

A Psychoanalytic Approach to Self-Identity in Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* Album

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis konstruksi dan fragmentasi identitas-diri dalam album *SOUR* (2021) karya Olivia Rodrigo melalui kerangka psikoanalisis Lacanian. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan analisis teks, penelitian ini mengkaji lima lagu terpilih untuk mengidentifikasi representasi dari tiga tatanan Lacanian: The Imaginary, The Symbolic, dan The Real. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa subjek lirik tidak memiliki identitas-diri yang stabil dan koheren, melainkan terbentuk secara dialektis melalui identifikasi imajiner dengan citra yang gagal, melalui penundukan pada hukum dan bahasa simbolik, serta melalui pertemuan traumatis dengan Real yang menolak segala representasi. Setiap lagu menampilkan dinamika ketiga tatanan tersebut secara berbeda. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa fragmentasi identitas dalam *SOUR* bukanlah kegagalan artistik, melainkan pencatatan yang setia terhadap kondisi struktural subjek yang berbicara dan berkeinginan.

Kata Kunci: identitas-diri, album sour, the imaginary, the symbolic, the real

Abstract

This study analyzes the construction and fragmentation of self-identity in Olivia Rodrigo's debut album *SOUR* (2021) through the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Employing a qualitative approach and textual analysis, this research examines five selected tracks to identify representations of the three Lacanian orders: The Imaginary, The Symbolic, and The Real. The analysis reveals that the lyrical subject possesses no stable, coherent self-identity but is instead formed dialectically through imaginary identification with a failed image, through submission to symbolic law and language, and through traumatic encounters with the Real that resist all representation. Each song manifests the dynamics of these three orders differently, revealing that the fragmentation of identity in *SOUR* is not an artistic failure but rather a faithful registration of the structural condition of the speaking and desiring subject.

Keywords: self-identity, sour album, the imaginary, the symbolic, the real

INTRODUCTION

Music functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a cultural text through which social meanings, emotions, and identities are produced and negotiated. Scholars in popular music studies argue that music operates as a site of emotional articulation, allowing listeners to interpret personal experiences within broader cultural frameworks (Frith, 1996; Negus, 2019). In contemporary popular music, lyrical confession and emotional vulnerability have become central strategies for engaging audiences, particularly within youth-oriented genres such as pop, pop-punk, and bedroom pop (Bannister, 2020). These musical forms often foreground affective intensity, using narrative lyrics to foster intimacy between artist and listener and transforming individual feelings into shared cultural narratives.

Within this context, self-identity is widely understood not as a fixed essence, but as a dynamic and fragmented process—especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Psychological and cultural theorists emphasize that identity formation involves continuous negotiation between the self and external social structures, relationships, and symbolic meanings (Erikson, 1968; Giddens, 1991). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Jacques Lacan further conceptualizes identity as inherently split, formed through the subject's misrecognition in the mirror stage and sustained through desire within the Symbolic order (Lacan, 2006). This framework highlights how the self is constructed in relation to the Other, producing ongoing feelings of lack, dissatisfaction, and longing. Popular music serves as a crucial medium through which these struggles of self-identity are articulated and made intelligible.

It is within this landscape that Olivia Rodrigo emerged in 2021 as a defining cultural figure in contemporary youth-oriented music. Her debut single "*Drivers License*" achieved unprecedented commercial success, and her debut album *SOUR* garnered widespread critical acclaim for its potent articulation of emotional states—such as heartbreak, jealousy, and self-doubt—that are central to identity formation in late adolescence (Erikson, 1968; McLeod, 2020). Through its confessional style and affective depth, *SOUR* offers a compelling case study for examining how popular music narrates and shapes the psychic landscape of youth identity.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory offers a profound framework for understanding this intersection. Central to his work is the notion that the subject is fundamentally split—constituted through a primordial loss and structured by language and desire (Lacan, 2006). Concepts such as the mirror stage, the Symbolic order, and the object petit a illuminate how identity is formed through misrecognition, mediated by social and linguistic structures, and driven by an insatiable longing for wholeness. In the context of contemporary youth culture and popular music, Lacan's ideas provide a theoretical vocabulary to examine how musical texts articulate the experience of lack, desire, and the negotiation of selfhood.

