



The Portrayal of the Eldest Daughter in the Song “Eldest Daughter” By Taylor Swift

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ABSTRACT

Popular music is a strategic medium for cultural communication that conveys emotions and ideology, social values, and the construction of gender identity. Taylor Swift’s song “Eldest Daughter” depicts the emotional experience of the eldest daughter, who is often burdened with moral and emotional responsibilities within the family. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the Eldest Daughter Syndrome. The research focuses on the meaning contained in the song lyrics and how the representation of the eldest daughter is constructed in modern sociocultural society. To investigate meaning at the denotative, connotative, and mythic levels, the research employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis method. Research data were obtained through the analysis of song lyrics as the primary source; interviews with female listeners who are also eldest children were conducted to support the literature analysis related to representation theory. The research findings indicate that the song “Eldest Daughter” portrays the eldest daughter as a figure imbued with the values of resilience, sacrifice, and emotional responsibility, which are naturalized by patriarchal cultural myths. This portrayal highlights the internal conflict between societal expectations and women’s personal needs. This research finds that the song not only depicts an individual’s experience but also conveys ideological meaning about the role of women in the family. This study also suggests further research on gender representation in popular music.

Keywords: Popular_Music; Semiotics; Representation; Eldest_Daughter; Gender_Construcion

INTRODUCTION

Music is a cultural tool for communication, identity-building, and understanding various social realities. It is understood as a cultural product born from social and historical processes and interactions among agents; it cannot be separated from the technological and communicative contexts that influence its production, distribution, and consumption in society. Music not only possesses aesthetic value but also functions as a tool for conveying symbolic messages that reflect the principles, customs, and beliefs present in society. Songs, as a form of music, possess lyrical structure, melody, rhythm, and narrative, making them cultural texts through which various social meanings are produced, discussed, and disseminated to the public. In the digital age, popular music has become increasingly integrated into the daily lives of the younger generation and is utilized as a medium for self-expression and emotional regulation, particularly by Generation Z (David, 2023; Imawan, 2025).

Songs are a form of storytelling that blends emotion and symbolism through the use of figurative language, metaphors, and representations of human experience (Arifai & Saiyed, 2023; Baru & Sumarto, 2025; Puteri Eka Susilowati & Rachmawati, 2024; Setyoningrum et al., 2022). Song lyrics have the ability to capture specific social phenomena and convey messages related to psychological dynamics, family relationships, and the process of identity formation (Maharani &

Lestari, 2025; Marín-Liébana & Ibias, 2025). Therefore, songs are a relevant subject of study in cultural communication, particularly when their lyrics deeply represent the experiences and realities of specific social groups (Sihabuddin et al., 2023).

Taylor Swift's song "Eldest Daughter" depicts the social and emotional challenges faced by the eldest daughter in a family. This narrative relates to "eldest daughter syndrome," a condition in which the eldest daughter is expected to serve as a role model, a source of emotional stability, and an unofficial caregiver for her younger siblings. This pressure results in a psychological burden stemming from the need to always appear wise, strong, and reliable (Chatterjee, 2024; Gonzales, 2024). This phenomenon illustrates how women's roles are shaped by patriarchal values from a young age, placing them in a moral position with significant emotional responsibilities (Meisabillah et al., 2024).

Musician Taylor Swift is known for using lyrics as a tool to convey personal experiences and social issues that resonate with women. Swift emphasizes the portrayal of authentic emotions, psychological conflicts, and complex family relationships. Because of these qualities, she has become a significant figure in the study of popular music and cultural communication. Her work often reflects the dynamics of female identity in modern society (Théberge, 2021). The lyrics of "Eldest Daughter" tell the story of an eldest child who bears the emotional burden of the family and neglects her own needs in order to maintain harmony, reflecting cultural ideals of resilience, sacrifice, and the moral expectations placed on women.

