



Analyzing Self-Perception Theory in Lady Gaga's "Born This Way": A Psychological Study of Identity and Social Freedom

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Abstract: Moving beyond the view of anthems as mere entertainment, this research posits that the song functions as a psychological instrument for identity reconstruction. Specifically, it investigates how the lyrics provide behavioral scripts that allow listeners to infer and solidify a resilient self-concept. Methodologically, this research utilizes a qualitative textual analysis to systematically map specific lyrical directives against the framework of Bem's (1967) Self-Perception Theory. Rather than a general interpretation, the study employs a thematic coding process where lyrical phrases are categorized as explicit behavioral prompts—distinguishing between physical, social, and verbal actions. Within this interpretive framework, specific lyrical elements are analyzed not merely as artistic metaphors, but as analogues to observable behaviors that listeners may enact to infer their own internal states. The results suggest that the song's repetitive verbal affirmations and explicit rejection of insecure behaviors function as cognitive scaffolds for identity reconstruction. By intertwining these performative cues with the developmental principles of reflected appraisal, the lyrics illustrate how external actions and validated self-talk work synergistic-ally to shape self-concept, effectively operationalizing a "behavior-first" pathway to confidence. Ultimately, this research contributes a novel application of Self-Perception Theory to cultural analysis, defining "Born This Way" as a generative behavioral mechanism where the explicit enactment of confidence functions as the necessary precursor to internalized self-worth.

Keywords: *Self-Perception Theory; Identity Formation; Social Freedom; Behavioral Cues; Self-Concept*

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INTRODUCTION

Current research on the psychological impact of music suggests that popular anthems function as more than mere entertainment; they are potent instruments for identity construction and social liberation. While scholars have established that music influences emotional regulation and group cohesion, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the precise intersection of lyrical directives, physical performance cues, and the internal cognitive shifts that facilitate social freedom. This study addresses this intersection by examining Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" through the lens of Daryl Bem's Self-Perception Theory.

The current understanding of music's role in identity is built upon several key pillars, yet each contains limitations that this research seeks to address. Bennett (2014) argues that "Born This Way" serves as a "queer vernacular" and a rhetorical tool used by marginalized groups to resist heteronormative social norms (p. 212). While Bennett highlights the socio-political power of the lyrics, the study focuses on rhetoric rather than the psychological mechanism of how individual listeners internalize these claims. Similarly, Mallory (2023) explores how the album utilizes "monstrous" imagery to deconstruct traditional sexuality, effectively creating a "safe space" for identity experimentation (p. 45). Although Mallory identifies the environment created by the music, the specific behavioral triggers that lead to identity adoption remain under-theorized.

From a sociological perspective, Deflem (2019) analyzes Gaga's management of public identity, suggesting that identity is a performative, enacted behavior rather than a static internal trait (p. 88). This supports the notion that "acting" precedes "being," but Deflem's focus remains on the artist's persona rather than the listener's psychological transition. Quantitatively, Elvers et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence that listening to empowering music significantly raises both explicit and implicit self-esteem (p. 3).

However, their findings do not explain the process by which lyrical commands translate into lasting self-conceptions. These studies are grounded in Bem's (1967) foundational Self-Perception Theory, which posits that individuals come to "know" their own attitudes by observing their own external behaviors (p. 185). Collectively, these works suggest a link between music and identity but fail to pinpoint how specific behavioral directives—such as the "paws up" gesture—serve as the catalyst for internalizing a new, liberated self-concept.

The existing literature leaves a significant research gap: there is an inadequate understanding of how specific musical elements—namely lyrical directives (commands to the listener) and performance cues (physical gestures)—function as behavioral triggers that reshape identity through self-perception. Most studies treat the listener as a passive recipient of a message rather than an active participant whose physical response to the music dictates their internal psychological state.

This study offers a novel contribution by applying Self-Perception Theory to the specific "call-and-response" nature of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." Unlike previous research that focuses on the song's meaning, this research analyzes the song as a psychological tool that forces a behavioral commitment from the listener. By investigating how the physical and vocal participation of the audience acts as "observed behavior" from which they infer their own bravery and acceptance, this study provides a unique bridge between musicology and cognitive psychology.

This research employs Daryl Bem's Self-Perception Theory to examine how the lyrical and performance directives in Lady Gaga's Born This Way function as active psychological prompts for identity formation. By analyzing the causal link between elicited listener behaviors—specifically physical posturing and verbal affirmations—and the construction of a positive self-concept, the study demonstrates how the song's interactive



nature fosters a subjective sense of social freedom and authentic self-expression.