Critically, *SOUR* operates as a confessional narrative that employs pop-punk and bedroom-pop aesthetics to articulate the instability of the adolescent self, aligning closely with psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity. The album's lyrical emphasis on loss, rivalry, desire, and emotional fragmentation corresponds with Lacanian concepts such as the mirror stage, the encounter with the Other, and the structure of desire within the Symbolic order (Lacan, 2006). Scholars note that Rodrigo's dense use of figurative language, emotional hyperbole, and first-person confession enables listeners to project their own experiences onto the text, producing a shared affective identification (Illouz, 2007; Negus, 2019). While critics have praised the album's emotional authenticity and generational resonance, some have criticized its reliance on established stylistic influences, arguing that its intertextual gestures occasionally verge on derivativeness. Nevertheless, the album's enduring appeal lies in its capacity to transform private emotional turmoil into a collective cultural expression, suggesting that *SOUR* gives voice to repressed anxieties and desires characteristic of contemporary youth culture, thereby justifying its analysis through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. This research will analyze five tracks from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album: "*Traitor*," "*Drivers License*," "*Deja Vu*," "*Good 4 U*," and "*Happier*." These songs collectively express the central themes of desire,

dissatisfaction, and self-identity that align with the psychoanalytic framework guiding this study; however, the selection is not driven by thematic resonance alone, as the songs' massive mainstream popularity and streaming performance also justify their status as culturally significant artifacts of adolescent emotional experience.

As of 2024, these five tracks rank among Rodrigo's most-streamed on Spotify, with "*Drivers License*" and "*Good 4 U*" each surpassing 1.5 billion streams, indicating that the psychoanalytic conflicts they narrate resonate widely with a global audience of young listeners. Each track serves as a distinct case study in adolescent identity formation: "*Traitor*" examines betrayal and the destabilization of trust; "*Drivers License*" embodies melancholic longing and loss tied to identity; "*Deja Vu*" explores the haunting repetition of past relationships; "*Good 4 U*" channels aggressive confrontation with rejection and self-worth; and "*Happier*" negotiates the ambivalence of wanting an ex's happiness while resenting it. By combining thematic alignment with empirical evidence of cultural reach, this study treats these tracks not as niche psychoanalytic case studies but as widely consumed narratives that shape and reflect collective processes of identity negotiation. Collectively, these five tracks provide a comprehensive and layered exploration of how self-identity is psychically constructed, contested, and narrated within the emotional landscape of *SOUR*, making the album the most fitting subject for a psychoanalytic investigation into its portrayal of youthful subjectivity.

Previous research has not fully explored how Lacanian concepts of identification and the split subject can illuminate the album's portrayal of adolescent female identity. Furthermore, prior work has overlooked the role of musical and lyrical form in performing identity fragmentation. This study aims to fill these gaps by offering a comprehensive psychoanalytic reading of self-identity in *SOUR*, bridging theoretical frameworks and examining both content and form. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How are Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real represented in selected songs from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album? (2) How do these Lacanian structures contribute to the construction and fragmentation of self-identity in these songs?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method using textual analysis. The primary data consist of five song lyrics from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album: "*Traitor*," "*Drivers License*," "*Deja Vu*," "*Good 4 U*," and "*Happier*." These tracks were selected because they collectively

engage with the core theme of self-identity in crisis through adolescent angst, romantic heartbreak, social comparison, and perceived inadequacy—prime materials for a psychoanalytic reading. The selection is also justified by the songs' mainstream popularity and streaming performance, indicating that the psychoanalytic conflicts they narrate resonate widely with a global audience of young listeners.

The data collection process was conducted through several systematic steps. First, the official lyrics of the five songs were collected and compiled into a single plain text file to create a unified corpus for computational analysis. Second, the lyrics were uploaded to Voyant Tools, a web-based text analysis platform, where four analytical features were employed: the Cirrus tool generated a word cloud to identify prominent vocabulary; the Contexts tool produced keyword-in-context lines for theme-related terms; the Trends tool mapped the distribution of keywords across individual songs; and the Collocates tool revealed semantic networks surrounding key emotional words. All Voyant-generated frequency counts, concordance lines, and collocation data were exported for subsequent qualitative thematic analysis.

The data analysis proceeded through three integrated phases. In the first phase, Voyant Tools generated frequency lists, keyword-in-context lines, distribution trends, and collocation networks for keywords representing four thematic categories: self-identity, dissatisfaction, desire, and emotional conflict. This computational output identified lyrical passages with high thematic density for closer examination. Second, qualitative textual analysis through close reading was applied to these passages to identify keywords, metaphors, imagery, and narrative patterns reflecting emotional and psychological tensions. Third, these textual elements were interpreted using Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—to reveal how desire, lack, and identity are constructed within the lyrics.

This study is delimited by its theoretical framework, applying strictly Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and deliberately forgoing other theoretical lenses to maintain methodological coherence and depth. The interpretive framework focuses on the registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, examining how these psychic structures manifest in the selected lyrical texts.

