

Emotional Experience in Contemporary R&B Lyrics: A Transitivity Analysis Of Sza's Sos Album

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Abstract

Song lyrics can be analyzed with regards to the dynamics of discourse, while the connection between emotional experience and agency within contemporary R&B lyrical albums is still not extensively discussed in SFL research. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to apply the transitivity system, as described by Halliday (1994), to the analysis of emotions and agency as portrayed by SZA in six songs from her album SOS, namely, "Kill Bill," "Snooze," "Good Days," "Nobody Gets Me," "I Hate U," and "Shirt." To achieve this goal, a qualitative descriptive approach was utilized based on the principles of functional grammar presented by Halliday (1994) and Gerot & Wignell (1994). The corpus of the research includes songs' lyrics taken from Genius (genius.com) containing 164 clauses in total. According to the results, mental processes prevail (31.7%) in relation to material (29.9%), relational (22.0%), verbal (7.9%), behavioral (4.9%), and existential (3.7%) ones. The high percentage of mental and material processes makes SOS different from other lyric corpora and reflects the conflict between emotional experiences and contested agency. The construction of identity via the use of relational processes demonstrates the speaker's relationship-based nature.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Transitivity, Ideational Metafunction, Emotional Experience, Agency

Abstrak

Lirik lagu dapat dianalisis melalui dinamika wacana, namun hubungan antara pengalaman emosional dan agensi dalam album lirik R&B kontemporer masih belum banyak dibahas dalam penelitian Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (Systemic Functional Linguistics/SFL). Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menerapkan sistem transitivitas sebagaimana dikemukakan oleh Halliday (1994) dalam menganalisis emosi dan agensi yang direpresentasikan oleh SZA dalam enam lagu dari album *SOS*, yaitu *Kill Bill*, *Snooze*, *Good Days*, *Nobody Gets Me*, *I Hate U*, dan *Shirt*. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif yang didasarkan pada prinsip-prinsip tata bahasa fungsional yang dikemukakan oleh Halliday (1994) serta Gerot dan Wignell (1994). Korpus penelitian berupa lirik lagu yang diambil dari *Genius* dengan total 164 klausa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa proses mental mendominasi data dengan persentase 31,7%, diikuti oleh proses material (29,9%), relasional (22,0%), verbal (7,9%), perilaku (4,9%), dan eksistensial (3,7%). Tingginya frekuensi proses mental dan material menjadikan album *SOS* berbeda dari korpus lirik lagu lainnya serta mencerminkan adanya konflik antara pengalaman emosional dan agensi yang diperdebatkan. Selain itu, konstruksi identitas yang diwujudkan melalui penggunaan proses relasional menunjukkan bahwa penutur memiliki karakter yang berorientasi pada hubungan interpersonal.

Kata Kunci: Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (SFL), Transitivitas, Metafungsi Ideasional, Pengalaman Emosional, Agensi

A. Introduction

Language is a semiotic system used by humans in creating their experiences in the world, establishing relationships with one another, and organizing discourse (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In SFL theory, the transitivity system categorizes clauses based on process types, participant roles, and circumstances to provide an analytical tool for analyzing how the author of a given text positions himself in the world around him. According to Halliday (1994, p. 106), transitivity “constitutes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types,” each of which represents a particular way of being, doing, sensing, and relating.

Song lyrics are poetic, commercial, and sociological texts in which artists construct their identities and emotions. Some SFL studies have suggested that process type distribution indicates the thematic orientation of a particular text. As far as song lyrics studies are concerned, the material process types dominate in The Beatles songs, with 26%, according to Harbi et al. (2019). Material process dominance is also evident in Ariana Grande’s singles, accounting for 44.62%, while mental processes dominate in worship songs (41.58%), as Halawa et al. (2024) noted. Additionally, Siahaan (2021) pointed out that process distribution was mixed in Bon Jovi’s lyrics. According to Bibi et al. (2023), transitivity analysis can highlight gender dynamics in literature texts. Material and mental processes dominate in *Jane Eyre* and *Beloved* novels by Sarwat et al. (2023), respectively. According to Amjad and Hashmi (2023), the presence of material processes accounted for 54% in a fictional character analysis, whereas Nazir et al. (2026) found that material processes dominated at 40%–64% among eight protagonists of short stories. Regarding the poetic genre, Sultan et al. (2023) observed a structural change from behavioral/verbal processes to material ones in a poem by Tennyson, whereas Amina et al. (2022) noted the domination of verbal processes (55%) in a poem emphasizing the impact of words.

