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Emotion Through Metaphor: A Conceptual Analysis of Billie Eilish's songs

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Abstract

This study explores the use of conceptual metaphors in Billie Eilish's 2024 album *Hit Me Hard and Soft*, focusing on four selected songs: *Birds of a Feather*, *Wildflower*, *L'Amour de Ma Vie*, and *Blue*. The research has two main objectives: to identify the types of conceptual metaphors in the lyrics and to analyze how these metaphors shape listeners' interpretation of meaning and emotion. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and situated within the field of cognitive semantics, the study employs a qualitative descriptive approach guided by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The data consist of official song lyrics, chosen for their popularity and richness in metaphorical expressions. Findings reveal a strong presence of ontological metaphors (e.g., "Emotions as Objects"), structural metaphors (e.g., "Love as a Journey"), and orientational metaphors (e.g., "Happiness is Up," "Sadness is Down"). These metaphorical mappings enable listeners to comprehend abstract feelings such as love, grief, and vulnerability through familiar embodied experiences. Overall, the study demonstrates how metaphors enrich lyrical meaning and enhances emotional resonance in contemporary pop music.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Metaphor in Music, Emotional Expression, Song Lyrics Analysis, Billie Eilish

Emosi Melalui Metafora: Analisis Konseptual lagu-lagu Billie Eilish

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneroka penggunaan metafora konseptual dalam album Billie Eilish tahun 2024 bertajuk Hit Me Hard and Soft, dengan memberi tumpuan kepada empat lagu terpilih: Birds of a Feather, Wildflower, L'Amour de Ma Vie, dan Blue. Kajian ini mempunyai dua objektif utama: mengenal pasti jenis-jenis metafora konseptual dalam lirik lagu-lagu tersebut, dan menganalisis bagaimana metafora ini membentuk tafsiran makna dan emosi oleh pendengar. Berlandaskan Teori Metafora Konseptual (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) dalam bidang semantik kognitif, kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif berpandukan Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Data kajian terdiri daripada lirik asal lagu, dipilih berdasarkan tahap populariti dan kekayaan ekspresi metafora. Dapatkan menunjukkan kehadiran yang ketara bagi metafora ontologis (contoh; "Emosi sebagai Objek"), metafora struktural (contoh; "Cinta sebagai Perjalanan"), dan metafora orientasi (contoh; "Kebahagiaan berada di atas Kesedihan berada di bawah").

Pemetaan metafora ini membolehkan pendengar memahami perasaan abstrak seperti cinta, kesedihan, dan kerentanan melalui pengalaman yang lebih biasa. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menunjukkan bagaimana metafora memperkayakan makna lirik dan meningkatkan resonans emosi dalam muzik pop kontemporari.

Kata kunci: Teori Metafora Konseptual, Metafora dalam Muzik, Ekspresi Emosi, Analisis Lirik Lagu, Billie Eilish

1. Introduction

Language is an ever-evolving phenomenon, and one of its primary functions is the expression of emotion. In contemporary society, music has emerged as a prominent medium through which individuals convey emotions, often in implicit or metaphorical ways. According to Juslin and Laukka (2004), listening to music can significantly influence both emotional states and cognitive processes. Songwriters carefully craft lyrics, selecting specific words and structuring sentence not only to convey meaning but also to preserve aesthetic and emotional resonance.

Metaphor plays a central role in this creative process, enabling the communication of abstract ideas through more familiar, concrete terms. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in *Metaphors We Live By* emphasize that metaphors are not merely stylistic devices found in literature, but are fundamental to human cognition, shaping the way we conceptualize our experiences. A conceptual metaphor, as they define it, involves understanding one domain of experience (typically abstract) in terms of another (typically concrete).

Despite extensive scholarly attention to conceptual metaphors in literature and poetry, their presence and function in contemporary music remain underexplored. Billie Eilish's songs, known for their emotionally resonant and distinctive lyrical style, present a valuable opportunity to investigate how conceptual metaphors construct meaning and influence listener interpretation. While existing studies often focus on classical music or traditional genres, few have examined how metaphors function in modern pop music to articulate psychological depth and emotional complexity. A study on Motion Metaphors in Music Criticism by Nina Jülich-Warpakowski (2022) for instance, analyzes Western classical music criticism through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory, reveals how metaphors such as TIME IS MOTION are deployed in music discourse and explores how musicians and non-musicians perceive metaphoricity differently. Another study by Suparak & Bunsorn (2022) examined conceptual metaphors of love in Thai Pop songs produced by Nadao Music and has identified 166 metaphorical expressions where the target domain LOVE is conceptualized through twelve different source domains. Their findings highlight how conceptual metaphors construct emotional meaning and reflect cultural perceptions of love. This study addresses this research gap by analyzing the use of conceptual metaphors in four selected tracks; Birds of a Feather, Wildflower, L'Amour de Ma Vie, and Blue from the album Hit Me Hard and Soft by Billie Eilish. Grounded in Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), it examines how these metaphors contribute to the expression of emotions and ideas in modern music, thereby enriching listener engagement and understanding. The findings may also enhance our understanding of how metaphor in music can facilitate emotional processing and identity construction among young listeners.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study investigates the use of conceptual metaphors in selected songs by Billie Eilish, focusing on their interpretative significance. Specifically, it aims to

- i. identify the types of conceptual metaphors present in Eilish's song lyrics and
- ii. examine how these metaphors help listeners understand the meanings conveyed.

A descriptive qualitative approach, informed by cognitive semantics, will be employed to analyze four songs from her 2024 album Hit Me Hard and Soft.

