



PAPER – **OPEN ACCESS**

## Self and Society: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Lyrics of 'What Was I Made For?' by Billie Eilish

Author : Maysarah Siregar, dkk  
DOI : 10.32734/lwsa.v8i3.2514  
Electronic ISSN : 2654-7066  
Print ISSN : 2654-7058

*Volume 8 Issue 3 – 2022 TALENTA Conference Series: Local Wisdom, Social, and Arts (LWSA)*



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/).

Published under licence by TALENTA Publisher, Universitas Sumatera Utara



# Self and Society: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Lyrics of 'What Was I Made For?' by Billie Eilish

Maysarah Siregar, Aqia Syahnayya Putri, T. Silvana Sinar

Universitas Sumatera Utara

maysarah201999@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Song serves as significant artistic works that influence public opinion while communicating ideas, feelings, and social criticisms. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology, this study attempts to conduct a CDA of Billie Eilish's song "What Was I Made For?" in order to analyze the intricate relationship between one's self-identity and society's expectations. Using a qualitative approach, contextual observation and lyrical analysis were used to collect data. The three interrelated aspects of the analysis framework are as follows: (1) The text dimension, which looks at the language and structure of the lyrics; (2) The discourse practice dimension, which highlights the song's creation and reception in relation to its cultural setting; and (3) The sociocultural practice dimension, which takes into account the lyrics' broader social and ideological implications. The findings show that the song captures elements of emotional struggle, existential doubt, and alienation, demonstrating how relatable Eilish's lyrics are to anyone going through comparable difficulties. The study comes to the conclusion that comprehending song lyrics in their entirety is crucial to understanding the songwriter's goals as well as the socio-emotional context of modern music.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Music; Self-identity; Lyric; Billie Eilish

## 1. Introduction

Songs are among the pieces of art that have a profound impact on society. Numerous songs have been written for a variety of reasons. Some of them are made for entertainment, satire, and motivational purposes. Song lyrics are a combination of art and communication, which makes them especially interesting to analyze. Lyrics, in contrast to other forms of expression, blend musical elements with poetic language to produce an emotional resonance that has the power to profoundly affect listeners. Lyrics frequently offer a distinct viewpoint on topics like identity, relationships, and mental health by reflecting the songwriter's own experiences as well as cultural observations. These days, streaming media like Spotify, iTunes, YouTube Music, and many more make it simple for individuals to read and sing along to the lyrics of their favorite artists. The lyrics of songs are a potent form of communication that convey social, cultural, and personal stories. In addition to serving as a communication tool, each song's lyrics have unique qualities that vary based on the songwriter's intent, whether the song was written to express his feelings and thoughts or if a third party asked or encouraged the songwriter to write something based on the listener's expectations and satisfaction (Huaman & Idemaru, 2018), because song lyrics can disclose underlying cultural and emotional nuances, Lyrics are therefore a rich and complex subject for investigation. Robert Walser (1995) emphasizes that song lyrics are not only a form of personal expression but also a reflection of broader cultural narratives. In his work, he discusses how music and lyrics interact to create meanings that resonate on multiple levels.

Billie Eilish is one well-known musician whose music emotionally resonates with today's youth. Her passionate and reflective lyrics, which often address identity, mental health, and social pressures, make her songs particularly relevant to today's youngsters. Her ability to convey very personal emotions while tackling more universal political and cultural issues makes her songs particularly fascinating to analyze. Eilish's songs usually relate to young people who are grappling with questions of identity and purpose while also reflecting the struggles of her generation. "What Was I Made For?" from the movie "Barbie" soundtrack is a well-known example of Eilish's work that evokes strong feelings and thoughts. The lyrics of this song address themes of existentialism, identity search, and self-reflection, which are highly relevant to the experiences of many listeners, especially among the youth. In an increasingly complex and pressurized world, questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of existence have become more pressing. Therefore, a discourse analysis of these lyrics can provide deep insights into how language is used to convey powerful messages and how those messages interact with social and cultural contexts.

Discourse analysis is a branch of linguistics that examines how written and spoken language are used in communication, taking into account both the sender and the recipient of the message (Slembrouck, 2009). The study of language usage is the focus of discourse analysis (Aprilia, Lustyantje, & Rafli, 2020). The goal of discourse analysis is to identify the patterns that a text expresses. The primary focus of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a subset of discourse analytical research, is on how text and language in social and political contexts enact, reproduce, and oppose social power abuse, dominance, and inequality. Critical discourse analysts take an explicit stance in such dissident research, which aims to comprehend, reveal, and eventually oppose social inequalities (Van Dijk, 1993).

