

# Analysis of Gen-Z's Reception on Identity Crisis Messages in Billie Eilish's Music Video "What Was I Made For"

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## ABSTRACT

Identity crisis is a significant issue among Generation Z, who are in the midst of searching for self-identity and life purpose. Social expectations and the need for validation serve as core factors contributing to the emergence of identity crisis. As a form of mass communication, music videos have the potential to function as a medium of validation for such conditions. This study analyzes Generation Z's reception of the identity crisis message in Billie Eilish's music video *What Was I Made For?* using Stuart Hall's reception analysis method to categorize audience interpretations.

The findings indicate that the majority of informants adopt a dominant-hegemonic position, as the depiction of identity crisis characteristics in the video is interpreted affirmatively by each participant. The reception is influenced by various factors, including belief systems, family dynamics, occupational demands, and cultural background. These findings affirm that music videos can serve as an effective medium for articulating identity-related concerns among Generation Z, while simultaneously contributing to identity formation.

**Keywords:** *reception analysis; identity crisis; music video; billie eilish "what was i made for"; validation.*

## INTRODUCTION

As social beings, the environment has a significant influence on individuals in gaining acceptance and recognition. Since childhood, humans learn to understand themselves through interactions with others, forming an identity based on how they are perceived and treated by others. Recognition from family, friends, and society not only provides a sense of security but also strengthens self-confidence, helping a person understand their position in the social environment. One form of recognition that plays an important role is known as validation.

Validation is the process by which an individual or group accepts and recognizes a person's feelings, thoughts, or actions. In a psychological context, validation functions as a form of support that can strengthen a person's self-esteem and provide a sense of security and

appreciation in the social environment (Linehan, 2015). This can be achieved or fulfilled in various forms such as verbal affirmations, gestures, or even through digital symbols such as likes and comments on social media. This social acceptance plays a major role in shaping a person's identity and providing certainty that their existence and perspective are recognized by others.

The main purpose of validation is to improve emotional well-being and strengthen social relationships. Support and validation received from others have been shown to contribute significantly to a person's level of self-confidence and psychological well-being (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Conversely, lack of validation can lead to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and even contribute to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. In the context of everyday life, validation also has a significant impact on decision-making, both in personal and professional life. When someone receives support and recognition from their environment, they tend to be more confident in their choices and more courageous in facing life's challenges. In today's digital era, Generation Z shows a greater dependence on validation than previous generations. This generation, born between 1997 and 2012, faces unique challenges in forming their self-identity. Moreover, the presence of the internet and social media provide unlimited access to opinions and social expectations from various groups. One journal entitled "Validation on social media and Adolescents: A Matter of Self-esteem" explains that many teenagers spend time on social media to seek validation, and this plays an important role in shaping their self-confidence (Dhingra & Parashar, 2022). This generation tends to seek validation from online communities, peers, and public figures they admire. One public figure who provides validation for Generation Z is Billie Eilish. Through Fame Magazine, Eilish has emerged as a voice representing Generation Z as her songs are very resonant with a generation that is facing mental health challenges, identity exploration, and social pressure (Dee, May 21, 2025).

Through an interview with Apple Music on YouTube, Billie revealed that the song was written based on feelings of uncertainty and "Self-discovery.". In producing her work, Billie collaborated with her brother, Finneas O'Connell or Finneas under the record labels DarkRoom and Interscope Records. Billie Eilish's popularity as one of the leading young artists cannot be separated from her role on various digital platforms, one of which is Spotify. As of January 2025, Billie has more than 110 million followers and 105 million monthly listeners on Spotify. The song "What Was I Made For" is ranked 5th with the most total streams among other releases. The song, which is one of the soundtracks in the film "Barbie," reached 1,075,080,053 streams in July 2023. The song "What Was I Made For," which is part of the soundtrack of the film "Barbie," not only gained high popularity but was also nominated for Best Original Song at the 2024 Golden Globes and won an Oscar for Best Original Song (Frazier, 2024). This achievement shows Billie's significant influence in the music industry while strengthening the appeal of her songs in conveying profound messages that are relevant to personal and social issues.