2. Literature Review

Metaphor is not merely a stylistic ornament in language but a fundamental mechanism through which humans conceptualize and communicate abstract ideas. Within the framework of cognitive semantics, metaphors are viewed as cognitive tools that structure thought, enabling individuals to understand complex or intangible experiences through more concrete and familiar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This perspective is particularly relevant in music, where metaphor shapes both lyrical expression and audience interpretation, allowing listeners to connect emotionally and imaginatively with a song's message. Drawing on the theoretical foundation of CMT, this literature review examines the role of metaphor in meaning-making, with particular emphasis on its influence in musical contexts. It also surveys past studies that have investigated the use of metaphor in song lyrics, providing a scholarly context for the present research.

2.1 Cognitive Semantics

Cognitive semantics refers to the semantic approach that focuses on experience, conceptual systems, and semantic structure. Cognitive semantics started in the 1970s as an alternative to traditional semantic theories that excluded cognitive organisation in linguistics. In contrast to this view, cognitive semantics considered linguistic meaning as an expression of conceptual structure: the nature and mental representation of all its richness and diversity, making it a distinct approach to meaning in linguistics (Evans, 2007). According to Talmy (2000), cognitive semantics study is "research on conceptual content and its 16 organisations in language". The statement emphasised that conceptual content in a cognitive semantics study was defined as a broad term that contained the meaning of thoughts. Conceptual content was defined as both ideational content and experiential content, which included emotional aspects and perceptual systems. It meant that the notion was utilised to provide more thorough information and to study experiential material in which the perceptual and emotional components of a language were discussed in greater depth. Cognitive semantics explores the link between experiences, conceptual systems, and language-embodied structures. Adherents of cognitive semantics researched conceptual structure (knowledge representation) and conceptualisation (meaning) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980); a conceptual metaphor describes how humans conceptualise their thoughts. This metaphor was dynamic since it represented user experience-based thoughts, feelings, and actions. Cognitive metaphor theory identified conceptual metaphors for analysing the metaphors. With a foundational understanding of cognitive semantics in place, the next step is to examine how metaphor functions specifically in the context of music and lyrics.

2.2 Metaphor

Metaphors are used in daily communication and it is in line with human thought and reasoning (Kovecses 2010). They are commonly perceived as being confined to the realm of literature, such as poetry, *pantun*, and other similar forms (Mohd. Helmi & Rashidin 2024). However, modern linguistic and cognitive studies have expanded this definition, suggesting that metaphors are fundamental to human thought. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but are deeply rooted in conceptual understanding. Hidden expressions, which require an inner interpretive lens for comprehension, distinctly reveal the use of metaphor (Mohammad Fadzil, Rashidin & Pelet 2024). When someone says, "Time is money," they are using a conceptual metaphor that influences how time is valued and managed. Culture fosters the idea of time as a valuable commodity. This is because in one's daily life, one frequently considers time as a valuable commodity that can be saved, invested, and borrowed. Metaphors also help to connect abstract concepts to concrete experiences, allowing people to make sense of complex or emotional ideas. This connection enables people to understand complex or emotionally charged ideas in relatable terms. Furthermore, metaphors are not limited to verbal language where they can take visual, spatial, and

even behavioural forms, demonstrating their deep meaning in human cognition and communication. They are also important in creative disciplines such as literature, music, and visual arts, allowing artists or writers to express their deep emotions, social critiques, and philosophical ideas. As a result, metaphors are much more than just beautiful language because they are cognitive tools that shape perception, impact behaviour, and promote meaning-making across all aspects of human experience.

2.2.1 The Influence of Metaphor in Music

Music, particularly in its lyrical form, is a rich and dynamic source of metaphorical language. Songwriters frequently use metaphors to express complex emotions, abstract concepts, and nuanced experiences that are difficult to describe in literal language. Artists can use metaphor to express feelings such as love, grief, fear, and hope in unique and emotionally compelling ways. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are more than just stylistic elements; they allow people to interpret one idea in terms of another. Metaphors in music improve lyrics' expressive power by bridging the gap between personal emotion and shared perception. This allows listeners to interpret and internalise the lyrics in ways that are consistent with their personal experiences. For example, Billie Eilish's "Birds of a Feather" uses the metaphor of love as a fleeting bird to capture the fragile and elusive aspect of romantic relationships, allowing listeners to relate emotionally through familiar imagery.

According to Zbikowski (2002), metaphor and music also have a particularly strong relationship because both rely on pattern detection and emotional evocation. Music has the unique potential to combine auditory aspects with metaphorical language, producing multi-layered meanings that go beyond literal interpretation. Metaphors in lyrics not only provide richness to the story, but they also increase the listener's engagement with the music by encouraging imagination and emotional introspection. For example, Zbikowski discussed how musical gestures and structures can mirror conceptual metaphors such as MOTION IS PROGRESS and EMOTIONAL CHANGE IS MOVEMENT, where shifts in melody, or rhythm correspond to metaphorical patterns of human experience. These examples illustrate how metaphor functions as both an artistic and communicative tool that enable musicians to express complex emotions and ideas in ways that are really embodied and culturally meaningful. Metaphor in music shapes the emotional and intellectual connection between artist and listener that helps offering valuable insight into the interplay of language and creativity in musical contexts.

The impact of metaphor in music extends beyond artistic expression; it shapes how listeners interpret meaning and experience emotion. Through metaphor, abstract concepts such as love, pain, freedom and identity become accessible and memorable. Studies have shown that metaphorical lyrics increase cognitive engagement and emotional connection, making songs more impactful (Gibbs, 2006). Moreover, metaphors can evoke shared cultural or personal understandings, thus fostering a sense of unity among listeners. In educational settings, metaphor in music has also been used to aid language learning and comprehension, as it encourages learners to think creatively and critically. A study on The Use of Figurative Language in the Construction of Musical Meaning: A Case Study of Three Sixth Grade General Music Classes by Emilija A. Sakadolskis (2003) has identified several pedagogical implications. The researcher applied a cognitive-linguistic analysis to examine how musical meaning is constructed through figurative language, particularly metaphors such as containment, personification, verticality, motion, and timbre. The researcher measured understanding through interpretive analysis rather than direct testing. By examining how ambiguous metaphors encouraged deeper cognitive reflection, the study assessed understanding in terms of the learners' ability to interpret and connect metaphorical meanings. In other words, "understanding" was reflected in how learners or listeners demonstrated cognitive engagement and meaning-making through the interpretation of metaphors, especially when kinaesthetic elements were integrated into the learning process. The influence of metaphor in music is, therefore, both psychological and educational.

