

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Research Background**

Portrayals of women in the media have always been changing, however feminist scholars argue it still maintains the patriarchal values. In earlier media, representation of women is in a strict configuration of a passive “damsels in distress” waiting for male rescue or manipulative femme fatales who used their beauty to target men (Rodriguez & Lopez-Figueroa, 2024). These portrayals reinforce the gender hierarchies by identifying women with communal traits such as warmth, empathy, and supportiveness, which contrasted with men that were identified by competence and agency (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). As the modernization of media continues, the restriction shifts towards commodification of the female body, where sexualization and objectification became common and pervasive (Lestari & Elfattah, 2025). Through television programs, movies, advertising, and magazines, women's bodies became more and more displayed as objects for visual consumption, promoting the idea that a woman's value lies in their physical appearance (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). This is evident in television series *Baywatch* and fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, that normalized idealized beauty standards that caters to the male gaze (Sydney, 2023). Although these representations seem modernized, it still maintains gender hierarchy and shapes society's attitudes towards women (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Lestari & Elfattah, 2025).

The persistence of gender hierarchy in media representation led to feminist resistance. The persistence of gender hierarchy is what led the feminist resistance in response to those dominant portrayals, through multiple waves of feminism. Through The Suffragettes movement in first-wave feminism, women were able to gain political recognition by purposefully engaging in acts that would capture attention from the press (Timeline – World History Documentaries, 2023; Holborn, 2022). Second-wave feminism expanded the engagement into systematic critiques of media organizations, arguing that mainstream media representation actively upheld patriarchal values (Anderson, 2012). This is shown by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), that criticize how domesticity was framed as women's inherent destiny, while writings like *Symbolic Annihilation of Women* by Gaye Tuchman (1978) criticize how women were marginalized or excluded from media narratives. Through the slogan "the personal is political", it reinforces the argument that these portrayals of women were structural issues rather than individual issues (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). However, second-wave feminism often treated femininity as a patriarchal construct that is used to maintain women's submission (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006), limiting the possibility to reconstruct femininity as empowering.

Taking the two histories together shows that while early feminist viewed the media as misogynistic and marginalizing women, activists did not sit in silence. As a response they fought back these misinterpretations of

women in the media. From the Suffragettes movement to gain press attention to the writings of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Gaye Tuchman's *The Symbolic Annihilation of Women* (1978) that critiques the mainstream media's portrayal of women. Within this framework, media was used as a defense mechanism to correct these misrepresentations.

The emergence of third-wave feminism marked a crucial shift, by reframing feminism as dynamic, intersectional, and shaped by personal and cultural experiences (Johnson, 2017). Rather than rejecting femininity entirely, third-wave feminism emphasized agency and women's ability to interact with feminism in their own term. Often known as "girlie feminism", this wave embraces and celebrates symbols of femininity as a form of empowerment rather than oppression (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006; Snyder, 2008). Anoushka Tanwar (2025) further highlights this shift by framing femininity as a source of power, arguing that rather than rejecting femininity and its essence, modern feminist reclaimed and rewrites its meaning as a form of self-definition and agency.

With this shift, feminist and the media's relationship also changed. This shift can be understood in the perspective of cultural studies, stated by Littlejohn, Foss, and Oetzel (2017), culture is dynamic and is a result of ongoing disputes between groups with different interests and perspectives at different power levels. Whereas earlier waves engagement with the media was primarily through confrontations driven by anger, third wave feminism

viewed media as its cultural “playground” where gender roles and norms are reproduced and reshaped (Snyder, 2008). This is shown by the rise of feminist magazines such as *Bust* and *Bitch* that critiques the media and provides an alternative voice about women empowerment to the mainstream media (Helmbrecht & Love, 2009). Similarly, artists such as Salt-N-Pepa, Ani DiFranco, and Lilith Fair use their platform to express female agency, voicing women's sexual identities in a "sexist world" (*1990s-Today*, n.d.). These examples support the shift of women expressing desires is reframed as a potential space of assertion and self-agency, not as objectification. Rens (2023) conceptualizes this notion as “sexssertive”, which means a combination of sexual and assertive. Where women confidently choose how to express their bodily autonomy as a form of control and agency, not a submission to the male gaze (Rens, 2023). Therefore, femininity is increasingly depicted as a set of expressive choices that women are able to use and assert agency in a post-modern society, not a fixed limitation. With that being said, the media play an essential role given that they create, challenge and transform cultural meanings (Littlejohn, 2017). In this context, popular culture becomes a platform for social changes. Thus, third-wave scholars emphasize pop culture and highlighting female icons, hip-hop, and beauty culture rather than traditional politics (Snyder, 2008). As Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler, the editor of *Bitch* magazine says “The world of pop culture is the marketplace for ideas” (as cited in Snyder, 2008).

Feminism in the media has come in several forms, developing from confrontational media resistance to strategic engagement with mainstream media industries. In the earlier waves of feminist deconstructed pamphlets became one of the most influential media in disseminating feminist ideas that are more radical and confrontational (Fitzpatrick, 2021). By literal cutting, disassembling, and republishing, it symbolizes a rejection from the dominant media constructs and reclaiming authority over representations and narrative based on their experience. These practices emerge from women's own initiative, rather than a fixed agenda. This participatory culture continued into third-wave feminism particularly in the Riot Grrrl movement through self-published magazine and grassroots media publication (Jeffries, 2024; Tracy, 2018). Through these activities women are positioned as active participants in cultural and narrative shaping, rather than as passive figures. This shift to cultural participation marked an important change, as the media also functions as place for feminist agency and identity formation in the media and not only a site of oppression.

Music in particular, became a key media in expressing third-wave feminism. As Riot Grrrl bands gained attention through college radio stations and underground shows, music became a vehicle in the circulation of feminist ideas to enter wider public discourse (Tracy, 2018). Other than a channel in disseminating feminist ideas, music functions as a place where gender, power, and identity are negotiated through lyrics, performances, and audience engagement (James, 2020; Padan, 2023). Different from earlier

waves of feminism where negotiations were primarily confrontational, third-wave feminism engaged the media differently. Rather than rejecting traditional femininity, it explored how femininity could be expressed freely through performance and music. Due to its ability to reflect and shape culture and social values through a wide media network, music also presents insights to how feminist ideologies are formed, contested, and evolved. These factors prove why music specifically needs to be studied to understand how feminism, power, and pop culture are connected.