In the context of this research, a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach enables an interpretation of Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* not as a confessional diary of adolescent heartbreak, but as a textual enactment of the divided subject in pursuit of an impossible recognition. The album's preoccupation with comparison, inadequacy, and the gaze of the other; its oscillation between defiance

and despair; its recurrent figures of emptiness, fracture, and failed communication—these are not merely themes but *structures*. They articulate the condition of the speaking subject as Lacan describes it: alienated, lacking, and forever caught between the Imaginary desire for wholeness and the Symbolic impossibility of its attainment. The present study therefore reads *SOUR* not through a Freudian model of repression and sublimation, but through Lacanian categories of desire, lack, the gaze, and the three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Imaginary Order

Within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the Imaginary Order designates the realm of images, mirrored identifications, and fundamental duplicity. This register is structured by key dynamics: duplication and mirroring, rivalry or fusional union, narcissism and body image, and misrecognition. The Imaginary is the space of the ego's formation, where the subject identifies with external images to construct a coherent, albeit alienated, sense of self.

Table 1. The Imaginary of *Drivers License*

<i>Drivers License</i>	past	5
	forever	4
	weren't/can't	4
	Imagine	3
	perfect	3
	love	3

In "*Drivers License*," the song operates primarily within the Imaginary Order, staging the Imaginary after the mirror has shattered. The lyrical subject inhabits a broken mirror world where the loved one has withdrawn, leaving behind only traces, memories, and painful comparisons. The line "I got my *Drivers License* last week / Just like we always talked about" reveals a shared fantasy of future selves and an Imaginary identification in which the couple was imagined as unified. Terms such as "forever" and "perfect" operate as pure Imaginary signifiers, promising timeless fusion and wholeness, as in

"Cause you said forever, now I drive alone past your street." The verb "imagine" introduces the rival as an obstacle within this same register, revealing how jealousy and idealization coexist within the dyadic structure of the Imaginary.

Table 2. The Imaginary of *Good 4 U*

<i>Good 4 U</i>	Cared	5
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By contrast, "*Good 4 U*" exhibits only a vestigial presence of the Imaginary Order. The song's discourse resists the dynamics of mirroring and dualist identification, replacing such dyadic longing with performative contempt and externalized accusation rather than internalized idealization. The term "cared" refers to a past emotional investment—the subject's belief that the ex once had genuine affection—but this belief constitutes an Imaginary retrospective construction. Crucially, the subject does not seek identification with the other; rather, she caricatures his perceived satisfaction, thereby disrupting the specular bond that typically defines Imaginary relations.

Table 3. The Imaginary of *Traitor*

<i>Traitor</i>	-	-
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Similarly, "*Traitor*" offers only a minimally developed Imaginary register. The song introduces a rival figure through the repeated pronoun "she," yet this rival remains abstract and undescribed. There is little to no specular engagement—no detailed mirroring of traits, no fusional fantasy, and no narcissistic injury rooted in a shattered image. The Imaginary here serves more as a placeholder than as an operative structure within the lyrics.

Table 4. The Imaginary of *Deja Vu*

<i>Deja Vu</i>	Unique	1
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In "*Deja Vu*," the Imaginary Order is almost entirely absent. Only the term "unique" gestures toward the Imaginary register, and it does so ironically. The subject sings "I know you get deja vu," implying that the ex-partner's new relationship is not unique but rather a copy. The Imaginary claim to specialness—the assertion that "our love was one of a kind"—is explicitly dismantled by

the song's central thesis. Consequently, the subject has fully exited the dynamics of nostalgic mirroring and entered a critical, meta-cognitive stance.

Table 5. The Imaginary of *Happier*

<i>Happier</i>	Happier	4
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"*Happier*," however, remains fully caught within the dyadic space of the Imaginary. The subject is constituted through jealous comparison rather than possessing a stable pre-existing self. The comparative term "happier" from "I hope you're happy but don't be happier" invokes the core Imaginary wound: the subject demands that her ex's future happiness be less than what he experienced with her. Nevertheless, the Imaginary in "*Happier*" remains fragmented; there is no sustained nostalgic fantasy, and the subject performs "I hope you're happy" as a symbolic gesture through which the Imaginary wound leaks through the gaps.

The Symbolic Order

In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic Order governs language, law, social structure, and the mediation of desire through signifiers. Unlike the dyadic fusion of the Imaginary, the Symbolic is the realm of the Other—the impersonal network of norms, roles, and codes that precede and shape the subject.