2.3 Theoretical Foundation

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was introduced by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) through their book entitled *Metaphors We Lived By*, where they proposed that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental mechanism of thought. Conceptual metaphors are dynamic because they manifest what the user is thinking, feeling, and doing, constantly changing based on different feelings, thoughts, and experiences in each culture. According to CMT, people will also understand abstract concepts and experiences by mapping them onto more familiar or concrete experiences that are referred to as “source domains” and “target domains”. The source domain represents the familiar concept, while the target domain is the abstract idea that we aim to understand.

CMT identifies three types of conceptual metaphors which are structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors, each of which contributes uniquely to how we think, speak, and perceive the world.

2.3.1 Structural Metaphor

According to Kovecses (2002), structural metaphor is defined as a displacement of a concept to another concept to form meaning. Structural metaphors exist based on systematic correlations of everyday experiences. These metaphors provide a framework for how we think about the target concept. A well-known example is “Argument is War”. This metaphor allows people to discuss arguments using battle-related vocabulary, such as “*He attacked my point*”, “*I defended my position*”, or “*She shot down his argument*”. In this scenario, the metaphor impacts not just the content of discussions, but also how they are conducted, which is frequently combative. Structured metaphors are popular in song lyrics when emotions are shown as conflicts, journeys, or storms, impacting how listeners interpret relationships or personal challenges. This connection between musical and emotional structure is further explained by Zbikowski (2002), who emphasised that musical structure can mirror mental structure, with repetition, harmony, or tension reflecting cognitive experiences of connection or conflict. Thus, structural metaphors aid listeners in interpreting emotional meaning by connecting abstract events to familiar structured images.

2.3.2 Orientational Metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2002), orientational metaphors organise concepts according to their spatial orientation, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, or near-far. These metaphors are derived from physical and human experiences. For example, the metaphor “Happy is Up; Sad is Down” generates phrases such as “*I'm feeling up today*” or “*She's been feeling down lately*.” In music, this form of metaphor is frequently employed to portray emotional states; phrases like “*I'm sinking deep*” or “*I'm on top of the world*” are orientational and convey feelings through spatial directionality. These metaphors are strongly established in common language, allowing composers to create sympathetic images based on physical experience. Thus, orientational metaphors play an important role in how both language and music communicate emotion through embodied and spatial understanding.

2.3.3 Ontological Metaphor

Ontological metaphors represent abstract experiences, events, and emotions as concrete beings or objects according to Lakoff & Johnson (1980). This metaphor enables people to relate to, quantify, and reason about intangibles in the same way that they would objects or beings. Emotions, for example, might be depicted as containers in statements like “*I'm full of anger*”, or as tangible objects in “*She gave me her love*”. Ontological metaphors can also be found in phrases like “*I have a lot on my mind*” or “*He's carrying emotional baggage*”. Another example is the metaphorical concept of Inflation as an Entity. Inflation is lowering our standard of living. “*If there's much more inflation, we'll never survive*”, and “*We need to combat inflation*”. The term “*inflation*” can be used metaphorically to refer to, quantify, identify specific elements, consider it as a cause, act accordingly,

and assume we comprehend it. Such ontological analogies must be explored further to interact logically with our experiences. Thi Vu and Nguyen Thi Hong (2020) found that ontological metaphors frequently appear in English love-song lyrics, where abstract emotions such as love, pain, or longing are conceptualised as concrete entities, containers, or physical spaces. Through this metaphorical framing, songwriters transform intangible emotional experiences into perceptible forms that listeners can more easily visualise and relate to. For example, love may be depicted as a *place* one enters (“falling into love”) or an *object* that can be held, lost, or broken (“my heart is shattered”). Ontological metaphors function as a cognitive bridge that link abstract feelings with perceivable forms that help deepening listener’s understanding of emotional expression in music.

These three types of conceptual metaphors are not separate because they frequently overlap or combine in song lyrics to elicit complex meanings and emotional responses. Recognising these analogies allows listeners to gain a better understanding of the artist’s intentions and the song’s underlying message. As a result, CMT offers a significant lens through which to perform lyrical analysis, particularly in current music, where metaphorical language is crucial to building both personal and cultural narratives.

2.4 Previous Studies

The use of metaphor in music and song lyrics has garnered substantial academic interest due to its deep connection with human cognition, culture, and communication. Metaphors allow artists to express complex emotions and abstract concepts through familiar, concrete imagery, enabling listeners to relate to and internalize the message in a more personal way. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not just stylistic features, but fundamental to how people think and make sense of the world. In music, these conceptual metaphors become especially powerful, as they are layered with melody, rhythm, and emotion to form a multidimensional mode of expression. Through metaphor, musicians can convey vulnerability, resistance, joy, and existential doubt in ways that are both intellectually resonant and emotionally engaging.

Several scholars have examined the significance of metaphor in music. Charteris-Black (2004) examined metaphors in both political and musical contexts, focusing on how figurative language influences public perception and collective feeling. Kövecses (2010) broadened this research cross-culturally, revealing how conceptual metaphors such as love, melancholy, and identity manifest in global music trends, frequently adjusting to diverse cultural frames but retaining shared conceptual structures. Steen (2011) has researched metaphor in pop music, noting common themes including heartbreak, longing, and human growth. His studies show that metaphors are frequently used to universalise intensely personal experiences, allowing various audiences to connect emotionally with the songs. Furthermore, Lwin and Marlina (2018) focused on the instructional function of metaphors in English-language songs, demonstrating their ability to improve language acquisition by making abstract topics more accessible through vivid and relevant images.