Individuals who are going through an identity crisis often experience confusion in recognizing who they are, question their purpose in life, and feel unsure of their values and beliefs. Erikson (1968) defines an identity crisis as a period in which individuals must make important decisions about various aspects of their lives, including values, goals, and commitments to themselves and society. When individuals cannot find clarity in their identity, they are prone to anxiety, loss of direction, and difficulty in planning for the future (Hidayah & Huriati, 2016).

Identity crises do not just appear, but are influenced by various factors. Family is the main element; a supportive environment contributes to a cohesive identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996), while authoritarian parenting or lack of emotional support can hinder self-exploration (Hidayah & Huriati, 2016). Culture and social values also play a role; adolescents are often caught between social expectations and personal desires, especially those from mixed ethnic backgrounds who must balance the cultural values of family and society (Yang, Zhao, & Liu, 2021).

Religion can be a foundation for identity, but conflicts between religious values and personal experiences can also trigger confusion (Hidayah & Huriati, 2016). In the digital era, social media also shapes identity. It is shown as in 'likes' and 'followers' has become tangible metrics by which identity is measured and validated, influencing both self-perception and behaviour (Leinster, 2025).

Identity crises that are not handled properly can have a negative impact on an individual's psychological and social well-being. Emotional instability such as anxiety, stress, and depression often occur due to a lack of direction in life (Hidayah & Huriati, 2016). In Indonesia, 34.9% of adolescents around 15.5 million people experience mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders (I-NAMHS, 2022).

Identity confusion also hinders important decision-making such as educational paths, careers, and social relationships (Ardi et al., 2024), and makes individuals vulnerable to external pressures. As a result, they tend to withdraw from the social environment, triggering isolation and loneliness (Sunuhadi, Deliana, & Hendriyani, 2013). In some cases, identity crises encourage risky behaviors such as substance abuse or juvenile delinquency as a form of escape (Hidayah & Huriati, 2016).

With the development of digitalization, mass communication has now undergone a significant transformation. Digitalization has transformed the production, distribution, and consumption of news, with the increasing integration of digital technology in news gathering and presentation, as well as changes in the interaction between media and audiences (Karaoğlu, 2022). The ability to reach audiences has also become wider with the help of digital platforms. This proves that the dissemination of information is faster and more interactive, thus providing opportunities for audiences to participate in the communication process. Srikandi et al., 2023 stated that the active participation of audiences in social media affects the flow of information and online dynamics, where their decisions and interactions affect the dissemination of information and algorithmic behavior patterns. This shows that the

audience has an important role in determining the content they consume and share. Thus, the audience has greater control in interpreting and spreading messages in the media.

This study is based on a journal entitled Analysis of Followers' Reception of the Instagram Account @MenjadiManusia in Mental Health owned by Diva Amayia Sumarsono Putri (2025), a student at the Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta. However, it was found that this study was still limited in exploring the long-term impact of mental health content on Instagram on changes in follower behavior. In addition, the implications of the discussion regarding the factors that shape the meaning of the audience, such as personal characteristics, life experiences, and level of knowledge about mental health have not been discussed in the journal.

Furthermore, the researcher used a journal entitled Identity Crisis and Existential Crisis in the Film "Barbie: The Movie" by Ainun Fitri Mughiroh and Munawara (2024), students of Hasyim Asy'ari University. The study has a little similarity in the object, namely the message of "identity crisis." However, there are differences in the subjects and methods used. The study used the film "Barbie: The Movie" as the subject and the semiotic method by Charles Sanders Peirce.

