music for emotional regulation, narrative reframing, and self-understanding, especially when navigating major life transitions (Taufik & Cahyati, 2022). Recent research in Indonesia has highlighted the role of music in handling stress and mental health among Generation Z in the digital era. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, (Najma Zulfatus Izza, 2025) found that music can significantly reduce stress by influencing the dopamine levels, while also serving as a medium for expressiveness and emotional processing. These findings support the interpretation that albums like *Folklore* can provide young adults with psychological and emotional resources to navigate relational uncertainty, identity exploration, and life transitions. *Folklore*, with its introspective lyrical and symbolic imagery, has become a cultural text that mirrors and speaks the psychological experiences of a generation facing relational ambiguity, shifting identity, and uncertain futures. Songs such as “Cardigan,” “The 1,” “Mirrorball,” and “August” provide narrative spaces through which listeners can project their own struggles with self-concept, emotional vulnerability, and the complexities of early adulthood.

In recent years, scholars have begun examining the lyrical and symbolic features of *Folklore* to understand its emotional and narrative construction. There are also research that explored conceptual metaphors of grief in the album, showing how songs like “Exile” and “My Tears Ricochet” reflect emotional stages aligned with Kübler-Ross’s model and offer listeners psychological pathways for processing loss and transition (Suci Ayustika Dewi & Gusthini, 2025). Gustsa & Laili (2022) analysed figurative language in the album and identified metaphors, symbolism, paradoxes, and personification as central devices that enhance its introspective tone. Similarly, Indah Windy Khoerunisa (2024) showed a semiotic reading of the “teenage love triangle” like Cardigan or August revealing symbolic structures of longing, insecurity, relational conflict, and identity negotiation that parallel core emotional features of emerging adulthood. In another strand of research, Fadila & Nisa (2024) examined gendered signifiers in songs like “Mad Woman,” showing how Swift uses symbolic language to critique gender ideology and cultural dynamic. These findings demonstrate how narrative texts can represent psychological struggles during adolescence and emerging adulthood, offering insights into how literary characters embody emotional and developmental themes.

Existing research has mostly examined Folklore through metaphor, semiotics, figurative language, or gender discourse in isolation. Yet no research explicitly connects the album to emerging adulthood theory or examines how its lyricism articulates the developmental, emotional, and relational challenges experienced by young adult. This study fills that gap by combining semiotic interpretation with emerging adulthood theory. This kind of hybrid approach hasn’t been discussed in recent literature, making this study original in viewing Folklore as a psychological map of identity exploration in emerging adulthood. No existing studies integrate semiotics with emerging adulthood theory when analysing Folklore, so this study provides an original interdisciplinary contribution. Based on the gap identified above, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do the lyrics in Taylor Swift’s *Folklore* represent the characteristics of emerging adulthood?
2. What semiotic signs in the selected songs reflect five characteristics of emerging adulthood?

Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to analyse how Taylor Swift’s *Folklore* reflects the characteristics of emerging adulthood. Data consisted of lyrics from six purposively selected tracks that are “The 1,” “Exile,” “Cardigan,” “Mirrorball,” “This Is Me Trying,” and “August”. These six songs were selected purposively because they reflect core aspects of emerging adulthood such as identity exploration, emotional vulnerability, relationship instability, and nostalgia, which aligns with Arnett’s theoretical framework. Data analysis follows Matthew B. Miles (2014) approach, involving data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing.

During data reduction, song lyrics were coded and categorised based on Arnett’s five features of emerging adulthood and supported by semiotic, and psychological indicators. The lyrics were coded using a two-cycle coding process. The first cycle consisted of line-by-line coding to identify denotative meanings (literal messages) and connotative meanings (symbolic, emotional, or metaphorical interpretations) based on Barthes’ semiotic framework. This semiotic procedure followed Barthes’ first and second orders of signification, in which denotation represents the literal meaning of the sign, while connotation reflects its cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings. These layers were used to deepen the interpretation of how lyrical signs construct the emotional and psychological dimensions of emerging adulthood. In the second cycle, similar codes were grouped

into analytical categories aligned with Arnett's five features of emerging adulthood such as instability, identity exploration, emotional vulnerability, nostalgia, and sense of possibilities. This process was repeated several times to ensure that the interpretations were consistent and clearly connected to the theoretical framework.

