

Communicating Gender Norms: A Discourse Analysis of "Not Your Barbie Girl" and "Barbie Girl"

Desy Eva Laila Rokhmah¹, Martha Betaubun², Yuni Ratna Purwaningsih³

^{1,2} Teacher Profession Education Program, Universitas Musamus, Merauke, Indonesia

³ Department of English of Literature, Universitas Musamus, Merauke, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received October 4, 2024
Revised October 15, 2024
Accepted October 21, 2024

Kata Kunci:

Analisis Wacana,
Teori Feminis,
Representasi Gender,
Musik Populer,
Pemberdayaan,

Keywords:

Discourse Analysis,
Feminist Theory,
Gender Representation,
Popular Music,
Empowerment,

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis wacana untuk mengkaji representasi perempuan dalam dua lagu ikonik: "Barbie Girl" (1997) oleh Aqua dan "Not Your Barbie Girl" (2018) oleh Ava Max. Melalui pemeriksaan bahasa dan strategi diskursif yang digunakan dalam lagu-lagu ini, penelitian ini mengungkap bagaimana keduanya membangun dan menyampaikan identitas sosial, peran, dan ideologi yang berbeda. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi perubahan signifikan dalam representasi perempuan seiring waktu, mencerminkan perubahan sosial yang lebih luas dan evolusi wacana feminis. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang bagaimana musik populer membentuk dan mencerminkan sikap masyarakat terhadap perempuan, serta mendorong representasi yang lebih inklusif dan memberdayakan di media.

ABSTRACT

This study uses discourse analysis to explore the portrayal of women in two iconic songs: Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" (2018) and Aqua's "Barbie Girl" (1997). The research highlights how they construct and convey particular social identities, roles, and ideologies by examining the language and discursive strategies used in these songs. The analysis reveals significant shifts in the representation of women over time, reflecting broader societal changes and evolving feminist discourses. This paper contributes to understanding how popular music shapes and reflects societal attitudes towards women, advocating for more inclusive and empowering representation in the media.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license



Corresponding Author:

Desy Eva Laila Rokhmah
Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Musamus
Papua Selatan, Indonesia
Email: desyeva_pbi@unmus.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in popular culture has been a subject of research and debate among feminist scholars. Popular music, in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting societal norms and attitudes towards gender. The lyrics and themes of songs often mirror the cultural narratives about femininity, beauty, and women's societal roles. As such, they serve as an essential site for feminist critique and analysis. This study aims to explore the

representation of women in two iconic songs, Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" [1] and Aqua's "Barbie Girl" [2], through the lens of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on how language constructs social identities, roles, and ideologies. It is concerned with the ways in which language reflects and reinforces societal norms and power structures. By analyzing the language used in the lyrics of these two songs, we can gain insights into how they construct and convey particular views on gender roles and identities [3], [4]. Popular music, as a highly accessible and influential medium, has the power to challenge or reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, examining the lyrics and themes of popular songs can provide valuable insights into how gender norms are constructed and perpetuated in contemporary culture [5], [6]

The urgency of this study is underscored by the ongoing discourse about gender equality and the representation of women in media. Despite significant strides in gender equality, women continue to face pervasive stereotypes and expectations that limit their opportunities and self-expression. Popular music, as a highly accessible and influential medium, has the power to challenge or reinforce these stereotypes. Therefore, examining the lyrics and themes of popular songs can provide valuable insights into how gender norms are constructed and perpetuated in contemporary culture [5], [6],

Choosing "Not Your Barbie Girl" and "Barbie Girl" as the objects of study is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, both songs explicitly reference the iconic Barbie doll, a symbol that has long been associated with idealized femininity and consumer culture. Barbie's image and the associated expectations have been critiqued by feminists for promoting unrealistic beauty standards and limiting women's roles to passive objects of male desire [7], [8]. By analyzing songs that invoke this symbol, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these themes are represented and contested in popular music.