This negotiation strategy with the media structures became more evident as feminist discourse entered mainstream pop culture. Spice Girls illustrates this shift by expressing feminist activism from within the mainstream media (Padan, 2023). Bringing their slogan "girl power", the girls reframe femininity that was a symbol of oppression in the earlier days into something playful and empowering (Padan, 2023). Their willingness to embrace nicknames created by the media as branding tools shows a shift from direct opposition to strategic calculation with the media (Czachor, 2021). This shows their treatment of utilizing media as a "cultural playground", where stereotypes and labels can be reused and reframed into something empowering.

This negotiation of feminism through the media, later known to be a postfeminist cultural practice, is evident in modern popular music. In recent years more pop icons such as Beyonce, Taylor Swift, Sabrina Carpenter, and can be seen incorporating themes of female agency and feminist

advocacy into their musical narratives (Hobson, 2024; O. X. Tong, 2024). This exhibits that their political positioning does not always come in a form of explicit declaration, instead it emerges through storytelling, personal construction, and digital engagements. This aligns with Snyder's (2008) argument that third-wave feminism does not reject popular culture, rather it actively works within it to reshape its meanings. Nevertheless, this integration raises questions regarding the connection between feminist resistance and commodification.

These questions between empowerment and commodification become a central concern in what scholars refer to "popular feminism". Empowerment generally refers to the process through which women gain agency, autonomy, and the capacity to make choices over their own bodies, identities, and lives (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). In contrast, commodification refers to the transformation of feminist ideas and representations into marketable products that generate commercial value (Butler, 1999; Banet-Weiser, 2018). As explained by James (2020), popular feminism relies heavily on visibility, which aligns with the characteristics of music that intersect with various mass media platforms. However, the increase in visibility also raises its concern because, for feminism to be "popular" it would need to be consumable. Resulting in possibilities of structural critics to be simplified, while empowerment becomes commodified as a marketing strategy (James, 2020). Rosalind Gill (2008) explains this as postfeminist media culture, a condition where feminist ideas

and commodification overlap. In this case, empowerment can be demonstrated through sexual self-expressions or crafted public personas, but still circulate within the industries that benefit from it. As a result, the issue is no longer about whether media constrains or liberates women, but how empowerment, media spectacle, and commodification coexist and influence one another.

Within this context, Sabrina Carpenter emerges as a relevant case of this study due to her rising popularity within the music industry and in feminist media discourses. This is marked by the high success of her *Short n' Sweet* album that secured multiple spots in the Billboard Hot 100 (Caulfield, 2025). In the following year, Carpenter released another album, *Man's Best Friend*. Which debuted at number one on Billboard 200 during the first week of release. The album achieved 366,00 equivalent album units, supported by 224,000 traditional sales and 184.11 million on demand streams. Making it her largest opening week of her career and records one of the largest album debuts of 2025 (Caulfield, 2025).



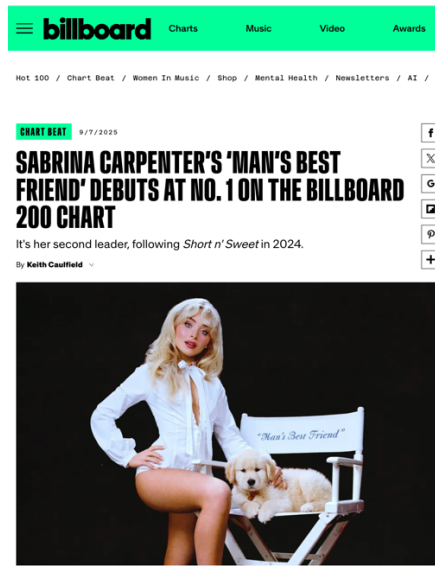


Figure 1 Man's Best Friend on Billboard's Website

Source: <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/sabrina-carpenter-mans-best-friend-number-one-billboard-200-1236060936/>

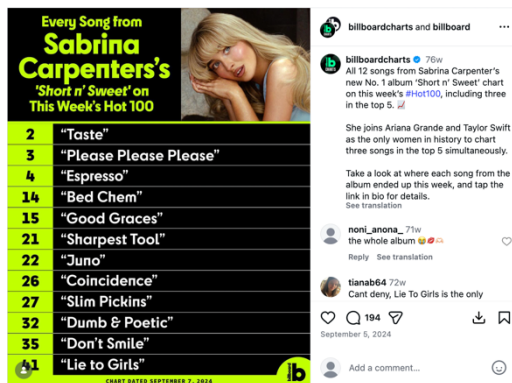


Figure 2 Sabrina Carpenter on Billboard's Instagram

Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/C\\_grbUdRPI4/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C_grbUdRPI4/)

One song from the album, titled "*Manchild*" stands out as it's way of representing romantic frustrations through humor and exaggeration. The song narrates around emotionally immature male figures, while its lyrics portrays independence and self-assurance in a playful and sarcastic way. It gained considerable attention among digital platforms, particularly on

TikTok with different personal interpretations regarding confidence and agency in relationships. The circulation becomes important as it shows the ability for it to reach a wide audience and potentially interpreted in different meanings. As Hence, this study examines the song and its music video as the media text provided may produce various meanings.

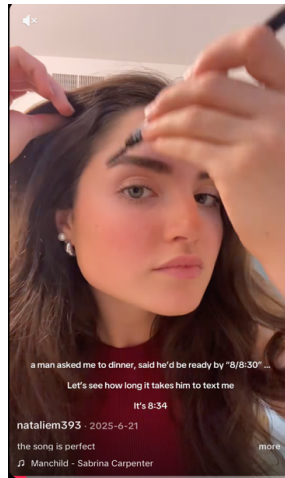


Figure 3 Interpretation of Manchild

Source: [https://www.tiktok.com/@nataliem393/video/7518430037176061197?\\_r=1&\\_t=ZS-94AOUQYoKSj](https://www.tiktok.com/@nataliem393/video/7518430037176061197?_r=1&_t=ZS-94AOUQYoKSj)

One interpretation regarding the song frames it as a familiar experience of dealing with a “*Manchild*”. The narrative frames a man who initially pursues a woman but fails to follow through his actions, leaving little to no explanation before finally dismissing the situation. The interpretation indicates a lack of emotional responsibility and commitment from the male figure. This portrays relation to the song’s romantic frustration that emerges from immature behavior in a relationship dynamic.

