
The Role of Popular Music Lyrics in Shaping Youth Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: Popular music lyrics are not merely a form of entertainment but also function as potent cultural texts that shape and reflect youth identity. This study explores how contemporary popular songs construct and convey representations of adolescent identity through language. This study highlights the role of music as a site of identity negotiation, where adolescents interpret and internalize messages that influence their behaviors and values. By combining textual, discursive, and social dimensions of analysis. Using a qualitative-descriptive method and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary framework, the research investigates lyrics from selected international and Indonesian artists, including Billie Eilish, Taylor Swift, BTS, Raim Laode, and musicians from urban London. The analysis focuses on linguistic features, ideological structures, and social implications embedded in the lyrics. Discourse strategies such as metaphor, repetition, symbolism, and localized language are used to articulate personal and collective experiences. Findings indicate that popular music lyrics contribute to shaping emotional, gendered, and cultural identities among youth. Common themes include loneliness, empowerment, romantic ideals, social anxiety, and cultural belonging. Moreover, the lyrics often reflect or challenge prevailing ideologies related to gender norms, consumerism, and social expectations. This research reveals how popular music becomes a dynamic space for ideological contestation and identity formation. The findings offer valuable insights for scholars in literature, media studies, and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of music in understanding the lived realities of youth in a globalized world.

INTRODUCTION

Popular music plays a pivotal role in shaping and disseminating social and cultural discourses, especially among adolescents who are in a critical phase of identity formation. In today's globalized and media-saturated society, music serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium through which young people make sense of the world around them. Song lyrics, in particular, function as rich textual sources that reflect, reinforce, and sometimes challenge prevailing ideologies and social norms. As mass-mediated texts, lyrics become a linguistic and cultural space where values, emotions, ideologies, and identities are performed and negotiated (Sánchez González, 2021; Leinster, 2025).

Adolescents arguably the most active consumers of popular music often turn to song lyrics as a form of emotional expression and social commentary. Through repeated listening, internalization, and even imitation, youth engage with the narratives presented in songs, many of which address themes of self-discovery, gender roles, marginalization, rebellion, love, and belonging. These lyrics are not consumed passively; rather, they interact with listeners' personal experiences and help articulate or validate their feelings and identities (Hanzilia et al., 2024; Haminur et al., 2024).

Several studies have shown that song lyrics contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities. They encode specific worldviews and can subtly promote or resist hegemonic ideologies related to gender, race, class, and sexuality (Widiyanti, 2022). For example, feminist discourse can be embedded in the lyrical portrayal of empowered female characters, while resistance narratives may emerge in songs critiquing social injustice or cultural stereotypes (Sulistyawati et al., 2022; Petrušić, 2021). Furthermore, local and global music industries often tailor lyrics to resonate with the cultural and emotional landscapes of youth, making them powerful vehicles for ideological transmission (Sukma et al., 2025; Manifesty, 2024).

Given the increasing academic interest in the intersection of language, media, and identity, song lyrics are now being examined not merely as aesthetic texts but as discursive artifacts worthy of critical linguistic and socio-cultural analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as proposed by theorists such as Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, provides a robust framework for exploring how power relations, ideologies, and identities are constructed and negotiated through language. CDA allows researchers to uncover the implicit meanings, intertextual references, and social practices that shape lyrical narratives (Kelly et al., 2016).

In this context, this study aims to investigate the role of contemporary popular music lyrics in shaping youth identity using the CDA approach. By focusing on the linguistic strategies and discursive elements embedded in selected popular songs, the research seeks to explore how lyrics serve not only as reflections of youth experience but also as tools for shaping how young people perceive themselves and the world around them.

Based on the background described, this study is driven by two central research questions: how youth identity is represented in contemporary popular song lyrics, and what linguistic strategies are employed to construct identity discourse within these lyrics. These questions are aimed at exploring the interplay between language and identity in the context of modern music consumed predominantly by adolescents and young adults.

The objectives of this research are twofold. First, it aims to analyze the discursive structures found in selected popular music lyrics that influence the way youth identity is framed and perceived. This includes examining how themes such as self-expression, emotional struggles, empowerment, and social belonging are articulated through language. Second, the study seeks to identify the specific linguistic and ideological strategies embedded within the lyrics, focusing on

how word choice, tone, and narrative framing contribute to the portrayal of emotions, gender roles, acts of resistance, and personal or collective identity.

This research holds significance for the fields of literary and cultural studies, particularly within the scope of popular literature and media discourse. It provides a deeper academic insight into the relationship between language in music and the evolving identities of youth in a media-driven society. Furthermore, it serves as a valuable resource for scholars, educators, and students exploring the intersections of linguistics, discourse analysis, and cultural identity formation. The application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this study demonstrates the method's potential in uncovering hidden ideologies and the social dynamics underlying the lyrics of seemingly simple cultural texts such as popular songs.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive research design, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological approach. The qualitative nature of this research enables a deep exploration of meaning, ideology, and identity construction through language used in popular song lyrics. CDA provides a theoretical and analytical framework for examining the complex relationship between text, discourse, and social context (Kelly et al., 2016; Widiyanti, 2022). The aim is not merely to interpret what is said in the lyrics but to uncover the underlying power dynamics and ideological structures that shape those expressions.