The researcher realized that the phenomenon of identity crisis has never been studied using the reception analysis method, especially in music video media. This is an element of novelty in this study. Seeing the psychological impact that occurs due to the identity crisis, the researcher feels the need to study the depiction of the identity crisis in media products that will be understood by the audience

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Music Video as Mass Communication*

Mass communication disseminates messages to vast, heterogeneous audiences through television, radio, print, and the internet. McQuail (2010) describes it as public, rapid, and continuous, with media acting as pivotal intermediaries that shape public opinion. Although traditionally one-way and large-scale (Cangara, 2018), digital technology has rendered the process increasingly interactive: audiences now function as both receivers and content producers via social media, enabling two-way exchange. Consequently, mass communication fulfils broader social functions—information, education, entertainment, persuasion, and social control while simultaneously influencing political and economic decision-making (Effendy, 2017).

Within this more participatory communication landscape, music videos have emerged as a potent hybrid medium that fuses audiovisual storytelling with interactive, user-generated practices. No longer merely promotional tools, music videos constitute a sophisticated form of visual communication that conveys complex messages within brief narratives (Fachruddin, 2015). The convergence of high-resolution digital production and distribution platforms such as YouTube has extended their reach and interactivity, enabling audiences to like, comment, remix, and share content with unprecedented ease. Miller (2017) demonstrates that such

participatory culture transforms viewers into co-creators, amplifying a video's cultural footprint through online remixing and collaborative edits.

Beyond entertainment, music videos increasingly act as vehicles for cultural expression and identity formation. Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) argue that their symbolic imagery can articulate or even redefine social norms, especially among youth audiences who appropriate visual motifs to construct personal and collective identities. This dynamic is intertwined with consumer culture: stylistic cues in dress, setting, and aesthetics often translate into lifestyle aspirations. Dasovich-Wilson, Thompson, and Saarikallio (2022) show how these cues stimulate consumerist behaviour by promoting fashions and attitudes embodied by artists.

Accordingly, music videos now operate as multifaceted cultural texts that mediate between artists, industries, and digitally empowered audiences. They shape discourse, foster participatory reinterpretations, and embed themselves in wider social and economic practices illustrating how mass communication has evolved from linear message delivery to a dialogic, meaning-making process in the digital age.

### ***Media and Emotion***

In consuming media, the audience experiences the relationship between the media and the individual's emotional response. Media not only functions as a tool to convey information or entertainment, but also as an active agent in shaping the audience's emotional experience. The emotional experiences that arise can vary, from basic emotions such as fear and happiness, to more complex emotions, triggered by characters, narratives, or conflicts in media texts (Eder, Hanich, & Stadler, 2019). Media can manipulate audience emotions through various structural elements such as images, sounds, and narratives, all of which aim to arouse certain affections in the audience (Eder et al., 2019).

This indicates that media functions to focus the audience's attention on the desired emotional experience, directing the audience towards certain types of emotions designed by the media creator. In practice, media can create what is known as an emotional niche, namely a controlled emotional space where the audience can feel certain emotions that may not be experienced in real life (Hven, 2019). Emotional niches not only serve to create individual experiences, but also form collective experiences, where audiences share similar emotions, for example in the experience of watching a movie together or when engaging in social media discussions. Thus, media has the potential to shape or change social and cultural values, as well as strengthen audience views on social, political, or societal issues (Eder et al., 2019).

Furthermore, emotional responses to media are not spontaneous but are also influenced by cognitive factors that play a role in assessing and interpreting the media consumed. Audiences evaluate elements in the media, such as characters and plots, and adjust their emotional responses to their own social and cultural contexts (Feng & O'Halloran, 2013). Understanding how audiences respond emotionally to media is essential to

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understanding how media not only communicates messages but also influences the formation of social identities and norms that apply in society (Eder et al., 2019).

### ***Music and Identity***

Music plays an important role in the formation of identity, both individual and collective. Music, especially popular music, is not just a reflection or mirror of a particular society or social group but functions as a shaper and definition of identity experience. So music becomes an understanding of oneself and the group because listening to music or participating in musical activities facilitates the formation of deep emotional relationships with others (Frith, 1996).

