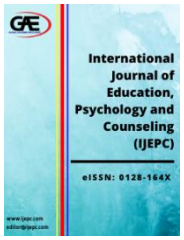
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THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL: A COMPARATIVE TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF AGENCY IN POPULAR MONSTER AND THE VOICES IN MY HEAD BY FALLING IN REVERSE

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Abstract:

This study investigates the grammatical construction of agency in modern rock lyric discourse through M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Transitivity framework. Specifically, this study offers a comparative quantitative analysis of agency patterns in the song lyric of Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head by Falling in Reverse. This paper focuses strictly on the linguistic mechanisms through which agency, participant roles and process types are foregrounded at the clause level. The research addresses two primary objectives, to quantify and compare the frequency and percentage distribution of high versus low agency subject roles across both lyrics and, to determine and compare the numerical distribution of Hallidayan process types associated with low agency subject roles. Using a quantitative clause by clause transitivity coding methodology, 83 clauses were analysed in total the findings revealed Popular Monster exhibits 56% of low agency and 44% of high agency while The Voices in My Head exhibits 58% low agency and 42% high agency. Low agency in both lyrics is heavily realised through Relational and Mental processes, making the speaker mainly as a passive Carrier or Sayer, whereas high agency is predominantly externalised to non-speaker entities or restricted to destructive Material processes. This study highlights how SFL transitivity modelling provides an empirical methodology for decoding narrative voice, power dynamics, and agency distribution in musical texts.

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Introduction

Song lyrics constitute a distinct genre of written and vocalised discourse that relies on specific lexicogrammatically choices to construct narrative perspectives, power relations, and participant identities (Riandini, 2024; Siahaan et al., 2025). In rock and alternative metal music, lyric discourse frequently centres on internal conflict, external pressures, and thematic alienation. While literary and musicological analyses often examine these themes through thematic or socio-cultural lenses, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a rigorous, clause-level empirical framework to dissect how meaning in systematically built through grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Aghaei, 2025).

A central dimension of ideational meaning in SFL in the System of Transitivity, which models how language construes human experience into a manageable set of process types, participant roles and circumstantial elements (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Subianto et al., 2026). Within stylistics and discourse analysis, transitivity choices directly dictate the representation of agency, the degree of intentionally, causal power and physical control that a participant exercises within a clause (Lin, 2025; Suari et al., 2024). Examining agency in lyric texts allows linguists to track whether a protagonist is represented as an active initiator of change or a passive recipient of external events.

The primary aim of this study is to provide a quantitative comparative analysis of agency in the lyrics of Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head. Specifically, the study seeks to quantify and compare the frequency and percentage distribution of high and low agency subject roles across both lyrics. In addition, this study also aims to determine and compare the numerical frequency and distribution of Hallidayan processes, associated with low-agency subject roles in both lyrics.

Literature Review

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has emerged as one of the most sound paradigms for analysing written, spoken and literary texts (Aghaei, 2025; Darong, 2025). Within SFL, transitivity analysis serves as a primary tool to deconstruct how texts build meaning at the experiential level (Chen, 2024; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Recent scholarly literature

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demonstrates an increasing application of transitivity tools to literary narratives, political speeches, commercial discourse and musical lyrics.

Transitivity System and Agency Hierarchy Framework

This study is grounded in M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), mainly the Ideational Metafunction realised through the Transitivity System (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), integrated with stylistics concepts of Agency Hierarchy and Mind Style (Fowler, 1986; Lin, 2025).

Halliday categorises human experience into sic distinct process types ranging from Material Processes to Existential Processes each representing a distinct way in which experience is construed through language. Material Processes represent processes of doing and creating, typically involving an Actor who performs an action that may affect a Goal or Scope. Mental Processes construe processes of sensing, including perception, cognition, and emotion. The Mental Processes involve a Senser and a Phenomenon. Relational Processes express states of being, becoming and having which assigns an Attribute or Identity to a Carrier or Identified participant. Verbal Processes represent acts of saying or signalling and generally involve a Sayer, Receiver, and Verbiage. Behavioural Processes capture physiological and psychological behaviours which are typically performed by a Behaver. Finally, Existential Process construe the existence or occurrence of entities or events which involves an Existent. Collectively, these process types provide a systemic framework for examining how experience, actions, perceptions, relationships, communication, behaviour and existence are represented in discourse.

