

Decoding the 'Bad Guy': Implementing the V.O.I.C.E. Framework in Analyzing Contemporary English Song Lyrics

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Abstrak – Evolusi musik populer kontemporer telah mengubah lagu menjadi teks multimodal kompleks yang seringkali menghadirkan tantangan bagi analisis linguistik dan sastra tradisional. Studi ini memperkenalkan kerangka kerja V.O.I.C.E— yang berperan sebagai alat analitis sederhana—untuk menguraikan interpretasi mendalam lagu Billie Eilish 'Bad Guy'. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang berlandaskan Analisis Wacana Multimodal (MDA), penelitian ini mengkaji lagu tersebut melalui lima pilar yang saling terintegrasi: Performa vokal, Orisinalitas produksi, Konstruksi identitas, Sirkulasi budaya, dan Resonansi emosional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa 'Bad Guy' mencapai dampak subversifnya dengan mendekonstruksi kiasan pop tradisional melalui vokal berbisik seperti ASMR, estetika produksi 'kamar tidur' minimalis, dan konstruksi persona 'anti-hero' yang menantang peran gender konvensional. Lebih lanjut, studi ini menunjukkan bahwa strategi V.O.I.C.E secara efektif menjembatani kesenjangan antara teori semiotik kompleks dan interpretasi praktis, memberikan peta jalan yang terstruktur namun fleksibel bagi para peneliti dan pendidik. Jadi, penelitian ini menyoroti pergeseran menuju 'Keaslian Baru' dalam wacana bahasa Inggris, di mana tekstur bunyi dan sirkulasi budaya digital sama pentingnya dengan konten tekstual dalam membentuk identitas kontemporer dan resonansi global.

Kata Kunci: Strategi V.O.I.C.E, Billie Eilish, Wacana Multimodal, Konstruksi Identitas, Analisis Lagu

Abstract - The rapid evolution of contemporary popular music has transformed songs into complex multimodal texts that often pose challenges for traditional linguistic and literary analysis. This study introduces the V.O.I.C.E framework—a simplified, analytical tool—to decode the multi-layered meanings of Billie Eilish's global hit, 'Bad Guy'. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the research examines the song through five interconnected pillars: Vocal performance, production Originality, Identity construction, Cultural circulation, and Emotional resonance. The findings reveal that 'Bad Guy' achieves its subversive impact by deconstructing traditional pop tropes through ASMR-like whispered vocals, minimalist 'bedroom' production aesthetics, and the construction of an 'anti-hero' persona that challenges conventional gender roles. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the V.O.I.C.E strategy effectively bridges the gap between complex semiotic theories and practical interpretation, providing a structured yet flexible roadmap for researchers and educators. Ultimately, this research highlights a shift toward 'New Authenticity' in English discourse, where sonic textures and digital cultural circulation are as significant as textual content in shaping contemporary identity and global resonance.

Keywords: V.O.I.C.E Strategy, Billie Eilish, Multimodal Discourse, Identity Construction, Song Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of contemporary English studies has undergone a significant transformation, moving beyond traditional literary canons to embrace multimodal texts, such as popular music. In this current digital era, songs are no longer perceived merely as auditory entertainment but as complex cultural artifacts that carry profound linguistic and social meanings (Fisher, 2021). Famous singer Billie Eilish (Wales & Sanger, 2026), for instance, utilizes a unique blend of provocative lyrical themes and unconventional sonic textures that resonate deeply with global audiences. Consequently, the ability to decode these layers of meaning has become an essential skill for students and researchers in the field of English literature and linguistics. This allows for a deeper understanding of how English is used to negotiate identity and cultural trends in a modern context.



Despite the importance of song analysis, the process often presents a daunting challenge for learners and novice researchers due to its multi-interpretative nature. Traditional analytical frameworks frequently lean toward two extremes: either they are overly focused on textual linguistics—ignoring the crucial sonic and cultural dimensions—or they are burdened by complex semiotic theories that are difficult to apply in practice (Rehfeldt *et al.*, 2021). This complexity often leads to an overly complex analytical processes that discourage students from exploring the rich discourse of popular music. There is, therefore, a pressing need for a more streamlined, strategic, and holistic framework that can bridge the gap between deep theoretical insight and practical ease of use (Sandberg-Jurström *et al.*, 2021).

