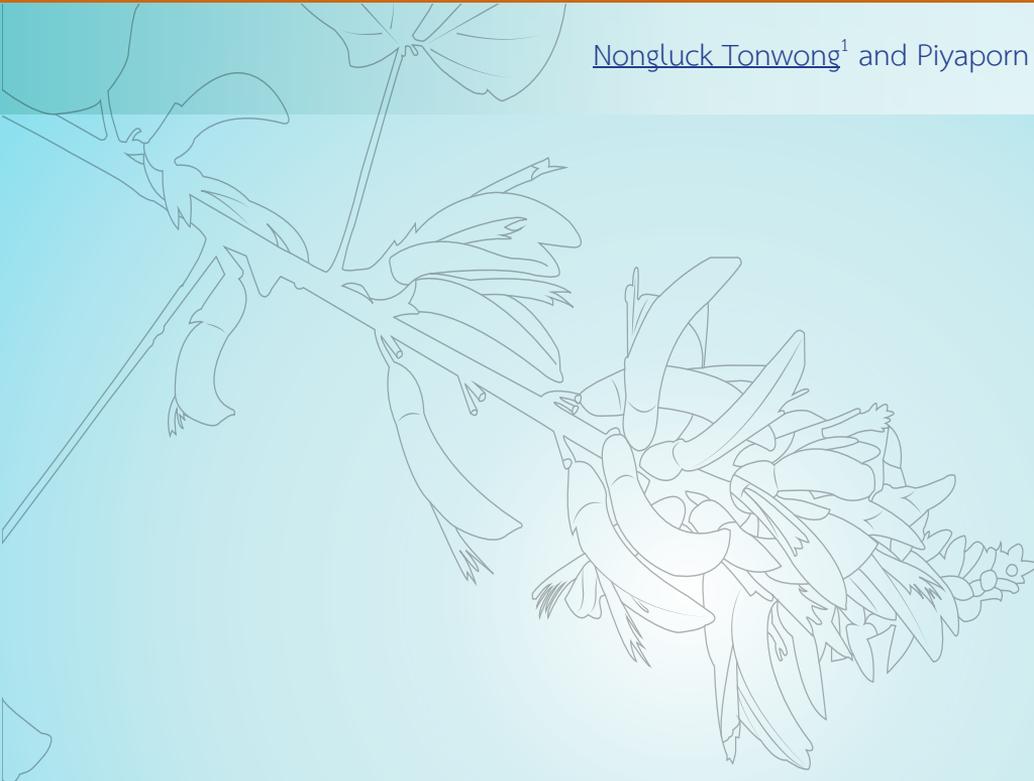# An Analysis of Figurative Language and Values in American Culture in Taylor Swift's Song Lyrics

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Abstract

In America, the music and songs are favored diversely which can reflect American's ethnicity and diversity. This study aimed to 1) explore values in American culture in Taylor Swift's 20 songs based on actual performance on the weekly Billboard Hot 100 in January 2023 by applying Kohls' (1984) framework and 2) investigate linguistic aspects in the songs by using Reaske's (1966) framework to find out figurative language types used. The results can be summarized as follows: the most frequently used types of figurative language are symbol (26.79%) frequently used in *Bad Blood* and *Tim McGraw* and paradox (14.34%) used mostly in *Blank Space* and *Red*. The most frequently found values in American culture are directness/openness/honesty (26.46%) found mostly in *Blank Space, I Knew You Were Trouble* and *Bad Blood*, individualism/privacy (11.38%) (*Wildest Dreams, Shake it Off*, etc.) and future orientation (11.08%) (*You Belong With Me, Style,* etc.). To summarize the figurative language aspect, the present study found a greater number of figurative language types used in Taylor Swift's songs once compared with the previous studies: the present studies found 15 types. In terms of American culture, the present study also found other different American values in more extensive views: future orientation, practicality/efficiency, competition, time and its control, self-help and informality. The results of this present study could be used as a guideline for writers, authors, composers or artists to create their art works as well as teaching materials in English creative writing course and courses related to American culture.