However, there still are two important gaps in the current SFL transitivity research concerning song lyrics. Firstly, existing research predominantly concentrates on the examination of individual songs or sets of related lyrics without considering an album as a coherent linguistic text that is a corpus for further discourse analysis. Secondly, even more specifically, none of the studies done thus far employs the tools of SFL to examine the interconnection between emotions and agency as represented by the language of contemporary R&B songs written by a woman. As can be noticed, all of the abovementioned studies emphasize only one particular semantic orientation, whether it is actions, devotion, or personal identification. Moreover, gender and emotional labor in the analyzed lyrics were not seen as the key concepts, and, as a result, feminine emotions have not yet been analyzed systematically in terms of the language of SFL. This is where the current study is expected to fill these gaps in existing research.

An especially intriguing cultural site for this analysis is that of SZA's album released in 2022, *SOS*. The album was released on December 9, 2022, by Top Dawg Entertainment and RCA Records. Upon its release, the album debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart, selling 318,000 equivalent album units in its first week and accumulating 404.58 million on-demand streams in its first week—the highest streaming week achieved by an R&B album in history, and second-highest ever achieved by an album by a female artist (Wikipedia, 2025). Subsequently, the album spent 13 weeks atop the Billboard 200 chart in total across three separate years, and is thus the first ever album by a woman to have spent 100 weeks within the top ten slots of the Billboard 200 chart, with the album in 2025 surpassing Michael Jackson's *Thriller* to become the highest-ranking album by a black artist on the chart in US music history (RIAA, 2025). On an international scale, the album has sold over 22.3 million equivalent album units worldwide and is eligible for 9x Platinum certification from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA, 2025), becoming the decade's best-selling female album released in the United States.

The chosen six songs from the album were selected due to their significance and popularity not just within the album, but also outside of it through the number of views they have gained. The "Kill Bill" is the most streamed song in the album with about 2.8 billion views on Spotify, 139 million views on YouTube, and the first one to reach the top of both the Billboard Hot 100 and the Billboard Global 200. "Good Days" has gained around 1.66 billion Spotify streams and 132 million YouTube views (Kwordb, 2025). "Nobody Gets Me" has exceeded 1.26 billion Spotify streams and 56 million YouTube views (Kwordb, 2025). "I Hate U" and "Shirt" have gained more than 570 million and 637 million Spotify streams respectively (Kwordb, 2025). Each of these songs has been certified individually by the RIAA and, as a whole, provide the complete emotional range of the album, such as "kill bill," which evokes obsessive love; "snooze," which describes devoted sacrifice; "good days," which speaks of self-reliance; "nobody gets me," which expresses emotional vulnerability; "i hate u," which is an expression of bitter sarcasm; and "shirt," which is an indication of lust.

The research questions guiding this study are:

(RQ1) What are the transitivity processes employed in the chosen lyrics from SZA's *SOS* album, and what is the predominant type?

(RQ2) How is emotional experience conceptualized using the transitivity model in these lyrics?

(RQ3) How is agency created through the transitivity processes, and how does that place the lyrical speaker within her emotional and relational universe?

B. Methodology

The present investigation involves a qualitative descriptive design in line with the SFL theoretical perspective. According to comparable studies in transitivity analysis (Harbi et al., 2019; Dita, 2025; Halawa et al., 2024), qualitative descriptive methods involve a systematic organization and interpretation of linguistic data, emphasizing its meaning rather than any kind of statistical conclusions drawn from this data. However, a quantitative component will be added to the investigation (i.e., frequency tabulation of process types) following the methodological guidelines of Bibi et al. (2023).

As for the dataset, it consists of the lyrics from six songs chosen from the album *SOS* released by SZA in 2022, namely, "Kill Bill," "Snooze," "Good Days," "Nobody Gets Me," "I Hate U," and "Shirt." The songs have been chosen to reflect the main themes and emotions contained in the album. As to the source of the data, lyrics were extracted from the web site Genius (genius.com) which is frequently used by academics when conducting song lyrics analysis (e.g., see Dita, 2025; Harbi et al., 2019). Primary sung vocal lines only were included in the investigation while all other repetitions of the vocals (including any spoken parts of the lyrics) were not taken into account.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process adhered to the theory of transitivity formulated by Halliday (1994) and discussed further by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) and Gerot and Wignell (1994). The data analysis process entailed the following six stages: (1) clause segmentation—segregating each song lyric into clauses having either finite or non-finite verbal groups; (2) identification of processes—the classification of verbal groups using Halliday's (1994) six-part categorization of the processes; (3) labelling participants—determination of their status (actor, goal, senser, phenomenon, carrier, attribute, token, value, sayer, behavior, existent); (4) tabulating—recording of clauses in analysis tables with their process types and participant labels; (5) frequency calculation—frequency and percentages for each process category were calculated at the level of