The extant literature on the analysis of popular music has predominantly focused on textual and stylistic devices, often treating lyrics as isolated literary works. While these studies offer valuable insights into metaphorical language, they frequently overlook the multimodal nature of contemporary pop discourse. Specifically, previous research often fails to integrate sonic textures, such as vocal delivery and production aesthetics, with the broader cultural significance of a song (Moniz, 2022). This fragmented approach leaves a significant gap in understanding how modern tracks—which rely heavily on non-verbal cues—communicate complex identities to a global audience. Consequently, there is a pressing need for an analytical tool that can bridge the divide between traditional linguistic study and the multifaceted reality of digital-era music production.

By applying the existing methodologies in song analysis, such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2023) or traditional semiotics, one has undeniably provided valuable insights into the power structures and signs within lyrics. However, these approaches often require an extensive background in linguistic philosophy, which can be overwhelming for those seeking a more direct, integrative interpretation. Furthermore, many current studies still treat the song's auditory performance and cultural circulation as secondary elements rather than as primary sources of meaning. This fragmented approach fails to capture the ‘*vibe*’ and the emotional impact that define contemporary hits. Thus, a more accessible pedagogical and analytical tool is required—one that synchronizes the various dimensions of a song into a single, cohesive, and intuitive system (Tang *et al.*, 2025).

To address the above-mentioned issues, this study proposes the *V.O.I.C.E* framework as a strategic approach to song interpretation. Hence, V.O.I.C.E. is an acronym representing five critical analytical lenses: V is for Vocal performance, O is for Originality in production, I is for *Identity construction*, C is for *Cultural circulation*, and E is for *Emotional resonance*. Unlike more rigid academic models, this framework offers a flexible yet structured roadmap that guides the researcher through the layers of a song—from the way a lyric is whispered to its global impact on digital platforms (G’aniyeva & Shamsiddinova, 2025). By implementing this strategy, the complex task of decoding multi-interpretative texts becomes more manageable and systematically organized, making it an ideal tool for both academic inquiry and classroom instruction in English studies.

This study specifically applies the *V.O.I.C.E* framework to analyze Billie Eilish’s ‘*Bad Guy*,’ a song that exemplifies the complexity of modern pop discourse. By focusing on this particular track, the research aims to demonstrate how the framework can effectively decode the intricate layers of a global hit that defies conventional genre boundaries. Through a qualitative examination of Eilish’s vocal delivery, the song’s minimalist production, and its socio-cultural impact, this paper illustrates the practical utility of the *V.O.I.C.E* strategy. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to provide researchers and educators with a robust yet accessible model for interpreting contemporary English lyrics, ensuring that the depth of the message is preserved without the burden of unnecessary analytical complexity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To ensure a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the multi-interpretative nature of contemporary songs, a rigorous methodological framework is essential. This research is designed to move beyond traditional, one-dimensional lyric analysis by integrating various semiotic modes that contribute to the overall meaning of a musical work. By aligning the study with qualitative principles (Naeem *et al.*, 2023), the researcher seeks to capture the nuances of human expression and cultural phenomena found in the chosen object. The following sections detail the systematic steps—from selecting the qualitative approach to implementing the V.O.I.C.E. strategy—to provide a transparent and replicable analytical process.

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method to provide an in-depth interpretation of the meanings embedded in popular music. As noted by Lim (2024), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. In this context, the study focuses on the problem of multi-interpretability in contemporary song lyrics. To handle the complexity of the data, a Multimodal

Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach is utilized (Forte, 2023), acknowledging that meaning is constructed through various semiotic modes, including linguistic, vocal, and auditory elements.

2. Data and Data Source

The primary data for this research consists of the lyrics, vocal performance, and musical composition of the song 'Bad Guy' by Billie Eilish, released in 2019. The audio-visual material from the official music video and live performances is also consulted to provide context. Secondary data are gathered through library research; including academic journals, music reviews, and official interviews that discuss the song's production and cultural impact.

3. Research Instrument

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. To ensure the analysis remains systematic and straightforward, the researcher uses the V.O.I.C.E. framework as an analytical tool. This heuristic framework categorizes data into five distinct lenses:

- a. *V* (Vocal Performance): Analyzing tone, pitch, and delivery.
- b. *O* (production Originality): Examining the background of the song's creation.
- c. *I* (Identity Construction): Identifying the persona and social identity projected.
- d. *C* (Cultural Circulation): Observing the song's reception and digital presence.
- e. *E* (Emotional Resonance): Evaluating the psychological and emotional impact on the audience.