Additionally, Pramudhita and Hanidar (2019) examined metaphorical phrases in chosen English song lyrics and concluded that metaphors are useful instruments for conveying subtle emotions that are difficult to explain using literal language. Their research found that metaphors in songs go beyond embellishment; they alter listeners’ emotional judgements and influence the perceived tone of the song. Kamaliah (2013) applied CMT to Coldplay’s lyrics to show how metaphors frame experiences of love, transformation, and existential inquiry. Johansson (2016) also contributed to this field by investigating metaphors in Leonard Cohen’s ten new songs, highlighting how figurative language enhances the philosophical and emotional content of the songs. These findings consistently support the use of metaphor as a significant linguistic and artistic tool in songwriting, strengthening emotional meaning and encouraging topic development.

While these works provide valuable insight into metaphorical usage in music, there is still a major gap when it comes to modern artists who combine creative nuance with experimental sound, especially Billie Eilish. Her most recent album, *Hit Me Hard and Soft*, stands out for its emotional

vulnerability and lyrical richness, often using metaphor to express complicated thoughts of identity, love, and development. Despite her music's growing popularity and cultural significance, Eilish's use of metaphor has received little scholarly attention. Most extant research focuses on metaphor in general pop music or on musicians from previous generations. This study aims to fill that gap by applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory to four selected songs from *Hit Me Hard and Soft*—namely, *Blue*, *L'Amour de Ma Vie*, *Birds of a Feather*, and *Wildflower*. Through this analysis, the study seeks to uncover how Eilish utilizes conceptual metaphors to express emotional depth, challenge conventional themes, and engage listeners on both cognitive and emotional levels.

In conclusion, Lakoff and Johnson's CMT provides an important analytical framework for this study since it allows for a more in depth explanation of how abstract emotions and experiences are expressed through metaphorical language in music. CMT gives the tools needed to methodically evaluate the figurative expressions found in Billie Eilish's songs by identifying and categorising them as structural, orientational, or ontological. This theoretical method enables the researcher to identify the underlying conceptual mappings that influence how listeners interpret emotional and psychological themes in songs.

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive design based on textual and thematic analysis to examine how metaphors help listeners understand song lyrics. It focuses on interpreting language, emotion, and symbolic meaning rather than quantifying metaphors. Guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the research explores how abstract concepts like love, heartbreak, vulnerability, and identity are expressed metaphorically, revealing underlying conceptual structures. The study analyzes four songs from Billie Eilish's third studio album *Hit Me Hard and Soft* (2024)—*Birds of a Feather*, *Wildflower*, *Blue*, and *L'Amour de Ma Vie*—selected for their thematic richness, emotional depth, and strong use of metaphors. Their popularity and streaming success further justify their inclusion, with *Birds of a Feather* becoming the fastest song in Spotify history to surpass 2.7 billion streams (Reddit, 2025). The album covered themes such as romance, individuality, vulnerability, and detachment, and these songs provide diverse material for exploring conceptual metaphors. Lyrics were sourced from official and verified platforms, with analysis limited to textual content for consistency and focus.

The study used a self-developed metaphor-identification protocol adapted from the Pragglejaz Group's (2007) Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to systematically analyse song lyrics for metaphorical expressions. Following MIP, the researcher compared contextual meanings with basic meanings to identify metaphors and then determined source and target domains using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Guided by CMT, the analysis involves reading each song's lyrics to identify metaphorical expressions, determining their source-target domain mappings, and classifying them based on established metaphor types (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kovecses, 2010). To triangulate the data, a questionnaire-based participant analysis was incorporated: a purposive sample of participants (10 undergraduate students who were fluent in English) were asked to read the same song excerpts and mark phrases they perceived as metaphorical, provide the contextual meaning, and suggest source-target mappings. Participant responses were compared with the researcher's MIP/CMT-based categorizations to check consistency in metaphor detection.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the metaphorical expressions identified in the lyrics of the selected songs. The identification process was guided by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), which involved analyzing the contextual meaning of words and comparing them to their basic meaning. This section addresses two research objectives for this study which are identifying the types of conceptual metaphors in Billie Eilish's songs and analyzing how listeners interpret those metaphors to derive meaning.

4.1 Research Question 1: Metaphor Identification and Categorization in Selected Songs

This section focuses on the identification and categorization of metaphors in the lyrics of the four chosen songs: *Birds of a Feather*, *Wildflower*, *L'Amour de Ma Vie*, and *Blue*. The analysis follows the MIP developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and applies the framework of CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to classify each metaphor into ontological, structural, or orientational type.

4.1.1 Birds of a Feather by Billie Eilish

The song *Birds of a Feather* employs metaphorical language to express deep emotional connection, unity, vulnerability, and the inevitability of life and death. The lyrics contain metaphors that reflect the intensity of romantic attachment, the fear of separation, and the emotional weight of words and promises. The table below categorizes the metaphors based on their conceptual mappings and metaphor types:

Table 4.1.1
Metaphors Identification for Birds of a Feather by Billie Eilish

Lyric Line (Excerpt)	Keywords	Conceptual Metaphor	Type
Birds of a feather, we should stick together	Birds of a feather	SIMILARITY IS PROXIMITY / PEOPLE ARE BIRDS	Structural
I want you to stay / Till I'm in the grave	Till I'm in the grave	LIFE IS A JOURNEY / DEATH IS A DESTINATION	Ontological
Til I rot away, dead and buried / Til I'm in the casket you carry	Rot, casket	LIFE IS A JOURNEY / DEATH IS FINAL RESTING PLACE	Ontological
If I'm turning blue, please don't save me	Turning blue	LIFE IS A PHYSICAL STATE/ DEATH IS LOSS OF COLOUR	Ontological
Can't change the weather, might not be forever	Change the weather	LIFE EVENTS ARE WEATHER	Ontological
You and I / 'til the day we die	'til the day we die	LIFE IS A JOURNEY / DEATH IS A TIME BOUNDARY	Ontological
Til the day that I die / Til the light leaves my eyes	Light leaves eyes	LIFE IS LIGHT / DEATH IS DARKNESS	Ontological
Nothing left to lose without my baby	Nothing to lose	RELATIONSHIP IS A POSSESSION	Ontological
I knew you in another life	Another life	LIFE IS A CYCLE / REINCARNATION AS A JOURNEY	Ontological
Your mind's polluted	Mind polluted	MIND IS A CONTAINER / IDEAS ARE SUBSTANCES	Ontological

4.1.2 Wildflower by Billie Eilish

The lyrics of *Wildflower* contain several metaphorical expressions that convey themes of natural beauty, emotional detachment, and individuality. The table below presents the metaphorical expressions found in the song:

Table 4.1.2
Metaphors Identification for Wildflower by Billie Eilish

Lyric (Excerpt)	Keywords	Conceptual Metaphor	Type
You are a wild flower	You are a wild flower	PEOPLE ARE PLANTS	Ontological
Things fall apart, and time breaks your heart	Fall apart, breaks your heart	EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS / HEART IS FRAGILE OBJECT	Ontological
I see her in the back of my mind all the time	Back of my mind	MIND IS A CONTAINER / MEMORIES ARE OBJECTS INSIDE	Ontological
Like a fever, like I'm burning alive	Fever, burning alive	EMOTIONS ARE HEAT/FIRE	Structural
Did I cross the line?	Cross the line	ACTIONS ARE MOVEMENTS ACROSS BOUNDARIES	Orientational
Life moves so fast	Life moves fast	LIFE IS A JOURNEY/MOVEMENT	Structural
Feels like a fever, like I'm burning alive	Fever, burning	EMOTIONS ARE HEAT/FIRE	Structural
You say no one knows you so well / But every time you touch me, I just wonder how she felt	Touch, wonder how she felt	EMOTIONAL KNOWLEDGE IS PHYSICAL TOUCH	Ontological
Valentine's Day, crying in the hotel	Crying in hotel	EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS	Ontological
Kept it to myself	Kept it to myself	EMOTIONS ARE OBJECTS THAT CAN BE CONTAINED	Ontological

4.1.3 L'Amour De Ma Vie (The Love of My Life) by Billie Eilish

The song *L'Amour de Ma Vie* explores themes of love, detachment, regret, and emotional distance. The metaphors used in this song express the past significance of a relationship and the shift in emotional closeness through tangible imagery such as clothing, physical space, and movement. These metaphorical expressions highlight the speaker's complex emotional journey and identity in the aftermath of a lost connection.

Table 4.1.3*Metaphors Identification for L'Amour de Ma Vie by Billie Eilish*

Line (Key Excerpt)	Keywords	Metaphorical Expression	Type
You were the love of my life	Love of my life	LOVE IS A UNIQUE TREASURE	Ontological
But you were not mine	Not mine	LOVE IS POSSESSION / OWNERSHIP	Ontological
You wanted to keep it like somethin' you found	Keep it, something you found	RELATIONSHIP IS AN OBJECT	Ontological
It's over now	Over	RELATIONSHIP IS A CONTAINER / EVENT WITH A BOUNDARY	Ontological
Caught on camera	Camera	EVENTS ARE OBJECTS THAT CAN BE CAPTURED	Ontological
Felt sorry for you when I looked in your eyes	Eyes	EYES ARE CONTAINERS OF EMOTION	Ontological
For making me feel like it'd kill you if I tried to leave	Kill you if I leave	EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL INJURY OR DEATH	Ontological
Then you moved on immediately	Moved on	EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS	Ontological

4.1.4 Blue by Billie Eilish

In *Blue*, metaphors are used to explore deep emotional pain, identity, and the sensation of being overwhelmed by sadness. The recurring use of colour, water, and possession reflects the emotional weight of the lyrics and the internal conflict faced by the speaker. These metaphors portray sorrow as something that surrounds, consumes, and defines the speaker's state of being.

Table 4.1.4*Table Metaphors Identification for Blue by Billie Eilish*

Line (Key Excerpt)	Keywords	Metaphorical Expression	Type
I try to live in black and white	Black and white	EMOTIONS ARE COLORS/ LIFE IS COLOR	Structural
But I'm so blue	Blue	SADNESS IS BLUE/ EMOTIONS ARE COLORS	Ontological
Birds of a feather, now I'm ashamed	Birds of a feather	PEOPLE ARE BIRDS / SIMILARITY IS PROXIMITY	Structural
A bird in a cage, thought you were made for me	Bird in a cage	EMOTIONAL CONFINEMENT IS PHYSICAL CONFINEMENT	Ontological
You were born bluer than a butterfly	Bluer than butterfly	IDENTITY IS COLOR / INNATE SADNESS IS BLUE	Ontological
Colder than your father's	Colder, eyes	EMOTIONS ARE TEMPERATURE /	Ontological

eyes		COLDNESS IS EMOTIONAL DISTANCE	
Victim of your father's plans to rule the world	Rule the world	LIFE IS A BATTLEFIELD / CONTROL IS POWER	Structural
Born blameless, grew up famous too / Just a baby born blue	Born blue	INNATE EMOTION IS COLOR	Ontological
It's over now	Over	RELATIONSHIP IS A CONTAINER / EVENT WITH A BOUNDARY	Ontological

Following Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classification, the identified metaphors were categorised into three main types: structural, orientational, and ontological. These categories provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how metaphorical expressions in the lyrics shape listeners' engagement with the songs.