Table 6. The Symbolic of *Good 4 U*

<i>Good 4 U</i>	good	15
	guess	8
	you're	7
	really	7
	maybe	6
	emotional	4
	unaffected	3
	healthy	3
	happy	3

"*Good 4 U*" operates firmly within the Symbolic Order, yet deploys it against the other. The repeated invocation of "good"—occurring fifteen times—is performative rather than sincere; the repetition annihilates sincerity, exposing language as a hollow ritual. The subject recites the law of the ex-partner's world ("You're supposed to be happy, unaffected, healthy, great") only to reveal its inherent absurdity. Modalizing terms such as "guess," "maybe," and "really" mark the subject's epistemic uncertainty within the Symbolic Order. Crucially, the subject does not submit passively to social law; she wields the law as a weapon. The diagnostic terms—"emotional," "unaffected," "healthy," and "happy"—borrow the language of the Other, enabling the subject to accuse the ex-partner using his own vocabulary.

Table 7. The Symbolic of *Drivers License*

<i>Drivers License</i>	cause	8
	drive/drove	9
	know	5
	street	4

"*Drivers License*" exhibits only a weak Symbolic structure. The term "cause" functions as the most explicitly Symbolic term, as it attempts to introduce causality—to impose logical order upon loss—yet the logic ultimately fails. Terms such as "know" perform epistemic mastery, but this "knowing" constitutes a symbolic gesture that merely papers over doubt. The *Drivers License* itself is a quintessential Symbolic object, as it confers legal status, marks the transition to adulthood, and integrates the subject into social bureaucracy.

Table 8. The Symbolic of *Traitor*

<i>Traitor</i>	traitor	5
	funny	4
	ain't	4
	betrayed	3
	cheat	3
	guess	3

"*Traitor*" offers a more developed but ultimately failed Symbolic register. The subject attempts to invoke an implicit contract—"we were together, you shouldn't move on that fast"—appealing to shared symbolic norms governing romantic conduct. However, the Symbolic fails because the ex-partner has technically kept the letter of the law while violating its spirit. The central symbolic accusation, "traitor," is unstable: a traitor is defined as one who breaks a formal oath, yet the subject cannot identify a literal violation. The repetition of the term reveals her desperate attempt to force the word to signify what she needs it to signify. The term "funny" operates at the border between the Symbolic and the Real, marking the moment when the Symbolic Order's expectations break down.

Table 9. The Symbolic of *Deja Vu*

<i>Deja Vu</i>	Deja vu	10
	she's	6
	tell	4
	reused	3
	bet	3
	tradin	2

"*Deja Vu*" is, in a meta-theoretical sense, a song about the Symbolic Order itself. *Déjà vu* names the uncanny experience of a signifier repeating without generating new meaning. The term "deja vu" is a meta-linguistic borrowing from French: the subject not only experiences repetition but names its very structure. The repetition of "deja vu" is thus performative: the song is about the Symbolic, and it performs what it describes. The term "reused" constitutes the central accusation—the ex-partner does not create new desire but reuses old signifiers. This accusation is not that the ex is cruel but that he is unoriginal; his desire is not authentic but a copy. This is the horror of the Symbolic: once one sees the structure, one cannot unsee it.

Table 10. The Symbolic of *Happier*

<i>Happier</i>	hope	7
	happy	7

	you're	7
	happier	4
	better	4
	great	3
	love	2

"*Happier*" reveals itself as a sustained study in the gap between social law and subjective desire. The subject knows what she is supposed to feel and what she is supposed to say—"I hope you're happy"—and she performs these Symbolic gestures repeatedly. Yet each performance is immediately followed by its contradiction ("but don't be happier"), exposing the lie that the Symbolic script could ever fully contain the ambivalent reality of post-breakup desire. The Symbolic is performed under duress, and the performance is cracking.

The Real Order

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real designates that which resists symbolization absolutely: the traumatic, inassimilable kernel that escapes the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It is the domain of jouissance, of excess, of the breakdown of meaning.

Table 11. The Real of *Happier*

	Ooh	7
<i>Happier</i>	Selfish	3
	can't	3

In "*Happier*," the Real erupts in three distinct forms. First, the vocalization "ooh" is the painful, longing sound of a subject who cannot let go, each utterance sounding the body's refusal to comply with the symbolic script. Second, the term "selfish" functions as the most revealing term in the dataset: the subject calls herself selfish because she knows she is supposed to be selfless, yet the Symbolic Order's demand cannot accommodate her desire to limit his happiness. Third, the term "can't" marks the limit of the subject's agency—she cannot mean "I hope you're happy" without reservation, cannot stop resenting his happiness, and cannot fully enter the Symbolic script.