4. Data Collection Technique

The data for this study were collected through a systematic and comprehensive documentary study technique (Singh & Kumar, 2025). The process began with an intensive auditory observation, in which the researcher repeatedly listened to 'Bad Guy' to capture subtle vocal nuances, intonations, and sonic production details often absent in written lyrics. This was followed by transcribing the lyrics and annotating crucial segments that indicate shifts in meaning or in the projection of identity. Next, secondary data were gathered through a digital archival search, including official music reviews, producer interviews, and relevant literature to provide context on the song's production background and global reception. All collected data were then categorized according to the five pillars of the V.O.I.C.E strategy to ensure data validity and structural consistency prior to analysis.

5. Data Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using the Interactive Model of Analysis (Xia *et al.*, 2025), which includes data condensation, data display, and drawing or verifying conclusions. Specifically, the data were filtered through the five pillars of the V.O.I.C.E framework. To ensure data trustworthiness, the study employs theoretical triangulation, cross-referencing linguistic findings with sonic and socio-cultural data to provide a validated and holistic interpretation. The analysis followed the Interactive Model of Analysis, operationalized through the following steps, as follows:

a. Data Condensation (Coding & Classification)

The researcher transcribed the lyrics and annotated the audio-visual segments of *Bad Guy*. The collected data were then categorized using the V.O.I.C.E framework as a coding matrix. For instance, vocal nuances were classified under '*V*', while production aesthetics were indexed under '*O*'. This process transformed raw observation into meaningful data units.

b. Data Display

The classified data were organized into a multimodal matrix, mapping the correlation between lyrical content and technical elements (*e.g.*, how the '*whispered vocals*' in the '*V*' component align with the '*anti-hero persona*' in the '*I*' component). This allowed for a systematic comparison between textual content and sonic textures.

c. Drawing and Verifying Conclusions

Finally, the categorized findings were cross-referenced with secondary data (interviews and literature) to verify the interpretations. This step ensured the validity of the '*New Authenticity*' discourse, linking the individual V.O.I.C.E components back to the broader cultural impact of the song.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings and comprehensive discussion of Billie Eilish's '*Bad Guy*' as analyzed through the V.O.I.C.E framework. By deconstructing the song into five distinct yet interconnected pillars (V.O.I.C.E)—Vocal performance, production, Originality, Identity construction, Cultural circulation, and Emotional resonance—the study reveals how a contemporary pop track functions as a complex multimodal

discourse. The results demonstrate that the song’s global resonance is not merely a product of catchy melodies, but a deliberate subversion of traditional pop tropes achieved through specific linguistic and sonic strategies. The upcoming discussion highlights the efficiency of the *V.O.I.C.E. strategy in streamlining the interpretive process, providing a structured roadmap to uncover the layered meanings behind Eilish’s antihero persona*. Employing the five-pillar *V.O.I.C.E* framework, this study dissects *Bad Guy*. Table 1 delineates the core findings and the relevant theoretical underpinnings that inform the analysis.

Table 1. Summary of *V.O.I.C.E* Multimodal Analysis of Billie Eilish’s *Bad Guy*

<i>V.O.I.C.E</i> Pillar	Key Findings	Theoretical Support
Vocal	Whispered and close-mic delivery	ASMR-like whispering
Originality	Minimalist and 'bedroom' synth	DIY Production Aesthetic
Identity	Subversive the 'anti-hero' persona	The Gender Roles and Social Expectations
Cultural	Global cultural phenomenon	The social media platforms
Emotional	Psychological impact	The foundation of cognitive dissonance

1. Vocal Performance (V)

The first pillar of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework focuses on *Vocal Performance*, examining how the delivery of lyrics transcends mere melody to communicate deeper psychological states. In ‘*Bad Guy*’, the singer employs a non-traditional vocal technique characterized by an ASMR-like whisper and heavy breathiness (Warrenburg *et al.*, 2021). Unlike the belting style prevalent in mainstream pop—which often signifies emotional vulnerability or grandeur—Eilish’s hushed tones create a sense of subversive intimacy. Then, the analysis reveals that this vocal choice functions as a tool of intimidation and dominance. By whispering lyrics such as ‘*I’m that bad type or Make your mama sad type,*’ Eilish forces the listener to lean in, effectively invading their personal auditory space (Formilan & Stark, 2023). This technique creates an ‘*eerie*’ atmosphere that aligns perfectly with the song's dark, pulsing bassline. From a linguistic perspective, the lack of vocal strain or high-pitched belts suggests a nonchalant or bored attitude toward social norms, reinforcing the persona of a character who is in total control and unimpressed by traditional masculine bravado (Diko, 2024).