4.2 Research Question 2: How these conceptual metaphors help listeners interpret meaning, emotion, and theme in the selected songs

Drawing upon the researcher's analysis, common CMT and insights from pilot study responses, each metaphor is examined in terms of its interpretive function in communicating emotion and meaning. Conceptual metaphors serve as cognitive tools that enable listeners to comprehend abstract emotional experiences by mapping them onto familiar physical or natural domains, thus enhancing both their understanding and emotional connection to the songs.

4.2.1 Birds of a Feather

"Birds of Feather" was Billie's fourth single from her album "Hit Me Hard and Soft" , which was released on May 17, 2024 by Darkroom and Interscope Records.

The first line analysed is "*Birds of a feather, we should stick together*" The phrase "*birds of a feather*" uses the structural metaphor PEOPLE ARE BIRDS, which is based on the common idiom that those who are similar belong together. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define structural metaphors as the use of one concept to structure another; in this case, human similarity is structured using bird behaviour. The phrase "*stick together*" exemplifies the metaphor Emotional Closeness is Physical Attachment, which expresses the idea that emotional unity is felt as physical bonds. This image conveys the concept of inseparability, of two people who are so emotionally connected that they metaphorically cling to one another.

The line "*I want you to stay/Til I'm in the grave*" reflects the ontological metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY/DEATH IS A DESTINATION, as defined by Lakoff and Turner (1989). Here, love is portrayed as a lifelong commitment that lasts until the ultimate end of human life; death. This aligns with the concept that abstract ideas such as time and life are understood in terms of physical movement or travel. The metaphor constructs concept of life as a path, and the presence of a loved one is imagined as companionship throughout this journey, making the promise of love feel permanent and rooted in existential continuity.

The phrase "*Til I rot away, dead and buried / 'Til I'm in the casket you carry*" expands on this metaphor, portraying death as the ultimate resting place and final stage of existence. The mention of physical deterioration and burial heightens the notion of mortality, implying the speaker's desire to remain linked to the lover even after death.

The sentence "*If you go, I'm going too*" embodies the ontological metaphor LOVE IS COMPANIONSHIP / SHARED DESTINY, in which the fates of both lovers are connected. This metaphor represents the speaker's opinion that their existence is incomplete without their spouse, and that separation, even via death, is unthinkable.

The metaphor LIFE IS A PHYSICAL STATE/DEATH IS LOSS OF COLOUR in "*If I'm*

turning blue, please don't save me" depicts life and death through physiological changes, with the loss of life corresponding to a fading of colour in the body. This emphasises the speaker's acceptance of death if love is lost, which reveals emotional dependence.

The phrase "*Nothing left to lose without my baby*" uses the metaphor RELATIONSHIP IS A POSSESSION to depict love as a valuable possession that can be lost. According to the Pragglejaz Group (2007), metaphor identification is recognising when abstract emotions are conceptualised as physical beings or objects and in this case, love is imagined as something that can be held and hence lost, emphasizing the speaker's experience of emptiness.

The phrase "*we should stick together*" employs the conceptual metaphor UNITY IS PHYSICAL ATTACHMENT, which is classified as an ontological metaphor. In this metaphor, emotional closeness and interpersonal unity are conceptualized through the language of physical adhesion, suggesting that relational bonds are tangible and durable. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), ontological metaphors enable individuals to understand abstract experiences such as unity or loyalty by framing them as concrete objects or physical entities. The use of the verb "*stick*" implies a level of attachment that is not easily undone, reinforcing the speaker's desire for long-term connection and inseparability. This allows listeners to visualize emotional commitment as something that binds people together physically and makes the concept of unity more accessible and emotionally resonant.

In the line "*You and I/Till the day we die,*" the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY/DEATH IS A TIME BOUNDARY is revisited. This metaphor emphasises the experience of love as a shared path that ends only in death, reinforcing the metaphorical use of time and space to express emotional endurance. The speaker sees love as something that follows the course of life, giving the relationship gravity and permanence.

The phrase "*I knew you in another life*" presents the metaphor LIFE IS A CYCLE / REINCARNATION AS A JOURNEY, which implies that relationships continue throughout lifetime. Such metaphors clarify the abstract concept of reincarnation by framing it as a recurring journey or cycle (Lakoff & Turner, 1989).

Finally, "*Your mind's polluted*" uses an ontological metaphor, MIND IS A CONTAINER / IDEAS ARE SUBSTANCES, which depicts the mind as a space that can be "polluted" by unpleasant thoughts. According to the Pragglejaz Group (2007), this illustrates how abstract mental states are perceived through physical contamination, strengthening the notion of corrupted or problematic thinking.

Song 2: *Wildflower*

The lyric "*You're a wildflower*" introduces the ontological metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, which views people as living organisms that grow organically. Wildflowers, unlike cultivated flowers, symbolise freedom, resilience, and natural beauty. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that ontological metaphors help structure identity and development in concrete terms. In this context, the metaphor implies that the subject's beauty stems not from social conformity, but from her authenticity and untamed nature.

The lyric "*Things fall apart, and time breaks your heart*" introduces the ontological metaphor EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS / HEART IS A FRAGILE OBJECT, where emotional pain is conceptualized as the literal breaking or falling apart of something solid. In this context, the heart symbolizes emotional well being, and its breaking signifies profound sadness or emotional damage. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that such ontological metaphors allow abstract feelings to be understood in terms of concrete, physical experiences, making the pain of lost love more relatable to listeners.

The setting of "*Valentine's Day, crying in the hotel*" uses the ontological metaphor EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS, which connects emotional experiences to physical locations. The hotel becomes a symbol of misery and loneliness, confirming the notion that particular

sites have emotional meaning. This geographical metaphor helps listeners visualise the scenario and the intensity of the speaker's loneliness and anguish.