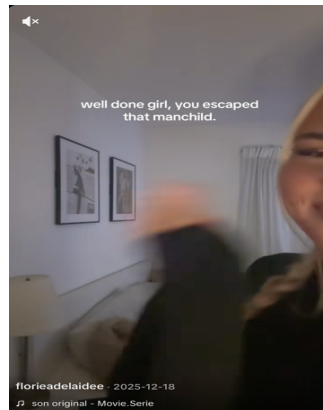


Figure 4 Interpretation of *Manchild*

Source: [https://www.tiktok.com/@florieadelaidee/video/7584952453590732054?\\_r=1&\\_t=ZS-94AP7VQGogq](https://www.tiktok.com/@florieadelaidee/video/7584952453590732054?_r=1&_t=ZS-94AP7VQGogq)

Another interpretation uses the same song into a celebratory soundtrack for leaving an emotionally immature relationship. This interpretation, frames the song as a symbolic affirmation that highlights detachment and the decision to move on rather than romantic frustration. From the two examples, these different framings portray how the song may be interpreted in different ways, Nonetheless, the way empowerment messages presented in Carpenter's work also carries tension. While the music is often framed as empowering, the promotional material for the recent release received a divided public response.



Figure 5 *Man's Best Friend* launch on Sabrina's Instagram

Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/DKxDWGBxybt/?hl=en&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DKxDWGBxybt/?hl=en&img_index=1)

The image shows Carpenter kneeling on all fours wearing a tight black dress with her hand resting on the leg of an unidentified male figure. Meanwhile a portion of her hair is grabbed by the said figure. As a media text, it may be interpreted in different ways. Some argues that the image is degrading and misogynistic, as it reinforcing stereotypes of female submission and catering to the male gaze (Rufo, 2025; Horton, 2025). From this perspective, the visual demonstrates power imbalances between men and women that feminist have fought against. Another perspective interprets the image to be satire and an exaggerated play on the album's name. PR expert Beth Booker (Jeffrey, 2025) implies that the image should be understood within the context of Carpenter's public persona and marketing strategies commonly used for female pop artist. With this view, the image portrays the misogynistic stereotypes of women being labelled "bitches" on purpose. By incorporating this label to her public persona, the image promotes control rather than passivity. However, this does not fully resolve the tension between agency and objectification. Rather it emphasizes how contemporary feminism in pop culture functions with irony, sexual visibility, and marketing strategy, within postfeminist media culture. The aim for this study is not to determine which interpretation is correct, rather to examine how multiple meanings may coexist in the media text.

Recently Sabrina Carpenter's public image has frequently associated with feminine aesthetics and themes of female sexuality. She often incorporates visual elements commonly associated with femininity, such as

stylized fashion, flirtatious characterization, and conventional feminine aesthetics throughout her music videos, performances, and lyrics (Hurt, n.d.). The high frequency of these depictions has created public discussions regarding the meanings attached to femininity and women's position on modern popular culture. The music video *Manchild* is one of the media texts that exhibits this broader representation. Through its visual narratives, character portrayals, and symbolic elements, the music video may present various depictions of femininity that can be examined in relation to representations of femininity in contemporary media. Therefore, *Manchild* provides a relevant site for analyzing how femininity is represented and constructed within contemporary popular media.

Within *Manchild*, humor, exaggeration, and visual portrayal becomes a recurring representational element that may contribute to how femininity is portrayed throughout the music video. By using satire and humorous storytelling, the music video engages with gendered norms and romantic dynamics (Hurt, n.d.). However, this operates within mainstream media platforms, where visibility, branding, and commodification is a focal point. In this context, hyper-femininity and humor cannot be understood simply as acts of liberation, but as forms of mediated negotiation within the postfeminist media culture.

In conclusion, Sabrina Carpenter's music video and song lyrics show how feminism are now mediated through digital pop culture. The online success of her album *Short n' Sweet* and *Man's Best Friend*, particularly

through the virality of the song “*Manchild*” on TikTok as a tool in reclaiming confidence, illustrates how audience are actively participate in transforming pop music into areas to express feminist ideas. At the same time, the album cover created a controversy that split the audience response, which some seeing as form empowerment and powerful self-branding, while others believe it is too catering to the patriarchal values and male gaze. Through audiovisual and lyrical elements that use hyper-feminine aesthetics, humor, and strategic self-presentation, it reflects the duality of postfeminist media culture, where agency and empowerment coexist with commodification and objectification within the same media framework.

While postfeminism has widely been discussed within popular culture, existing literature mostly focuses on feminism that are expressed explicitly and directly. Ruby Cain (2021) exemplifies this by her work that analyzes explicit feminist songs such as “God Is a Woman” by Ariana Grande and “Woman Like Me” by Little Mix, where empowerment is expressed through clear and declarative messages. Similarly, Adriaens and Van Bauwel (2011) discussed female sexuality and independence that are represented in television narrative particularly in “*Sex and the City*”. Robin James (2020) also addresses feminism in 21st-century music, frequently referencing examples such as Beyoncé’s performance featuring the giant “FEMINIST” sign, highlighting highly visible and explicit forms of feminist declaration.