According to Norman Fairclough (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies the interplay of language, power, and social behaviors. He contends that language is a social practice that both reflects and perpetuates ideologies and power dynamics. While taking into account the social, political, and historical settings in which discourse takes place, CDA uses in-depth textual analysis to reveal the meanings and presumptions contained within texts. In addition, Fairclough stresses intertextuality, emphasizing the ways in which many texts impact one another. For a thorough grasp of discourse, analysts must investigate these relationships.

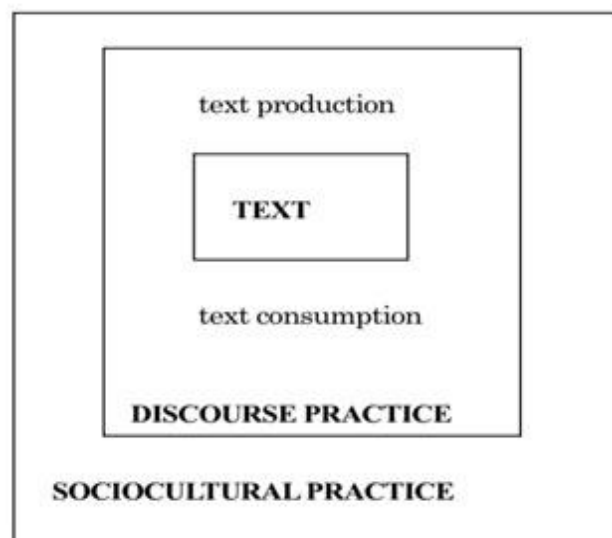


Figure 1. A Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis of 'Communicative Event' (Fairclough, 1995)

The discourse analysis theory developed by Norman Fairclough offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between language, power, and ideology. By focusing on three dimensions of analysis text, discursive practices, and social practice. Research has highlighted the unique role of song lyrics in conveying social, cultural, and personal narratives. Susanti (2016) explored how song lyrics exhibit critical aspects through their structure, scheme, and delivery, emphasizing that lyrics often reflect the songwriter's intentions and deeper societal meanings. Similarly, Belete and Mengistie (2019) examined the representation of national identity and patriotism in Ethiopian songs, demonstrating how lyrics can act as powerful tools for uniting and inspiring audiences. Furthermore, Farisya and Dewanty (2023) analyzed the feminist dimensions of idol representation in Japanese music, revealing how lyrics can also perpetuate stereotypes and societal expectations. These studies underscore the richness of song lyrics as a subject of critical discourse analysis, as they encapsulate complex themes of identity, emotion, and ideology. This research aims to explore how the lyrics of "What Was I Made For?" not only convey meaning directly but also reflect and shape the social reality surrounding them. Through this research, it is hoped that insights will emerge regarding how Billie Eilish uses language to communicate with her audience and how the lyrics can serve as a mirror for the collective experiences of society.

## 2. Methods

This study analyzes Billie Eilish's song *What Was I Made For?* as the primary data source using a descriptive qualitative methodology. The research framework is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically utilizing Fairclough's model, which examines the interrelation between text, discourse practice, and socio-cultural practice. The data collection process involved obtaining the song lyrics from reliable online sources. The song was chosen after a pre-research analysis revealed significant self-identity themes, particularly addressing mental health stereotypes. In addition to the lyrics, literature reviews were conducted by consulting academic journals, websites, and other relevant references to provide theoretical and contextual support for the analysis.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Analysis of the song lyrics

The song's vocabulary, which reflects themes of uncertainty, self-doubt, and existential pondering, is intensely emotional and contemplative. Words like "float," "fall down," "ideal," "real," and "paid for" highlight the speaker's own quest for meaning and purpose by drawing a contrast between abstract optimism and a grounded, frequently unpleasant reality.

*I used to float, now I just fall down*

Describes a sharp contrast between two emotional states, float represents a sense of freedom, lightness, or stability in the past, and fall down, which represents a sense of loss, struggle, or failure in the present. A sense of ease and positivity, perhaps associated with emotions of joy, purpose, or self-assurance, is implied by the word "float." On the other hand, falling down signifies a loss of control, a decline into uncertainty or hopelessness, and the weight of emotional burdens. The singer's emotional decline is conveyed by this change from floating to falling, which shows a path from self-assurance or contentment to vulnerability and alienation. The contrast between these situations highlights how brittle identity is and how difficulties in life affect one's sense of self.