The primary data in this study consist of selected lyrics from contemporary popular songs that reflect themes relevant to youth identity. The songs are chosen from both Western and non-Western artists, allowing for a diverse and comparative analysis. Notable examples include works by Billie Eilish and Taylor Swift (representing Western pop culture), BTS (representing K-pop and global youth discourse), Raim Laode (representing Indonesian contemporary music), and several urban musicians from London, whose lyrics engage with issues of race, gender, and youth struggle in multicultural societies (Leinster, 2025; Sulistyawati et al., 2022).

Data were collected using documentation methods and literature study. The documentation involved collecting and transcribing the official lyrics of the selected songs from verified sources. In addition, a literature review was conducted to support the analytical framework, drawing from journal articles, books, and scholarly works on discourse analysis, music studies, and identity formation. These sources help provide theoretical grounding for interpreting the linguistic and ideological elements embedded within the lyrics (Manifesty, 2024; Sánchez González, 2021; Alek et al., 2020).

The analytical framework for this study is based on the models proposed by Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, which emphasize a multi-dimensional view of discourse. The analysis proceeds through three main stages:

1. **Textual Analysis:** This includes examining sentence structures, lexical choices, rhetorical figures, and metaphorical language that contribute to identity construction within the lyrics (Petrušić, 2021).
2. **Discursive Practice:** This aspect investigates how the lyrics are produced, distributed, and consumed within the music industry and among youth audiences. It addresses issues such as intertextuality, authorship, and reception (Sukma et al., 2025).
3. **Social Practice:** This final stage situates the discourse within broader social and ideological contexts. It explores how song lyrics reflect or resist dominant ideologies, such as those related to gender norms, youth culture, and emotional expression (Haminur et al., 2024; Hanzilia et al., 2024).

By integrating Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, this study aims to reveal how language in music not only conveys meaning but also shapes social realities, particularly in the lives of youth.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Identity in Song Lyrics

The lyrics of contemporary popular music often serve as mirrors of the emotional and psychological landscapes of youth. In this study, the representation of adolescent identity is examined through key recurring themes, including loneliness, the search for self, rebellion, feminism, and existential struggles. These thematic patterns are evident across various musical genres and cultures, suggesting that music is a significant medium through which youth articulate their inner conflicts and societal positions (Sánchez González, 2021; Sulistyawati et al., 2022).

One striking example of identity construction can be found in Taylor Swift's song "Look What You Made Me Do." The lyrics of this song portray a shift from vulnerability to empowerment, reflecting a narrative of a young woman reclaiming control over her image and voice in response to public criticism and betrayal. The use of assertive diction and metaphoric language such as "I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time" demonstrates a transformation from victimhood to agency. This reflects the modern female identity that challenges traditional expectations and embraces self-definition (Alek et al., 2020).

Such representation aligns with the feminist discourse embedded in popular music, where women resist objectification and assert autonomy. Swift's lyrical persona embodies a response to the pressures of celebrity culture and gendered double standards, echoing broader issues faced by young women globally. This approach is consistent with Petrušić's (2021) findings that female artists increasingly use music as a form of socio-political commentary and identity formation.

Furthermore, youth identity in lyrics is also shaped through emotional themes like alienation and existential anxiety. These are commonly present in works by artists such as Billie Eilish, whose songs often convey a deep sense of emotional complexity and isolation, resonating with listeners experiencing similar inner turmoil (Hanzilia et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in the lyrics of BTS, themes of self-love, societal expectations, and cultural belonging reflect the struggles of youth navigating identity in a globalized yet demanding environment (Sukma et al., 2025).

Overall, the discourse within song lyrics constructs multifaceted portraits of youth identity. These portrayals are not merely reflections but also tools of meaning-making, helping listeners to position themselves within social and cultural narratives. Music thus becomes a vehicle through which language, ideology, and personal experience intersect, providing young people with frameworks for understanding and expressing who they are.

Discourse Strategies in Lyrics

In the analysis of contemporary popular music lyrics, various discourse strategies are employed by artists to shape youth identity and embed ideological messages. These strategies often involve a deliberate use of linguistic and stylistic devices that allow listeners to emotionally relate to the content, while also critically engaging with broader social structures and values.

One common strategy is the use of emotional metaphors and repetitive structures. These devices function to build emotional resonance and solidarity between the artist and their audience. For instance, in many of Billie Eilish's tracks, metaphors relating to darkness, drowning, or invisibility express intense emotional struggles. Similarly, repetitive refrains and choruses, such as "I'm the bad guy" (Bad Guy), function not only as catchy hooks but also as affirmations of identity that blur the line between self-perception and public perception. This use of metaphor

and repetition reflects what Hanzilia et al. (2024) describe as a discursive alignment with youth experiencing emotional instability or seeking recognition. Sulistyawati et al. (2022) also note that such lyrical patterns strengthen identification and emotional affiliation with listeners, turning music into a space of collective expression and empathy.