Keywords: Figurative Language, American Culture, Values, Taylor Swift

Introduction

Language is the medium used among humans for communication, and language is delivered in the form of writing, speaking, or even body language. To communicate, there are always a message sender and a message recipient who are using a language as a medium to convey the message. Holloway and Cheney [1] stated that songs are messages which convey a lyricist's points of view to their audiences. Song is known as a part of literature as Meyer [2] explained that literature contains careful language use. Literature can contain several features, such as metaphor, rhyme, and alliteration which are open for interpretation.

As songs have been carefully written to convey people's attitudes, there have been several previous studies conducting an analysis of figurative language used in song lyrics. For example, Shodio [3] found six types of figurative language and meanings in anthem songs, and Puspitorini and Hamdani [4] who studied figurative language used in Coldplay's selected song lyrics, found four types of figurative language. The findings of these previous studies showed that songs did contain several types of figurative language; metaphor was found to be the most dominant type in the anthem songs while hyperbole was the most frequently used in Coldplay's song lyrics. However, the results found were fairly limited. Consequently,

the researchers of the present study were interested in exploring a wider range of figurative language used to creatively compose a song in a more profound perspective. The present study, hence, adopted Reaske [5] figurative language that contained 18 types and was originally used to analyze the poetry to analyze Taylor Swift's song lyrics. The researchers believed the results yielded would vary from the previous studies and contain a variety of figurative language used.

The reason why Taylor Swift's song lyrics was selected was that pop songs can easily convey messages to many groups of people who tend to effortlessly perceive the messages [6]. Taylor Swift's reputation has been recognized by a great deal of memorable awards she has received from a variety of music brands, such as 10 Grammy Awards and 23 Billboard Music Awards. Hirschberg [7] stated that Taylor Swift has been popular as her writing style in song lyrics is outstanding from other songwriters as she has elaborated her own life experience in the writings.

Figure 1. Taylor Swift
Source: https://www.vogue.co.th/celebrity/article/psychology-of-taylor-swift

In fact, Taylor Swift's song lyrics have been widely analyzed to find out figurative language, yet the results were fairly limited since pretty small group of figurative language were found in previous studies. For instance, Suriyawongpaisal [8] found only three types of figurative language used, and Lusiana, Aryawibawa, and Qomariana [9] found eight types of figurative language. The researchers firmly believed that the present study would gain different results from the previous studies as the researchers has collected a great number of types of figurative language from Reaske [5] to analyze the songs in deeper dimension. Furthermore, the researchers selected Taylor Swift's 20 songs based on actual performance on the weekly Billboard Hot 100 which were ranked in January 2023 while the previous studies selected the songs from a particular album.

In addition, many previous studies have studied only linguistic features from song lyrics, figurative language, and its meanings. To differentiate the present study from those previous studies, the researchers investigated both linguistic aspect (i.e. types of figurative language) together with explored the cultural aspects regarding American culture hidden in Taylor Swift's song lyrics. As Frith et al. [6] stated, social phenomena can be reflected through songs, and pop songs tend to convey shared cultural values. Therefore, lyrics which were written by Taylor Swift as an American would reflect American cultural values to a certain extent.

Ford [10] wrote that "music is like a time capsule." Music is capable of capturing events and incidents happening at that time, for eternity. For example, slang and the use of language at a particular time have been recorded in the music, and the listeners could tell when the songs were written from the language use. Moreover, music contains and mentions about people's lifestyles, such as foods, fashion trends, or celebrities.

As there is only a small number of previous studies studying figurative language and cultural aspects in parallel, the present study would yield elaborate newer and fresher results. Despite the Suriyawongpaisal's (2013) study [8] on figurative language and American cultural values, the present study was different in terms of the number of figurative language types and different framework of values in American culture used. The present study aimed to analyze values in American culture hidden by implementing Kohls (1984)'s framework [11] which consists of 13 values to gain wider results.

To conclude, the present study explored figurative language employed in Taylor Swift's 20 songs based on actual performance on the weekly Billboard Hot 100 by using Reaske (1966)'s framework [5] regarding figurative language types and to find out values in American culture hidden in the lyrics by applying Kohls (1984)'s framework [11] related to values in American culture.

Objectives

To explore figurative language employed in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

To explore values in American culture embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

Methodology

The present study mainly employed qualitative methodology to elaborate the study results while quantitative methodology would be slightly applied to present numerical data which represents frequency of types of figurative language and values in American culture found in the song lyrics.