Second, the two songs offer an obvious contrast in their portrayal of women and femininity. "Barbie Girl," released in 1997, reflects a playful yet problematic depiction of women as plastic and perfect, reinforcing the notion that a woman's value lies in her appearance. On the other hand, "Not Your Barbie Girl," released two decades later, presents a more empowering narrative that rejects these stereotypes and emphasizes women's autonomy and strength. This contrast allows for a comparative analysis that highlights shifts in the representation of women over time and the influence of evolving feminist discourses [9]

Previous research on gender representation in popular music has primarily focused on the visual aspects, such as music videos, and less on lyrical content. For instance, Railton and Watson (2011) examined the representation of gender in music videos, highlighting how visual narratives reinforce traditional gender roles. Similarly, Gill and Orgad [5] explored the portrayal of femininity in media and its impact on women's self-perception and societal expectations. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the influential role of lyrics in shaping and reflecting cultural attitudes toward gender [10].

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the lyrical content of "Not Your Barbie Girl" and "Barbie Girl." Lyrics are a powerful form of storytelling that can convey complex messages and influence listeners' perceptions and attitudes. By analyzing the lyrics of these two songs through the lens of discourse analysis, this study adds to the body of research on gender representation in music and highlights the importance of examining language use in understanding cultural narratives.

In addition to the discourse analysis, this study explores the potential application of these songs in English Language Teaching (ELT). Integrating popular music into language teaching can enhance student engagement, provide cultural insights, and offer practical language use examples. Songs like "Not Your Barbie Girl" and "Barbie Girl" resonate with students due to their popularity and relevance, creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment that enhances language acquisition [11]. Research has shown that using music in the classroom can support vocabulary acquisition, listening skills, and cultural awareness, making it a valuable tool in ELT [12], [13]. This dual focus on discourse analysis and ELT application aims to comprehensively understand how popular music can influence cultural attitudes and educational practices.

2. METHOD

The analysis employs a qualitative approach, utilizing discourse analysis as a framework to dissect the lyrics and themes of both songs. Discourse analysis focuses on how language is used to construct social identities, roles, and ideologies [3], [4]. The study draws on feminist theories, including second-wave feminism's critique of objectification[9], and third-wave feminism's emphasis on individuality and self-expression [14]. The analysis is conducted by examining the lyrics line by line to identify themes such as empowerment, objectification, individuality, and self-expression[15].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lyric Analysis

The results of the analysis is presented in the following table, which, compares key aspects of the lyrics of “ Not Your Barbie Girl” and “ Barbie Girl”

Table 1. Lyrics Analysis

Aspect	“Not Your Barbie Girl” by Ava MAX	“Barbie Girl” by Aqua
Representation of Women	Empowering and Independent	Objectified and hypersexualized
Lyrics	“Not your Barbie Girl/ I’m Livin’ in my own world/ I ain’t plastic, call me classic”	I’am a barbie girl, in a Barbie World/ Life in plastic, it’s fantastics/ You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere”
Gender Role	Rejects traditional gender roles and expectations	Reinforces traditional gender roles and expectation
Message	Women shpould be valued for more than their looks and should not be treated as objects	Women should conform to societal expectation of beauty and behaviour
Autonomy	“You can’t touch me there, you can’t touch my body	“make me walk, make me talk, do whatever you please/ I can act like a star, I can beg on my knees”
Self - Reliaance	“I can take myself on a dinner date / Buy myself diamonds and a champagne”	"You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere"
Individuality	“ I’m not your Barbie girl, I’m livin’ in my own world	"I'm a blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world"
Consent	"You can't touch me there, you can't touch my body / Unless I say so"	"You can touch, you can play / If you say, I'm always yours"
Materialism	"Buy myself diamonds and a champagne"	"Life in plastic, it's fantastic"
Agency	"I'm my own boss, I'm remindin' you of it"	"You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere"

Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" is an empowering anthem that challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The lyrics emphasize independence and self-worth beyond physical appearance. Lines such as "Not your Barbie girl / I'm livin' in my own world / I ain't plastic, call me classic"[1] explicitly reject the notion of women as passive objects meant to please men. This aligns with third-wave feminism's focus on diversity and individuality, encouraging women to embrace their unique identities [14]. The song's emphasis on autonomy and self-reliance is further highlighted in lines such as "I can take myself on a dinner date / Buy myself diamonds and a champagne / Order five courses then chocolate cake" [1]. These lyrics challenge the traditional narrative that women need men to provide for them or validate their worth. Instead, it promotes the idea that women are capable of achieving their own happiness and success, embodying the feminist principle that women should have control over their own lives and choices [16].