Frith also argues that identity is not something static, but a dynamic process, which can be formed through musical experiences. Music is not only a means to express identity, but also a way to live and realize social and ethical values in a community. In this case, identity is understood as something more flexible and continuously formed through social interactions mediated by music. Music also functions as a tool for individuals to navigate their roles in society, by reframing their narratives in a broader social context (Frith, 1996).

### ***Gen-Z***

Generation Z, also known as the iGeneration, Net Generation, or digital natives, is a demographic group generally born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Dimock, Jan. 17, 2019). They grew up and developed amidst the rapid advancement of digital technology and the internet, so their interactions with the world are heavily influenced by technology. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z has been accustomed to the existence of smartphones, social media, and instant access to information since childhood. It forms distinctive characteristics, such as digital multitasking abilities, speed in obtaining information, and a tendency to rely on technology in daily activities (Prensky, 2001).

Psychologically and socially, Generation Z is known to have high self-awareness, more inclusive values, and concern for social and environmental issues. They show a preference for autonomy, freedom of expression, and diversity in identity and lifestyle. On the other hand, due to constant exposure to information and social pressure from the digital environment, several studies have shown that this generation is also prone to experiencing higher levels of anxiety, stress, and identity crises than previous generations (Twenge, 2017).

### ***Identity Crisis***

Identity crisis is a psychosocial phase when an individual doubts their self-concept, values, and life purpose. Erikson (1968) placed it in the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage typically occurring throughout adolescence and early adulthood—when an individual examines moral beliefs, career choices, and personal aspirations. When this exploration becomes blocked, emotional instability and doubt in decision-making arise (Schwartz et al., 2019). Recent studies have extended this concept to the entire life span; major changes such

as career transitions, marriage, or retirement also trigger identity crises in middle adulthood and old age (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2020). Thus, identity crises are understood as dynamic processes that can recur, influenced by social, cultural, and psychological variables.

Given the recurrent and contextual nature of identity crises, early adulthood, a period of identity determination and career foundation is the next critical point. It is at this stage that existential pressures often peak, giving rise to a more specific but related phenomenon, the quarter-life crisis. This transition highlights how the search for meaning and certainty in one's 20s often rekindles the dynamics of an identity crisis, but with different socio-economic and digital challenges.

Quarter-life crisis refers to a period of uncertainty and anxiety in one's 20s–30s, when individuals must make career, relationship, and life choices without feeling adequately prepared (Robinson, 2015). Perfectionism and self-comparison exacerbate this condition; high self-standards trigger depression when realizations fall short of expectations, while social media amplifies the pressure of external validation (Flett, Nepon, & Hewitt, 2022). As a result, individuals are caught in an existential dilemma between the demands of adulthood and the unfinished search for identity.

According to Schwartz et al. (2019), individuals experiencing an identity crisis typically exhibit the following five characteristics:

1. **Uncertainty:** Individuals experience ambiguity regarding their identity, including core values, interests, and life goals.
2. **Internal Conflict:** A struggle arises between competing identities or roles that the individual may consider or adopt.
3. **Identity Search and Adjustment Difficulties:** Individuals actively seek experiences and information to form a cohesive identity, but often struggle to align with social norms and expectations during this exploratory phase.
4. **Cognitive Confusion:** Individuals may feel overwhelmed or frustrated due to an inability to find satisfactory answers to questions related to their identity. As a result, they often seek external validation to reinforce their sense of self.
5. **Emotional Instability:** Frequent emotional fluctuations occur, such as anxiety, restlessness, or sudden shifts in mood—from confidence to worthlessness—over a short period of time.

Identity crisis is influenced by several interrelated factors, one of which is age. Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968) identifies the period of late adolescence to emerging adulthood (18–27 years) as a crucial phase for identity exploration, where individuals are more susceptible to uncertainty. Côté (2006) emphasizes that younger individuals tend to experience identity moratorium, while older individuals are more likely to achieve identity commitment.