After coding cycles, thematic labels were developed through a clustering process in which codes that shared similar psychological, symbolic, or emotional meaning were grouped together. Codes related to regret, longing, or nostalgia were combined into themes such as identity exploration or emotional vulnerability, while codes describing uncertainty, conflict, or unpredictability were grouped under the theme of instability. Additional codes that reflected hopefulness, self-reflection, or transitional feelings were labelled as sense of possibilities or feeling in-between. This thematic labelling produce ensured that coded data were not only categorized but also meaningfully organized into boarder interpretive patterns that aligned with both Arnett's emerging adulthood framework and Barthes' semiotic concepts.

In the data display phase, thematic tables, and descriptive summaries were created to organize the coded citations and symbolic patterns. Finally, conclusions are drawn by ELT creating thematic patterns from the analysis of lyrics, supported by theories from Arnett, and Barthes. This analytical process reveals how Folklore functions as a narrative and emotional source for listeners facing the psychological transition of early adulthood.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, expert validation was conducted by consulting the academic supervisor during the coding and interpretation stages. The lecturer reviewed the coding decisions, semiotic interpretations, and thematic classifications. The study also applied theoretical triangulation by combining Arnett's emerging adulthood framework with Barthes' semiotic model. Feedback from this validation process helped refine the analysis and reduce potential researcher bias, thereby strengthening the credibility of the study.

Findings and Discussions

This research analysed the representation of emerging adulthood in Taylor Swift's Folklore using Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory (2000) and Barthes Semiotics (1991). The data were taken from six selected tracks in Folklore: "The 1," "Exile," "Cardigan," "Mirrorball," "This Is Me Trying," and "August".

Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood in Folklore. The analysis of Taylor Swift's songs "The 1", (song 1), "Exile" (song 2)", "Cardigan" (song 3), "Mirrorball" (song 4), "This Is Me Trying" (song 5), "August" (song 6), shows five characteristics of Emerging Adulthood through (Arnett, 2000) : identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, sense of possibilities. These characteristics emerged through lyrical expressions of regret, longing, insecurity, introspection, nostalgia, and emotional transition, experiences among individuals aged 18-29. There are the data:

Table 1. Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood in *Folklore*

Characteristic s of Emerging Adulthood in <i>Folklore</i>	The 1		Exile		Cardigan		Mirrorball		This Is Me Trying		August	
	Data	Detail s	Data	Detail s	Data	Detail s	Data	Detail s	Data	Detail s	Data	Detail s
Identity Exploration	Lyrics "It would 've been fun, if you would 've been the one"	Reflec ts recons iderin g past choice s and imagi ned life paths.	"You' re not my homel and anymo re"	Shows the proces s of redefi ning onesel f after breaku p.	"And when I felt like I was an old cardig an"	An identit y shape d by memo ries of past relatio nships .	"I can chang e everyt hing about me fit in"	Search ing for self- definit ion throug h adapti ve behavi our	"They told me all of my cages were mental "	Show self- assess ment and face your fears.	"Want ing was enoug h"	Highli ghting emoti onal explor ation from emerg ing adulth ood.

Instability	“I guess you never know, never know”	Express unpredictability in early adulthood relationships.	“I think I’ve seen this film before, and I didn’t like the ending”	Recurring relational conflict symbolizes instability cycles	“Chase two girls, lose the one”	Shows unstable emotional commitment.	“Hush, when no one is around, my dear”	Fragile emotional states reflecting shifting stability”	“I’ve been having a hard time adjusting”	Shows difficulty coping with life changes.	“August slipped away into a moment in time”	Captures fleeting moments and temporary emotional connections.
Self-focus	“In my defense, I have none”	Focus on personal reflection.	“You didn’t even hear me out”	Attention on personal needs not being met.	“I knew you, leaving like a father”	Self-focused recognition of emotional impact.	“I’m still trying everything to keep you looking at me”	Awareness of one’s desires and insecurities.	“I was so ahead of the curve, the curve became a sphere”	Reflection on internal pressure and personal expectation	“Cancel plans just in case you call”	Shows self-prioritization around emotional desire.
Feeling in-Between	“If my wishes came true, it would’ve been you”	Reflections on longing and ambiguity between past and present.	“You’re not my town”	Being between attachment and detachment	“You drew stars around my scars”	Between pain and healing.	“I’m a Mirror ball”	Between different versions of oneself	“I just wanted you to know, this is me trying”	Between failure and effort.	“Back when we were still changing for the better”	Between adolescent nostalgia and adult changes.
Sense of possibilities	“Roaring twenties, tossing”	Optimistic projection of future	“You never gave a warning sign”	Realizing possibilities for better	“I knew I’d curse you”	Realization of emotional consequences	“All I do is try, try, try”	Belief in growth despite	“I got wasted like all my potential”	Recognize future potential despite	“So much for summer love”	Recognizing future hope after temporary