As a type of cultural text, song lyrics consist of a series of signs that can be analyzed through a semiotic framework. According to Roland Barthes, there are three levels of meaning in a text: denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972). Myth contains ideological messages that have become ingrained in society, while denotation refers to literal meaning, and connotation relates to emotional or cultural meaning (Rejeki, 2025). By applying a semiotic analysis to the lyrics of the song "Eldest Daughter," we can uncover how the song conveys meanings that depict the role of the eldest daughter within the structure of the contemporary family. According to research on the inner conflicts found in song lyrics, music often serves as a tool for reflecting emotional struggles. Therefore, a semiotic approach can be used to explain the symbolic meanings contained in Swift's lyrics (Ramadhan & Imawan, 2025).

Numerous studies have been conducted on how women are portrayed in popular media, but most still focus on sexuality, body image, and women's empowerment (Azeharie, Sari, & Irena, 2022; Nurwahid, 2021). There has been little research examining the figure of the eldest daughter in popular music as a symbolic construct. Because "eldest daughter syndrome" is directly linked to the emotional responsibilities placed on women within the household, it represents a distinct form of social pressure that differs from broader gender issues. The limitations of existing research highlight a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed, particularly regarding how popular music represents women's identities within the family.

The meaning in the lyrics of "Eldest Daughter" is examined through the lens of Roland Barthes's semiotics and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Hall's theory helps us understand how discursive practices in popular culture shape and produce meaning, while Barthes's theory is

used to trace the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings contained within the song's text. This approach provides a strong analytical foundation for understanding how the song's lyrics represent the figure of the eldest daughter within social and cultural contexts (Ratunis, 2020).

By broadening our understanding of music's role as a space for the production of social meaning, this study offers a theoretical contribution to how social identities and perceptions are formed. Music is no longer viewed merely as a form of entertainment but rather as a medium that plays a role in shaping how individuals interpret their social positions, family relationships, and emotional experiences. Through this study, listeners are expected to better understand the emotional messages implied in song lyrics and recognize the psychosocial pressures experienced by eldest daughters in a contemporary social context (Bagaskara et al., 2023).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to use Roland Barthes's semiotic approach to analyze the signs and meanings contained in Taylor Swift's song "Eldest Daughter." Additionally, the study aims to uncover the construction of the eldest daughter's representation within a modern sociocultural context. By providing a better understanding of the relationship between popular music, gender identity, and women's emotional dynamics, this study is expected to enrich the literature on cultural communication.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to describe and interpret the meanings of signs, symbols, and social messages in the lyrics of the song "Eldest Daughter." The song addressed the theme of "eldest daughter syndrome," a phenomenon characterized by social pressures, emotional burdens, and moral expectations associated with being the eldest daughter.

The lyrics of the song "Eldest Daughter" and the research informants selected through purposive sampling constituted the two categories of research subjects. The informants were female listeners who were eldest daughters and observers of popular music, considered to possess the critical ability to understand and interpret lyrics. Experience and abilities relevant to the research focus were used to select the informants. The signs, symbols, and social representations of the eldest daughter presented in the song lyrics were the primary objects of analysis. The research was conducted from October 2025 to July 2026, during a period when the song was still being discussed online. Primary data were obtained from the song's official lyrics, while supplementary data were derived from music media reviews, public interviews, and direct interviews with informants. Audience comments on online platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram were used to understand how the public interpreted the song (Imawan, 2025).

This study centered on the researcher, who utilized Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis sheet, which includes the categories of denotation, connotation, and myth. This analysis sheet was used to identify linguistic signs in the lyrics, interpret literal meanings, and explore the emotional or cultural meanings embedded in the text. Additionally, a semi-structured interview guide was used to capture the informants' understanding of the song's symbolic meaning, their emotions as eldest daughters, and the gender representations reflected in the song. This method allowed the

data collection process to proceed in a focused manner while remaining flexible enough to adapt to the dynamics of the discussion (Fabbri et al., 2022).

The data collection process was conducted in four stages: documentation, in-depth interviews, literature review, and digital observation. The documentation phase included the collection of official song lyrics and transcripts of Taylor Swift's public interviews. To gain an understanding of the subjective interpretations of the song's meanings and their connection to the participants' life experiences, in-depth interviews were conducted with three to five informants (Meisabillah et al., 2024). Relevant theories and previous research were incorporated into this study, including works by Meisabillah et al., Ramadhan and Imawan (2024), Cahya and Sukendro (2022), as well as Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Roland Barthes's semiotics. Digital observation was used to examine the meaning of the song in popular culture by analyzing audience comments on social media (Ramadhan & Imawan, 2025).