This study employed Reaske (1966)'s framework [5] regarding 18 figurative language types: personification, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, irony, paradox, symbol, repetition, litotes, synecdoche, parallelism, oxymoron, alliteration, onomatopoeia, allusion, allegory, and antithesis. Furthermore, to study cultural aspects, Kohls (1984)'s framework [11] related to values in American culture was employed in the data analysis. The framework contained 13 values: personal control over the environment, change, time and its control, equality, individualism/privacy, self-help, competition, future orientation, action/work orientation, informality, directness/openness/honesty, practicality/efficiency, and materialism/acquisitiveness.

In data analysis, to gain the quantitative data, the researcher put lyrics of each song in a separate Words file and marked the parts with different abbreviations belonging to each type of figurative language and American value. Once all lyrics were analyzed, the researcher searched for the frequencies occurring of each abbreviation and entered the frequencies in the PowerPoint to create a pile chart which also calculated in a percentage.

For a qualitative study, it was necessary to take credibility and trustworthiness into account to certify the research quality. Credibility and trustworthiness of a qualitative research are comparable to reliability and validity in quantitative research [12]. Hence, triangulation which is one of the most popular and well-known methods was employed to assure the reliability and validity of the research as it has been widely used among numerous researchers. There are many types of triangulations which use different information sources to confirm and improve the clarity a research result, and the present study employed triangulation by involving an additional inter-rater with a similar academic and research background as the first author to analyze the data, ensuring precision, consistency, and reliability.

Results

Objective 1: To explore figurative language employed in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

From the data analysis, there were 15 types of figurative language employed in Taylor Swift's song lyrics shown in frequency and percentage as follows: Symbol (71, 26.79%), Paradox (38, 14.34%), Repetition (27, 10.19%), Parallelism (23, 8.68%), Simile (16, 6.04%), Antithesis (16, 6.04%), Metaphor (15, 5.66%), Irony (14, 5.28%), Personification (13, 4.91%), Hyperbole (13, 4.91%), Synecdoche (8, 3.02%), Allusion (6, 2.26%), Alliteration (3, 1.13%), Oxymoron (1, 0.38%), and Allegory (1, 0.38%).
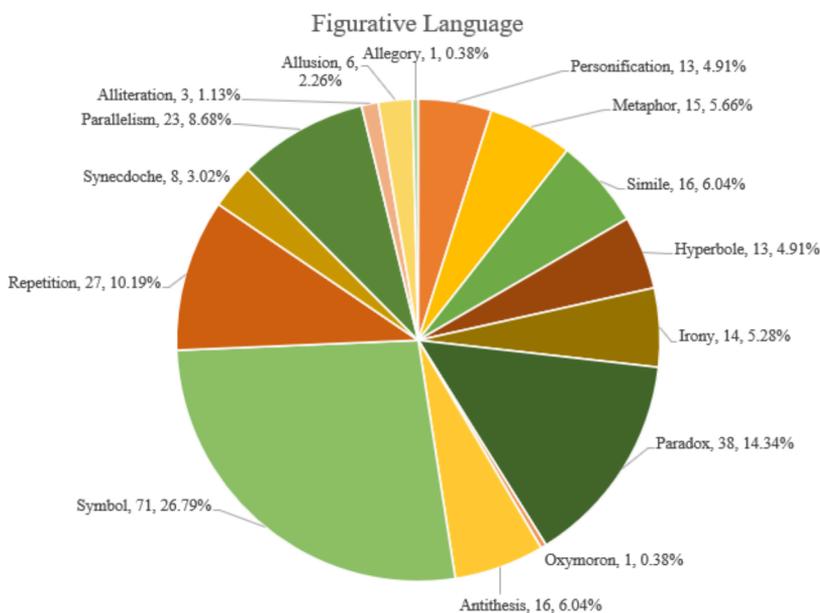
Figure 2 Frequency and percentage of types of figurative language employed in
Taylor Swift's song lyrics

Symbol was the most frequently employed in the song lyrics for 71 times at 26.79%.
Examples are shown as follows:

Table 1. Examples of symbol

Lyrics	Song
Still got **scars** on my **back** from your **knife**	*Bad Blood*
Walk in the streets with you in your **worn-out jeans**	*You Belong With Me*
He knelt to the ground and pulled out a **ring**	*Love Story*
He's **the song in the car** I keep singing	*Teardrops On My Guitar*
September saw a month of tears	*Tim McGraw*

Symbol was the most frequently employed mostly in *Bad Blood* and *Tim McGraw*.
There were several lines containing more than one symbol, for example:

Still got **scars** on my **back** from your **knife** (*Bad Blood*)

For the background of the song *Bad Blood*, Taylor Swift recounted the story of a
platonic breakup she went through with a female friend after a long friendship. "Scars"
mean bad things in the past done to the singer by someone which have still reminded her
about those things until now; "back" means the situation that she was betrayed by her
loved one; and "knife" means the cruel action that caused her to be upset, sad or hurtful.

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September saw a month of tears (*Tim McGraw*)

Tim McGraw was written by Taylor Swift and Liz Rose, a songwriter, during Taylor Swift's freshman year at Hendersonville High School. Taylor Swift anticipated the eventual breakup with her senior boyfriend as he prepared to leave for college, so Taylor Swift channeled her complex emotions into writing the song. In the above line, "September" was compared as a month of tears as she and her boyfriend broke up in the month. Furthermore, "September" is believed to be a month of loneliness as it is the end of summer in America, leading to winter soon.

Also, there were several other symbols Taylor Swift often used in her songs, for example, "worn-out jeans". As widely well known, jeans are young men and women's choices of high character, the singer used this phrase to wistfully look back at her teenager time in the past.

Paradox was found to be the most second employed type of figurative language in the song lyrics for 38 times at 14.34%. Examples are shown as follows:

Table 2 Examples of paradox

Lyrics	Song
You made a rebel of a **careless** man's **careful** daughter	*Mine*
Rose garden filled with **thorns**	*Blank Space*
Forgetting him was like trying to **know somebody you never met**	*Red*
It's just **wrong** enough to make it feel **right**	*Sparks Fly*
Wondering if I **dodged a bullet** or just **lost the love** of my life	*I Don't Wanna Live Forever*

Paradox was found to be the second most employed type of figurative language in the song lyrics, and it was found mostly in *Blank Space* and *Red*. For the song *Blank Space,* there were several interesting lines containing paradox, for example:

Rose garden filled with **thorns** (*Blank Space*)

Taylor Swift, aged 26 at that time, revealed that the portrayal of her as a "psycho serial dater girl" by the media inspired her to write *Blank Space*. The song's lyrics portray it as an ironic and self-referential tribute to her character as a flirtatious woman from numerous romantic relationships Taylor Swift had been experiencing.

"Rose garden" is recognized as a beautiful place conveying romantic atmosphere, however, in the song, it was filled with thorns. The singer pointed out that a good-looking and beautiful thing can be dangerous and can harm people.

In *Red*, Taylor Swift wrote several lines using paradox to convey the situations that

she could not control and the situations that it was barely possible for her to move on from her ex-boyfriend. The lyric above indicates that it was hardly possible for her to forget him.

Repetition was found to be the third most used type of figurative language in the song lyrics for 27 times at 10.19%. Examples are shown as follows:

Table 3 Examples of repetition

Lyrics	Song
You say you're fine, I know you better than **that**	*You Belong With Me*
Hey, what you doing with a girl like **that**?	
Can't **stop**, won't **stop** moving	*Shake it off*
And the **fakers** gonna **fake**	*You Belong With Me*
See the lights, **see** the party, the ball gowns	*Love Story*
And I used to say, "**Never** say **never**…"	*We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*

Repetition was found mostly *in Shake It Off* and *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*.

Can't **stop**, won't **stop** moving (*Shake It Off*)

Shake It Off was released in 2014. The song revolved around Taylor Swift's nonchalance towards her critics and their negative perception of her image. It served as the leading single from her album "1989", which marked Taylor Swift's transition into the pop genre. In the above lyric, Taylor Swift emphasized that nothing can stop her from being herself and enjoying her life by ignoring all haters.