	pennie s in the pool”	possib ilities.		bound aries.	foreve r”	quenc es and alterna tives		fragilit y.		e facing obstac les.	and telling us”	rary loss.
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From the six songs examined in Taylor Swift’s *Folklore*, the most outstanding characteristics of Emerging Adulthood are identity exploration, instability, and feelings in between. Firstly, identity exploration was frequently observed in songs such as “Mirrorball,” “Cardigan,” “and “The 1”. Emerging adulthood often question who they are, who they want to become, and how relationships will shape their identity (Arnett, 2000). Swift describes this through metaphors of reflection and transformation, such as the symbol of a “Mirrorball” representing ever-changing identity and adaptability, as well as through nostalgic memories of past relationships that contribute to the narrator’s self-understanding. In these songs, the narrator constantly reflects on decisions, emotional experiences, and efforts to develop a complete understanding of self amid uncertainty.

Secondly, instability appears strongly in “Exile,” “The 1,” and “August”. According to Arnett (2000), instability in emerging adulthood often emerges through unstable relationships, shifting goals, and emotional unpredictability. These songs describe relational turbulence, unresolved conflicts, and fleeting romantic experiences that mirror real-life instability experienced by young adults. The dual perspectives in “Exile” depict conflicting emotions and misunderstanding, while “August” captures the uncertainty and timelessness in a relationship that “slipped away into a moment in time”. These depictions align with the emotional swings that commonly occur during this period of development.

Thirdly, the theme of feeling in-between is especially evident in “Cardigan,” and “This Is Me Trying”. Emerging adults frequently experience a psychological space between adolescence and adulthood, unsure of where they belong. Swift’s lyrics emphasize nostalgia, regret, and attempts to regain control, all which signify emotion transitional state. Meanwhile, the less dominant but still significant characteristics found in the six songs were self-focus and sense of possibilities. Self-focus, which refers to the tendency of emerging adults to prioritize personal growth and emotional needs, is evident in “The 1” and “Mirrorball”, where the narrator reflects deeply on regrets, desires, and personal shortcomings. These introspective moments emphasize desire for self-improvements and self-understanding. Sense of possibilities, distinctive features of emerging adulthood, appears in “August” and “This Is Me Trying”. Although filled with disappointment, these songs carry an undercurrent of hope, rebuilding, and imagining different futures. This mixture of optimism and uncertainty reflects an openness to possibility that characterizes individuals in their late teens to late twenties.

Overall, from the six songs analysed, emerging adulthood clearly stands as the central theme of *Folklore*. The album captures emotional complexity, identity struggles, and transitions that resonate strongly with young listeners. Emerging adulthood in this album is pictured not merely as a phase of confusion, but as the deep journey of meaning-making, relational negotiation, and personal growth.

These findings reinforce Arnett’s (2000) argument that emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental phase marked by instability, identity exploration, and emotional uncertainty. The repeated appearance of regret, transition, and self-reflection across the six songs suggests that *Folklore* does not merely depict personal heartbreak, but also represents broader psychological conditions experienced by emerging adults. Through Barthes’ semiotic framework, the denotative experiences of love, loss, and change are transformed into connotative signs of identity reconstruction, emotional vulnerability and transitional adulthood.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that highlight popular music as a medium for expressing young adults’ emotional struggles and identity transitions. Previous studies have shown that contemporary song lyrics often reflects themes of self-searching, relational instability, and emotional vulnerability among young listeners. Similar to earlier studies on youth identity in music, folklore constructs emerging adulthood as a phase of uncertainty mixed with self-reflection and hope. However, unlike studies that emphasize rebellion or social freedom, this album emphasizes introspection, regret, and emotional fragility.