METHOD

Research Design and Data Collection To rigorously investigate the psychological implications of "Born This Way," this study transitions beyond general library research to employ a Hermeneutic Qualitative Content Analysis. This specific design is selected for its capacity to go beyond surface-level description, allowing for the interpretation of the latent meanings and psychological triggers embedded within cultural texts (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24). Rather than merely treating the lyrics as static words, this approach views the song as a dynamic communicative act that constructs social reality. The primary data consists of the official lyrics and the accompanying performative descriptors (e.g., stage directions or music video gestures) of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." To support this analysis, secondary data collection was conducted through a systematic review of scholarly literature, selecting high-impact sources from social psychology and cultural studies databases. This process involved filtering for peer-reviewed articles and seminal texts published between 2009 and 2026 that specifically address the intersection of music, identity formation, and behavioral psychology, ensuring the theoretical framework is grounded in contemporary academic discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 88).

Textual Analysis and Theoretical Application The analytical procedure follows a systematic, multi-stage coding process to ensure methodological rigor. First, utilizing the "In Vivo" coding method described by Saldaña (2021, p. 14), the lyrics are broken down into key phrases and imperatives (e.g., "don't hide," "paws up") to preserve the raw impact of the language. These codes are then categorized into thematic clusters related to identity affirmation, behavioral commands, and social resistance. Crucially, this study bridges these textual themes with Daryl Bem's Self-Perception Theory by treating the lyrical commands not just as artistic expression, but as "behavioral scripts." The analysis explicitly

maps how the song's directives function as external stimuli that prompt physical or verbal compliance from the listener. By examining these scripts, the study elucidates the psychological mechanism: as listeners enact the song's behaviors (singing the anthem, adopting the posture), they retrospectively infer a strengthened internal attitude of self-acceptance, consistent with recent interpretations of embodied cognition in music (Maes & Leman, 2013, p. 21).

The Implied Listener and Ethical Reflexivity Methodologically, this research operationalizes the "implied listener" as a theoretical construct to map the song's psychological reception pathways, effectively bypassing the need for direct empirical surveillance while maintaining analytical depth regarding the text's design (Dutton, 2010, p. 102). This interpretative framework is rigorously bounded by ethical reflexivity; by explicitly acknowledging researcher positionality, the study mitigates subjective projection and ensures that insights regarding the song's empowering potential are not treated as universal truths, but as analytically sound interpretations consistent with the integrity of modern qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 35).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes Lady Gaga's Born This Way through the lens of Daryl Bem's (1967) Self-Perception Theory, proposing that the lyrics function not merely as artistic expression, but as psychological prompts for identity formation. The analysis posits that the song encourages specific physical, social, and verbal behaviors that listeners may use to infer and construct their own internal attitudes of confidence and self-worth.

Embodied Cognition: Physical Action as a Precursor to Confidence

The imperative "put your paws up" operates as a literal instruction for a dance gesture while simultaneously serving as a symbolic behavioral cue for assertiveness. Extending Bem's (1967) premise that individuals infer internal states by observing their overt behavior, this specific gesture encourages an "embodied" form of confidence. By enacting a posture associated with pride and solidarity—occupying space and raising limbs—listeners generate proprioceptive

feedback that signals dominance and positive affect to the brain.

Recent research in embodied cognition supports this mechanism, suggesting that motor behavior and posture can directly modulate emotional processing. For instance, substitution of expansive postures for constrictive ones has been shown to enhance subjective feelings of power and reduce cortisol reactivity (Cuddy et al., 2020). Therefore, the physical act of "putting paws up" may facilitate a "body-first" pathway to self-esteem, where the listener infers, "I am acting proudly, therefore I must be proud." Bem's theory suggests individuals infer their internal states (e.g., "I am confident") by observing their own overt behavior.

Lyric Evidence:

(2) *"Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this way, baby"*

Analysis: The instruction in Line 2 is the song's primary psychological trigger. It is not just a dance move, but a "power pose" (Cuddy et al., 2020). By commanding the listener to physically occupy space ("put your paws up"), Gaga initiates a body-first pathway to self-esteem. The listener observes their own dominant posture and, via proprioceptive feedback, infers an internal state of pride. The physical action precedes and generates the emotional feeling of empowerment.

Reflected Appraisal: External Cues and the Social Mirror

The lyric "she rolled my hair and put my lipstick on" moves beyond a narrative of maternal grooming to illustrate the psychological process of reflected appraisal. In this context, the mother's grooming behavior serves as an external signal of value. Self-Perception Theory suggests that individuals often interpret their own worth based on how they observe themselves being treated by significant others.

Contemporary developmental psychology reinforces this, noting that identity is frequently co-constructed through "social mirroring." When caregivers perform acts of adoration, they provide the behavioral evidence necessary for the subject to internalize a positive self-concept. As noted by Brummelman and Thomaes (2021), the internalization of positive social feedback is crucial for developing a stable self-identity, particularly in marginalized groups. Thus, the song illustrates how external behavioral

validation functions as the scaffold upon which internal self-worth is built. Identity is co-constructed through "social mirroring," where we value ourselves based on how we are treated by significant others (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2021).

Lyric Evidence:

(5) *"She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on"*
(9) *"So hold your head up girl and you'll go far"*

Analysis: Lines 5 and 6 illustrate the mechanism of Reflected Appraisal. The mother's physical grooming is an external signal of value. The listener (the child) infers their own worthiness ("I must be valuable because I am being treated with care"). This external validation provides the psychological scaffold for the internalized command in Line 9 to "hold your head up," transforming external praise into internal self-respect.