Religious belief also significantly contributes to identity formation. Marcia's (1966) identity status theory suggests that individuals may experience identity foreclosure if they adopt religious values without exploration, or identity moratorium when questioning their

beliefs. King et al. (2013) further argue that dissonance between religious teachings and lived experiences may result in identity confusion, particularly in rigidly religious contexts. Supporting this, a Harvard study (2023) found that religious individuals report a higher sense of life purpose (47%) compared to atheists (34%) and agnostics (32%).

Employment status is another influential factor. Erikson identified occupational goals as essential to resolving identity versus role confusion. Arnett (2014) noted that during emerging adulthood, career instability or a lack of direction may exacerbate identity crises.

Family environment plays a pivotal role. Parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991) and emotional family climate shape identity development. Luyckx et al. (2011) demonstrated that strong familial support facilitates stable identity exploration, whereas dysfunctional environments increase vulnerability to identity disturbance.

Lastly, cultural context is fundamental. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, cultural affiliation shapes self-concept. Minority group members often face identity disorientation when navigating conflicting cultural norms (Phinney, 1990; Schwartz et al., 2010).

### ***Audience***

The term audience is commonly understood as a group of individuals who receive or engage with a message. Etymologically, it derives from the Greek word *audier*, meaning "to hear." In communication studies, an audience is defined as individuals who listen to, read, or interpret messages. Within rhetorical and public speaking contexts, the term audience is frequently used to describe message recipients. The study of audiences is one of the earliest focal points in communication theory. Audience theory seeks to explain how audiences interpret, respond to, and make meaning from texts. According to Baran and Davis (2021), the audience is no longer viewed merely as a passive recipient of messages, but rather as an active agent that constructs meaning through individual social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the characteristics of an audience are dynamic and subject to change, rather than being fixed or static.

In mass communication studies, audiences are conceptualized as active agents who interpret messages through the lens of personal experience, socioeconomic background, and cultural context (Baran & Davis, 2021). Social structures—including education, income level, and access to information contribute to the diversity of message interpretation: individuals from different economic or educational backgrounds may perceive the same media content in distinct ways (McQuail, 2010). This variation is further shaped by the nature of the medium; for example, print media encourages deeper analysis, whereas electronic media often facilitates faster and more immediate consumption.

The reception of media messages is also influenced by the credibility of the source, the clarity of the message, and the relevance of the information within the audience's social framework. Psychological dimensions such as attitudes, motivations, and lived experiences play a significant role in how individuals cognitively process media content (Severin &

Tankard, 2014). Consequently, the media's ability to control meaning is inherently limited, as each audience member is capable of reconstructing messages through their own interpretive lens. This underscores the understanding of mass communication as a dynamic, bidirectional process involving negotiation between media producers and audiences, rather than a unidirectional flow of information.

### ***Reception***

The reception theory introduced by Stuart Hall in 1980 through the encoding/decoding model has served as a foundational framework in the field of mass communication and media analysis. Hall emphasized that the meaning of a media message is not solely determined by the producer, but rather shaped through a decoding process by an active audience. In this context, the audience is conceptualized as an active subject who interprets messages based on their social, cultural, and personal contexts. This process enables diverse interpretations, rather than a single fixed meaning.

With the rapid advancement of communication technologies particularly the emergence of social media and the internet reception studies have experienced significant developments. Audience interaction with media texts is no longer confined to passive consumption of traditional media content such as television or film. Instead, it has evolved into a more dynamic process, characterized by active audience engagement across multiple digital platforms. Liu (2020) asserts that in the digital era, the reception process involves cross-platform interactions, enabling audiences to participate in the creation, modification, and dissemination of meaning.