Moreover, the repeated refrain "You can't touch me there, you can't touch my body / Unless I say so, ain't your Barbie no" [1] serves as a powerful assertion of bodily autonomy and consent. This is a direct challenge to the objectification of women and the notion that their bodies exist for male pleasure. By emphasizing the importance of consent, the song aligns with contemporary feminist movements that advocate for women's rights to control their own bodies and reject unwanted advances. The song also addresses broader societal expectations placed on women. By asserting her autonomy and rejecting the "Barbie" image, Ava Max highlights the importance of self-acceptance and confidence in one's identity. This message is particularly relevant in social media and popular culture, where women are often subjected to unrealistic beauty standards and pressure to conform [5]. The empowering lyrics of "Not Your Barbie Girl" provide a counter-narrative that encourages women to embrace their individuality and resist societal pressures.

In stark contrast, Aqua's "Barbie Girl" perpetuates the objectification of women. The song's playful tone masks a deeper reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, portraying women as plastic, perfect, and primarily concerned with appearance. Lyrics such as "I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world / Life in plastic, it's fantastic / You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere"[2] suggest that women's value lies in their ability to conform to societal beauty standards. The song further reinforces traditional gender roles by depicting the female character as submissive and eager to please, as seen in lines like "Make me walk, make me talk, do whatever you please / I can act like a star, I can beg on my knees" [2]. This portrayal can be detrimental, especially for young girls, as it encourages them to prioritize appearance over personal growth and self-expression.

Additionally, the repeated refrain "Come on, Barbie, let's go party" [2] emphasizes the idea that women's lives should revolve around male pleasure and social acceptance based on appearance. The song's portrayal of women as disposable and interchangeable further reinforces these harmful stereotypes. The song's impact on societal attitudes towards women is significant, as it has been widely popular and frequently played since its release. While its catchy tune and playful lyrics have made it a cultural phenomenon, the underlying message of objectification and reinforcement of gender stereotypes raises important questions about the influence of popular music on gender norms [7]. The song's portrayal of women as plastic and perfect can contribute to unrealistic beauty standards and body image issues, particularly among young girls[17]

3.2. Theme Analysis

3.2.1. Empowerment vs. Objectification

Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" promotes empowerment by encouraging women to define themselves on their own terms. The song's rejection of the "Barbie" image represents a broader rejection of societal expectations that limit women's potential. This empowerment is evident in lines like "I'm my own boss, I'm remindin' you of it / Somethin' that you just can't get"[1]. The song empowers women to seek self-validation and independence, reinforcing that their worth is not determined by their appearance or ability to conform to traditional gender roles.

The theme of empowerment is underscored by the lyrics "I can take myself on a dinner date / Buy myself diamonds and a champagne"[1]. These lines emphasize the protagonist's financial and emotional independence, a stark contrast to the passive and dependent portrayals of women often seen in earlier media representations. This aligns with contemporary feminist discourses that advocate for women's autonomy and the right to self-determination [16]. The lyrics serve as an anthem of self-sufficiency and defiance against societal pressures to conform to specific gender roles.

Conversely, "Barbie Girl" reinforces objectification, suggesting that a woman's worth is tied to her appearance and her ability to please men. The repeated refrain "I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world / Life in plastic, it's fantastic" emphasizes a hyper-feminized and commodified image of women, reflecting second-wave feminist critiques of media that objectify women's bodies and reduce them to decorative objects [9]. By presenting women as plastic, perfect, and passive, the song perpetuates harmful stereotypes that limit women's roles and undermine their agency [7].

The objectification is further highlighted in lines like "Make me walk, make me talk, do whatever you please" [2], which depict the female character as submissive and eager to fulfill male desires. This portrayal reinforces traditional gender roles where women are expected to be compliant and subservient, aligning with patriarchal norms that prioritize male control and pleasure. The song's impact on societal attitudes is significant, as it popularizes an image of femininity that is shallow, materialistic, and ultimately disempowering [5].