Table 12. The Real of *Deja Vu*

	ha	13
<i>Deja Vu</i>	oh	5

In "*Deja Vu*," the Real appears as the dry, nervous laugh "ha." It is neither amused nor joyful; it is the sound of a subject who sees the trap and can do nothing but laugh dryly at it. Each "ha" marks the moment when the subject recognizes the repetition. In Lacanian terms, "ha" registers the subject's encounter with the Real of repetition: the traumatic kernel that desire is not free, that the subject is caught in a chain of signifiers it did not choose.

Table 13. The Real of *Traitor*

	ah	14
<i>Traitor</i>	ooh	6

In "*Traitor*," the Real is located in the gap between the word "cheat" and the feeling of betrayal. The ex-partner has not violated any literal symbolic contract, yet the subject's affective experience remains indistinguishable from infidelity. The song contains fourteen instances of "ah" and six of "ooh," totaling twenty non-lexical vocalizations, the highest combined frequency across all five songs. This proliferation of vocalic excess marks the point where the Symbolic Order breaks down entirely. The Real in "*Traitor*" is thus located in the irreparable gap between the word "cheat" and the feeling of betrayal—a structural mismatch that no symbol can heal.

Table 14. The Real of *Good 4 U*

<i>Good 4 U</i>	ah	12
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In "*Good 4 U*," the Real operates through both sardonic vocalization and abject spatial imagery. The non-lexical vocalization "ah" appears twelve times, functioning as sardonic, mocking, and almost aggressive—not a sigh of pain but an expulsion of breath that mimics sincere emotional release while simultaneously exposing its impossibility. The Real also manifests in material, bodily remnants including "floor," "bathroom," and "cryin'."

These constitute abject, non-symbolizable surfaces—the Real as that which lies beneath signification.

Table 15. The Real of *Drivers License*

<i>Drivers License</i>	Ooh	12
	can't	4

In "*Drivers License*," the Real is located in the gap between the legal, achieved milestone—the *Drivers License* as a quintessential Symbolic object—and the emotional collapse that this milestone cannot heal. The interjection "ooh" appears twelve times, more than any other word except the structural conjunction "cause." This vocalization is not a word but a vocalic eruption of jouissance: the voice as pure materiality, irreducible to meaning. Each "ooh" marks the precise point where symbolic language fails and the body speaks through the subject. The term "can't" marks the impossible: the subject cannot move on, cannot stop revisiting the past, and cannot make the Symbolic Order function as intended. The license symbolically declares, "You are now an adult." The voice responds, "Ooh"—and in that sound, the Symbolic fails, the Imaginary shatters, and the Real speaks.

Synthesis

Across the five songs, the Imaginary order produces moods ranging from melancholic frustration "*Drivers License*" and resentful self-image "*Good 4 U*" to violated uniqueness "*Déjà Vu*", collapsed idealization "*Traitor*", and compensatory fantasy "*Happier*". The Symbolic order produces moods that range from structural absence "*Drivers License*" through sarcastic resentment with leakage "*Good 4 U*" and bitter ambivalence through signifier repetition "*Déjà Vu*", to failed symbolic containment "*Traitor*" and incomplete maturation "*Happier*". The Real order produces moods that range from structural absence "*Drivers License*," "*Déjà Vu*" through residual leakage "*Good 4 U*" and traumatic dominance "*Traitor*", to unspeakable residue "*Happier*".

The trajectory of the album charts a movement from the relative containment of pain within the Imaginary, through the partial and leaking symbolizations of the Symbolic, toward a catastrophic confrontation with the Real—that which resists all representation and retroactively destroys the meaning of the past. Crucially, the three orders do not appear in pure succession but rather in dynamic, uneven coexistence. "*Drivers License*" operates almost exclusively within the Imaginary. "*Good*

4 U" and "*Déjà Vu*" privilege the Symbolic while retaining residual Imaginary attachments. "*Traitor*" marks the tipping point at which the Real becomes dominant. Finally, "*Happier*" stages an incomplete symbolic maturation haunted by an unspeakable Real residue.

The Imaginary Order: Mood Identification

In "*Drivers License*," the mood is characterized by entrapment within a failed ideal image. The subject experiences the painful discrepancy between the anticipated future and the empirical reality of solitary isolation, as the act of driving alone through previously shared spaces produces a mood of absolute solitude and spatial repetition of loss. Within the Imaginary order, the subject loves not the real ex-boyfriend but the image of the ideal ego reflected in his eyes; its collapse generates a frustration that cannot yet be mediated by symbolic law.

In "*Good 4 U*," the mood retains a residual imaginary dimension characterized by the subject's identification with a wounded but righteous self-image. This imaginary register produces a mood of narcissistic injury, wherein the ex-boyfriend is cast as the villain and the self as the aggrieved party; however, this imaginary mood remains secondary to the symbolic order and manifests primarily as the affective ground upon which sarcastic anger is constructed.