Today's audiences not only access media messages, but also actively shape them through activities such as remixing, commenting, and sharing on social media platforms. This shift marks a significant paradigm change in media reception, whereby audiences assume an active role in participatory media practices. As noted by Jenkins (2006) and Couldry (2010), this phenomenon demonstrates that while Hall's reception theory remains relevant, it must be recontextualized within the more interactive and participatory nature of contemporary digital media environments.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach, chosen because of its ability to explore meaning, interpretation, and subjective experiences aspects not covered by quantitative methods (Saryono, 2010). Through this approach, researchers can examine social, historical, and behavioral phenomena in depth and contextually, so that the variety of qualities and special features of social impacts can be revealed comprehensively.

In line with this qualitative framework, the method used is reception analysis to examine the audience's interpretation of the representation of the identity crisis in Billie Eilish's song "What Was I Made For?". This method views the media and the audience as two agents that interact with each other, not just a one-way relationship (Hadi, 2020). By referring

to Stuart Hall's decoding model, informant responses will be mapped into three reading positions, namely dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional; this categorization allows researchers to understand the diversity of interpretations that emerge based on the socio-cultural background of each message recipient.

To obtain rich data, the study utilized primary sources in the form of song lyrics and audio that were listened to repeatedly. These sources were supplemented with secondary data (books, journals, and digital and printed documents) to strengthen the theoretical context. Information collection techniques were carried out through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews both offline and online with informants selected purposively (Sugiyono, 2019).

The next stage is systematic text analysis. According to Babbie (2013), this activity includes breaking down the research object to find patterns, meanings, and internal relationships. More specifically, the researcher applied interpretive analysis that combines objective reading with subjective interpretation of symbolism, context, and social implications (Saldana, 2016). This interpretive approach is crucial in qualitative studies because it opens up space for researchers to uncover complex layers of meaning that are relevant to the informant's experience, thus producing a comprehensive understanding of the construction of the meaning of the identity crisis in the socio-cultural context of the listener.

This study explains how Gen-Z interprets and accepts the music video "What Was I Made For" using reception analysis developed by Stuart Hall. That way, researchers can categorize the responses obtained into three reception categories (dominant-negotiation-opposition).

The informants in this study meet several specified category requirements. Some of the requirements are:

- a. Aged 21 to 27 years.
- b. Know the song "What Was I Made For" by Billie Eilish.

The following are the informants in this study, including:

1. MA, a student majoring in Communication Sciences, has a permanent job, is a victim of a broken home, adheres to a belief and has been active in religious activities, has a high level of self-confidence.
2. RD, a graduate of English Literature, has a job, is not a victim of a broken home, adheres to a belief and is religious, has a high level of self-confidence.
3. JS, a student majoring in Business Management, has a permanent job, is not a victim of a broken home, has high self-confidence, and adheres to a belief but is not religious.
4. S, is in an interracial family, has a permanent job, is a victim of a broken home, has low self-confidence, and adheres to a belief but is not religious.
5. DCH, did not complete his studies, does not have a job, has low self-confidence, and does not adhere to a belief.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Identity Crisis Reflected Through Emotional Instability and Internal Conflicts*

All informants exhibited distinct emotional responses after watching Billie Eilish's What Was I Made For music video. Feelings of confusion, emotional volatility, and internal conflict emerged as central characteristics of an identity crisis.

Informant MA interpreted the video as portraying internal struggles within an individual. He viewed the miniature clothes as symbols of the various identities a person might adopt. For him, social media and peer influence can create identity overload, which causes confusion about which identity is genuinely hers. His coping mechanism is rooted in Christian spiritual teachings. "Identity is not just one thing... We can be extroverted, introverted, or ambivert. But we must know who we truly are." (MA, 2025)

In contrast, DCH, who identifies as an atheist, interpreted the identity crisis from a cultural and societal standpoint. He viewed the falling miniature clothes and sudden rain as metaphors for social pressure and the emotional burden of expectations. "When she let go of all expectations and just became herself, she felt better." (DCH, 2025)

Informant S perceived the rain as a metaphor for a painful realization feeling hollow and emotionally numb due to societal expectations. "The rain is like the sadness of realization... You don't understand yourself anymore." (S, 2025)