Semiotic Construction of Emerging Adulthood in Folklore

The study employed Barthes’ semiotic analysis model to uncover the denotative and connotative meaning within the lyrics. The lyrics explicitly depicted personal conflict, unstable relationships, and emotional vulnerability as the struggles typical of emerging adulthood.

Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of *Folklore*

Song 1: The 1				
No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristic
1.	[Verse 1, line 1-2] “I’m doing	The singer states that she is doing well and trying new aspect in her life.	Represent emotional transition and the emerging adulthood attempt to redefine	Identity Exploration: reshaping who she is after past experiences.

	good, I'm on some new shit"		oneself after past experiences.	
2.	[Verse 1, line 3-4] "I thought I saw you at the bus stop, I didn't though"	A moment of thinking she saw someone from her past, but realizing she didn't.	Symbolizes lingering attachment and unresolved feelings common in emerging adulthood.	Instability: unresolved emotions and uncertainty from past relationships.
3.	[Chorus, line 1-2] "It would've been fun if you would've been the 1"	Highlighting regret like didn't workout in a past relationships.	Express nostalgia and idealization of "what could've been" reflecting identity exploration and emotional vulnerability.	Possibilities: imagining alternative life paths/lost future potential.
4.	[Verse 2, line 1-2] "I hit the ground running each night"	She spends her nights staying active.	Depicts the self-focus phase of emerging adulthood, filling life with activities to cope with uncertainty.	Self-Focus: directing energy toward self-growth and distraction.
5.	[Bridge, line 1-2] "If my wishes came true It would've been you"	She admits that her wish was for a certain person stay in her life.	Demonstrates relationship instability in emerging adulthood and emotional negotiation between past expectations and current reality.	Feeling in-between: stuck between acceptance and longing for the past.

Song 2: Exile

No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristic
1.	[Verse 1, line 1-2] "I can see you standing, honey, With his arms around your body"	The male narrator sees someone he once love standing with another person.	Refers to the relational instability and the emotional displacement often felt in emerging adulthood.	Instability: express the emotional shock of seeing someone once loved with another person.
2.	[Verse 1, line 5-6] "You're not my homeland anymore, so what am I defending now?"	The singer states that the person is no longer his home"	Represent loss or emotional security and identity confusion following relationships transitions.	Identity exploration: reflects the confusion and self-questioning that appears when one must rebuild identity after emotional separation.
3.	[Chorus, line 1-2] "I think I've seen this film before, and I didn't like the ending"	The situation feels as same as his past relationship and ended bad.	Reflects patterns of repeated conflict and the cyclical nature of unstable emerging adulthood relationships.	Instability: illustrates emotional instability, such as relationships start, end repeat, and rarely permanent.
4.	[Verse 2, line 3-4] "You never gave a warning sign, I gave you many signs"	Each narrator accuses the other of miscommunication.	Highlights emotional misalignment and the struggle with communication typical in emerging adulthood.	Self-focus: highlights miscommunication and emotional imbalance. Young adults often focus on their own perspective during conflict.
5.	[Bridge, line 1-2] "you're not my homeland anymore, so what I'm a defending now?" (reprise)	The line repeats the metaphor of losing a home.	Emphasizing emotional isolation, which represents a breakup and shift in identity after a significant breakup.	Feeling in-between: suggest that the narrator is in an in-between state, like no longer connected to the past, but not yet settled in a new identity.

Song 3: Cardigan

No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristic
1.	[Verse 1, line 1] "Vintage tee, brand new phone"	A contrast between an old T-shirt and a new phone.	Represents the duality between past and present identity, reflecting how emerging adults are underestimated despite undergoing significant emotional development.	Identity exploration: balancing post and present identity while redefining self.