Denotation, connotation, and myth were the three stages of Roland Barthes's semiotic model used to analyze the data. In the lyrics of the song "Eldest Daughter," the denotative stage was used to explain the literal meanings of words, phrases, and narrative structures. The connotative stage explored cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings beyond the literal text, particularly regarding the emotional experiences of the eldest daughter. Myth was used to uncover ideological values normalized in society, such as the social perception that positions the eldest daughter as the family's emotional pillar. In addition to textual analysis, thematic analysis was used to examine interview results and identify patterns of meaning emerging from the informants' narratives. To strengthen validity through the triangulation of theory, data, and sources, semiotic analysis was used to compare interview findings with digital observations (Hall, 2020; 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Taylor Swift's song "Eldest Daughter" presents a powerful personal narrative about an individual's emotional experiences in dealing with social pressures, family relationships, and the evolving cultural demands of modern society. This song is not only understood as an expression of the songwriter's personal feelings but also as a cultural text containing symbols, metaphors, and social discourse relevant to the lives of today's generation. Through a semiotic approach, the song "Eldest Daughter" can be interpreted as a representation of subjective experience that simultaneously reflects a broader social reality, particularly regarding the position of the eldest daughter within the family structure and social environment.

In the context of modern society, this song emerged amid a digital culture that demands individuals project a certain self-image, particularly through social media. The song's opening lyrics depict a societal phenomenon where people appear apathetic and aggressive in the digital realm, and are accustomed to hiding their true feelings in order to conform to social expectations. This situation creates emotional pressure that isn't always explicitly visible, yet is deeply felt by those caught up in it (Hall, 2024; David, 2023). The song "Eldest Daughter" captures that restlessness through reflective and symbolic language.

This song specifically focuses on the eldest daughter as its central subject. In many cultures, including within broader social contexts, the eldest daughter is often burdened with expectations to act as a mature, responsible figure capable of providing emotional support to other family members. This role is frequently accepted as normal—even viewed as part of one’s social nature—without considering the psychological burden that comes with it (Chatterjee, 2024; Ramadhani, 2024). The song “Eldest Daughter” conveys this reality implicitly through metaphors and personal storytelling.

Family relationships are not the only aspect highlighted in this song; the dynamics of social and romantic relationships are also a focus. The subject of the song is portrayed as having a desire to live honestly and authentically, in contrast to the surrounding environment, which tends to display emotional insincerity. The desire to maintain relationships—whether with family or a partner—becomes a source of constant inner conflict. This demonstrates that the song “Eldest Daughter” is not merely a story about family, but also about the negotiation of self-identity amidst complex social demands.

This section serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the overall analysis in this study. An overview of the song and its social context provides an initial framework for interpreting the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in the lyrics. Through this understanding of the context, the analysis in the following sections can be conducted in a more focused and in-depth manner, without detaching the song “Eldest Daughter” from the social and cultural realities that surround it.

Denotative Meaning

Analysis at the denotative level aims to understand the literal meaning that is directly apparent in the song lyrics. This stage focuses on what is explicitly stated without involving deeper symbolic, ideological, or cultural interpretations. Denotative interpretation serves as the initial foundation for analyzing the song’s narrative structure before moving on to the next layer of meaning. Through this reading, the lyrics are understood as factual statements that describe situations, actions, and social conditions as written.

“Everybody’s so punk on the internet / Everyone’s unbothered ‘til they’re not”

On a denotative level, this verse directly depicts the social situation unfolding in public spaces, particularly in the context of digital media. The lyrics present a general picture of individuals who appear relaxed, indifferent, and unaffected by pressure or judgment from their surroundings. The word “punk” is used to describe an attitude that tends to be aloof, uncaring, and seemingly resistant to social norms. Meanwhile, the word “unbothered” literally means not disturbed or emotionally burdened.