JS described identity crisis as a deeply personal and emotional experience. He associated the clothing in the video with "masks" people wear in public, shaped by familial and societal expectations. "I don't know who I want to be, what I want to do, or who to be with. That's an identity crisis." (JS, 2025)

RD, the only informant with professional work experience, viewed her crisis through the lens of career uncertainty. She once struggled with the mismatch between her degree and her job. However, she eventually realized that her identity as a secretary had been forming since her university years through student organization roles. "I feared failure because my career path felt uncertain. But looking back, I've been doing this role all along." (RD, 2025)

### *Barbie as a Symbol of Identity and Self-Expression*

The Barbie figure portrayed by Billie Eilish in the music video was interpreted by all informants as a complex representation of identity and self-expression.

MA viewed Barbie as a metaphor for freedom of choice. Drawing from childhood memories, he associated Barbie with the idea that girls can take on any role they want. "*The world may be colorful, but we choose what colors to wear.*" (MA)

RD perceived clothing color as an outward expression of personality. Bright colors symbolized friendliness, while using darker tones could convey emotional distance. "*People wearing bright clothes seem cheerful and approachable. Dark ones... not so much.*" (RD)

JS connected Barbie with beauty standards in digital society. He believed the video reflected Billie Eilish's transition from conforming to expectations to expressing her true self.

*“This is who I am now—someone who fits your beauty standards, but I’ve fought to become this.” (JS)*

S and DCH similarly believed the Barbie character was someone overwhelmed by social expectations, who had forgotten how to feel joy and authenticity. *“She felt numb... she forgot how to be happy because of all the societal expectations.” (S)*. *“Even though she was being herself, she still expected to be someone else.” (DCH)*

### ***Song Lyrics as Emotional and Existential Mirrors***

Apart from the visuals, several lyrics from the song stood out to the informants. The line: “What was I made for?” was interpreted by JS as a commentary on the performative pressures from the music industry. *“This is who I’ve become because of what you paid for, not who I really am.” (JS)*

S saw the line as capturing the desperation of someone trying to find meaning. *“It reflects a struggle to find purpose. There’s a sense of hopelessness but also a tiny hope.” (S)*

MA interpreted it through a spiritual lens, believing that happiness is the ultimate purpose of life, which aligns with his religious values. *“What’s the point of living if you’re not happy? Life is about finding peace with who you are.” (MA)*

Another lyric, “Takin’ a drive, I was an ideal, looked so alive, turns out I’m not real...” was highlighted by RD and DCH, who resonated with the idea of emotional fatigue from maintaining a public image. *“Branding yourself is exhausting. That version isn’t really me.” (RD)*. *“She probably thought she was fine following social expectations... until she realized it made her unhappy.” (DCH)*.

### **Gen-Z Reception of Identity Crisis Messages**

**Table 1.1 (Coding Metric)**

Message	Informan 1 (MA)	Informan 2 (RD)	Informan 3 (JS)	Informan 4 (S)	Informan 5 (DCH)
Identity Crisis Reflected Through Emotional Instability and Internal Conflicts	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant
Barbie as a Symbol of Identity and Self-Expression	Negotiated	Negotiated	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant
Song Lyrics as Emotional and Existential Mirrors	Negotiated	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant	Negotiated

Source: Author’s own research

Informants’ reception of the video’s identity crisis theme was shaped by four key factors: religion, family, career, and culture.

MA, the only informant in the negotiated reception position, viewed the video through a spiritual-religious framework. She emphasized identity resolution as necessary to reach happiness and inner peace, aligning with identity achievement in James Marcia’s theory.

In contrast, DCH, an atheist, focused on cultural expectations and digital identity, particularly the need for validation in online spaces. Her experience with authoritarian parenting and emotional distance within her family further shaped her identity development.