We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together contained repetition in many parts, including the song title itself. **Never** say **never** means we should not say "I will never…" or "I will never go to…" because the future is unpredictable. However, Taylor Swift did not care, and she insisted to say "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" as she could not hold on to the toxic relationship anymore.

To conclude, the most frequently used types of figurative language were symbol, paradox and repetition. Symbol was predominantly used to refer to what Taylor Swift had memorized from her past relationships, whether in positive or negative ways, such as "ring" and "September", respectively. Paradox was mainly used in sad songs or unromantic songs rather than love songs, such as in *Red* and *Blank Space*. Repetition use was found in both sad songs and love songs in the similar proportions as repetition was used to emphasize a meaning of something both in good way and bad way. However, the least frequently used types of figurative language were alliteration, oxymoron, and allusion.

Objective 2: To explore values in American culture embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

There were 13 values embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics shown in frequency and percentage as follows: directness/openness/honesty (86, 26.46%), individualism/privacy (37, 11.38%), future orientation (36, 11.08%), personal control over the environment (28, 8.62%), practicality/efficiency (22, 6.77%), competition (21, 6.46%), time and its control (20, 6.15%), self-help (20, 6.15%), informality (19, 5.85%), change (16, 4.92%), materialism/acquisitiveness (15, 4.62%), action/work orientation (4, 1.23%) and equality (1, 0.31%).
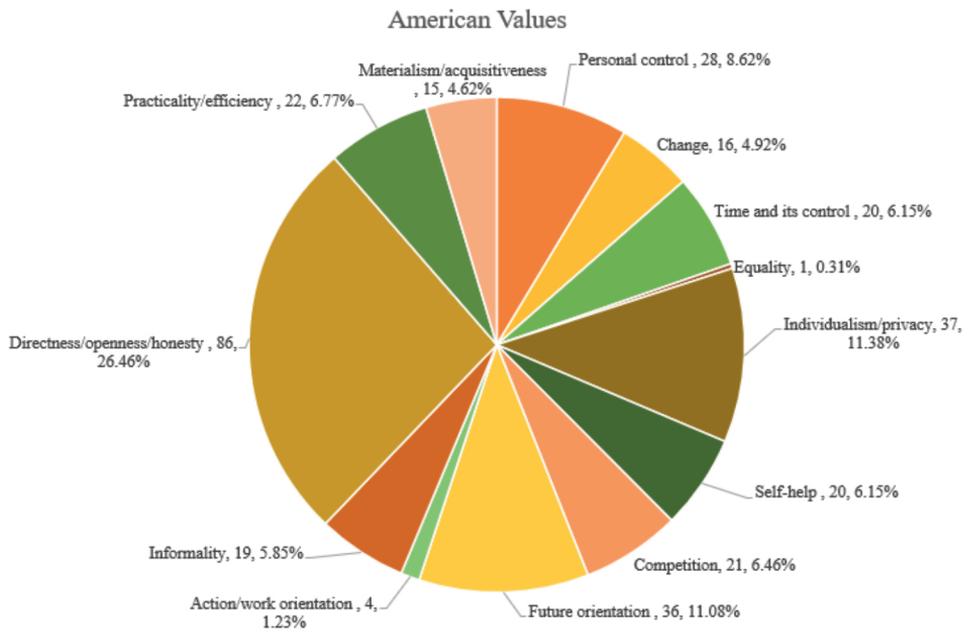

Figure 3 Frequency and percentage of values in American culture embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

Directness/openness/honesty was the most frequently found value in the song lyrics for 86 times at 26.46%. Examples are shown as follows:

Table 4 Examples of directness/openness/honesty

Lyrics	Song
I go on too many dates, ha-ha	*Shake it Off*
But I can't make them stay	*Blank Space*
You look like my next mistake	*Blank Space*
'Cause, darling, I'm a nightmare dressed like a daydream	*I Knew You Were Trouble*
Once upon a time, a few mistakes ago	*Wildest Dreams*

Directness/openness/honesty was the most frequently value found in the song lyrics accounting for 26.46% or more than 25% of all collected data. Directness/openness/honesty was found the most in three songs: *Blank Space, I Knew You Were Trouble* and *Bad Blood*, while it also occurred many times in other songs. From the result found, it was possible to say that Taylor Swift had no hesitation to speak about negative things to others, or even to herself, or had no hesitation to reveal some secrets or what in her mind to the public.