2.	[Verse 1, line 7] “When you are young, they assume you know nothing”	The idea that youth are assumed to lack knowledge or maturity.	Represents the in-between feeling of emerging adulthood, where they are underestimated despite undergoing significant emotional development.	Feeling in-between: treated as inexperienced though in transition toward adulthood.
3.	[Chorus, line 1-2] “And when I felt like I was an old cardigan, Under someone’s bed”	A forgotten cardigan left under a bed”	Represents emotional abandon, self-doubt, and fragile self-worth, common psychological experiences during unstable emerging adulthood relationships.	Instability: emotional neglect and self-doubt.
4.	[Verse 2, line 5] “Chase two girls, lose the one”	Losing someone due to indecision.	Represents relational instability, impulsive decision, and emotional immaturity typical among individuals navigating emerging adulthood.	Instability: impulsive choices and relational uncertainty.
5.	[Bridge, line 3] “You drew starts around the scars”	Someone metaphorically highlights the singer’s scars with stars.	Represents emotional healing, acceptance, and reconstruction of identity after past hurt, representing growth and resilience in emerging adulthood.	Sense of possibilities: healing, identity reconstruction, resilience after hurt.

Song 4: Mirrorball

No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristic
1.	[Verse 1, line 1-2] “I want you to know, I’m a Mirrorball”	The singer compares herself to a Mirrorball.	Represents identity exploration and self-fragmentation, reflecting how emerging adults adapt themselves to be accepted by others.	Identity exploration: reflects self-fragmentation and experimentation, showing how they adapt themselves to be accepted.
2.	[Verse 1, line 4] “I can change everything about me to fit in”	A declaration of willingness to change oneself.	Represents social pressure and instability in self-concept during emerging adulthood, showing emotional vulnerability and desire for belonging.	Instability: shows emotional vulnerability and the pressure to conform.
3.	[Chorus, line 1] “I’m still a believer, but I don’t know why”	The singer says she still believes in something unclear.	Represents uncertainty and confusion typical of the in-between stage of emerging adulthood, where hope exists despite unclear direction.	Feeling in-between: expresses uncertainty and confusion typical of the transitional stage.
4.	[Bridge, line 2] “Hush, when no one is around, my dear”	A quiet, intimate moment when no one is present.	Represent hidden emotional struggle, showing how emerging adults maintain a polished public image while privately dealing with fragility.	Instability: reveals private struggles and fragility behind a polished public persona.
5.	[Bridge, line 4] “I shine just for you”	The singer shines for someone else.	Represents dependence on external validation, symbolizing how emerging adults often derive identity from relationships and perception of others.	Self-focus: highlights reliance on external validation, showing how identity can be shaped by others’ perceptions.

Song 5: This Is Me Trying

No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristics
1.	[Verse 1, line 1] “I’ve been having a hard time adjusting”	The singer states that she is struggling to adapt.	Represents emerging adulthood instability, showing emotional difficulty during life transitions where change feels overwhelming.	Instability: shows difficulty coping with life transitions, reflecting the emotional instability.

2.	[Verse 1, line 4] “They told me all of my cages were mental”	Others tell her that her limitations are mental rather than physical.	Represents internal barriers, self-doubt, and psychological confinement commonly experienced by emerging adults dealing with identity confusion.	Self-focus and identity exploration: represents internal barriers, self-doubt, and the process of self-assessment in forming identity.
3.	[Chorus, line 1] “It’s hard to be at a party when I feel like an open wound”	She feels emotionally exposed and uncomfortable in a social setting.	Represents emotional vulnerability, an important part of emerging adulthood where individuals feel fragile in relationships and identity formation.	Instability: reveals fragility in social and relational contexts, highlighting vulnerability during emerging adulthood.
4.	[Verse 2, line 2] “They told me all of my cages were mental, So I got wasted like all my potential”	She says she wasted her potential because of emotional struggles.	Represents regret and self-criticism, symbolizing the pressure to achieve and the fear of failure that young adults commonly face.	Self-focus: reflects self-criticism, regret, and the pressure to achieve something.
5.	[Bridge, line 1] “At least I’m trying”	The singer affirms that she is making an effort.	Represents resilience and a sense of possibilities, despite emotional hardship, she continues to push forward, which aligns with emerging adulthood’s developmental optimism.	Sense of possibilities: demonstrates resilience and optimism.