each song and collectively; and (6) interpretation—interpretation of quantitative findings into qualitative meanings. The worked-out example in Table 1 shows how the coding was done.

Table 1. Data of the research

Lyric Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
<i>I'll touch that fire for you</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: that fire; Circ.: for you
<i>I still love him though</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: him
<i>You just too important</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: you; Attribute: too important
<i>I testify for you</i>	Verbal	Sayer: I; Circ.: for you
<i>I'm the main one cryin'</i>	Behavioral	Behaver: I
<i>Bloodstain on my shirt</i>	Existential	Existent: bloodstain

Analytical reliability was ensured by applying Halliday's (1994) and Gerot and Wignell's (1994) classification criteria consistently. Borderline cases—particularly at the mental/relational and material/behavioral boundaries—were resolved by reference to the dominant semantic function of the verbal group in its clause context, as recommended by Thompson (2014). RQ1: Types and Distribution of Process Types.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

RQ1: Types and Distribution of Process Types

A total of 164 clauses were identified and classified across the six songs. All six of Halliday's (1994) process types were found in the corpus. Table 2 presents the full frequency distribution.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Transitivity Process Types in Selected Songs from SZA's SOS

Process type	Kill Bill	Snooze	Gods	Nobody gets me	I Hate U	Shirt	Total	%
Material	10	9	7	7	8	8	49	29.9
Mental	9	6	10	9	10	8	52	31.7
Relational	6	7	7	6	5	5	36	22.0
Verbal	2	3	2	2	2	2	13	7.9
Behavioral	1	2	1	1	2	1	8	4.9
Existential	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3.7
Total	28	28	28	26	28	25	164	100%

Note. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

As classified by Halliday (1994), all six process types were identified in the corpus. Mental processes are dominant with 52 occurrences (31.7%), closely followed by material processes at 49 occurrences (29.9%), relational at 36 (22.0%), verbal at 13 (7.9%), behavioral at 8 (4.9%), and existential at 6 (3.7%). The following sub-sections present the clause-level findings for each song.

Kill Bill

"Kill Bill" yields 29 analysable clauses. Material processes are most frequent at 10 clauses (34.5%), followed by mental at 9 (31.0%) and relational at 6 (20.7%). Table 3 presents selected clause analyses classified according to Halliday's (1994) process types.

Table 3. Selected Clause Analysis: "Kill Bill"

No	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>I'm still a fan even though I was salty</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: still a fan
2	<i>Hate to see you with some other broad</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I (impl.); Phenomenon: you with another
3	<i>I'm so mature</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: so mature
4	<i>I don't want none</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: none
5	<i>I just want you</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: you
6	<i>I might kill my ex</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: my ex
7	<i>not the best idea</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: it (impl.); Attribute: not the best idea
8	<i>I still love him though</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: him
9	<i>rather be in jail than alone</i>	Relational (identifying)	Token: I (impl.); Value: in jail
10	<i>I get the sense it's a lost cause</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: it's a lost cause
11	<i>you was out of reach</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: you; Attribute: out of reach
12	<i>Now I'm in the basement plannin' home invasion</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: home invasion
13	<i>I did it all for love</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: it; Circ.: for love
14	<i>I did all of this sober</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: all of this; Circ.: sober

Snooze

"Snooze" yields 28 analysable clauses. Material processes account for 9 clauses (32.1%) and relational for 7 (25.0%)—the highest relational proportion among the six songs. Table 4 presents selected clauses.