On popular music particularly, prior studies on pop artists and feminism also tend to concentrate on individual textual aspects of representation. Pebrawaninggil and Nurhayati (2025), for instance, examine Sabrina Carpenter's "*Feather*" through a radical feminist lens, while Ruanglertsilp (2022) explores self-empowerment in "*Thank U, Next*" by Ariana Grande through lyrical analysis. While these studies provide valuable insights into feminist themes in pop music, they primarily analyze feminism as an explicit message and center on earlier-generation pop figures. However, across these studies, feminist expression is generally analyzed as something openly stated and clearly positioned, leaving less room for exploring satire, ironic, or hyperfeminine modes of articulation. This is especially evident in studies on Sabrina Carpenter that have primarily focused on specific feminist themes. Resulting in the limited attention on how her recent works uses humor, exaggeration, and hyperfeminine aesthetics to construct and negotiate meanings of femininity within postfeminist media culture. Therefore, this study aims to examine how Sabrina Carpenter's music videos and lyrics collectively create and negotiate feminist meanings within postfeminist media culture.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

Over time feminism has evolved in its efforts to reclaim women's rights, from the basic civil rights to the ability for women to reclaim authority over their own narratives. Ideally women are able to express their femininity and sexuality freely, without the restriction of being considered

to be “too sexual” or catering to the male gaze”. However, in reality these stereotypes and normative restriction still exist, particularly in the media landscape. While women should have the freedom to express feminine characteristics and sexuality on their own terms, this expression occurs in a modern-day media environment that is highly digital and commercialized. In this environment, visibility becomes a central component that invites public engagement which creates tension between empowerment or acts of commodified performance created for media attention.

Rising pop artist Sabrina Carpenter has emerged in the feminist discourse as an example for this debate. Initially Carpenter gained attention through her sarcastic and playful lyrics, that listeners interpret as empowering. On platforms such as TikTok, numerous users have reinterpreted her songs to match their own personal experience, often utilizing the song as a way to regain confidence and independence in romantic relationship. However, in the promotion of her album *Man's Best Friend* a controversy regarding the album cover arose. While some audiences interpret it as a play on stereotypes of women, others view it as degrading towards women and a commodification, catering to the male. This condition reflects a broader issue within popular feminism, where the increase of visibility in the mainstream media also increases the risk of simplification and commodification. Therefore, this study attempts to explore how femininity is negotiated through satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics in Sabrina Carpenter's music video and lyrics of *Manchild*.



### **1.3 Research Objective**

This study aims to understand how femininity is negotiated through satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics in Sabrina Carpenter's music video and lyrics of *Manchild*,

### **1.4 Research Significance**

#### **1.4.1 Theoretical Significance**

In a theoretical sense, this study explores how gendered meanings are negotiated within the media of modern popular music. Through Rosalind Gill's Postfeminist Media Culture and Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, it is hoped to give new perspective of using satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics as a tool to negotiate feminism in the mainstream media.

#### **1.4.2 Practical Significance**

In a practical sense, this study analyzes how hyperfeminine and satire can be used to challenge traditional patriarchal norms. It is hoped to provide a perspective for the media industry to navigate strategies in expressing feminism through strategic self-presentation and humor, and also to show the risks and opportunities in expressing feminism in the era where empowerment and commodification coexist.

#### **1.4.3 Social Significance**

In a social sense, this study hopes to raise awareness to the younger generations regarding modern feminism in popular culture, providing understanding of how meanings of femininity are constructed and

communicated through mainstream media using satire and hyperfeminine aesthetics.

## **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

This study employs an integration of several theories that complements the analysis all together. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory functions as the primary analytical framework to examine the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings embedded in the music video *Manchild*. To support the semiotic analysis, Andrew Goodwin's (1992) music video theory will serve to explain the relationship between lyrics and visuals. Considering the transformation of music video in the digital era, this study also incorporates Brad Osborn's (2010) contemporary perspective.

The signs identified through Barthes' semiotic analysis are then interpreted using theories of gender. Judith Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity explains how femininity is constructed and negotiated through repeated performances rather than an inherent trait. Rosalind Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminist media culture is used to examine the coexistence of empowerment and commodification within the music video. In addition, Laura Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory provides the lens in understanding how traditional stereotypes and patriarchal representations of women are reinforced through visual representations. With these frameworks, it enables the study to analyses both how hyper-

feminine aesthetics and satire produce meaning, and how they negotiate femininity within contemporary popular culture.

### **1.5.1 State of the art**

The dominant theme of recurring ambivalence between empowerment and commodification becomes a first. Multiple researcher (Zhao, 2025; Ananda & Annisa, 2025; Ruanglertsilp, 2022; Glantz, 2011) shows that as female artists are positioned to be empowered subject by asserting control over their bodies, sexuality, and narratives, these portrayals are shaped by a commercial state of mind. Where feminist messages are often delivered in visually appealing and marketable forms that conforms with the patriarchal beauty standards and the male gaze.

Postfeminist framing of empowerment through individual choice, self-expression, and personal agency becomes another dominant theme. Studies by Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2011; Muslim, 2021; Ruanglertsilp, 2022, explains how modern pop culture shifted its focus on feminism, from a collective political action to personal agency and individual choice. Cain (2021) also adds that young women often prefer these individualistic expressions of empowerment because they feel more personal and less "confrontational" than traditional political feminism. Thus, empowerment operates within the constraints of the capitalist media system, where empowerment and commodification coexist. This suggests that modern female empowerment is increasingly described as a matter of personal choice rather than a response to structural inequalities.

Sexuality and self-objectification as a tool of agency also is a common theme across literature. Some studies (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2011; Muslim, 2021) suggest that with a postfeminist perspective, self-objectification may function as a strategic and conscious choice where women maintain control, confidence, and authority. On the other hand, other studies (Glantz, 2011; Zhao, 2025; Ananda & Annisa, 2025) suggest that this representation is still a conformity within the male gaze and patriarchal values. This results in an ongoing tension where sexual expression both represents agency and conformity, depending how it is constructed and interpreted.

Despite the increasing visibility of feminism, patriarchal norms still persist and is continuously negotiated. This becomes another theme that reoccurs in prior literature. Cain (2021) emphasize how audience favors feminist expression that remains subtle and aligns with traditional feminism rather than those that are more radical and confrontational. Similarly, Ananda & Annisa (2025) and Glantz (2011) supports the idea that even when artist performs power and independence, they still rely on conventional beauty standards and feminine aesthetics to remain acceptable within the patriarchal media. This suggest that feminist expressions in popular media are often constraint within socially acceptable boundaries of femininity, rather than fully disrupting them.

While previous studies have examined feminist representation in popular media, most of them focus on explicit forms of empowerment and

direct resistance to patriarchal norms. These studies tend to conceptualize empowerment as something that are clearly articulated, and less attention has been given to more subtle and indirect forms of empowerment that are negotiated through humor, satire and feminine aesthetics. Additionally, hyper-femininity is often interpreted as a conformity to patriarchal standards or as a mere expression of choice, with little exploration of how it may function as a site of feminist negotiation. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining how Sabrina Carpenter negotiates feminist ideas through satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics, and how these strategies operate within the dynamics of postfeminist media culture where empowerment and commodification coexist.