The phrase “til they’re not” signifies an explicit change in condition. On the surface, this phrase indicates that such indifference is not permanent but can change at any moment. Thus, this verse denotatively highlights the contrast between the image of composure a person projects in public and the reality that this composure can crumble when the individual finds themselves in certain situations. These lyrics depict a social reality in which individuals often project an image of strength and stability, even though that image does not always reflect their actual state.

The literal context suggests that this verse can be understood as a depiction of a common social phenomenon, in which environmental pressures drive individuals to project a resilient and unflappable self-image. At the denotative level, these lyrics do not imply any deep symbolic or emotional meaning; rather, they present a superficial depiction of the attitudes and behaviors visible in social spaces. Thus, this verse serves as an introduction to the narrative, presenting the social conditions that form the backdrop of the character's experience in the song.

The next denotative approach continues to focus on the meanings explicitly stated in the text. A literal reading helps identify the characters' actions and statements without first linking them to a broader ideological context or cultural structure.

"When you found me, I said I was busy / That was a lie"

Denotatively, this stanza contains a direct admission by the "I" character regarding a lie told to others. The literal meaning of these lyrics is the character's claim that they are busy, even though that excuse does not match the actual situation. There is no use of complex metaphors or symbols in this stanza, so the message is conveyed plainly and explicitly.

On a surface level, this verse describes the simple act of refusing or avoiding social interaction by citing busyness as an excuse. This situation is a common occurrence in everyday life, when someone chooses not to openly explain their personal circumstances and instead uses practical excuses as a form of self-protection. These lyrics literally highlight the discrepancy between what is said to others and the reality of one's actual circumstances.

The denotative framework positions the acknowledgment of the lie as unrelated to any emotional motive or specific pressure, but rather as an event that occurs concretely and explicitly. This verse serves to emphasize the gap between the statements made in the social sphere and the personal circumstances of the "I" character. Thus, these lyrics present a direct description of the behavior that is part of the character's experience in the song, without involving further symbolic or ideological interpretations.

Connotative Meaning

Connotative analysis is based on the understanding that a text contains not only literal meaning but also the emotional and cultural associations inherent in certain symbols. This stage focuses on how language conveys additional meanings produced through social experiences, cultural values, and the social roles that exist within society. Through a connotative reading, lyrics are understood as a medium that represents more complex emotional experiences.

"Every eldest daughter was the first lamb to the slaughter"

On a connotative level, this verse is no longer interpreted literally, but rather understood through the emotional, social, and cultural associations inherent in the symbols used. Culturally, the phrase "first lamb to the slaughter" refers to a figure who is the first to be sacrificed, is vulnerable, and has little choice to avoid suffering. In the context of the song, this symbol carries a strong emotional meaning regarding the position of the eldest daughter within the family structure.

The connotative meaning of this verse reflects the experience of the eldest daughter, who is often the first to bear the family's demands, responsibilities, and expectations. The eldest

daughter is portrayed as someone who must grow up faster, understand the family's circumstances, and make sacrifices for the sake of others. These sacrifices are not always perceived as a burden, as they have become an integral part of the role assigned to her from the very beginning.

The interview findings indicate that this symbol is deeply connected to the informant's experiences. According to Informant 4, "as the eldest child, from a young age I've been used to understanding the situation, giving in, and feeling like I have to be strong, even when I'm actually tired or sad." This statement illustrates how the connotative meaning of the lyrics is alive in the real-life experience of an eldest daughter, where sacrifice is understood as an unwritten obligation.

Other informants also confirmed that being the eldest child often places women in situations that demand greater emotional resilience. Informant 3 stated that "there is a perception that the eldest child is always expected to be strong, to mature more quickly, and to serve as a role model for their younger siblings." This suggests that the lamb symbol represents not only vulnerability, but also compliance and acceptance of a sacrificial role.

Thus, on a connotative level, this verse evokes an emotional sense of the unfairness of the role experienced by the eldest daughter. The song not only depicts this suffering but also shows how such sacrifices are accepted and normalized in everyday social life.