Say you'll see me again even if it's just pretend (*Wildest Dreams*)

Wildest Dreams describes Swift's plea for her lover to remember her despite the inevitable end of their relationship.

Taylor Swift did not state who she was writing about in *Wildest Dreams* but it portrayed Taylor Swift's heartfelt request to her lover, urging him to hold onto the memory of her even as their relationship was destined to come to an end. She could just ask the man to say the thing she wanted but she decided to say "even if it's just pretend" to let the man know that she did not care if he would lie since she only wanted to comfort herself.

'Cause, darling, I'm a nightmare dressed like a daydream (*Blank Space*)

Taylor Swift revealed that the portrayal of her as a "psycho serial dater girl" in *Blank Space* was an ironic tribute to her character as a flirtatious woman. Throughout the song, she had been very straightforward about who she truly was without questioning at all whether he would be able to accept it.

Individualism/privacy was the second most frequently found value in the song lyrics for 37 times at 11.38%. Examples are shown as follows:

Table 5 Examples of individualism/privacy

Lyrics	Song
He said, "Let's get out of this town	*Wildest Dreams*
Drive out of the city, away from the crowds"	
I said, "No one has to know what we do"	*Wildest Dreams*
And you've got a smile	*You Belong With Me*
That can light up this whole town	
Heart-breakers gonna break, break, break, break, break	*Shake it Off*
And the fakers gonna fake, fake, fake, fake, fake	*Love Story*
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake	
Shake it off, I shake it off	
Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone	

Individualism/privacy was found 37 times and often occurred in several songs, such as, *You Belong with Me, Love Story, Style*, and *Wildest Dreams*. Individualism/privacy was found when Taylor Swift wanted to talk about something or someone unique in their own way or when she and her boyfriend wanted to have some private time.

For example, Taylor Swift indicated running away or getting away with her boyfriend in the following lines.

He said, "Let's get out of this town, drive out of the city, away from the crowds." (*Wildest Dreams*)

Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone (*Love Story*)

In some other songs, it was found that Taylor Swift prioritized her privacy in her love life.

Future orientation was the third frequently value found in the song lyrics in 36 times, 11.08%. Examples are shown as follows:

Table 6 Examples of future orientation

Lyrics	Song
Dreaming about the day when you wake up and find	*You Belong With Me*
I can make the bad guys good for a weekend	*Blank Space*
Long drive could end in burning flames or paradise	*Style*
Flash forward, and we're taking on the world together	*Mine*
We'll be out of here as soon as we can	*Fifteen*

Future orientation was not significantly found in a particular song, but it was found in almost every song, 15 songs out of 20.

Besides the hope that she wanted her love to last long, future orientation was found to play an important role when she stated and wished that her teenager time would pass by quickly so that she could start her new life by being adult as in the following examples.

Flash forward, and we're taking on the world together (*Mine*)

We'll be out of here as soon as we can (*Fifteen*)

For *Mine*, with her positive view on love, she and her ex-lover had dreamed to grow and to face any challenges they would come across in the future together, indicating their optimism about the incomings. Similar to *Fifteen*, when she was only fifteen, she wished she would graduate from high school very soon so that she could live her life the way she wanted to, expressing how optimistic she was for the near future.

To conclude, the most frequently found values in American culture were directness/openness /honesty, individualism/privacy and future orientation. Directness/openness/honesty was

revealed when Taylor Swift was expressing her own feelings or her own thoughts directly towards the situations she was facing to the audiences without being afraid of negative feedbacks later. It is possible to say that she was hugely confident and encouraged to be the best version of her own self. Individualism/privacy was mainly found in one's own characteristics which are hard to find from anybody else, such as Taylor Swift's characteristics and confidence in *Shake It Off*. Future orientation was mostly found in the songs during Taylor Swift's teenage life when she was longing to grow up very soon so that she could be able to live her own life in her own way. The least frequently found values were action/work orientation and equality. Action/work orientation pointed out duties/responsibilities which Taylor Swift was in charge of when she started to grow up, such as mentioning "bills to pay" in *Mine*. Equality, in this context, was found to convey the equality among humans as the saying goes, "Everyone is equal and deserves to be celebrated and treated fairly".