Table 4. Selected Clause Analysis: "Snooze"

No.	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>I'll touch that fire for you</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: that fire; Circ.: for you
2	<i>I testify for you</i>	Verbal	Sayer: I; Circ.: for you
3	<i>I told that lie</i>	Verbal	Sayer: I; Verbiage: that lie
4	<i>I'd kill that bitch</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: that bitch
5	<i>Long as you dreamin' 'bout me</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: you; Phenomenon: me
6	<i>I don't got nobody</i>	Relational (possessive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: nobody
7	<i>I look better under you</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: better
8	<i>I can't lose when I'm with you</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: (losing)
9	<i>You just too important</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: you; Attribute: too important
10	<i>I feel like Scarface</i>	Mental (perceptive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: like Scarface
11	<i>I'll be your main one</i>	Relational (identifying)	Token: I; Value: your main one
12	<i>it was magic</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: it; Attribute: magic
13	<i>How you threatenin' to leave</i>	Material	Actor: you
14	<i>I'm the main one cryin'</i>	Behavioral	Behaver: I
15	<i>Just tryna be your everything</i>	Relational (identifying)	Token: I; Value: your everything

Good Days

"Good Days" yields 28 clauses. Mental processes are highest at 10 clauses (35.7%), as classified by Halliday (1994), followed by material and relational at 7 each (25.0%).

Table 5 presents selected clauses : "Good Days"

No.	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>Good day in my mind</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: (it's a) good day; Circ.: in my mind
2	<i>You be heavy in my mind</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: you; Attribute: heavy; Circ.: in my mind
3	<i>I try to keep from losin' the rest of me</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: losing the rest of me
4	<i>I worry that I wasted the best of me on you</i>	Mental (cognitive/affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: I wasted the best of me
5	<i>You don't care</i>	Mental (affective, negated)	Senser: you; Phenomenon: (implied: about me)
6	<i>Got me a war in my mind</i>	Relational/Existential	Carrier: I; Attribute: a war in my mind
7	<i>Gotta let go of weight</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: weight
8	<i>Still wanna try</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: (trying)
9	<i>still believe in good days</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: good days
10	<i>I don't miss no ex, I don't miss no text</i>	Mental (affective, negated)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: ex / text
11	<i>I choose not to respond</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: (response)
12	<i>I don't regret</i>	Mental (cognitive, negated)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: (past actions)
13	<i>just pretend shit never happened</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: shit never happened
14	<i>I'll await my armored fate with a smile</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: my armored fate

Nobody Gets Me

"Nobody Gets Me" yields 26 clauses. Mental processes account for 9 clauses (34.6%) and material processes for 7 (26.9%). Table 6 presents selected clause analyses.

Table 6. Selected Clause Analysis: "Nobody Gets Me"

No	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>Took a long vacation</i>	Material	Actor: I (impl.)
2	<i>Had me butt-naked at the MGM</i>	Material	Actor: you; Goal: me; Circ.: at the MGM
3	<i>It's too late</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: it; Attribute: too late
4	<i>I don't wanna lose what's left of you</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: what's left of you
5	<i>I don't wanna see you with anyone but me</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: you with anyone but me
6	<i>Nobody gets me like you</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: nobody; Phenomenon: me; Circ.: like you
7	<i>How am I supposed to let you go?</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: you
8	<i>Only like myself when I'm with you</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: myself; Circ.: when with you
9	<i>You was feelin' empty</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: you; Phenomenon: empty
10	<i>you left me</i>	Material	Actor: you; Goal: me
11	<i>I deserve less</i>	Relational (identifying)	Token: I; Value: less
12	<i>I pretend when I'm with a man it's you</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: it's you
13	<i>Took me out to the ballet</i>	Material	Actor: you; Goal: me; Circ.: to the ballet
14	<i>You proposed</i>	Verbal/Material	Actor: you

I Hate U

"I Hate U" yields 28 clauses. Mental processes are dominant at 10 clauses (35.7%), equal to "Good Days," followed by material at 8 (28.6%). Table 7 presents selected clause analyses classified by Halliday's (1994) transitivity system.

Table 7. Selected Clause Analysis: "I Hate U"

No.	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>I be so sick of you niggas</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: you niggas
2	<i>I be so bored with myself</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: myself
3	<i>I feel so ordinary</i>	Mental (perceptive/affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: ordinary
4	<i>Treat me like corduroy, wear me out</i>	Material	Actor: you; Goal: me
5	<i>Heavy on the missing you</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: you
6	<i>Wish it was different than what it was</i>	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: (different reality)
7	<i>Lost in the lie of us</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: lost
8	<i>if you wonder if I hate you (I do)</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: you
9	<i>Shitty of you to make me feel just like this</i>	Material Mental	+ Actor: you; Goal: me; Senser: me
10	<i>Used to be too solid 'til you scrambled me</i>	Relational Material	+ Carrier: I; Attr: solid; Actor: you; Goal: me
11	<i>Used to be your rider, you mishandle me</i>	Relational Material	+ Carrier: I; Actor: you; Goal: me
12	<i>Used to be nonviolent 'til you ambushed me</i>	Relational Material	+ Carrier: I; Actor: you; Goal: me
13	<i>I've been up, baby</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: up
14	<i>Now I'm out here wildin' with you</i>	Material	Actor: I; Circ.: with you