JS and S similarly referenced family dynamics. JS highlighted how her emotionally distant father and sister influenced her self-perception. Despite this, she found emotional support from her mother. S, who came from a broken home, described feeling unacknowledged by both parents, leading to withdrawal and self-isolation, an example of self-withdrawal as a coping mechanism.

RD, meanwhile, interpreted identity crisis mainly through the lens of professional misalignment and pressure. Although she initially doubted her career choice, she later saw her role as part of a naturally developed identity.

The interviews suggest that the dominant-hegemonic reading was most common among participants. Most accepted the video's emotional and thematic direction as relevant to their own experiences.

This aligns with Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, especially the stage of identity vs. role confusion, and the model of quarter-life crisis that marks early adulthood as a time of existential questioning. Informants confirmed this through shared feelings of emotional instability, confusion, and internal conflict.

Moreover, the video's impact validates media reception theory proposed by Stuart Hall, where the audience plays an active role in interpreting media based on their lived experiences, social positions, and values.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings gathered through in-depth interviews, it can be concluded that the overall reception of the informants predominantly aligns with the dominant-hegemonic position, as conceptualized within Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework. Most participants agreed that the main messages conveyed in *What Was I Made For?* namely the search for self-meaning, uncertainty about the future, and the pressures of social expectations—deeply resonated with their personal experiences. No informants rejected the content in an oppositional manner.

This tendency toward dominant reading was significantly shaped by contextual factors such as religious background, family dynamics, professional experiences, and digital culture. Informants interpreted the music video not only through their individual worldviews but also through broader socio-cultural filters that reflect their generational reality as members of Gen Z. These factors served as the "field of experience" and "frame of reference" that determined how they made sense of the media content.

The music video thus becomes more than just a product of entertainment. It emerges as a powerful psychosocial mirror, particularly for Gen Z who are navigating identity development and life transitions. The use of visual metaphors such as the miniature clothes, suitcase, and emotionally hollow expressions of the Barbie character offered clear symbolic

representations of identity crisis, as commonly experienced by the informants. These representations, when paired with emotionally rich and melancholic lyrics, successfully create a reflective atmosphere, inviting audiences to see their own narratives within the media.

Furthermore, this study reinforces the potential of music videos as effective communication tools in reaching young audiences, especially in raising awareness on sensitive issues such as mental health, identity struggles, and emotional isolation. It demonstrates that popular media, when crafted thoughtfully, can serve as a vehicle for social messaging and emotional validation. In this context, the video functions as both a cultural artifact and a catalyst for introspection.

Rather than acting as passive consumers, Gen Z viewers engage actively with the content. They respond not only based on aesthetics or personal taste but through critical reflection shaped by lived experiences. Informants like MA, who drew on spiritual values, or DCH and S, who emphasized family dysfunction and cultural pressure, exemplify the diversity and depth of meaning-making among young people today.

The findings also underscore the importance of recognizing media as a dynamic site of meaning production, where audiences actively negotiate the messages they receive. As Stuart Hall posited, meaning is not fixed by the sender but is interpreted variably by the receiver. In this study, while most informants accepted the video's message as intended (dominant), their specific reasons for doing so were deeply personalized—ranging from religious faith and familial relationships to educational and career paths, as well as interactions with digital culture.

The convergence of these interpretations confirms the relevance of Hall's theory in today's digital media landscape, especially among Gen Z audiences who are immersed in visual culture and social media. It also affirms the role of emotionally resonant media as a form of indirect counseling or narrative therapy creating space for reflection, connection, and validation of inner experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken.

In conclusion, this study highlights that music videos like *What Was I Made For?* hold substantial symbolic and emotional power in shaping how young people engage with their inner struggles. These visual narratives, when paired with meaningful lyrics and relatable imagery, become instruments of identity construction and emotional processing. Thus, rather than dismissing popular media as shallow or trivial, scholars and educators should recognize its potential as a site of dialogue, healing, and growth, especially in supporting youth during critical phases of identity development.

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