The phrase "*I see her in the back of my mind all the time*" employs the ontological metaphor MIND IS A CONTAINER / MEMORIES ARE OBJECTS INSIDE, where the mind is imagined as a physical space containing stored memories or thoughts. The use of "back" suggests that these memories, although not consciously focused on, remain present and influence the speaker's emotions. This metaphor helps listeners conceptualize the intrusive and lingering nature of past relationships in a tangible way.

The ontological metaphor EMOTIONAL KNOWLEDGE IS PHYSICAL TOUCH is used in the line "*You say no one knows you so well / But every time you touch me, I just wonder how she felt*". Emotional connection and understanding are described by the act of touching, a bodily sense. The speaker's preoccupation with the past companion is projected onto current physical touch, combining emotional knowledge and sensory experience to convey insecurity and comparison.

"Kept it to myself" reflects the ontological metaphor EMOTIONS ARE OBJECTS THAT CAN BE CONTAINED, which conceptualises feelings as tangible entities that can be stored or concealed. This metaphor conveys the speaker's restraint and unwillingness to express emotional pain, rendering the experience of repression more comprehensible through the notion of physical containment.

The line "*Like a fever, like I'm burning alive*" reflects the structural metaphor EMOTIONS ARE HEAT/FIRE, framing emotional discomfort, jealousy, or longing as intense heat or burning sensations. According to Kövecses (2010), the use of heat metaphors is common in describing emotional intensity because heat is universally felt and strongly associated with states of agitation or arousal. This metaphor thus conveys the overwhelming, consuming quality of the speaker's feelings.

The expression "*Life moves so fast*" draws upon the structural metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY/MOVEMENT, where life is understood as an entity moving along a path or timeline. The speed at which life "moves" suggests the fleeting nature of experiences and the difficulty of holding on to moments or relationships. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that such journey metaphors help people make sense of life's temporal flow by linking it to physical travel. The repetition of "*Feels like a fever, like I'm burning alive*" supports the structural metaphor EMOTIONS ARE HEAT/FIRE, which was previously examined. The singer's emotional torment is heightened by the recurring metaphor, which depicts envy and distrust as an untamed inner fire that eats from within.

Finally, the rhetorical question "*Did I cross the line?*" represents the orientational metaphor ACTIONS ARE MOVEMENTS ACROSS BOUNDARIES, where acceptable behaviour is imagined as being within boundaries or limits. Crossing this metaphorical line suggests that the speaker fears having overstepped social or moral expectations in the relationship. This spatial metaphor allows the listener to understand guilt and uncertainty as a matter of direction and position.

Song 3: *L'Amour De Ma Vie (The Love of My Life)*

The phrase "*You were the love of my life*" contains the ontological metaphor LOVE IS A UNIQUE TREASURE, which depicts love as a rare and valuable possession. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), ontological metaphors allow abstract concepts to be treated as separate entities. In this lyric, love is more than just an emotion; it is an object of great value that emphasizes the speaker's strong emotional investment. The phrase also elevates the romantic bond and emphasizes its loss.

This is juxtaposed with the sentence "*But you were not mine*" which reflects the metaphor LOVE IS POSSESSION/OWNERSHIP, which depicts love as an object that can be claimed or possessed. The lack of ownership in this metaphor implies emotional imbalance and unmet expectations in the connection, emphasising the speaker's sense of detachment. As noted by Kövecses (2010), such possession metaphors express control, dependency, or lack thereof in intimate bonds.

In the lyric "*You wanted to keep it like somethin' you found*", the metaphor RELATIONSHIP

IS AN OBJECT emerges, reducing the relationship to a material possession that is discovered, held, and discarded when no longer needed. This expresses the speaker's recognition of being devalued, as the partner regards the relationship as a non-precious thing rather than a genuine connection. According to the Pragglejaz Group (2007), metaphor identification necessitates recognising when abstract sensations (such as love) are viewed as real, manipulable things.

The phrase "*It's over now*" uses the metaphor RELATIONSHIP IS A CONTAINER / EVENT WITH A BOUNDARY, in which the relationship is envisioned as an enclosed place or event with a definite outcome. This metaphor signals the emotional closure of the romantic chapter, aligning with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) observation that people conceptualize events as bounded spaces or periods that can be entered or ended.

The metaphor "*Caught on camera*" is clear as EVENTS ARE OBJECTS THAT CAN BE CAPTURED. Experiences are viewed as things that can be preserved in time, recorded, and replayed, implying that private moments have been made public or exposed. This is consistent with Kövecses' (2010) observation that memory and experience are frequently symbolically organised as visual or material records.

The phrase "*felt sorry for you when I looked in your eyes*" reflects the metaphor EYES CONTAIN EMOTION, depicting the eyes as windows into a person's inner state. The speaker accesses the partner's feelings through their gaze, a concept that aids listeners in understanding nonverbal emotional communication. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), bodily containers are commonly utilized in metaphors to depict inner feelings.

The metaphor EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL INJURY OR DEATH appears in "*For making me feel like it'd kill you if I tried to leave*", comparing emotional suffering with deadly harm. This heightens the impact of the partner's deceitful actions by presenting the emotional weight as possibly deadly. Kövecses (2010) also describes how such severe metaphors help to portray the severity of psychological pressure.

Finally, the phrase "*Then you moved on immediately*" uses the concept EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS, which depicts emotional recovery as leaving one mental or emotional area and entering another. This indicates detachment and the partner's apparent ease in switching to a different emotional state, emphasizing the speaker's sense of betrayal and disbelief.

Song 4: *Blue*

The opening line "*I try to live in black and white*" refers to the metaphor EMOTIONS ARE COLORS/LIFE IS COLOUR, which represents emotional simplicity using binary tones. Living in "*black and white*" implies a desire for emotional clarity, control, or balance. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this metaphor structures internal states through visual perception, transforming psychological confusion into a simple concept.