In the context of urban British music, symbolism relating to urban space and social class is a prominent discursive element. Artists from London's urban scene frequently reference housing estates, transport lines, brands, and street codes, not just as background setting but as identity markers. These symbols act as sociolects, encoding the lived experiences of marginalization, class consciousness, and racial identity. Leinster (2025) highlights how these linguistic symbols serve to validate lived realities of working-class youth, often excluded from mainstream narratives. Through such localised discourse, the lyrics perform both a representational and a resistive function, voicing authenticity while also challenging dominant ideologies of success and respectability.

A third discourse strategy found in some popular lyrics is resistance to consumerist culture. Lyrics in this category often critique the superficiality of materialism and the commodification of self. For example, Petrušić (2021) points to how artists strategically employ irony, sarcasm, or minimalist language to reject the ideals of consumption-driven identity, instead promoting introspection, authenticity, or even spiritual alternatives. This resistance can be subtle or explicit, but it disrupts the dominant narrative of consumption as the route to happiness, particularly in youth-targeted music.

Together, these discourse strategies emotional metaphors and repetition, urban and class symbolism, and anti-consumerist themes construct a rich field of meaning within popular song lyrics. They not only reflect youth realities but also participate in shaping how young listeners perceive and perform their identities with the social world.

The Role of Music in Culture and Social Behavior

Popular music plays a significant role not only as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural artifact that influences social behavior and shapes collective norms. Through lyrics, imagery, and performance styles, music transmits values, reinforces ideologies, and provides a lens through which listeners interpret social relationships, including those related to gender, romance, and cultural identity (Widiyanti, 2022).

One of the most profound impacts of popular music is its ability to construct and normalize gender roles. Many song lyrics perpetuate traditional representations of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing ideas about dominance, beauty standards, and emotional expression. However, other lyrics actively challenge these constructs by promoting alternative narratives, such as emotional vulnerability in men or empowerment in women. As noted by Widiyanti (2022), the repetition and circulation of such themes in popular media contribute to the internalization of gender norms among young audiences, shaping their understanding of relationships, roles, and expectations within society.

Beyond gender, music also participates in the broader negotiation of cultural and social stereotypes. Songs can both reinforce and subvert prevailing cultural narratives. For instance, certain Western pop songs may emphasize themes of individualism and self-promotion, aligning with capitalist ideals, while others question or critique such values through irony or minimalist expression. Sukma et al. (2025) emphasize that music serves as a medium for cultural discourse, allowing for the reproduction or resistance of dominant ideologies depending on how lyrics are written, performed, and interpreted by their audience.

An important example of cultural localization in popular music can be found in the

Indonesian hit song “Komang” by Raim Laode. This song showcases a unique blend of modern romantic lyricism with traditional and local values, presenting a narrative of love that is intimate, gentle, and deeply rooted in Indonesian sensibilities. The emotional delivery and lyrical simplicity connect with listeners on a cultural level, illustrating how local music can foster a sense of identity and belonging. According to Haminur et al. (2024), such music contributes to a broader discourse of cultural pride and romantic idealism that resonates with young Indonesian listeners.

In addition to being a medium of identity expression, popular music (especially in digital video format) also utilizes multimodal elements to convey social and health messages to the broader public. In his multimodal interpersonal discourse analysis, Bustam (2024) examined the World Health Organization’s digital video campaign for World Health Day and found that the combination of verbal and visual elements (such as imperative structures, frontal angles, as well as the use of color and social distance in visuals) effectively builds emotional engagement and closeness with the audience. This study shows that communication strategies in music and visual media not only reflect ideologies but also shape social relationships between message senders and receivers. Thus, both music and media campaigns can be considered important tools in fostering social awareness and constructing collective identity through a multimodal approach (Bustam, 2024).

Thus, music emerges as a powerful tool in shaping not only personal identity but also collective understandings of culture, gender, and behavior. Its influence extends beyond the private realm of listening, permeating social norms, public discourse, and cultural memory.

CONCLUSION

Popular song lyrics represent a form of cultural text that actively shapes and reflects youth identity. Through the language embedded in these lyrics, adolescents engage with emotional, social, and ideological meanings that influence how they perceive themselves and the world around them. Identity is constructed not only through explicit messages but also through subtle linguistic strategies that carry underlying ideologies. These strategies contribute to the reproduction or resistance of societal norms and values, particularly concerning gender, emotion, and social belonging.

Moreover, music holds a powerful symbolic and social influence over youth self-construction. It provides a platform for expressing personal experiences, cultural pride, and emotional states, while also serving as a shared space where young people form connections with their peers. As such, popular music acts as both a mirror and a tool for identity negotiation within a rapidly changing social environment.

Future research may benefit from incorporating audience perspectives through interviews or surveys, allowing researchers to better understand how listeners interpret and internalize lyrical content. Such methods could enrich the critical discourse analysis by adding empirical insights into reception and meaning-making processes.

Additionally, it is recommended that future studies expand the scope of musical genres and age demographics under investigation. Exploring different musical traditions and the experiences of varied age groups could provide a more comprehensive view of how music influences identity across cultural and generational contexts.

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