Discussion

Objective 1: To explore figurative language employed in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

From the results of this research, it was found that symbol, paradox and repetition were the most frequently used types of figurative language used in Taylor Swift's songs. In the present study, symbol was found in the highest proportion and also found the greatest in the most popular songs, such as *You Belong With Me* (No. 1 in the Billboard rank), *Love Story* (No. 3 in the rank) and *Our Song* (No. 5 in the rank), it could be interpreted that symbol is another interesting writing technique for songwriter to apply in their writing.

From the results of the previous research, it was found that the results of this research are different from other previous studies to some extent.

Suriyawongpaisal [8] found only three types of figurative language: metaphor, simile, and hyperbole, which were also found in the present study as well. Even though Suriyawongpaisal's study [8] was also to investigate the figurative language used to convey connotations related to American cultural values, due to the time difference in conducting the research (2013 and 2023), the results of the present study and those of Suriyawongpaisal 's are different in terms of the number of types of figurative language used.

In Lusiana, Aryawibawa, and Qomariana 's study [9] on 5 Taylor Swift's songs in the Album 1989: *Blank Space, Bad Blood. New Romantics, Style,* and *Clean*, the results revealed eight types of figurative language: simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, hyperbole, irony, dead metaphor, and paradox. Compared with the present study, only dead metaphor was not found as it was outside the framework of the present study. Interestingly, the eight types were also frequently found in the present study in fairly significant proportion, such as paradox (38, 14.02%). Among 5 songs of Lusiana, Aryawibawa, and Qomariana's study [9],

three songs were also selected to be analyzed in the present study: *Blank Space, Bad Blood* and *Style*. The results are fairly in line with each other. *Blank Space* was found to contain paradox the most, and both *Bad Blood* and *Style* were found to employ paradox as the second frequently used one, in which Lusiana, Aryawibawa, and Qomariana's study [9] also discovered paradox.

To sum up, metaphor, simile and hyperbole were found in all of the previous studies mentioned above, which is in line with the results of the present study in which simile (16, 5.90%), metaphor (15, 5.54%), hyperbole (13, 4.80%) were the three most frequently found figurative types. Moreover, it can be concluded that the present study found a great number of figurative language types used in Taylor Swift's songs (15 types) than those found in the previous studies (3-8 types).

Objective 2: To explore values in American culture embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics

Previous studies on American culture embedded in Taylor Swift's songs have not been widely conducted, so this section discusses results from Suriyawongpaisal's study [8] as Suriyawongpaisal conducted the study on figurative language in Taylor Swift's songs which conveyed connotation related to American cultural values. In this previous study, it was found that love and care, individualism, honesty and trust, and liberalism were four features of American cultural values unconcealed through the following themes: bond and relationship, independency, honesty, and dignity. Since the present study employed different framework from Suriyawongpaisal's study [8], it yielded different results. However, there were some comparable keywords from the American cultural values found in Suriyawongpaisal's study [8] which matched the findings in the present study as showed in Table 7.

Table 7 Result comparison with the previous study showing similar cultural aspects

Suriyawongpaisal (2013)	The present study
Individualism	Individualism/privacy
Honesty	Directness/openness/honesty
Liberalism	Individualism/privacy and equality
Independency	Personal control over the environment and self-help

It is possible to say that the present study's results did not also show similar cultural aspects, but the present study found other different American values in more extensive views. Values in American culture found in the present study but not found in Suriyawongpaisal [8] are future orientation, practicality/efficiency, competition, time and its control, self-help and informality. The possible reason is that the present study used a more extensive framework to discover more cultural aspects.

For the implications of this present study, the figurative language found could be used as a guideline for writers, authors, composers or artists to create their art works. In addition, the results found could be used as teaching materials for those interested in creative writing and in courses related to values in American culture.

Further studies may consider conducting a comparative study both in the respect of figurative language and cultural aspects found in English songs of various song writers or singers. Moreover, further studies may employ different framework to analyze cultural aspects in other types of songs in various culture such as the analysis of patriarchy or feminism in local songs of a particular culture.

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