To facilitate the analysis of agency through transitivity, this study adopts an Agency Hierarchy Framework informed by Lin (2025) and Suari et al. (2024). Within this framework, high agency is attributed to clauses in which the grammatical subject is constructed as an active and volitional agent who exerts direct physical influence, initiates communicative exchanges, or demonstrates dynamic behavioural force. This category is primarily associated with roles such as Actor in Material Processes and Sayer in Verbal Processes. In contrast, low agency is assigned to clauses in which the grammatical subject is represented as a passive experiencer, an entity being characterised or classified, an unempowered participant engaged in involuntary behaviour, or an entity represented through stative existence. These configurations correspond mainly to participant roles such as Senser in Mental Processes, Carrier in Relational Processes, Behaver in involuntary Behavioural Processes, and Existent in Existential Processes. Thus, the framework provides a systematic basis for quantifying how agency is distributed across the analysed texts.

Table 1: Transitivity System

Process types	Participant Roles
Material (Doing/Creating)	Actor / Goal / Scope
Mental (Thinking/Sensing)	Senser / Phenomenon
Relational (Being/Having)	Carrier / Attribute / Identifier
Verbal (Saying/Signifying)	Sayer / Receiver / Verbiage
Behavioural (Behaving/Physiological)	Behaver / Target
Existential (Existing/Occurring)	Existent

Source: (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)

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Table 2: Agency Hierarchy Framework

High Agency	Low Agency
Direct physical action (Actor)	Stative attributes (Carrier)
Explicit communication (Sayer)	Cognitive sensing (Senser)
Dynamic force (Transformative)	Passive behaviour (Behaver)

Source: (Lin, 2025; Suari et al., 2024)

Transitivity Analysis in Literary and Media Discourse

Recent studies confirm the empirical power of Hallidayan transitivity in uncovering underlying narrative structures and character agency. Lin (2025) conducted a transitivity analysis of character agency in William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily, demonstrating that although Emily is the nominal protagonist of the narrative, she is grammatically deprived of active Material processes. Lin (2025) found that the townspeople dominate as Actors and Sayers, grammatically confining the protagonist to low-agency Relational and Mental states. Similarly, Ishraq et al. (2025) applied Systemic Functional Grammar to Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, establishing that the interplay between high-agency Material processes and low-agency Mental processes tracks the protagonist's shift between physical struggle and internal endurance.

In long-form prose, Hassan et al. (2024) explored post-traumatic transformation in Delia Owens' Where the Crawdads Sing, extracting 199 clauses to highlight how a shift from low-agency Relational processes to high-agency Material processes marks the protagonist's narrative arc. Suari et al. (2024) applied SFL transitivity to narrative folk texts, categorizing character dynamics through participant roles and establishing that proactive characterization is overwhelmingly realized via transitive Material processes, while introspective traits rely on Mental and Relational choices. In media and digital contexts, Chen (2024) examined news headlines surrounding emerging technology using SFL transitivity, demonstrating how active versus passive verb choices obscure or foreground agency. Subianto et al. (2026) analysed political speeches, demonstrating that high-agency Material processes (43.7%) and Relational processes (24.4%) are systematically deployed to construct action-oriented authority while democratizing accountability through first-person plural pronouns.

Transitivity Realisation in Lyric Discourse

Song lyrics represent a specialized genre where clause structures are heavily constrained by rhythm, rhyme, and strophic repetition (Riandini, 2024; Siahaan et al., 2025). Despite these poetic constraints, transitivity choices remain systematic. Riandini (2024) investigated transitivity process realizations in selected Sia song lyrics, finding that while all six Hallidayan process types were present, Material processes occurred with the highest frequency, indicating a strong compositional reliance on physical activity to drive narrative momentum.

Siahaan et al. (2025) explored transitivity realization in broader pop and rock song discourse, arguing that song lyrics act as micro-narratives where agency shifts dictate the listener's perspective of the speaker's power. Muzammal et al. (2026) applied transitivity modelling to classical song poetry, demonstrating how initial stanzas foreground Material processes of purposeful action, only to systematically dismantle them through Relational processes that assert non-achievement and futility.

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In comparative hymnody and poetic discourse, Oduola and Lanre-Atoyebi (2024) and Ojo Akinleye and Lanre-Atoyebi (2024) demonstrated that transitivity selections mirror cultural and contextual orientations, where high frequencies of Verbal processes create dialogic structures, whereas Relational processes build introspective, stative mind styles. Asante et al. (2025) further proved that transitivity patterns can track how authority and passivity are constructed across public addresses.

To sum, while existing literature extensively explores transitivity in political speeches (Subianto et al., 2026), media headlines (Chen, 2024; Muhammad, 2024), novels (Hassan et al., 2024; Ishraq et al., 2025; Lin, 2025), and single-artist lyric corpora (Riandini, 2024), there is a significant empirical gap in comparative quantitative research examining agency distribution across contemporary rock lyrics. Specifically, few studies have systematically quantified the relationship between Hallidayan process types and high/low agency subject roles in modern heavy music lyrics. This study fills this gap by providing a detailed comparative clause-level analysis of Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head.