3.2.2. Individuality and Self-Expression

"Not Your Barbie Girl" celebrates individuality and personal choice, which are central tenets of third-wave feminism. The song's message is clear: women should embrace their true selves and not conform to restrictive societal norms. This is encapsulated in the lyrics "I'm not your Barbie girl, I'm livin' in my own world / I ain't plastic, call me classic" [1]. This statement encapsulates a defiance against conformist beauty standards, urging women to define their identities outside societal constraints. The emphasis on self-definition, autonomy, and resisting objectification speaks to a broader cultural shift toward celebrating diversity and individuality in women's self-expression [14], [15].

In contrast, "Barbie Girl" promotes a hyper-feminized, standardized image of femininity that is largely performative. The lyrics "I'm a blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world" suggest an adherence to superficial beauty and a lack of depth in women's portrayal, reinforcing damaging stereotypes. This perpetuation of a one-dimensional female character undermines individuality,

encouraging conformity to patriarchal ideals that position women as commodities [5]. Aqua's portrayal is emblematic of how popular media historically trivializes and flattens female identities, portraying them as mere adornments in a male-centered world [5].

Moreover, the line "You can touch, you can play / If you say, 'I'm always yours'" from Aqua's song starkly contrasts with the autonomy portrayed in Max's lyrics. By commodifying and submitting the female body to male desires, Aqua's lyrics perpetuate consent issues and problematic gender dynamics, aligning with second-wave feminist criticisms of media objectification [9]. This portrayal reinforces societal pressures that women's bodies are available for consumption, reflecting persistent power imbalances between genders[8].

3.2.3. Societal Impact and Reception

Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" has been praised for its empowering message and its challenge to gender stereotypes. Critics and listeners have lauded the song for promoting a positive self-image and encouraging women to reject societal pressures to conform. This reception aligns with the third-wave feminist movement's emphasis on individual empowerment and resistance to patriarchal norms [14]. The song's message of self-reliance and independence resonates with many listeners who see it as a call to embrace their true selves and reject societal expectations. The emphasis on autonomy and consent in lines like "You can't touch me there, you can't touch my body / Unless I say so, ain't your Barbie no" [1] has been particularly impactful in the context of contemporary feminist movements that advocate for women's rights to control their own bodies. Moreover, the song's celebration of individuality and personal choice reflects the principles of third-wave feminism, which emphasizes the importance of diversity and personal empowerment in the feminist movement. By promoting a positive and empowering vision of womanhood, "Not Your Barbie Girl" contributes to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and challenges traditional gender norms.

In contrast, Aqua's "Barbie Girl" has faced significant criticism for its portrayal of women. Feminist scholars have argued that the song perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the objectification of women in media. Despite its catchy tune and playful lyrics, the song's underlying message reinforces the notion that women's worth is tied to their physical appearance and ability to please men[9]. The song's popularity and widespread play have sparked debates about the impact of such representations on young girls and the broader societal implications. While some listeners may view the song as a playful and humorous take on the Barbie doll, others argue that it reinforces harmful stereotypes and undermines efforts to promote gender equality[7]. The song's portrayal of women as passive and compliant, coupled with the emphasis on appearance and male pleasure, raises important questions about the influence of popular music on societal attitudes towards gender. By presenting women as objects to be controlled and molded by men, "Barbie Girl" perpetuates outdated and damaging stereotypes that limit women's potential and reinforce gender inequality[17]

The contrasting receptions of these songs underscore the evolving nature of societal attitudes towards gender and the media's role in shaping these perceptions. As cultural narratives continue to shift, it is essential to critically examine how popular music reflects and influences public attitudes towards gender. Songs like "Not Your Barbie Girl" represent a growing demand for media that empowers and uplifts women, challenging traditional narratives that have long marginalized female voices[15].