The frequent use of the personal pronoun "I" throughout the song, as seen in lines like *"I used to float"*, *"I just fall down"*, and *"I don't know how to feel"*, firmly centers the narrative on the speaker's personal experience and self-reflection. This choice creates an intimate, confessional tone, aligning with the themes of self-identity and vulnerability. The repeated "I" allows listeners to connect with the deeply personal nature of the speaker's struggles. The alternation between past and present tense further emphasizes the contrast between the speaker's former self and their current state. Lines like *"I used to float, now I just fall down"* and *"I used to know, but I'm not sure now"* reflect a shift from confidence and purpose in the past to confusion and uncertainty in the present. This tense shift effectively highlights the speaker's emotional transition and loss of stability. Additionally, the song employs short sentences and rhetorical questions to mimic a stream-of-consciousness style. For instance, questions like *"What was I made for?"* recur throughout the song, reflecting the speaker's existential inquiry. The fragmented structure of lines such as *"Think I forgot how to be happy. Something I'm not. But something I can be."* adds to the raw vulnerability of the lyrics, mirroring the disjointed and searching nature of the speaker's thoughts. Repetition is a central device, with phrases like *"I don't know how to feel"* and *"What was I made for?"* recurring throughout the song. This repetition emphasizes the speaker's ongoing uncertainty and search for meaning, mirroring the cyclical nature of self-doubt and introspection. Each recurrence deepens the emotional impact, as it reflects the persistence of these existential questions and the speaker's struggle to resolve them.

Contrasts are another key stylistic feature, evident in the juxtaposition of positive and negative imagery. Lines like *"I was an ideal, looked so alive"* present hopeful and optimistic concepts, while phrases such as *"Turns out I'm not real"* and *"Think I forgot how to be happy"* introduce harsh, negative realities. This tension between the speaker's desires and their perceived reality highlights their inner conflict, underscoring the disparity between who they want to be and how they feel.

The song's tone is melancholic and reflective, shaped by its subdued and vulnerable language. Phrases like *"I'm sad again, don't tell my boyfriend"* and *"Think I forgot how to be happy"* convey a quiet, raw honesty that resonates with listeners. This tone aligns seamlessly with the song's exploration of emotional and mental health struggles, making it a poignant reflection on identity and the challenges of navigating complex emotions.

### 3.2. Discourse practice

The song reflects Billie Eilish's characteristic approach to songwriting, which often involves introspection, vulnerability, and a focus on self-identity. Eilish co-wrote the song with her brother, Finneas O'Connell, a frequent collaborator, highlighting their shared creative process. The text was likely influenced by their personal experiences and emotions, as well as external expectations tied to its role in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* movie. This production context shapes the song's dual narrative: an exploration of personal identity and a broader reflection of societal pressures, aligning with the themes of the film. The simplicity of the lyrics allows

accessibility, while the layered emotional depth invites interpretation, demonstrating a purposeful balance between artistic expression and audience relatability. The song was released as part of the *Barbie* movie soundtrack and distributed widely through streaming platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and iTunes. Its integration into a major cinematic release ensures that it reaches a global audience. The connection with a culturally significant film amplifies its reach, situating the song within a broader societal discourse on self-worth, gender roles, and identity. Music videos, live performances, and interviews further expand the distribution channels, allowing audiences to engage with the text visually and emotionally. The song's minimalist music video, featuring Eilish herself, adds to its reflective tone, reinforcing the themes of simplicity and vulnerability. The consumption of the song occurs on multiple levels. On a personal level, listeners resonate with its themes of self-doubt and existential questioning, as these are universal emotions, particularly for younger audiences. Lines like "*I don't know how to feel*" and "*What was I made for?*" echo common struggles with identity and purpose, making the song relatable to individuals navigating similar experiences. On a societal level, the song invites discourse around mental health and self-identity, especially in the context of modern pressures and expectations. It engages audiences not just as a piece of entertainment but also as a reflective tool, encouraging listeners to explore their emotional and psychological states. The alignment with the *Barbie* movie further situates the song in a cultural conversation about gender roles and self-worth, giving it a broader socio-cultural resonance.

### 3.3. Socio cultural practice

Billie Eilish's music has long been associated with themes of mental health, self-reflection, and societal expectations, and *What Was I Made For?* continues this tradition. The song speaks directly to issues of self-identity, existential questioning, and personal struggles, making it highly relevant to contemporary conversations around mental health, especially among young people.

Lines like "*I used to float / Now I just fall down*" and "*I was an ideal / Looked so alive / Turns out I'm not real*" address the contrast between youthful aspirations and the harsh reality of adult life, resonating with social discourses about the pressures of perfection and success. These lyrics speak to the expectations placed on individuals, particularly public figures, to embody ideals of beauty, happiness, and achievement, only to reveal the emptiness or disillusionment that may accompany these expectations. The song's portrayal of a personal journey from "floating" to "falling down" reflects a deeper social commentary on the fragility of mental well-being and the false sense of control often projected in popular culture.