### **1.5.2 Research Paradigm**

This research adopts an interpretivist research paradigm that views society as subjective and a product of social construct (Al-Azab, 2025). In this context, meanings are not something inherent but is a product from interpretation that are shaped by social interactions, cultural context, and individual experiences (Mokhtar & Pervin, 2022). Therefore, this approach becomes suitable in discussing concepts such as feminism, empowerment, and commodification as it is understood to be open to multiple interpretation, rather than a singular meaning. This perspective allows the research to explore how these meanings in popular media are actively constructed and negotiated.

In the context of this research, this paradigm becomes relevant as it will examine elements such as satire, hyper-feminine aesthetics, and visual representation as forms of symbolic expressions that hold contextual meanings. Through an interpretivist lens, this research explores how these expressions communicate feminist ideas that are delivered in indirect and implicit ways. This allows the research to analyze the critical meanings embedded in performance, lyrical, and aesthetic choices of Sabrina Carpenter. Thus, the analysis focuses on how Sabrina Carpenter's work constructs meanings of femininity and empowerment in the contemporary popular media.

In addition, the interpretivist paradigm allows this research to address the coexistence of concepts in the postfeminist media culture that are sometimes interpreted to be contradictory. In this research, representation of femininity can be understood to be empowering and commodified at the same time, depending on the perspective they are interpreted. This research aims to analyze how those meaning are negotiated and sustained at the same time, rather than resolving the tension. This is particularly important in analyzing Sabrina Carpenter's lyrics and music videos, as humor, satire, and hyper-feminine aesthetics are constructed and portrayed in a highly visible and commercialized media.

### **1.5.3 Music and feminism**

The relationship between feminism has evolved, from opposing media as a patriarchal force to utilizing it as a place to negotiate and reframe

the narration of women from within. Specifically in music, its relationship reflects a dynamic intersection where popular culture becomes a place in negotiating gender roles, agency, and power (Cain, 2021). It is a place where feminist ideas are performed, circulated, and consumed, not only as a source of entertainment (Cain, 2021). In this context, femininity is not understood as fixed, but continuously reconstructed and reshaped across different representations. As a result, music becomes a key site of the shaping of how feminist discourses are interpreted within popular culture.

Feminist discourse in the media can be traced back to the Riot Grrrl movement in 1990. Emerging from punk subcultures, this movement emphasized DIY practices and grassroots activism that enabled women to reclaim their voice and space from patriarchal norms that limits their participation in society (Jeffries, 2024). In the modern era groups such as Spice Girls popularized “girl power” while exaggerating feminine identities such as high heels, wonder-bra, and make up, demonstrating that gender is something performative rather than fixed (Padan, 2023). This shows how traditional symbols of femininity can be rephrased as forms of empowerment (Snyder, 2008). This proves how artists engage with the mainstream media to reach wider audiences, while at the same time challenge and reshape representations of femininity. Thus, femininity becomes something that can be strategically performed and reinterpreted, creating space for reclamation within popular culture.

Feminism in music has increasingly become visible in the modern era, yet it still remains complex and sometimes contradictory. Beyonce's performance in the VMAs with the word "FEMINIST" in the background exemplifies how contemporary pop artists bring feminist discourse into the mainstream media (James, 2020). However, as the visibility becomes higher it raises concerns regarding commodification within market-driven industries (Cain, 2021). Therefore, feminist expression in music often exists within the tension of empowerment and commercial appeal. This highlights how meanings of femininity are continuously negotiated through performative strategies.

#### **1.5.4 Music Video**

Andrew Goodwin's (1992) music video theory argues that music video cannot be read as like a traditional movie, as it operates as a multi-discursive promotional text. According to this theory, music video "musics" television, unlike how movies treat music as a secondary background, he believes that the visuals are the one that follows the logic of the music. Building on this perspective, Brad Osborn (2021) argues that the role of music video in this era has evolved. Rather than functioning as promotional material, music video itself has become an audio-visual commodity on its own through digital streaming platforms and social media (Osborn, 2021). As a result, contemporary music videos should not only be understood as an extension of an artist's persona, but as a multi-discursive text that constructs meanings through the interaction of music, visuals, and social context.



Although Goodwin's framework was developed during the MTV era, it remains relevant for examining the relationship between music, lyrics, and visual representations. The framework continues to provide a systematic approach in understanding how audio-visual elements interact to construct meaning regardless of the changes of media distribution. However, the role of music video has evolved considerably in the post-MTV era with the emergence of digital streaming platforms and social media. Therefore, while this study primarily adopts Goodwin's framework to examine the interaction between musical and visual elements, it also incorporates contemporary perspective by Osborn (2021) to contextualize music videos within the contemporary digital media landscape.

Goodwin (1992) believes in understanding music videos there are three interplaying components to analyze which are: music (such as the tempo and rhythm), lyrics, and iconography. Explaining the mechanism of this audio-visual mapping he introduced the concept of synaesthesia, an internal sensory process of visualizing music in the mind's eye. This enables viewers to perceive sound and image as a coherent audio-visual text. While the musical elements such as tempo, rhythm, harmonic development, arrangement, and acoustic space may influence editing and the cinematography, they primarily function as mechanism that organizes coherence within the music video

Continuing Goodwin's framework, there is an emphasis on the relationship between lyrics and visuals. Arguing that their interaction

fundamentally shapes how meaning is communicated. He divides the interplay of the lyrics and visuals into three categories:

1. Illustration: the visuals directly acting out the narrative of the lyrics
2. Amplification: the visual adds another layer that supports the lyrics
3. Disjuncture: the visual presents no correlation with the lyrics

Complementing this relationship is iconography. This refers to the recurring visual signs and symbols such as fashion, gestures, recurring props, and settings, that contribute to the construction of the meaning throughout the music video.