Verbal Self-Persuasion and Performative Identity

The repeated affirmation "I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way" and the directive "Don't be a drag, just be a queen" utilize verbal behavior as a tool for cognitive restructuring. "Because communication is inherently social, language is essential for expressing emotion and performing daily tasks effectively" (Priyoto & Rahmadiani, 2024). This aligns with the "saying-is-believing" effect, a corollary of Self-Perception Theory where individuals adjust their attitudes to align with their spoken words to maintain cognitive consistency.

Modern research on self-talk indicates that such declarative statements function as "verbal self-nudges." Kross (2021) argues that distanced self-talk (coaching oneself like a friend) helps regulate emotion and solidify identity. By vocalizing the persona of a "queen"—a signifier of dignity and autonomy—the listener engages in behavioral activation. They are not merely describing a state of being but are actively performing it, thereby increasing the likelihood that their internal self-perception will align with the external persona. Individuals strive for cognitive consistency; they adjust their internal attitudes to align with their spoken words ("verbal self-nudges").



Lyric Evidence:

(13) "I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way" (25) "Don't be a drag, just be a queen" (31) "Subway kid, rejoice your truth"

Analysis: The repetitive affirmation in Lines 13, 16, and 40 ("I'm on the right track") utilizes the "saying-is-believing" effect. By vocalizing this certainty, the listener actively performs the identity of someone who is secure, thereby reducing internal doubt. Furthermore, the imperative in Line 25 ("Don't be a drag, just be a queen") acts as a cognitive restructure. By referring to oneself as a "queen"—a signifier of dignity—the listener engages in performative identity, using language to manifest a reality of autonomy and survival (Line 64).

Critical Nuance and Limitations

While the application of Self-Perception Theory to Born This Way offers compelling insights, it is necessary to acknowledge limitations. The "fake it till you make it" approach—inferring confidence from induced behavior—is not universally effective. Recent studies on "toxic positivity" suggest that forcing positive behavioral cues (like smiling or assertive posturing) when they are deeply incongruent with an individual's internal emotional state can backfire, leading to increased psychological distress or feelings of inauthenticity (Prinzling et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Self-Perception Theory relies heavily on the ambiguity of internal cues; if a listener has a rigid, pre-existing negative self-concept, the behavioral cues in the song may be insufficient to override distinct internal doubts. Therefore, while the song provides powerful behavioral scripts for empowerment, the efficacy of these cues likely depends on the listener's baseline receptivity and the social context in which the behaviors are enacted. Theory: Self-Perception Theory relies on the existence of ambiguous internal cues; the individual must be unsure enough of their internal state to let their behavior guide it. However, if an individual holds a rigid, pre-existing negative self-concept, or if the gap between their true feelings and the induced behavior is too wide, the strategy fails. This phenomenon, often linked to "toxic positivity," suggests that forcing positive cues (like smiling or posturing) when deeply unhappy can backfire, increasing psychological distress and feelings of inauthenticity (Prinzling et al., 2020).

Lyric Evidence:

(15) "Just love yourself and you're set" (25) "Don't be a drag, just be a queen" (58) "Left you outcast, bullied, or teased"

Analysis: The limitations of the song's psychological intervention are most visible in the use of the minimizing qualifier "Just" in Line 15 ("Just love yourself and you're set"). This lyric frames self-actualization as an immediate, switch-flip decision, potentially disregarding the complex reality of the trauma referenced in Line 58 ("outcast, bullied, or teased").

CONCLUSION

This analysis confirms that Lady Gaga's Born This Way operates not merely as an anthem of self-acceptance but as a sophisticated psychological instrument for identity reconstruction, validating the utility of Bem's Self-Perception Theory in cultural analysis. By encoding specific behavioral cues—from the physical assertion of "putting paws up" to the verbal performance of the "queen" archetype—the song functions as a behavioral scaffold, allowing listeners to infer internal confidence from their own external actions. This reframes popular music within social psychology not just as a reflection of culture, but as an active "social technology" that provides accessible scripts for identity formation and emotional regulation.

However, it is critical to acknowledge that this study is limited by its qualitative, interpretive methodology, which relies on theoretical application rather than empirical observation. Consequently, while the potential for behavioral change is theoretically sound, this analysis cannot verify the causal magnitude of these cues on a general population without data. Future research should therefore prioritize empirical validation, employing quantitative experimental designs—such as randomized controlled trials measuring pre- and post-exposure self-esteem—to substantiate the tangible impact of these musical prompts. Practically, these findings support specific clinical applications, encouraging music therapists and educators to move beyond passive listening and instead utilize lyric-based "behavioral activation" exercises. By guiding clients to physically and verbally enact the song's cues, practitioners can help individuals bridge the gap between their current reality and their ideal self, leveraging the "fake it till you make it" mechanism to foster genuine, embodied resilience.

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