3.2.4. Implications for Future Research and Limitation

This study highlights the need for continued examination of gender representation in popular music. Future research could expand on this analysis by exploring other genres and time periods, examining how different musical styles and cultural contexts influence the portrayal of women. Additionally, incorporating audience reception studies could provide insights into how listeners interpret and respond to these representations, further illuminating the impact of music on societal attitudes towards gender [8]. Another area for future research is the impact of music videos and visual elements accompanying these songs. While this study focused on lyrical content, visual representations can also play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards gender. Examining the interplay between lyrics and visuals could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender norms are constructed and perpetuated in popular music[6].

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the lyrics of "Not Your Barbie Girl" and "Barbie Girl," it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The analysis is based solely on the lyrical content, without considering other elements such as music videos, artist interviews, or live performances that could provide additional context. Future research could adopt a more holistic approach, incorporating these elements to offer a more nuanced understanding of gender representation in popular music [4]. Furthermore, the study is limited by its focus on two specific songs. While these songs provide valuable insights into the representation of women in popular music, they are not representative of the entire genre. Expanding the analysis to include a broader range of songs and artists would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender norms are constructed and contested in popular culture [5].

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Ava Max's "Not Your Barbie Girl" and Aqua's "Barbie Girl" through the lens of discourse analysis reveals significant differences in their portrayal of women. While "Not Your Barbie Girl" promotes empowerment, self-expression, and individuality, "Barbie Girl" reinforces harmful stereotypes and objectification. This comparison underscores the importance of critically examining popular culture and its impact on gender norms and societal attitudes. By challenging traditional gender roles and promoting positive representations of women, popular music has the potential to contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality. The evolution of feminist thought and the broader cultural context in which these songs were released highlight the dynamic nature of gender representation in media. As feminist movements continue to advocate for greater equality and representation, it is crucial to critically engage with popular culture and challenge the narratives that reinforce harmful stereotypes. Through such engagement, we can promote a more inclusive and empowering vision of womanhood that celebrates diversity, autonomy, and self-expression.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Max, *Not Your Barbie Girl*. 2018.
- [2] Aqua, *Barbie Girl*. 1997.
- [3] J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis Discourse: Theory and Method*, Third.

- New York, NY: Routledge - Taylor and Francis, 2011.
- [4] N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*,. New York: Routledge - Taylor and Francis, 2003.
- [5] R. Gill and S. Orgad, "The shifting terrain of sex and power: From the 'sexualization of culture' to #MeToo," *Sexualities*, vol. 21, no. 8, pp. 1313–1324, 2018, doi: 10.1177/1363460718794647.
- [6] D. Railton and P. Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*,. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- [7] M. F. Rogers, *Barbie culture*. London: Thousand Oaks, 1999.
- [8] S. L. Smith, M. Choueiti, K. Pieper, A. Case, and A. Choi, "Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ," 2019.
- [9] B. Hooks, *FEMINIST THEORY from margin to center*. Boston, USA: South End Press, 1984.
- [10] R. Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1990.
- [11] T. Murphey, "The Discourse of Pop Songs," *TESOL Q.*, vol. 26, no. 4, p. 770, 1992, doi: 10.2307/3586887.
- [12] M. R. Jalongo and D. M. D. Ribblett, "Using Song Picture Books to Support Emergent Literacy," *Child. Educ.*, vol. 74, no. 1, pp. 15–22, 1997, doi: 10.1080/00094056.1997.10521908.
- [13] A. Kuśnierek, "The role of music and songs in teaching English vocabulary to students," *World Sci. News*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 1–55, 2016.
- [14] S. Gillis, G. Howie, and R. Munford, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Second. New York, NY: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2007.
- [15] L. Burns, M. Lafrance, and L. Hawley, "Embodied Subjectivities in the Lyrical and Musical Expression of PJ Harvey and Björk," *Music Theory Online*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 1–20, 2008, doi: 10.30535/mto.14.4.1.
- [16] A. McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*. Polity Press, 2020.
- [17] M. Tiggemann and A. Slater, "NetGirls: The internet, facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls," *Int. J. Eat. Disord.*, vol. 46, no. 6, pp. 630–633, 2013, doi: 10.1002/eat.22141.