While Goodwin (1992) proposes the concept of stay-text to connect fragmented narratives with the performer's public persona, this study instead will adopt Osborn's (2021) concept of personas. Osborn (2021) divides these persona into four distinctions, namely, human, artist, narrator, and actor. He argues that these identities must be analytically separated to avoid assuming that the lyrics or visual performances directly represent the artist's personal identity or beliefs. This way, music videos are able to be analyzed as a constructed audio-visual text where meanings are created through the interaction between narrative voice, visual performance rather than through the artist's celebrity persona.

### **1.5.5 Femininity and reclaiming femininity**

Femininity is not a fixed or an inherent attribute, but a social and cultural construct. Traditionally associated with traits like softness, beauty, passivity, and emotional expression, it positions women within specific gender roles (Tong, 2014). Femininity in media are mostly represented through visual and behavioral standards emphasizing appearance and desirability (Tuchman, 1978). This results in women are often evaluated based on how well they conform to these expectations (Kotliuk, 2022). This shows how in society, femininity is a set of ideals that are regulated and normalized.

In feminist discourses, femininity has often been criticized for its association with objectification and reinforcement of patriarchal norms. Traditional representations of women often position women as passive subjects, whose values lay on their physical appearance (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). This creates a notion that femininity is seen as restrictive rather than empowering. However, contemporary feminist perspective particularly in third-wave feminism repositions femininity as a site of empowerment by reframing the use of traditionally feminine symbols like makeup and high heels (Snyder, 2008; Tanwar, 2025). The shift is grounded in the understanding that femininity is a social construct rather than a naturally fixed (Butler, 1999). Rather than treating femininity as something that needs to be rejected, these perspectives suggest that femininity is performed and possible to reinterpret. In this context, femininity is a

performative tool that can be performed and reinterpret according to personal intention rather than a patriarchal confinement. However, this remains a complex process as it operates within media systems that continue to commodify female body and appearance. Therefore, reclaiming femininity can be understood as an ongoing negotiation between empowerment and structural limitation present in contemporary culture.

#### **1.5.6 Satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics**

Satire refers to the most politically focused form of humor or art, one that works to point out inconsistencies and hypocrisies within a social or political context (Greene & Day, 2020). George Test (as cited in Greene & Day, 2020) identifies four elements that make up satire, namely aggression, judgement, laughter, and play. These elements let criticism travel through a humorous and entertaining surface. Satire turns the aggressive act of ridicule into something more socially acceptable than attacking a target directly, using humor and playfulness to deliver sharp critique (Greene & Day, 2020). Within a feminist frame, satire becomes a form of artistic expression that challenges patriarchal norms and values while voicing a woman's point of view (Peg Brand, as cited in Greene & Day, 2020). It carries its critique through irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration, which means the surface of a text can look conventional while its underlying message pushes against dominant gender norms. This is achieved by the juxtaposition of various aspects such as lyrics, tone, imagery, and context, with meanings established through contrast rather than alignment (Kroløkke

& Sørensen, 2006). In this context, satire functions as a form of resistance while signaling awareness of dominant social norms. This allows media text to present ideas that may appear conventional on the surface while challenging them in a subtle way.

Hyper-feminine aesthetics refers to the exaggerated enactment of traditional feminine traits. Often characterized by elements such as beauty, softness, and desirability, these elements are typically associated with conventional ideals of femininity that are shaped through cultural and media representations (Tong, 2014; Gonzales and Spencer, 2015). Within this study, it explores the possibility of hyper-femininity to be interpreted as a form of performance where meanings of femininity are constructed and negotiated in media representations.

The combination of satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics highlights how meaning can be produced from what is shown and what is implied. While hyper-feminine visuals may appear to follow conventional ideas, the appearance of satire can introduce a layer of critique. This framework helps explain how femininity can be reclaimed not by rejecting it, but by using it strategically. Therefore, these concepts provide a relevant framework for analyzing how femininity is constructed and redefined within contemporary popular media.

#### **1.5.7 Postfeminist media culture**

Postfeminist media culture is a sensibility where feminist and anti-feminist ideas are not positioned as opposites but deeply entangled (Gill,

2007). Through this framework, media becomes a primary site where femininity is negotiated through empowerment narratives and traditional gender norms. This perspective highlights how contradictory feminist ideas can coexist within the same context, and not as a single definition. Women in popular media are often portrayed to be complex, layered, and open to multiple interpretations (Snyder, 2008; Padan, 2023), this makes the framework relevant in analyzing how meanings of femininity are not fixed, but continuously negotiated.

This sensibility puts an emphasis on transition from objectification to subjectification of women as active and desiring sexual subjects. It further highlights key characteristics such as individualism, choices, and self-empowerment where women are positioned to have control over their identities and self-expressions. However, in a postfeminist perspective femininity is often represented through appearance and the body. Instigating that women's value stands on their appearance, resulting in continuous self-surveillance in maintaining a certain standard (Gill, 2008). As women appear liberated and exercising agency, this sense of empowerment remains closely tied to neoliberal market values, where visual appeal plays a significant role. This is further layered by the use of irony and humor, as it allows the media to present stereotypical femininity while at the same time using sarcasm to signal awareness.

In the context of this research, this framework helps analyze how Sabrina Carpenter may potentially use satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics

in her music video and lyrics as a way of expressing and negotiating feminist ideas. With the process of "irony and knowingness" it views Carpenter's product not as purely empowering or commodified, yet existing as both at the same time. This allows the research to examine how Carpenter uses satire to signal her position as the knowing subject, indicating her awareness of the traditional feminine stereotype that she is portraying. Through this perspective, Carpenter's use of humor and satire can be understood as a way in performing traditional femininity and distancing from the representations through humor. Essentially this approach helps explain how this strategy influences the shaping of femininity and empowerment in the contemporary popular media.

#### **1.5.8 Gender performativity**

Gender performativity suggests that gender is not something inherent, but is a social construct created through a series of performative acts. Judith Butler interpreted gender as something that an individual does and not something pre-existing (Butler, 1999). As it is formed through continuous behaviours, gestures, and ways in presenting the self, the idea of gender identity is seen as a result of ongoing social and cultural processes (Butler, 1999). This repetition of expression gives the impression of an internal and consistent identity. As a result, gender is perceived as something that is constantly constructed and maintained over time.