Song 6: August

No	Data	Denotative	Connotative	Characteristic
1.	[Verse 1, line 3] “August slipped away into a moment in time”	The month of August is described as slipping away quickly.	Represents feeling youth, temporary relationships, and the instability typical in emerging adulthood, like nothing feels permanent.	Instability: reflects fleeting experiences, temporary relationships, and uncertainty typical of emerging adulthood.
2.	[Verse 1, line 6] “Cause you were never mine”	The singer states that the person was never truly hers.	Represents emotional ambiguity and uncertainty, like emerging adulthood’s feeling in-between stage, where relationships lack clarity.	Feeling in-between: shows ambiguity and uncertainty in relationships.
3.	[Chorus, line 1] “But I can see us lost in the memory”	She imagines a memory shared with someone.	Represents nostalgia and idealization of the past, a mechanism young adults use to cope with uncertainty and identity transitions.	Identity exploration (nostalgia): represents looking back at the past, reflecting on experiences to understand oneself.
4.	[Bridge, line 1] “Back when we were still changing for the better”	She recalls a time when both were improving.	Represents identity exploration and growth, like a key part of emerging adulthood where individuals reshape themselves through relationships.	Identity exploration: highlights personal growth and self-redefinition through relational experiences.
5.	[Bridge, line 3] “wanting was enough”	The singer says that simply wanting was enough for her.	Represents emerging adulthood’s sense of possibilities, the belief that desire and hope alone can drive emotional experience, even without certainty or commitment.	Sense of possibilities: expresses hope and openness to the future possibilities.

The semiotic analysis of the six songs in *Folklore* shows that the lyrics consistently construct emerging adulthood as a period marked by emotional struggle, unstable relationships, and ongoing identity exploration. Denotatively, the lyrics describe everyday situations, like seeing someone at a bus stop, feeling forgotten, adjusting to change, or watching a season pass. However, their connotative meanings reveal deeper themes linked to emerging adulthood. Across the songs, past relationships symbolize unresolved feelings, regret, and nostalgia, while conflict and miscommunication reflect the instability and confusion common in emerging adulthood’s relationships. Metaphors like being a Mirrorball, an old cardigan, or slipping through time represent fragile self-worth, shifting self-concepts, and the temporary nature of young adult experiences. The analysis also shows that

emerging adults often cope by redefining themselves, seeking validation, and trying to manage emotional vulnerability. Overall, the semiotic table reveals that *Folklore* portrays emerging adulthood as an “in-between” stage filled with self-discovery, uncertainty, emotional wounds, and efforts to grow despite instability.

From an English Language Teaching (ELT) perspective, these findings suggest that song lyrics in *Folklore* can serve as meaningful authentic texts for developing students' critical reading skills. Identifying denotative meanings allows students to practice understanding literal meanings, while connotative interpretations train them to infer implied emotions, symbolic messages, and deeper thematic content. This process supports higher-order thinking in reading instruction. Furthermore, themes exploring identity, instability, and feelings of being caught between two worlds are relevant for classroom discussions and reflective writing activities in English language education. Because song lyrics combine language, emotion, and symbolism, they also function as multimodal texts that enhance students' ability to interpret meaning beyond surface comprehension.

Discussion

The semiotic analysis of six songs from *Folklore* reveals a consistent construction of Emerging adulthood as a life stage characterized by fluid identity, emotional instability, relational uncertainty, and a longing for self-definition. On the denotative level, the lyrics describe common experiences like passing stranger, fleeting memories, lost lovers, and season-like transitions. But, on a connotative level, they evoke themes of identity exploration, vulnerability, nostalgia, emotional fragility and hope. In short, *Folklore* frames emerging adulthood as an “in-between” period: unstable yet hopeful, insecure yet searching, emotionally raw yet full of possibilities.

The findings of this study align with boarder research on music's role in young adulthood, emotional regulation, and identity formation. For example, a study conducted among emerging adulthood “sad-music listeners” found that emotional regulation through music significantly predicts well-being in emerging adulthood (Maria Ameylia Trisna Murti, 2023). Similarly, an international study investigated music consumption patterns among university students and reported a positive correlation between listening to music for emotional purposes and improved emotional well-being and stress management (Julia et al., 2025). This evidence parallels how *Folklore* can help emerging adults navigate instability, uncertainty, and relational challenges.