Methodology

The data corpus comprised the complete lyric transcripts of two contemporary rock compositions, Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head. Popular Monster consists of 45 clauses and 380 words, while The Voices in My Head contains 38 clauses and 312 words. The lyrics were formatted into orthographic lines and subsequently segmented into discrete ranking clauses for grammatical analysis. Halliday's Transitivity System, as outlined in Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), was adopted as the primary analytical instrument. Each clause was coded according to five grammatical dimensions: process type, subject role, verb role, object role, and adverbial role. Process types were classified as Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioural, or Existential, while participant and circumstantial roles were identified according to their respective transitivity functions.

Table 3: Data Corpus Based on Halliday's Transitivity System

Process Type	**Subject Role**	**Verb Role (SFL Process)**	**Object Role**	**Adverbial Role *SFL Circumstance***
Material *Doing/Happening*	Actor	Material Process	Goal/Beneficiary/ Scope	Place, Time, Manner, Cause, etc
Mental *Sensing/Thinking*	Senser	Mental Process	Phenomenon	Degree, Time, Place, etc
Relational *Being/Having*	Carrier *Attributive*	Relational Process	Attribute *Attributive*	Role, Cause, Time, etc
	Token *Identifying*		Value *Identifying*	

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Verbal *Saying/Telling*	Sayer	Verbal Process	Verbiage/Receiver/ Target	Matter, Angle, Place, etc
Behavioural *Physiological Acts*	Behaver	Behavioural Process	Behaviour/Range	Manner, Place, Time, etc
Existential *Existing*	Structural	Existential Process	Existent	Location, Time

Source: (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)

To examine agency systematically, the study operationalised agency as a classification of high agency and low agency, informed by SFL participant-role capabilities and previous studies (Lin, 2025; Suari et al., 2024). High agency was assigned when the grammatical subject functioned as an Actor performing direct physical or transformative actions, a Sayer initiating verbal communication, or an intentional participant exercising active control over an action or force. In contrast, low agency was assigned when the subject functioned as a Carrier in a stative Relational process, a Senser experiencing cognition, emotion, or perception, a Behaver undergoing involuntary physiological or emotional behaviour, or an Existent represented through an Existential process. This coding protocol enabled the systematic quantification and comparison of agency distribution across the two lyric texts.

Table 4: Clause Coding Protocol

Agency Classification	Decision Criterion: Active, Volitional initiator of physical force or direct verbal communication	Grammatical Role	Process Type
High Agency	Yes	Actor Sayer Active Behaver	Material Verbal Behavioural
Low Agency	No	Carries Senser Behaver (Involuntary) Existent	Relational Mental Behavioural Existential

Source: (Lin, 2025; Suari et al., 2024)

Findings & Discussion

Agency Distribution

The transitivity analysis of Popular Monster revealed 45 clauses of which 25 clauses (55.6%) were identified as Low Agency and 20 clauses (44.4%) were identified as High Agency. This spread suggests that the communicator is likely to occupy lower agency positions, especially as a Senser, Carrier or Behaver. Most of these roles are experiences of psychological distress, confusion, fear and numbness. For example, “don’t know”, “am terrified” and “fell asleep at the wheel”. Compare this with high agency items such as “my doctor”, “my therapist”, “my demons”, which are at times external items or destructive items personified. The speaker’s use of high agency Actor roles is relatively small and mainly used for self-destructive or unproductive actions such as “crashed my car” and “waste every single second”. Overall, the results indicate that linguistically, the speaker is constructed by means of a limited control over his psychological experiences and actions.

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Similarly, The Voices in My Head comprises 38 clauses, with 22 clauses (57.9%) classified as Low Agency and 16 clauses (42.1%) as High Agency. The slightly higher proportion of low-agency clauses indicates that the persona is predominantly represented as experiencing rather than controlling events. The speaker frequently assumes the roles of Senser, Carrier, or Behaver in clauses expressing cognitive disturbance and psychological disorientation, as reflected in expressions such as "spinning" and "losing my mind." High-agency roles, meanwhile, are often attributed to externalised or intrusive forces, particularly "the voices in my head." Where the speaker assumes the Actor role, the actions are predominantly associated with self-destructive behaviour, as demonstrated by "pull the trigger" and "Kamikaze crash." The findings therefore indicate a similar agency pattern to that observed in Popular Monster, in which the speaker is more frequently positioned as an experiencer of psychological turmoil than as an autonomous initiator of constructive action.

Hence, the first research objective which was to quantify and compare the frequency distribution of high and low agency subject roles in both Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head is summarised in the Table 4.