These acts are shaped by social expectations that push individuals to conform to recognizable forms of femininity or masculinity. Described as

"stylized repetitions of acts" it's a process where bodily gestures, aesthetic styles, and behaviors are repeated in ways that align with socially accepted gender norms (Butler, 1999; Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). Though it is constructed through discourse and social reinforcements, this repetition makes gender appear natural and stable over time. However, as it depends on repetition it allows the possibility for variation and disruptions (Butler, 1999). When these repeated acts are performed differently or with exaggerations, it may reveal that gender is something that is constructed and performed (Butler, 1999; Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006).

Gender performativity becomes relevant to this research as it provides a framework to understand femininity as something constructed and performed. This allows the study to analyze hyper-feminine aesthetics in Sabrina Carpenter's music videos as a repeated performance of traditional femininity. Simultaneously, the use of satire provides variations within the repetition, creating a gap between the performer and the femininity being portrayed. Through this perspective, femininity is not simply reproduced, but actively negotiated and reconstructed. Thus, this theory helps explain how Carpenter's product functions as a place where feminist ideas are expressed

## **1.6 Concept Operationalization**

This research focuses on how the negotiation and resistance of femininity are portrayed by Sabrina Carpenter in the music video *Manchild*. The study aims to examine how meanings surrounding femininity are



constructed through the interaction of hyper-feminine aesthetics, visual representations, and lyrical elements presented in the music video. By analyzing these representational elements, this research seeks to explore how femininity may be positioned in relation to dominant gender expectations and contemporary discussions of female agency.

This will be examined through the three levels of semiotic meaning established by Roland Barthes (Barus et al., 2025). It allows this study to delve in deeper in analyzing the meanings and power dynamics, rather than simply describing Sabrina Carpenter's music videos. By using the concepts of denotation and connotation, the framework helps explain how seemingly feminine visuals holds deeper and more critical meanings. Moreover, the concept of myth helps in examining how common beliefs of hyper-femininity means weakness are constructed and challenged. The specific elements of this resistance and negotiation are as follow:

1. Hyper-feminine aesthetics:

Hyper-feminine are typically identified with a narrow-idealized standards. Such as flawless, young, thin, conventionally attractive, and seemingly heterosexual. This is usually paired with specific clothing such as dresses or skirts, with the addition of high-heels and jewelry as accessories (Caldeira et al., 2021).

2. Satire:

Satire is identified through humor, irony, and exaggeration that carry criticism while keeping a playful surface (Greene & Day, 2020). George

Test (as cited in Greene and Day, 2020) mentions that there are four important elements in satire which are aggression, judgement, laughter and play, which enables the expression of criticism delivered in a humorous and entertaining way. Satire uses humor and playfulness to deliver harsh criticism, by transforming the aggressiveness into something more socially acceptable than ridiculing them directly (Greene and Day, 2020). In a feminist context, satire feminism is a form of artistic expression that challenges patriarchal norms and values, while simultaneously delivering women's perspective, according to Peg Brand (as cited in Greene and Day, 2020). In a sense it uses humor and playfulness to challenge dominant expectations of women. In the music video, satire is portrayed through humorous lyrics, irony, sarcasm, and exaggerated representations of masculinity. It serves as a critical commentary in a playful and entertaining manner. Satire is visible by the use of unusual lyrics and visual representations that highlight male incompetence as the music video uses sarcasm and humor to show actions against conventional views of masculinity, especially those related with competence and independence. This satirical portrayal is further reinforced by the contrast between Carpenter's hyperfeminine appearance and the critical and ridiculing lyrics.

### **1.7 Research Assumption**

Sabrina Carpenter's *Manchild* indicates a strong use of hyperfeminine aesthetics, visible through the visual presentation and styling. This research attempts to explore the possibility of meanings presented as a

contribution in the understandings of femininity in contemporary media. Within popular culture, highly feminine appearances have been interpreted in various ways. Where some perspectives associate them with traditional gender expectations and the male gaze, and other suggest the possibility of expressing agency or negotiating feminine identity. Through the different interpretations, hyper-feminine representation presents a relevant case in examining how femininity may be portrayed and potentially redefined within contemporary media text.

Through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, hyper-feminine aesthetics can be understood as a repetition of stylized acts of gender norms. However, the presence of sarcastic lyrical elements creates a contradiction between visual appearance and lyrical meaning. While the visuals emphasize exaggerated forms of femininity may align with the need of media visibility and marketability, the sarcastic lyrics introduce irony and self-awareness that complicate these representations. This tension suggests that femininity within the media text is presented as something that is constructed and negotiated, and not something inherent.

With Rosalind Gills's concept of postfeminist media culture, this interaction can be understood as a reflection of a condition where empowerment and commodification coexist. Through this framework, hyper-feminine representations remain relevant and commercially appealing within mainstream media culture. At the same time, the satirical lyrical elements introduce the irony and knowingness element that interferes

with the representations. This contradiction suggests that both the hyper-feminine representations and satire functions as a negotiation of femininity, within the ongoing tensions of marketability and empowerment.

## **1.8 Research Methods**

### **1.8.1 Research Type**

This research applies a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach focuses on identifying and describing patterns of meaning to uncover meanings embedded within a text (Atkinson, 2017). The study applies textual analysis to examine music videos and song lyrics as multimedia text, where meanings are created through audio and visual elements (Field & Moorjani, 1982). In this sense, the analysis explores the text to uncover underlying meanings and patterns of representation of the reclamation of femininity. With this approach, the research attempts to describe how femininity is negotiated within popular culture.

Furthermore, this research utilizes a semiotic approach of Roland Barthes to analyze the underlying meaning of signs and audiovisual elements in the text. The analysis focuses on identifying the denotation, connotation, and myths within the text to uncover underlying meanings. This also examines how visual imagery and song lyrics work together to produce cohesive representations (Field & Moorjani, 1982; Atkinson, 2017). With this framework, the research aims to describe how femininity is performed and negotiated within contemporary media context, supported by a postfeminist approach.

### **1.8.2 Research Unit**

The unit of this research is lyrical and visual texts that represents negotiation of femininity through hyper-feminine aesthetics and satire in the music video *Manchild*.

### **1.8.3 Research Subject**

The subject of this research is Sabrina Carpenter's music video titled *Manchild*.