Others research emphasizes the communicative and therapeutic function of music. There are study that demonstrated that music acts as a medium for emotional expression, stress relief, and psychological support, reinforcing the idea that listening to music can provide a coping mechanism and emotional shelter for young adults (Rahmad Surya et al, 2025). Furthermore, a large-scale study analysing music listening at home found that frequent music listening is significantly associated with higher subjective well-being among adults (Wang & Yang, 2024), supporting the interpretation that a popular album like *Folklore* can positively influence listeners' psychological experiences and identity development (Yan Zhang et al, 2024).

Although *Folklore* strongly reflects Arnett's (2000) characteristics of emerging adulthood, several representations appear paradoxical. While the theory emphasizes freedom, optimism, and expanding life opportunities, many songs in this album are dominated by emotional exhaustion, regret, and self-doubt, as seen in *Exile* and *This Is Me Trying*. This suggests that emerging adulthood is not only a phase of exploration and possibility but also one marked by psychological vulnerability and emotional pressure. Using Barthes' semiotic framework, this study mainly operates at the levels of denotation and connotation. At the denotative level, the lyrics present ordinary situations such as separation, memory, and personal struggle. At the connotative level, these situations construct deeper meanings related to identity instability, fear of failure, emotional longing, and uncertainty. Collectively, these repeated meanings form a broader myth that adulthood is not a linear movement toward stability but a continuous emotional negotiation between loss, hope, and self-redefinition.

From an English language education perspective, these findings indicate that *Folklore* provides meaningful material for developing students' critical reading and multimodal text interpretation skills. Students can be guided to distinguish between denotative meanings and connotative interpretations, analyse figurative language in symbols such as *Mirrorball*, *Cardigan*, and *August*, and engage in reflective writing or discussion related to identity and emotional experience. However, this study is limited by the analysis of only six selected songs and the focus on a single album, which restricts generalization. The interpretation of meaning also remains partly subjective despite the use of established theory. Future research may expand the data to other albums, artists, or genres, and further explore how song lyrics function as learning materials in English classroom contexts.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Taylor Swift's represents the characteristics of emerging adulthood by analysing six selected tracks using Arnett's (2000) theory and Barthes' semiotic model. The findings show that *Folklore* consistently pictures exploration, emotional instability, relational ambiguity, and a persistent feeling of being in-between. Swift's lyrical choice, supported by symbolic metaphors, narrative fragments, and intimate

emotional tones, capture the psychological struggles and developmental tensions commonly experiences by emerging adulthood.

Thematic analysis shows that exploration of identity, instability, and feelings of being caught between two factors are the most dominant characteristics in these songs. Narratives of regret, nostalgia, self-reflection, and uncertain self-definition reflect the internal conflicts faced by young people as they try to understand who they are and who they want to be. At the same time, semiotic analysis shows that metaphors such as mirror balls, sweaters, seasons, and “moments that slip away” hold deeper meanings about fragile self-esteem, emotional wounds, and changing identities. These symbolic elements highlight how young adults navigate instability through self-reflection, emotional adjustment, and tentative attempts at growth.

This study is limited to the analysis of six selected songs from a single album, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all of Taylor Swift’s works or to popular music more broadly. In addition, the interpretation of lyrics relies on the researcher’s analytical perspective, which may allow for alternative readings. Future research may expand the dataset by examining multiple albums, artist, or musical genres to explore whether similar representations of emerging adulthood appear across different context. Further studies may also investigate how song lyrics are received by listeners or used in educational settings to support critical reading and interpretation skills. From an ELT perspective, this study suggest that contemporary song lyrics can be integrated as authentic text to enhance students’ critical reading, metaphor interpretation, and reflective literacy practices.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I thank God for strength, clarity, and the opportunity to complete this research. My appreciation also goes to my lecturers and the English Education Department for academic support throughout my study period. I would like to thank my friends and everyone who shared ideas, feedback, and meaningful discussions along the way. To my family, thank you for being my biggest source of faith, patience, and emotional support. This research is as much yours as it is mine.

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