A further exploration of the connotative meaning reveals another symbol that serves as a strategy for representing identity. This symbol presents an image that contrasts with that of the victim, yet remains within the same framework of social pressure.

"So we all dressed up as wolves and we looked fire"

On a connotative level, the symbol of the wolf is not interpreted literally as an animal, but rather as a representation of strength, courage, and the ability to survive. Culturally, wolves are often associated with figures who are resilient, independent, and capable of protecting themselves in harsh environments. In the context of this song, the symbol carries an emotional meaning regarding the survival strategies employed by the eldest daughter.

The connotative meaning of this verse suggests that the resilience displayed by the eldest daughter is often the result of social expectations rather than a personal choice. The eldest daughter is portrayed as wearing a "mask" of strength to cope with pressure from her family and community. The phrase "we looked like fire" reinforces the outward image of success and resilience, even though her inner state does not always align with that appearance.

This experience is reflected in the informants' statements. Informant 2 stated that "it reflects my experience, particularly the pressure to always act mature and responsible, even when I'm actually exhausted." This statement suggests that the resilience displayed is often performative, serving as a form of adaptation to social expectations.

Informant 1 also revealed that the resilience of the eldest daughter is often perceived as an obligation. According to her, "pretending to be resilient, but actually being fragile and wanting to be loved for who she is, not because of her achievements that came at a cost." This suggests that the symbol of wolves represents a construct of resilience shaped by role pressures, not merely internal strength.

The connotative meanings associated with the symbols of “lambs” and “wolves” reveal how the stigma surrounding firstborn daughters exists not only as a social label but also shapes concrete emotional experiences. The sacrifice and resilience attributed to them from an early age become moral standards that must be met. This stigma functions as symbolic pressure that dictates how firstborn daughters are expected to behave and present themselves in social settings.

Overall, the connotative meaning of this verse underscores the duality of the eldest daughter’s identity. On the one hand, she is portrayed as a strong and resilient figure; on the other hand, that resilience stems from ongoing social pressures. Through the symbolism of wolves, the song represents the emotional adaptation process of the eldest daughter as she navigates the roles and responsibilities placed upon her.

Myth Meaning

At the level of myth, the lyrics in the song “Eldest Daughter” are no longer understood as merely individual experiences, but rather as representations of cultural values and ideologies that have become naturalized in social life. Roland Barthes views myth as a second-order system of meaning that functions by making certain social constructs appear normal, natural, and beyond question. In the context of this song, myth operates through a narrative about the strength and sacrifice of the eldest daughter, which is continually reproduced within families and society.

The lyrics “I’m never gonna let you down / I’m never gonna leave you out” perpetuate the myth that the eldest daughter has a moral obligation to always be there, to be responsible, and to never let others down. This promise not only represents a personal commitment but also reflects cultural values that position the eldest daughter as the family’s emotional pillar. Strength is not presented as a choice but as an inherent expectation from the start and accepted as part of her identity.

This myth about the need to always be strong is shaped through a repetitive and consistent social process. The eldest daughter is often associated with maturity, understanding, and the ability to yield, even from a young age. These expectations are then normalized, so that expressions of emotional exhaustion or vulnerability are seen as incompatible with the role assigned to her. In this song, strength is not portrayed as something liberating, but rather as a burden that must be constantly maintained so as not to disappoint those around her.

The interview findings indicate that this myth has been internalized in the informants’ life experiences. According to Informant 3, “ever since I was little, I’ve felt that I shouldn’t appear weak, because the eldest child has to set an example.” This statement illustrates how cultural values regarding the strength of the eldest daughter are not explicitly imposed, but rather shaped through a subtle and repetitive process of socialization. Consequently, emotional strength becomes an expected standard that is rarely questioned.

The perspectives of music experts further reinforce this interpretation. Music experts note that the repetition of lyrics conveying a sense of promise in the song creates an impression of strong and steadfast commitment, thereby guiding listeners to perceive strength as an essential part of the character’s identity in the song. Indirectly, the lyrical structure and musical emotions

contribute to perpetuating the myth of the eldest daughter as a figure who is always ready to bear the emotional burden.