### **1.8.4 Data type and source**

The qualitative data used in this research consists of music videos and song lyrics titled *Manchild* by Sabrina Carpenter, including visual imagery and audio presented in the video. This research utilizes both primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of music videos and lyrics that are accessed through the digital platform YouTube. The secondary data consists of supporting elements such as prior research, journals, scientific books, and media posts that may assist in the writing of this research.

### **1.8.5 Data Collection Technique**

This study utilizes purposive sampling in selecting scenes that were considered most relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling emphasis the intentional selection of information-rich evidences that are capable in providing in-depth insights into the case being studied rather than achieving statistical representation (Patton, 2015). In this study, the unit of analysis were scenes from Sabrina Carpenter's *Manchild* music video that presents prominent hyper-feminine visual aesthetics, the presence of

satirical lyrics or visual actions that challenge conventional gender roles. Scenes that primarily functions as transitional or didn't present any of the criteria were excluded. This way, it allows the study to have a more focused interpretation aligned with the research objectives.

The data are collected through observation, documentation, and literature study to analyze media texts in the music videos of Sabrina Carpenter. Observation is carried out by examining and interpreting audio-visual elements presented in the music videos, which includes lyrics and visual imagery. Documentation is done by collecting relevant data from the music videos, such as specific scenes that reflect the portrayal of reclaiming femininity through sarcasm and hyper-feminine aesthetics. Literature study is conducted through gathering secondary data from scientific books, journals, and other media posts to support the theoretical framework and analysis of the research.

#### **1.8.6 Data Analysis Technique**

The data analysis technique in this research uses the Semiotic Theory by Roland Barthes. Barthes argues that meanings within media text are created through different levels of signification, which are divided into the following:

1. Denotative level (denotation):

Denotation is described as the literal meaning of a sign. In this level the focus is what is directly shown or stated in the music videos or lyrics. Such as, visual appearances, actions, settings, and the explicit meaning of

the lyrics. The denotative level describes straightforward representations of objects without interpretations or cultural association (Barus et al., 2025).

2. Connotative level (Connotation):

Connotation is described as the secondary meanings that are carried within a sign, which are influenced by cultural or personal context. This level examines how media texts have hidden meanings and provides the interpretation of said meanings (Barthes, 1967). In this context Connotation allows the identification of implied meanings related to representation of femininity.

3. Myth Level (Myth):

Myth is what Barthes describe as a culturally constructed belief system that is used to naturalize and reinforce dominant ideologies. It functions as a second-order meaning that naturalizes ideological construction and turns them into seemingly universal truths. This level examines how representations in music videos and lyrics reinforce or challenge dominant narratives in relation to femininity and feminist discourse (Barus et al., 2025).

By using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework allows a deeper analysis beyond surface-level interpretation, allowing the deconstruction of how meaning is created within music videos and lyrics. Through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, it provides a systematic way to explore how hyper-feminine aesthetics and satire work together in the creation of meaning. This becomes relevant in analyzing layered meanings

that may appear in traditionally feminine form yet conveying irony and criticism. With this method, the research is able to reveal how femininity is negotiated and redefined within popular culture.

#### **1.8.7 Goodness Criteria**

Goodness criteria becomes crucial in maintaining the trustworthiness of the study. This study applies the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability based on Lincoln and Guba's definitions of quality criteria in qualitative research (as cited in Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility is established through data triangulation by comparing music video visuals song lyrics, and supporting literature related to femininity and postfeminist media culture. Persistent observation was also conducted by repeatedly reviewing the music video to identifying recurring characteristics and elements that are most relevant. The interpretation of each selected scene was subsequently cross-referenced with the chosen theoretical frameworks, namely Roland Barthes' semiotics, Judith Butler's gender performativity, Rosalind Gill's postfeminist media culture, and Goodwin's music video theory to ensure analytical consistency.

Transferability was achieved by providing a thorough description of the research context. This includes explanations of the selected scenes, visual signs, lyrics, and their denotative, connotative, and myths. The study also described the criteria used for selecting scenes so that readers can understand the scope of analysis and determine the applicability of the findings to similar text.



Dependability was maintained through a systematic and transparent analytical procedure. All selected scenes were analyzed with the same sequence of analysis based on Barthes' semiotic framework. The study also employed the same analytical categories across all scenes to ensure consistency throughout the research process.

Confirmability was established by grounding every interpretation in observable evidence from the music video rather than personal opinion. Analytical claims were supported by screenshots lyrics, and relevant literature. Interpretations were continuously compared with selected theoretical frameworks.

### **1.9 Researcher positionality and reflexivity**

As a Communication Studies student with a particular interest in gender studies and popular culture, the researcher acknowledges that personal background, academic interests, and familiarity with contemporary feminist discussions may influence the interpretation of the selected music video. The researcher approaches femininity from the perspective that women's expressions of femininity can constitute a form of empowerment, particularly when women actively negotiate and define femininity on their own terms. However, the researcher also recognizes that such expressions do not exist outside broader social and commercial structures. Contemporary female representation in popular media remains closely connected to commercially desirable beauty standards, which may shape how femininity is presented and understood. Rather than viewing these

standards solely as restrictive, the researcher recognizes that they may also become a medium through which women construct identity, express agency, and negotiate their femininity. This position allows the researcher to examine both the empowering possibilities and the commercial constraints surrounding hyper-feminine representation in the selected music video.

The researcher further recognizes that media texts are socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations rather than containing one single, definitive meaning. Therefore, the findings presented in this study represent one possible interpretation of the selected music video rather than an absolute truth. Knowing that semiotic analysis is inherently interpretative, the researcher continuously practiced methodological reflexivity throughout the analytical process. Each scene was analyzed using the same systematic procedure, beginning with denotative description, followed by connotative interpretation, and concluding with myth analysis based on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The interpretation of visual and lyrical signs was supported by Goodwin's music video theory, Butler's concept of gender performativity, Gill's postfeminist media culture, and Mulvey's theory of the male gaze when relevant. Throughout the analysis, interpretations were continuously compared with visual evidence, song lyrics, and academic literature to ensure that the findings remained theoretically grounded and consistently derived from the data rather than solely from the researcher's personal opinions.