Furthermore, the repetition of the question "*What was I made for?*" ties into broader socio-cultural discussions around existential purpose, often exacerbated by societal norms that promote individual success as the ultimate goal. In today's social media-driven world, where personal identity is frequently shaped by external validation and the pursuit of perfection, this questioning of one's worth challenges those norms and highlights the internal conflicts many face. The song thus taps into a cultural zeitgeist that questions identity, self-worth, and the pressures to meet external expectations.

The song's socio-cultural significance is also linked to the feminist discourse in popular culture. While *What Was I Made For?* does not overtly address gender, it was released as part of the *Barbie* movie soundtrack, a film that prominently engages with questions about societal roles for women. By being part of this cultural project, the song intersects with conversations about gender roles, expectations, and identity. The line "*Don't tell my boyfriend / It's not what he's made for*" hints at the complex dynamics of gendered expectations within relationships, where individuals may feel constrained by predefined roles of what is expected of them.

The line also speaks to the broader socio-cultural issue of emotional labor, particularly the idea that women are often expected to maintain emotional stability for others (such as their partners). This expectation aligns with cultural narratives that women must be caregivers, strong, and emotionally supportive, even when they themselves are struggling. Another key socio-cultural theme in the song is mental health, an increasingly important issue in contemporary society. Lines like "*Think I forgot / How to be happy / Something I'm not / But something I can be*" reveal the struggles with mental health, such as depression, apathy, and self-doubt. The song addresses these feelings in a way that is raw and relatable, offering a portrayal of the isolation and confusion that often accompanies mental health issues. In a society that is increasingly aware of mental health challenges, *What Was I Made For?* participates in the ongoing dialogue around mental illness, making these struggles more visible and normalizing conversations around them. This is particularly significant for younger generations, who may find solace in the fact that even someone as famous as Billie Eilish openly expresses these feelings of confusion and self-doubt.

## 4. Conclusion

Billie Eilish's song *What Was I Made For?* serves as a powerful reflection on themes of self-identity, mental health, and societal expectations, making it highly relevant to contemporary social and cultural discussions. Through its introspective lyrics and emotionally evocative language, the song articulates the struggles of existential questioning and self-doubt. By utilizing repetition, contrasting imagery, and a confessional tone, Eilish encapsulates the cyclical nature of personal introspection and the emotional challenges of modern life, particularly among young people. From a socio-cultural perspective, the song speaks to the pressures of perfectionism and the pursuit of external validation, reflecting the societal expectations placed on individuals,

particularly public figures, to embody ideals of success and happiness. Furthermore, it engages with feminist discourses and critiques gendered norms, highlighting the emotional labor women are often expected to bear in relationships. The song also contributes to the growing cultural conversation around mental health, normalizing the struggle with feelings of confusion, depression, and self-doubt.

Overall, *What Was I Made For?* not only captures the personal struggles of the artist but also resonates with broader cultural issues, making it a compelling piece for critical discourse analysis. The song's exploration of identity, emotional vulnerability, and mental health challenges provides insight into the complex socio-cultural landscape in which it was created, offering a poignant commentary on the pressures and expectations that shape contemporary life.

## References

- [1] Aprilia, F., Lustyantje, N., & Rafli, Z. (2020). The effect of reading interest and achievement motivation on students' discourse analysis competence. *Journal of Education and eLearning Research*, 7(4): 368-372.
- [2] Belete, E., & Mengistie, D. (2019). 'Ethiopia' in selected lyrics of Tilahun Gessesse and Tewodros Kassahun songs: A critical discourse analysis. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(21). <https://www.iiste.org>
- [3] Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- [4] Fairclough, N. (1995a). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- [5] Ghaida, F., & Dewanty, V. L. (2023). A critical discourse analysis on the representation of female idols in the "Idol" song lyric by Yoasobi from the feminism point of view. *JAPANEDU: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pengajaran Bahasa Jepang*, 8(2), 135–148.
- [6] Huaman, J & Idemaru, K. (2018). Japanese Gendered Language, idols, and the Ideal Female Romantic Partner. (Thesis).
- [7] Slembrouck, S. (2009). What is meant by discourse analysis. Ghent University.
- [8] Susanti, M. P. (2016). A critical discourse analysis of the songs' lyric in *Gypsy Heart* album by Colbie Caillat. *Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 3(1), 1–10.
- [9] Walser, R. (1995). *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Wesleyan University Press.