Table 5: Agency Distribution

Lyric	Low Agency	High Agency	Total Clauses Analysed
Popular Monster	25 (55.6%)	20 (44.4%)	45
The Voices in My Head	22 (57.9%)	16 (42.1%)	38
Combined Corpus	47 (56.6%)	36 (43.4%)	83

Distribution of Low Agency Subject Roles Across Process Types

Table 5 demonstrates that low-agency subject roles in both Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head are predominantly realised through Relational and Mental processes, indicating that the speakers are more frequently represented in terms of their psychological states and conditions rather than as active initiators of events. In Popular Monster, Relational processes constitute the largest category, accounting for 36.0% (n = 9) of low-agency clauses, followed by Behavioural processes at 24.0% (n = 6), Mental processes at 20.0% (n = 5), passive Material processes at 16.0% (n = 4), and Existential processes at 4.0% (n = 1). Similarly, The Voices in My Head exhibits an even stronger concentration of Relational processes, which account for 45.5% (n = 10), followed by Mental processes at 27.3% (n = 6), while Behavioural, Existential, and passive Material processes each account for 9.1% (n = 2). The greater representation of Relational and Mental processes in both texts implies that the speakers in both texts were being linguistic represented as individuals who are experiencing and describing their internal states, identities and psychological conditions. The overlap percentage of Relational and Mental processes is particularly high in The Voices in My Head where it comprises 72.8%, as opposed to Popular Monster with 56%. It can be concluded from the results that the processes of the construction of low agency in the two lyrics largely foreground psychological experience and states of being.

Table 6: Distribution of Process Types in Low Agency Subject Roles

Hallidayan Process Type	Popular Monster	The Voices in My Head	Combined Low Agency
Relational	9 (36%)	10 (45.5)	19 (40.4)
Mental	5 (20%)	6 (27.3%)	11 (23.4)

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Behavioural	6 (24%)	2 (9.1%)	8 (17%)
Existential	1 (4%)	2 (9.1%)	3 (6.4%)
Material	4 (16%)	2 (9.1%)	6 (12.8)
Total of Low Agency Clauses	25 (100%)	22 (100%)	47 (100%)

By synthesizing Halliday's Transitivity framework with Cognitive Stylistics (Fowler, 1986; Lin, 2025), this study demonstrates that agency distributions create a distinct "mind style"—a grammatical fingerprint of the narrator's perception of reality. In both song lyrics, the high frequency of Relational Attributive processes ("I'm a liar", "I'm a popular monster", "I'm a sad boy", "I'm trauma-zed", "I'm paranoid") freezes the narrator in an unalterable identity state. When combined with low-agency Mental processes ("I don't know", "I just want to feel okay", "I don't want to feel the pain"), the grammar constructs a world where cognitive and emotional states are suffered passively rather than managed actively. Furthermore, when external entities ("It", "demons", "they") are grammaticalized as high-agency Actors in Material processes ("It obliterates me", "demons go away", "they put me in the dirt"), the speaker is explicitly positioned as a passive Goal (affected object). Thus, transitivity choices across both texts establish a consistent grammatical paradox: high agency exists within the narrative world, but it is almost entirely wielded by external forces or directed toward self-destruction.

Conclusion

This study uses a quantitative transitivity analysis to analyse the construction of agency across 83 clauses in Popular Monster and The Voices in My Head. The findings illustrate the same general trend of low agency representation across the two texts. For Popular Monster, the low-agency clauses had a higher percentage (55.65%, n = 25) and for The Voices in My Head, a slightly higher percentage (57.9%, n = 22). The distribution of this kinesis quite regular, indicating that the speakers of both songs more often create their entities as experiencing psychological and emotional states than as governing events. The results therefore suggest that the lack of agency is a salient linguistic characteristic of the representation if the narrators in the two texts.

The analysis further revealed that Relational and Mental processes were the dominant process types associated with low-agency subject roles. Relational processes accounted for 36.0% of low-agency clauses in Popular Monster and 45.5% in The Voices in My Head, while Mental processes represented 20.0% and 27.3%, respectively. These patterns indicate that the narrators are predominantly represented through states of being, identity, perception, and psychological experience rather than through purposeful actions. The findings also demonstrate that high agency is frequently displaced from the narrators and attributed to external entities, including institutional figures such as the "doctor" and "therapist," intrusive forces such as the "voices in my head," and destructive forces represented through "It." When the first-person narrator assumes a high-agency role, the associated actions are predominantly realised through destructive Material processes. Collectively, these findings suggest that agency in the two songs is not distributed evenly but is linguistically constructed around experiences of limited control and externally situated forces.

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From a methodological and theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates the applicability of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a quantitative framework for investigating agency in lyric discourse. By systematically categorising participant roles according to an agency hierarchy and examining their realisation through transitivity processes, the study provides an empirical means of identifying patterns of power, control, and diminished autonomy in song lyrics. This approach extends the application of SFL beyond conventional discourse contexts and illustrates its potential for examining how grammatical choices contribute to the construction of psychological experience and agency in contemporary popular music.

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