Shirt

"Shirt" yields 25 clauses. Material processes account for 8 clauses (32.0%), the highest among the six songs alongside "Kill Bill." Table 8 presents selected clause analyses.

Table 8. Selected Clause Analysis: "Shirt"

No.	Clause	Process Type	Participant Roles
1	<i>Kiss me dangerous</i>	Material	Actor: you (impl.); Goal: me; Attribute: dangerous
2	<i>Been so lost without you all around me</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: I; Attribute: so lost; Circ.: without you
3	<i>Get anxious</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I (impl.); Phenomenon: anxiety
4	<i>Lead me, don't look back</i>	Material	Actor: you; Goal: me
5	<i>It's all about you</i>	Relational (identifying)	Token: it; Value: all about you
6	<i>Feelin' lost, but I like it</i>	Mental (perceptive affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: lost / it +
7	<i>Feel the taste of resentment</i>	Mental (perceptive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: resentment
8	<i>Simmer in my skin</i>	Behavioral	Behaver: I; Circ.: in my skin
9	<i>Bloodstain on my shirt</i>	Existential	Existent: bloodstain
10	<i>New bitch on my nerves</i>	Relational (attributive)	Carrier: new bitch; Attribute: on my nerves
11	<i>Still don't know my worth</i>	Mental (cognitive)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: my worth
12	<i>Still stressin' perfection</i>	Mental (affective)	Senser: I; Phenomenon: perfection
13	<i>Let you all in my mental</i>	Material	Actor: I; Goal: you all; Circ.: in my mental
14	<i>Got me lookin' too desperate</i>	Material Relational	Actor: (it); Goal: me; Attribute: too desperate +

Discussions

RQ1: Process Type Distribution

Mental processes are marginally dominant (31.7%), closely followed by material processes (29.9%). This near-parity distinguishes SOS from other lyrical corpora. Dita (2025) found material processes dominant at 44.62% in Ariana Grande's singles, attributing this to action-driven pop narratives. Harbi et al. (2019) found a more balanced distribution in The Beatles' corpus (material 26%, mental 23%, relational 22%), while Halawa et al. (2024) found mental processes dominant at 41.58% in worship songs. SOS most closely resembles the worship song pattern in mental process prominence, but with a much stronger material presence. Compared to literary corpora, Amjad and Hashmi (2023) found material processes at 54% in a character study, and Nazir et al. (2026) recorded 40–64% material dominance across eight short-fiction protagonists—both considerably higher than SOS's 29.9%, reflecting the action-driven nature of narrative fiction. Amina et al.'s (2022) verbal dominance (55%) in a poem about the consequences of speech represents a further genre-specific contrast. Sultan et al.'s (2023) finding of a structural shift from verbal/behavioural to material processes in a Tennyson poem offers a useful parallel: SOS's near-equal mental and material distribution may similarly encode an unresolved tension between inner experience and outward action.

RQ2: Emotional Experience in SOS

Mental processes dominate across all six songs, positioning the speaker primarily as a Senser whose consciousness is directed toward the beloved. Recurring configurations include: "Hate to see you happy" (Kill Bill), "I still love him though" (Kill Bill), "Heavy on the missing you" (I Hate

U), and "Nobody gets me like you" (Nobody Gets Me). Halliday (1994, p. 113) notes that mental processes require a conscious Senser—"a being that is capable of behaving consciously"—making each mental clause an assertion of the speaker's psychological interiority.

Among mental sub-types, desiderative processes—encoding wanting and longing ("I just want you," "I don't wanna lose," "still wanna try")—are the most frequent. Gerot and Wignell (1994, p. 58) classify these under the affective mental type, noting their orientation toward future states or objects. Negated desiderative processes ("I don't want none," "I don't miss no ex," "I don't regret") are particularly notable: they perform a claimed refusal of affect that the surrounding lyrics often undermine, encoding what might be called the psychic structure of denial.