In addition to myths about strength, the song “Eldest Daughter” also perpetuates myths about sacrifice as an ideal image of womanhood. In this context, sacrifice is not understood as a painful personal experience, but rather as a positive value associated with women’s roles within the family. The eldest daughter is portrayed as an individual expected to set aside her personal needs for the sake of others, particularly family members.

This myth of sacrifice operates through social constructs that position women as the guardians of harmony and emotional stability. Sacrifice is perceived as a sign of maturity, sincerity, and responsibility, and is therefore rarely viewed as a form of gender inequality. This song illustrates how such sacrifice is not only experienced but also accepted as normal and even something to be proud of.

The interview results indicate that the informants are aware of the demands for sacrifice inherent in their identity as eldest daughters. Informant 4 stated that “eldest daughters are often praised for being patient and strong, but rarely asked if they’re actually tired.” This statement suggests that sacrifice has become a social standard of evaluation considered ideal, while its emotional impact tends to be overlooked.

The stigma surrounding the eldest daughter functions as part of a naturalized cultural myth. Strength, patience, and sacrifice are no longer understood as personal choices, but rather as an identity that seems to be naturally ingrained. This process of naturalization means that the emotional burden experienced by firstborn daughters is rarely recognized as a form of role inequality. The stigma operates subtly through praise for resilience, while personal emotional needs tend to be overlooked.

Thus, on a mythical level, the song “Eldest Daughter” illustrates how ideologies regarding women’s strength and sacrifice continue to be reproduced and normalized within culture. This song not only reflects Taylor Swift’s personal experiences but also functions as a cultural text that both represents and opens up space for reflection on social values long considered normal. The myth of the eldest daughter as a figure who must be strong and willing to sacrifice persists in everyday social practices, and this song serves as a medium that both reveals and questions the perpetuation of this myth.

Representation of the Eldest Daughter

Findings regarding meaning at the mythical level reveal how this song represents the eldest daughter within a sociocultural context. From the perspective of Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, the song “Eldest Daughter” functions not only as a reflection of personal experience but also as a representational practice that shapes social meanings regarding the identity of the eldest daughter. Hall views representation as an active process, in which meaning is produced and circulated through language, symbols, and narratives in the media. In this context, the song’s lyrics serve as a medium that constructs a specific perspective on the position and role of the eldest daughter within the family and society.

Through the use of emotional language and powerful metaphors, Taylor Swift portrays the eldest daughter as a resilient, responsible figure capable of bearing emotional burdens. This portrayal is built through a narrative of commitment, sacrifice, and resilience that recurs throughout the lyrics. The eldest daughter is portrayed as a figure who is expected to always be present, understand the situation, and maintain the emotional stability of her surroundings. Thus, this song produces a social image of the eldest daughter as the main pillar of the family structure.

These representations are not neutral. The language used in the song simultaneously reveals a vulnerability hidden behind an image of toughness. Expressions of exhaustion, admissions of small lies, and metaphors about sacrifice and masks of strength reveal a tension between the identity presented and the inner experience being lived. Within Hall's framework, such representations demonstrate that meaning is not singular but open to negotiation between the text, social experience, and the listener's interpretation.

The interview findings reinforce the interpretation of this representation. Informant 5 stated that the song "Eldest Daughter" "depicts an eldest daughter who appears strong on the outside, but is actually facing a lot of unseen pressure." This statement indicates that the representation in the song is understood as a reflection of the social reality experienced by eldest daughters, as well as a form of validation for feelings that have rarely been expressed. This song not only depicts individual experiences but also fosters a collective understanding of the position of the eldest daughter.

The socio-cultural context suggests that the portrayal of the eldest daughter in this song reinforces family expectations of women. The eldest daughter is portrayed as an individual who bears greater emotional responsibility than other family members. This role includes the ability to yield, maintain harmony, and suppress personal needs for the sake of others. This representation aligns with cultural values that position women as the guardians of relationships and emotional stability within the family (Wulan et al., 2025).