Subsequently, the vocal performance in ‘*Bad Guy*’ uses staccato (each note sharply detached from the others) delivery and rhythmic chanting rather than soaring melodic lines. This rhythmic precision turns the voice into an additional percussion instrument, bridging the gap between speech and song. By prioritizing texture and tone over singing, Eilish successfully constructs a vocal identity that feels authentic and raw, yet calculated. This finding suggests that in contemporary English songs, the paralinguistic features (how it is said) are just as significant as the linguistic content (what is said) in shaping the listener's interpretation.

2. Production Originality (O)

The second pillar of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, the *production Originality*, investigates the environmental and technical background of the song’s creation and how these factors contribute to its authentic appeal (Fingerhut *et al.*, 2021). On the contrary to typical chart-topping hits produced in high-end, multi-million-dollar studios, ‘*Bad Guy*’ was famously produced in a modest bedroom studio by Billie Eilish and her brother, Finneas O’Connell. This ‘*Bedroom Pop*’ origin is not merely a biographical detail; it is a critical semiotic marker that defines the song’s sonic identity. The analysis reveals that this *DIY (Do-It-Yourself)* origin manifests in a minimalist production style that prioritizes raw, intimate textures over polished, wall-of-sound arrangements. The song is driven by a singular, distorted 808 bassline and sharp, finger-snapping percussion, creating a ‘*hollow*’ soundscape that leaves ample room for the vocal nuances discussed in the previous section. In the context of contemporary English discourse, this production origin challenges the hegemony of the over-produced music industry. It signals a shift toward ‘*New Authenticity,*’ where the domesticity of the recording space translates into perceived honesty and relatability for the audience (Holmes, 2023).

Moreover, the domestic origin of the production allowed for experimental sound sampling that defies traditional genre boundaries. For example, the inclusion of a distorted Australian pedestrian crossing signal in the song’s bridge acts as a unique auditory found object. Through the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, it becomes evident that the Production Origin serves as the foundation for the song’s subversive nature; by originating from a private, non-commercial space, ‘*Bad Guy*’ carries a sense of rebellion against the standardized factory sound of global pop music, reinforcing Eilish’s image as an outsider who successfully invaded the mainstream.

3. Identity Construction (I)

The third pillar of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, *Identity construction*, examines how the lyrical content and persona in ‘*Bad Guy*’ subvert traditional gender roles and social expectations. In mainstream pop discourse, female artists

are frequently categorized into binary identities: the ‘vulnerable victim’ or the ‘hyper-sexualized siren.’ Eilish, however, utilizes the *V.O.I.C.E* strategy to construct a third, more complex identity—the anti-hero. By explicitly claiming the title of the ‘*Bad Guy*,’ she adopts a traditionally masculine label to assert dominance and moral ambiguity (Michaelson, 2025).

The analysis of the lyrics reveals a deliberate use of irony and satire. Lines such as ‘*I’m the make-your-boyfriend-mad type*,’ and ‘*Might-seduce-your-dad type*’ are not merely provocative; they function as a critique of how society perceives young women’s agency. Eilish does not seek approval; instead, she adopts a menacing persona, reinforced by her nonchalant lyrical delivery. This construction of identity is solidified by the iconic refrain, ‘*I’m the bad guy, duh*,’ where the interjection ‘*duh*’ serves as a linguistic marker of condescension, suggesting that her subversion of norms is obvious and intentional (Welch *et al.*, 2023)

In addition, this identity construction is visually and lyrically stripped of the traditional notion of ‘*glamour*’. By choosing oversized clothing and a ‘creepy’ aesthetic, Eilish detaches her identity from the male gaze. In the context of English studies, this represents a significant shift in contemporary characterization, where the ‘*badness*’ is reclaimed as a form of empowerment and autonomy. Through the lens of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, it is clear that the identity presented in ‘*Bad Guy*’ is a carefully crafted performance of non-conformity, allowing Eilish to navigate the music industry on her own terms while resonating with a generation that values authenticity over perfection.