The phrase "*But I'm so blue*" extends the theme by employing the metaphor SADNESS IS BLUE, which is both culturally embedded and emotionally accessible. Blue evokes melancholy and loneliness that gives listeners a clear picture of the speaker's sadness. As Damiano et al. (2023) note, "*sadness is more blue ...*" which aligns with the use of blue to evoke melancholy. Kövecses (2010) points out that colour metaphors are also frequently used to communicate emotional states, which improves relatability and emotional precision.

The statement "*Birds of a feather, now I'm ashamed*" is based on the structural metaphor PEOPLE ARE BIRDS / SIMILARITY IS PROXIMITY, which was previously seen in Birds of a Feather. However, this marks a reversal of the earlier positive connection, as the lyric reveals the speaker's discomfort with emotional closeness. The phrase "*now I'm ashamed*" expresses regret over their shared similarity or bond. This shift suggests that what once symbolized harmony has now become a source of sorrow, highlighting the fragility of emotional attachment.

The line “*A bird in a cage, thought you were made for me*” employs the metaphor LOVE IS CAPTIVITY, portraying the relationship as a form of imprisonment that implies constraint, loss of independence, and emotional suffocation. This aligns with Shi & Khoo (2023) who found that metaphors of containment and confinement (e.g., “trapped”, “caged”) are frequently used by individuals to express emotional helplessness and relational restriction.

The line “*You were born bluer than a butterfly*” uses the metaphor IDENTITY IS COLOR / INNATE SADNESS IS BLUE, suggesting that sadness is not merely an emotional reaction but an inborn characteristic of the partner’s identity. A study by Mohammad & Kiritchenko, 2022 notes that “metaphoric language frequently uses colour as a vehicle for emotion: familiar English metaphors include “feeling blue” and it underscores how the colour blue has become culturally coded for sadness or melancholic identity. This metaphor allows listeners to perceive sadness as inherent, delicate, and fragile, much like a butterfly.

In line “*Colder than your father’s eyes*” demonstrates the metaphor EMOTIONS ARE TEMPERATURE / COLDNESS IS EMOTIONAL DISTANCE, linking the absence of warmth or empathy to physical coldness. As Kövecses (2010) explains, temperature metaphors are often used to convey degrees of emotional connection or detachment. By referring to the father’s coldness, the lyric implies that emotional detachment may be learned, reflecting generational distance and the difficulty of expressing affection.

The metaphor LIFE IS A BATTLEFIELD / CONTROL IS POWER is evident in the line “Victim of your father’s plans to rule the world.” Here, the speaker portrays love as a site of ongoing struggle, where both individuals compete for dominance and control. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) view that conflict metaphors structure how people conceptualize power dynamics and emotional negotiation within relationships. This interpretation is supported by Dornbrook (2022), who argues that “violent love metaphors have negative impacts on real life relationships and can be used to ... establish masculinization, power, and dominance”.

The phrase “*Born blameless, grew up famous too / Just a baby born blue*” emphasises the concept INNATE EMOTION IS COLOUR, in which the colour blue represents melancholy from birth. The Pragglejaz Group (2007) defines metaphor identification as recognising when an abstract attribute like grief is communicated through a tangible, visual domain such as colour.

Finally, “*It’s over now*” employs the metaphor RELATIONSHIP IS A CONTAINER / EVENT WITH A BOUNDARY, signifying the relationship as an enclosed, bounded period of life that has concluded. This spatial metaphor, described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), helps listeners understand the emotional process of closure and separation.

In conclusion, this section has met research objectives by identifying and classifying a diverse range of conceptual metaphors. The findings confirm Billie Eilish’s deliberate and impactful use of metaphors in her lyrics. The metaphors identified in the Hit Me Hard and Soft songs were more than just stylistic devices because they were essential mechanisms for communicating complex emotional states. Grounded in the principles of CMT, these expressions allowed abstract feelings to be mapped onto concrete, sensory, or spatial experiences and also enhanced listener comprehension and emotional engagement. It has been demonstrated that through metaphors, themes such as romantic connection, emotional growth, grief, and self-worth were made more vivid and relatable. The metaphors helped bridge the gap between personal expression and public understanding, reinforcing the idea that metaphor serves as a fundamental part of how individuals experience and interpret the world.

5. Conclusion

This study has identified, categorized, and analyzed various metaphorical expressions present in the selected lyrics. These expressions were further classified into three major types of conceptual metaphors: ontological, structural, and orientational. Ontological metaphors were most frequently

used, demonstrating their significance in conceptualising abstract emotions such as love, desire, regret, and vulnerability as tangible sensations or concrete entities. These metaphors allow listeners to make sense of complex emotions by picturing them as physical spaces, objects, or enclosed beings. Structural metaphors also played a key role in shaping emotional experiences through familiar domains such as journeys, goods, and natural elements, offering listeners an organised framework for understanding emotional development, relationship changes, and self-identity. Although less common, orientational metaphors effectively conveyed emotional intensity and distance through spatial orientation, representing shifts in emotional closeness or separation.

The findings align with Aleshinskaya's (2020) argument that song lyrics function not only as poetic expressions but also as a means for individuals to process emotions and make sense of their experiences. By illustrating how Billie Eilish's use of conceptual metaphors bridges deeply personal feelings with universally shared meanings, this study underscores how metaphorical language in her lyrics serves both cognitive and artistic functions, deepening emotional engagement and interpretive understanding. Data triangulation through participant responses further validated these findings, as participants' analyses of the lyrics showed consistent identification and interpretation patterns with the researcher's results. This convergence reinforces the reliability of the analysis and highlights the crucial role of conceptual metaphors in enhancing the emotional depth, resonance, and thematic richness of contemporary popular music lyrics.

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