Informant 1 revealed that this song made her realize how that role had long been assigned to her. In her words, "I have to be good at everything, understand every situation, and be a good listener." This statement suggests that the portrayal in the song not only reflects reality but also helps the informant reflect on and redefine her identity as the eldest daughter.

Furthermore, the song "Eldest Daughter" also represents the process of constructing the identity of the eldest daughter. This identity is shaped through the repetition of narratives about strength, sacrifice, and resilience. Within Stuart Hall's framework, identity is understood as something that is constantly being shaped and negotiated, not a fixed entity. This song illustrates how the identity of the eldest daughter is shaped by social relationships, family expectations, and the cultural values surrounding her (Loureiro et al., 2024).

Music scholars support this understanding by highlighting how the song's musical structure and reflective lyrics reinforce its emotional representation. According to music scholars, Taylor Swift's narrative approach makes listeners feel connected to the experiences conveyed, making the portrayal of an eldest daughter feel authentic and relevant. This demonstrates that musical elements also play a role in reinforcing the process of representing social meaning.

Taylor Swift's song "Eldest Daughter" offers a profound portrayal of the emotional experiences of the eldest daughter within the context of contemporary family and cultural life. Through its reflective lyrics, the song not only narrates a personal experience but also articulates the social realities faced by many women in similar positions. In this context, music serves as a medium of communication capable of conveying inner conflict, emotional pressure, and cultural values that are often unrecognized yet continuously reproduced in daily life (Cahya & Sukendro, 2022).

In the opening section of the song, Taylor Swift uses language that reflects the evolving culture of digital communication in modern society. The lyrics "Everybody's so punk on the internet / Everyone's unbothered 'til they're not" depict a social phenomenon in which an indifferent attitude and emotional detachment are presented as an ideal image. This language reflects cultural norms that demand individuals appear relaxed and unaffected by anything, even though in reality they still experience emotional attachment. This phenomenon aligns with the condition of the younger generation living in a performative culture, where self-expression is often adjusted to prevailing social expectations (David, 2023).



Source: <https://youtu.be/mUZ9T-hstUI?si=ltYohclYddvRe37Z>

Figure 1. Taylor Swift's Interview with Zane Lowe

In her interview, Taylor Swift explained that the first verse of this song is constructed satirically using language learned from the internet, such as memes, trolling, and popular expressions that romanticize apathy. The use of this language highlights the disconnect between the way one speaks and the emotions one actually feels. In the context of the eldest daughter, this situation can be interpreted as a form of adaptation to a social role that demands emotional control. The eldest daughter often learns to project an image of calm and composure, even though she is experiencing significant emotional.

The tension between social image and inner state becomes increasingly apparent in the lyrics "When you found me, I said I was busy / That was a lie." This expression represents a common self-protection mechanism used in social relationships, particularly when individuals feel they have no space to show vulnerability. The excuse of being "busy" serves as a symbol of delaying emotional openness, as well as a form of avoidance of the social expectations that might arise if feelings were expressed honestly. In the experience of the eldest daughter, such strategies are often employed to maintain the family's emotional stability, even at the expense of personal needs.

A significant shift in meaning occurs in the pre-chorus, when Taylor Swift transitions from satirical language to more personal expressions. The lyrics “I’ve been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness / I’ve been dying just from trying to seem cool” reflect the psychological exhaustion resulting from the constant effort to conform to certain cultural standards. Taylor Swift refers to this section as a shift in narrative voice, where she no longer speaks in the language of popular culture, but rather with an honest, personal voice. The exhaustion depicted is not merely individual fatigue, but rather the accumulation of social pressures experienced over the long term.

This experience of emotional exhaustion aligns with research findings on inner conflict in song lyrics, which suggest that music often serves as a medium for expressing psychological pressures that are difficult to articulate directly (Ramadhan & Imawan, 2025). For the eldest daughter, this pressure often stems from the expectation to act mature beyond her years, understand the family’s circumstances, and serve as an emotional pillar for other family members. The song “Eldest Daughter” provides a space to represent these experiences, allowing listeners to recognize that emotional exhaustion is not a personal failure, but rather a consequence of the social roles one assumes.