In "*Déjà Vu*," the imaginary mood is defined by the collapse of the subject's sense of unique selfhood; the subject experiences a mood of narcissistic haunting, not merely angered by being replaced, but because the ex-boyfriend replicates their specific, intimate moments with a new partner. This repetition destroys the imagistic belief that "our love was special and irreplaceable," resulting in a mood of wounded singularity wherein the subject's internal image of the past relationship is violated by its external reproduction.

In "*Traitor*," the mood within the Imaginary order is characterized by the total collapse of the ideal image of the past relationship. Unlike "*Drivers License*," where the imago is frustrated yet still present, the retroactive discovery that the ex-boyfriend's desire had already shifted while he was still with the subject retroactively destroys every imagistic memory of fidelity and sincerity. The mood is one of retroactive betrayal, wherein no stable imago can be maintained because the past itself has undergone a transformation of meaning; the Imaginary order fails entirely, which explains why the song shifts dominantly into the Real.

In "*Happier*," the imaginary mood manifests as a residual yet powerful compensatory fantasy; despite the subject's sincere attempt to wish her ex-boyfriend well—a symbolic gesture—the imaginary register produces the

mood that "he will never be as happy as when he was with me." This statement functions as an imagistic seal upon the traumatic void, a fantasy that the lost past remains superior to any possible future, producing a mood of bittersweet superiority wherein the imaginary image of an ideal past provides narcissistic consolation for present loss.

The Symbolic Order: Mood Identification

In "*Drivers License*," the mood within the Symbolic order is characterized by structural absence; the subject fails to exit imagistic dualism and does not engage with social law, mature relational structures, or symbolic mediation, with no symbolic mechanism such as social comparison or linguistic structuration of grief being employed. Consequently, the Symbolic mood is null or pre-symbolic, marked by the subject's refusal or inability to translate private suffering into publicly coded language.

In "*Good 4 U*," the mood is dominated by sarcastic employment of social law as a measure of injustice; the subject utilizes symbolic benchmarks—success, public happiness, and the culturally prescribed speed of "moving on"—to assess and articulate her pain, producing a mood of resentful comparison. However, the mood is characterized by incomplete symbolization, as residual anger persists beyond what sarcasm can contain, indicating that the symbolic order fails to fully mediate the trauma, resulting in a mood of sarcastic frustration that is clever and socially coded yet leaking affect.

In "*Déjà Vu*," the mood is structured by the repetition of signifiers—same places, same speech, same songs—which produces a complex symbolic-affective state wherein the subject experiences bitter ambivalence. On one hand, she is wounded by being replaced; on the other hand, she achieves symbolic victory because the relational pattern remains hers. This mood is purely symbolic because the trauma is fully mediated by recognition of structural repetition; the subject feels ironic triumph derived from knowing that the ex-boyfriend is not free but merely executes an old symbolic script, producing a mood of wounded superiority.

In "*Traitor*," the mood within the Symbolic order is characterized by the demonstrated inadequacy of legal-symbolic frameworks; the subject's claim that "this already constitutes infidelity" represents an attempt to fit the trauma into existing symbolic categories. However, the mood is one of symbolic failure, as no legal formula, no linguistic label, and no social convention can adequately contain or explain the betrayal; the subject is left with a mood of traumatic disorientation wherein the symbolic order proves insufficient, a failure that drives the song's dominant register into the Real.

In "*Happier*," the mood is characterized by an attempted but incomplete entry into the symbolic order; on the surface, the subject demonstrates symbolic maturity by praying and hoping for her ex-boyfriend's well-being, producing a surface mood of bittersweet sincerity. However, beneath this sincere prayer lies a failure to fully detach, manifesting as the unspoken clause "but not too happy," resulting in a symbolic mood of negotiation and failure wherein the subject performs symbolic maturity yet the performance is haunted by residues that cannot be fully symbolized, producing tragically ambivalent moods that are sincere yet resentful, mature yet wounded.

The Real Order: Mood Identification

In "*Drivers License*," the mood within the Real order is characterized by structural absence; the frustration and melancholic despair experienced by the subject remain entirely within the Imaginary register, with no unsymbolizable void or traumatic excess emerging. The subject's pain, while intense, remains attached to a failed ideal image rather than to a raw, unrepresentable kernel of trauma; consequently, the Real mood is null, and the song operates exclusively within the Imaginary with no confrontation with the Real.