Cognitive mental processes ("I know," "I believe," "I pretend") reflect the speaker's ongoing interpretive work on her own experience. This is most pronounced in "Good Days," where sustained cognitive engagement ("I worry that I wasted the best of me," "I still believe in good days") enacts a form of deliberate emotional self-management expressed entirely through mental process grammar.

RQ3: Agency in SOS

Agency in SOS is constructed through the distribution of Actor roles in material clauses. Two patterns emerge. First, when the speaker is Actor—"I'll touch that fire for you" (Snooze), "I did it all for love" (Kill Bill), "Gotta let go of weight" (Good Days)—the clauses encode self-directed agency and willed action. Second, when the addressee is Actor and the speaker is Goal—"you scrambled me," "you mishandle me," "you ambushed me" (I Hate U), "you left me" (Nobody Gets Me), "Treat me like corduroy, wear me out" (I Hate U)—the speaker is grammatically positioned as passive recipient of the other's actions.

This pattern is most developed in "I Hate U," where the second verse opens each line with a relational attributive process encoding the speaker's prior self ("Used to be too solid / your rider / nonviolent") before shifting to a material process in which the addressee is Actor and the speaker is Goal ("you scrambled me," "you mishandle me," "you ambushed me"). This grammatical sequence argues that a stable relational identity was materially undone by the other's actions. This mirrors Bibi et al.'s (2023) finding that relational processes encode identity states later disrupted by material actions, and Sarwat et al.'s (2023) observation that female characters in literary fiction are frequently positioned as Goals rather than Actors, encoding structural disempowerment. The same grammatical logic operates in SOS: the speaker is repeatedly made Goal, yet asserts herself as Actor elsewhere in the corpus.

Relational processes add a third dimension by constructing a speaker whose identity is contingent on the other: "I look better under you" (Snooze), "Only like myself when I'm with you" (Nobody Gets Me), "Been so lost without you" (Shirt). These attributive relational clauses position the speaker (Carrier) with an Attribute that depends on the beloved's presence or absence. This reveals that the album's emotional pain is not merely affective but relational: without the beloved, the speaker does not merely feel bad—she loses the attributes that constitute her selfhood. Mental, material, and relational processes therefore work together: mental processes encode the inner emotional world, relational processes ground identity in the relationship, and material processes provide the grammar of agency through which that identity is contested and asserted.

D. Conclusion

The transitivity framework developed by Halliday (1994) was used to analyse 164 clauses from six songs from SZA's 2022 album SOS. Six process types were identified. Mental processes were the most common (31.7%), followed by material (29.9%), relational (22.0%), verbal (7.9%), behavioral (4.9%) and existential (3.7%).

Most importantly, mental and material processes are found to be nearly on a par. In contrast to Dita's (2025) material-dominant Ariana Grande corpus (44.62%) and Halawa et al.'s (2024) mental-dominant worship song corpus (41.58%), SOS encodes a tension between emotional introspection and contested physical agency. The speaker is both a Senser, always focused on the beloved, and an Actor, willing to make sacrifices, endure pain, and assert herself. This is based on relational processes, through which a self is constructed, whose identity is shaped in the relationship.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it provides the first systematic transitivity analysis of SOS as a unified discursive corpus, building on previous work by Harbi et al. (2019), Dita (2025), Halawa et al. (2024), and Siahaan (2021). Secondly, it shows how the interaction of

mental, material, and relational processes participates in the encoding of emotional labor in contemporary R&B. This is corroborated by a comparison with literary corpora where the dominance of material processes is much higher (Amjad & Hashmi, 2023; Nazir et al., 2026) and poetic corpora where verbal dominance is prevalent (Amina et al., 2022). Third, it shows how the Actor-Goal asymmetry in SOS parallels patterns of grammatical disempowerment identified by Sarwat et al. (2023) in literary fiction, thus validating the utility of SFL tools designed for literary analysis in the domain of popular music.

There are three limitations in this study. Firstly, only six of the twenty-three tracks from the album were analysed. Second, the analysis is concerned with ideational metafunction. Interpersonal dimensions such as mood, modality and appraisal (Martin & White, 2005) are not included. Future work could expand the corpus to the full album, compare across multiple SZA albums, or integrate the appraisal framework to provide a fuller picture of the album's evaluative and relational meanings.

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