The symbol of sacrifice in this song is powerfully articulated through the lyric “Every eldest daughter was the first lamb to the slaughter.” This metaphor positions the eldest daughter as the figure who first bears the burden and demands. The symbol of the “lamb” represents innocence and vulnerability, while “slaughter” depicts the suffering endured as something inevitable. This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of the eldest daughter syndrome, which explains how the eldest daughter is often burdened with emotional responsibilities and caregiving roles from an early age (Chatterjee, 2024; Gonzales, 2024).

The sacrifices made by firstborn daughters are often not recognized as a form of injustice, as they have been normalized within family structures and culture. This notion of sacrifice then functions as a cultural myth, in which emotional suffering is viewed as a natural part of the firstborn daughter’s role. Within Roland Barthes’s framework, myths operate by naturalizing certain values and ideologies so that they appear normal and beyond question (Fabbri et al., 2022). The song “Eldest Daughter” debunks this myth by presenting a narrative that reveals the vulnerability hidden behind the demand for resilience.

The representation of resilience also emerges through the lyric “So we all dressed up as wolves.” In this context, the wolf symbolizes strength, vigilance, and the ability to survive. However, this resilience is performative—adopted as an external identity to cope with social pressures. Taylor Swift links this symbol to the figure of the showgirl, who appears glamorous and strong in public but hides emotional struggles behind her facade. This analogy illustrates how resilience is often constructed as a performance, rather than a genuine emotional state.

The perspective of representation suggests that this song not only reflects the experiences of the eldest daughter but also shapes how listeners understand that role. Stuart Hall emphasizes that representation operates through language and symbols to produce meaning within a culture (Hall, 2020). Through its lyrics and symbols, “Eldest Daughter” portrays the eldest daughter as a

strong, self-sacrificing figure capable of suppressing her emotions, while simultaneously revealing the emotional impact of this construction.

Taylor Swift also highlights a paradox in contemporary culture, where society appears open to discussing sadness and emotional pain, yet is reluctant to acknowledge the need for love and emotional dependence. In such a culture, emotional needs are often perceived as a weakness that must be hidden. This representation illustrates how cultural norms continue to reinforce demands for emotional independence, particularly for individuals who are expected to appear strong and self-sufficient (Hall, 2024).

From a musical perspective, the strength of the song “Eldest Daughter” lies in the simplicity of its musical structure, which underscores the depth of the lyrical narrative. The music serves as a medium that amplifies the emotional message, making the experience conveyed feel intimate and relevant to the listener. This aligns with the view that music plays a significant role in shaping an individual’s social and emotional experiences (Bagaskara et al., 2023; Salgar & Romero, 2016).

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that “Eldest Daughter” is a cultural text that represents the experiences of the eldest daughter as a result of the interaction between personal identity and cultural structures. This song reveals how the values of sacrifice and resilience are naturalized through language and symbols, while also opening up a space for reflection on the emotional burden that has long been hidden behind this role. Thus, “Eldest Daughter” functions not only as a personal expression by Taylor Swift, but also as a medium of communication that represents the collective experience of women in modern society.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Taylor Swift’s song “Eldest Daughter” depicts the emotional experience of the eldest daughter as a subject burdened by responsibility, demands for premature maturity, and emotional sacrifice—shapes that are shaped by social and cultural constructs rather than merely personal experience. The findings, derived using Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach, indicate that the song’s lyrics generate layered meanings reflecting gender role pressures, emotional labor, and the desire to appear strong and independent, particularly within digital and family contexts. These representations demonstrate how popular music functions as a tool for creating and disseminating ideological meanings regarding the role of the eldest daughter. This is particularly significant for cultural communication studies and gender studies. However, this study cannot be generalized to all experiences of firstborn daughters because it focuses on only one song text and one interpretive perspective. Therefore, further research should examine similar representations through other cultural works, compare experiences across social contexts, and employ more diverse methodological approaches. The aim of this study is to enhance our understanding of the construction of the firstborn daughter’s role in modern society.

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