In "*Good 4 U*," the mood is characterized by the persistence of unprocessed anger that escapes symbolic containment, manifesting as a mood of incomplete catharsis wherein the anger is not fully pacified by clever lyrics or pop-punk instrumentation. Within the Lacanian framework, this residual anger signals that the symbolic order has failed to fully mediate the trauma, as something unsymbolizable persists; the mood is thus one of affective excess, wherein the subject's performance of "moving on" is continuously undermined by a Real that refuses to be fully symbolized.

In "*Déjà Vu*," the mood within the Real order is again characterized by structural absence; the trauma experienced by the subject is fully mediated by symbolic recognition, as the repetition of signifiers produces a mood of bitter ambivalence and ironic triumph that remains within the symbolic register. No unsymbolizable void emerges because the subject's pain is successfully translated into symbolic terms; she understands why she is wounded, as repetition proves the ex-boyfriend is not free, and this understanding provides symbolic closure. Consequently, the Real mood is null, and the song operates exclusively within the Imaginary and Symbolic orders.

In "*Traitor*," the mood is characterized by the raw, unsymbolizable fact of retroactive betrayal that resists all linguistic and imagistic containment; unlike "*Good 4 U*," where the Real appears only as leakage, here the Real is dominant. The trauma originates not from the breakup

itself but from the retroactive discovery that the ex-boyfriend's desire had already shifted while he was still in the relationship—a fact that cannot be explained, forgiven, or accepted. The mood is one of traumatic shock, wherein the subject is not merely sad or angry but disoriented because the past itself has changed meaning; within Lacan's framework, it is impossible for the subject to fully accept this trauma, as it will always return, producing a mood of repetitive, unassimilable grief wherein no symbol is sufficient to forgive or explain the betrayal.

In "*Happier*," the mood is characterized by the residue of the Real that cannot be eliminated or uttered within sincere prayer; despite the subject's surface-level entry into the symbolic order, a trace of the Real persists, manifesting in the unspoken clause "but not too happy" and the hope for karma—affects that cannot be integrated into a well-intentioned, socially acceptable prayer. The mood is one of tragic ambivalence, wherein the subject experiences two incommensurable affective states simultaneously: genuine desire for his happiness and genuine resentment that refuses to dissolve. This is not a symbolic contradiction that can be resolved by logic or linguistic refinement but rather a Real impasse where the body harbors resentment that words cannot fully express or eliminate. Formally, the Real in "*Happier*" appears as a residue—an unspeakable trace of resentment that haunts the subject's otherwise sincere symbolic performance, producing a mood of tragic ambivalence where maturity and trauma coexist without resolution.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* does not merely narrate the affective experience of romantic rupture but stages a progressive traversal of the three Lacanian orders. Across the five tracks examined, the subject's self-identity is initially constructed within the Imaginary register, wherein the ego derives coherence from a failed ideal image of the beloved and the relationship. This imagistic foundation proves unsustainable, giving way to the Symbolic order's attempts to mediate trauma through sarcasm, social comparison, and the repetition of signifiers. However, the Symbolic framework ultimately reveals its own insufficiency, as no legal or linguistic category can contain the retroactive betrayal that emerges most forcefully in "*Traitor*." The trajectory of the album thus charts a movement from the relative containment of pain within the Imaginary, through the partial and leaking symbolizations of the Symbolic, toward a catastrophic confrontation with the Real—that which resists all representation and retroactively destroys the meaning of the past. Crucially, the three orders do not appear in pure succession but rather in dynamic, uneven coexistence: "*Drivers License*" operates almost exclusively within the Imaginary; "*Good 4 U*" and "*Déjà*

Vu" privilege the Symbolic while retaining residual Imaginary attachments and, in the former case, permitting minor leakage of the Real; "*Traitor*" marks the tipping point at which the Real becomes dominant, overwhelming both Imaginary and Symbolic frameworks; and "*Happier*" stages an incomplete symbolic maturation that remains haunted by an unspeakable Real residue. This synthetic reading reveals that the fragmentation of self-identity across *SOUR* is not a failure of artistic expression but rather a structurally necessary outcome of the subject's passage through the Lacanian orders, as the album does not resolve the trauma of heartbreak but instead documents the impossibility of such resolution, offering listeners not catharsis but a faithful map of the subject's confrontation with what cannot be symbolized, accepted, or left behind.