4. Cultural Circulation (C)

The fourth pillar of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, *Cultural Circulation*, examines the trajectory of ‘*Bad Guy*’ from a bedroom-produced track to a global cultural phenomenon. In the digital era, a song’s meaning is no longer static; it is constantly reshaped by its circulation through social media platforms, particularly *TikTok* and *YouTube*. The song’s minimalist bassline and iconic ‘*duh*’ whisper provided the perfect sonic template for user-generated content, enabling the track to go viral via internet memes and short-form video challenges (Queenta *et al.*, 2024). Also, the analysis reveals that this circulation functioned as a form of participatory culture, where listeners did not just consume the music but actively ‘*remixed*’ its identity. The ‘*Bad Guy*’ aesthetic, dark, neon-tinted, and quirky, became a visual and auditory shorthand for Gen-Z’s collective irony. Equally, the song’s success at the 62nd Grammy Awards, where it won Record and Song of the Year, marked a pivotal moment in cultural circulation: the formal institutionalization of ‘*weird*’ pop. This transition from an alternative niche to the pinnacle of mainstream recognition demonstrates how the *V.O.I.C.E* strategy captures the evolution of a song’s social status. Further, the cultural circulation of ‘*Bad Guy*’ highlights a shift in global music consumption (Thapa, 2025). The song’s massive streaming numbers and its presence in various global markets signify that its appeal transcends linguistic barriers, rooted instead in its ‘*vibe*’ and sonic texture. Within the context of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, it is evident that the song’s circulation was not accidental; it was driven by a perfect alignment between Eilish’s authentic outsider persona and a digital audience that craves nonconformity. Thence, the song became more than a track—it became a cultural milestone that redefined the ‘*pop hit*’ sound in the 21st century (Münzer, 2024).

5. Emotional Resonance (E)

The final pillar of the *V.O.I.C.E* framework, *Emotional Resonance*, explores the psychological impact and the specific ‘*vibe*’ that ‘*Bad Guy*’ evokes in its audience. Emotional resonance in contemporary pop is often associated with high-energy joy or deep sadness; however, Eilish’s work resonates through a more complex spectrum of dark confidence and unsettling playfulness. The song does not aim for traditional lyrical empathy; instead, it invites the listener into a shared space of rebellion and ‘*cool*’ detachment (Pagano, 2025). The analysis indicates that the song’s resonance is built on a foundation of cognitive dissonance. The juxtaposition of a bouncy, upbeat tempo with dark, menacing lyrics creates a menacingly engaging feeling. For the listener, this resonance provides a sense of empowerment, particularly for a generation navigating a world of high social pressure and anxiety. By identifying with the ‘*Bad Guy*’ persona, the audience experiences a cathartic release and an opportunity to embrace their own non-conformity in a safe, musical context. This resonance is amplified by the minimalist production, which allows the listener’s own imagination to fill the ‘*hollow*’ spaces of the track (Picone, 2024).

On top of that, the emotional impact of ‘*Bad Guy*’ is rooted in its relatable irony. In an era of curated perfection on social media, Eilish’s ‘*bored*’ and ‘*nonchalant*’ emotional tone feels authentic and grounded. The *V.O.I.C.E* strategy reveals that the song’s success is largely due to this emotional alignment; it reflects the cynical yet resilient spirit of modern youth. Ultimately, the resonance of ‘*Bad Guy*’ transcends linguistic meaning, tapping into a universal human desire to challenge authority and redefine one’s narrative. Through this final lens, the *V.O.I.C.E* framework demonstrates that a song’s power lies not just in its notes or words, but in the lasting affective connection it builds with its global audience.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the *V.O.I.C.E* —*Vocal performance, production, Originality, Identity construction, Cultural circulation, and Emotional resonance* framework offers a robust lens for analyzing contemporary multimodal music, effectively bridging the gap between sonic aesthetics and cultural identity in Billie Eilish's *Bad Guy*. The analysis reveals that the interplay of minimal production, whispering vocal techniques, and subversive visual cues constructs a new mode of 'authentic' pop discourse. Despite these insights, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Because this qualitative analysis focuses on a single musical artifact, the findings may not be generalizable to all pop music genres. Furthermore, the reliance on subjective interpretation of multimodal elements suggests that future studies could benefit from more quantitative approaches, such as sentiment analysis or listener surveys, to validate these semiotic interpretations.

Future research is encouraged to apply the *V.O.I.C.E* framework to a broader corpus of songs across different linguistic and cultural contexts to test the model's scalability. Additionally, incorporating cross-cultural comparative studies could further elucidate how global digital audiences decode the emotional resonance of multimodal production.

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