The fragmentation of self-identity across *SOUR* is not a failure of artistic expression but rather a structurally necessary outcome of the subject's passage through the Lacanian orders. The album does not resolve the trauma of heartbreak; instead, it documents the impossibility of such resolution, offering listeners not catharsis but a faithful map of the subject's confrontation with what cannot be symbolized, accepted, or left behind.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* does not merely narrate the affective experience of romantic rupture but stages a progressive traversal of the three Lacanian orders. Regarding the first research question, the analysis reveals that each of the three Lacanian orders manifests distinctly across the selected songs. The Imaginary Order operates most powerfully in "*Drivers License*" and "*Happier*," where the lyrical subject remains trapped within shattered mirror relationships, constructing identity through nostalgic fantasy and jealous comparison that can never be realized. The Symbolic Order governs "*Good 4 U*," "*Déjà Vu*," and aspects of "*Traitor*," deploying language, social law, and cultural codes to mediate trauma—whether through performative sarcasm, meta-theoretical critique of repetition, or failed appeals to symbolic contracts. The Real erupts most forcefully in "*Traitor*" and "*Good 4 U*," appearing in vocalic excess and abject bodily remnants that resist symbolization, marking precisely those points where the Symbolic Order breaks down and the body speaks through the subject.

Regarding the second research question, the analysis demonstrates that these three Lacanian structures fundamentally constitute the fragmented self-identity of the lyrical subject. The subject in *SOUR* possesses no stable, pre-existing self that then experiences jealousy, loss, or anger. Rather, the self is constructed through these

experiences: through Imaginary identification with an impossible image, through Symbolic submission to social law, and through traumatic encounters with the Real that resist integration into any coherent narrative. "*Drivers License*" shows the subject constituted by a shattered mirror; "*Good 4 U*" shows the subject constituted by performative defiance of symbolic norms; "*Deja Vu*" shows the subject constituted by the horrifying recognition that desire may be nothing but recycled signifiers; "*Traitor*" shows the subject constituted by a betrayal that language cannot name; and "*Happier*" shows the subject suspended irreducibly between the symbolic demand for maturity and the Real of bodily resentment. Across all five songs, the subject is not unified but split—divided between what she is supposed to feel and what she actually feels, between the image she projects and the void she carries.

In conclusion, *SOUR* functions as a clinical documentation of adolescent identity formation as Lacan theorized it: the subject emerges through loss, is structured by language, and is perpetually haunted by a Real that cannot be symbolized. Olivia Rodrigo's songs from the album *SOUR* can be read as documentation of how the human subject attempts to cope with the trauma of the Real through language (the Symbolic) and image (the Imaginary). However, every act of symbolization invariably and completely fails—and it is precisely from this failure that the work of art is born. The album's enduring cultural resonance lies precisely in this psychoanalytic fidelity—not because it accurately reports heartbreak, but because it enacts the structural condition of the speaking subject. Within Lacan's framework, pop music is not merely an expression of emotion but rather a form of sublimation: the elevation of unspeakable trauma into a symbolic form that can be shared, consumed, and collectively recognized, without ever healing the traumatic void at the subject's core. Thus, the fragmented self-identity in *SOUR* is not a flaw or an artistic failure; it is the text's most truthful registration of what it means to be a desiring, speaking, and irreparably divided subject.

SUGGESTIONS

While this study has provided a systematic Lacanian reading of *SOUR* through the three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, several dimensions remain unexplored and present productive avenues for future research. The musical form itself—including harmonic progression, rhythmic structure, dynamic shifts, and production choices—merits fuller psychoanalytic attention, as Rodrigo's strategic use of sudden dynamic contrasts may register shifts between the Lacanian orders, and future studies could adopt the methodological precedents established by Radoman (2021) and Klein

(2015) in analyzing how specific musical parameters mediate the subject's encounter with lack and jouissance. A comparative analysis between *SOUR* and Rodrigo's subsequent album *GUTS* would illuminate the diachronic development of the Lacanian subject, potentially revealing whether the subject's relation to lack transforms over time. Additionally, fan reception and listener identification remain outside the scope of this textual analysis, and future research employing qualitative methods such as interviews or online discourse analysis could investigate how adolescent listeners experience the album's vocalic excess as either catharsis or performative authenticity. A cross-cultural or comparative artist study—examining contemporaries such as Billie Eilish, Taylor Swift, or Phoebe Bridgers—would test the generalizability of these findings and distinguish between genre-wide conventions and Rodrigo's specific psychic signature. The concept of sublimation in popular music also warrants dedicated theoretical elaboration, particularly through deeper engagement with Lacan's Seminar VII on the ethics of psychoanalysis. Methodologically, future researchers should consider integrating computational lyric analysis with qualitative close reading and musicological analysis on a larger scale to determine whether the structures identified in *SOUR* are statistically distinctive or normatively characteristic of the genre. Ultimately, this study has opened a Lacanian reading of *SOUR* but has by no means exhausted its interpretive possibilities, and it is the hope of this researcher that the present analysis will serve as a foundation upon which subsequent scholars can build, extending and refining the dialogue between Lacanian psychoanalysis and contemporary popular music.

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