



FROM LYRICS TO EMPATHY: MEASURING EMOTIONAL VALUES AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF JUSTIN BIEBER'S LONELY

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Abstract

This study examines how university students interpret the emotional qualities in Justin Bieber's 2020 song "Lonely" and explores how linguistic and musical components influence recommendation intentions and sympathetic reactions. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative language analysis of the song's lyrics with quantitative survey data from 35 Indonesian university students. Eleven emotional and perceptual factors, such as grief, empathy, inspiration, authenticity, perspective change, lyrics-music effectiveness, melody contribution, and propensity to suggest, were measured on a 5-point Likert scale by participants in an online survey. According to the results, 71.4% of students rated authenticity as a 4 or 5, making it the most strongly perceived emotional value ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.92$). This was followed by inspiration ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.15$), melancholy ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.06$), and empathy ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.14$). Correlation analysis showed strong positive correlations between authenticity and empathy ($r = 0.58$), melancholy and empathy ($r = 0.61$), empathy and viewpoint change ($r = 0.53$), and lyrics-music effectiveness and recommendation likelihood ($r = 0.55$). 65.7% of students rated the likelihood of recommending as 4 or 5, with a mean score of 4.00 ($SD = 1.08$). These results show that "Lonely" is a linguistically rich emotional text that uses authenticity as the primary motivator of empathic involvement, converting feelings of loneliness into shared empathy. With practical implications for music education, music therapy, songwriting, and the music industry, the study makes an empirical contribution to affective linguistics and music psychology by offering a repeatable methodology for assessing emotional reactions to pop songs.

Keywords: Authenticity, Empathy, Loneliness, Lyrics, Music Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that music is a universal language that can communicate profound human feelings across cultural divides. Popular music has developed over the past few decades into a potent tool for social interaction, emotional expression, and young development (Annet, 2024). For young people navigating mental health issues and identity formation in the digital age, song lyrics in particular are particularly relevant as accessible and meaningful linguistic artifacts that capture complex emotions like loneliness, vulnerability, and hope (Aini et al., 2025; Barete et al., 2024). Lyrical content has been shown to influence how listeners process emotions, comprehend others' viewpoints, and develop empathy (Vuoskoski et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2015). Nonetheless, there is still a significant gap between empirical assessments of how audiences truly react to these works and textual analyses of pop songs.

There are still few systematic language examinations of modern pop lyrics, especially those that deal with loneliness, vulnerability, and the psychological effects of celebrity. According to a recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Marín-Liébaná & Ibias (2025), lyric analysis has a significant positive impact on students' emotional learning and attitudinal change. However, most studies still cannot connect textual elements to real listener responses, necessitating more comprehensive empirical research in this field. Similarly, Tu & Fu (2024) found that students' subjective well-being is

positively correlated with music empathy, which is defined as the capacity to react to and comprehend the emotional experiences communicated through music, with prosocial tendencies and self-esteem acting as parallel mediators. Their results confirm that music serves as a vehicle for identity building, perspective-taking, and emotional contagion in addition to being an aural input.

Even though there is increasing multidisciplinary interest in music and emotion, the research that has been done so far mostly falls into two categories (Eerola & Vuoskoski, 2013). The first camp (e.g., Chin & Gunawan, 2024; Shinta Pristianingrum & Rini Damayanti, 2021) measures listener reactions but performs in-depth linguistic or semiotic study of lyrics. The second examines how music affects people generally, although it often does not connect reactions to specific lyrical or melodic elements (e.g., He, 2025). Few studies have effectively combined the two methods to measure how fundamental characteristics like perceived genuineness, melancholy, and inspiration shape empathetic involvement, particularly for modern pop songs that delve into the unseen challenges of public life. Additionally, no previous study has explicitly linked the results to useful educational applications or rigorously examined the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy along with associated values in response to a single song. This results in a significant disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical pedagogical application (Cuervo & Campayo, 2024).

To fill these gaps, the current study presents an integrative analysis of Justin Bieber's 2020 song "Lonely," a well-known piece that candidly examines the paradox of fame: high public visibility combined with extreme private seclusion. The study shows that the song serves as a linguistically rich emotional text that converts individual vulnerability into mutual understanding using questionnaire data from 35 university students. It posits that both lyrical content and musical arrangement collaborate to promote introspection and a shift in viewpoint, and that perceived authenticity becomes a major factor in empathy, inspiration, and positive recommendation. In doing so, this study provides convincing proof that popular music can function as a valid and useful instrument for emotional learning in educational settings.

Authenticity was frequently linked to "roots" music and contrasted with commercial pop in conventional music criticism; however, Bennett & Waksman (2015) note that this framework has drastically changed in the digital age. Listeners today expect musicians to connect honestly, reveal vulnerability, and present themselves as genuine individuals rather than polished industry personalities; they no longer associate authenticity solely with non-commercial beginnings. Additionally, Lecamwasam & Chaudhuri (2025) discovered that even when musical characteristics are almost the same, listeners link perceived authenticity with "humanness" and greater emotional resonance; however, their study only looked at instrumental music, ignoring lyrical contributions. Empirically, showed that perceived authenticity has a significant impact on emotional resonance: participants rated work they thought was human-created as more emotionally impactful, attributing this quality to perceived sincerity and imperfection rather than technical polish.

The order of this paper is as follows. It begins by reviewing key theoretical ideas about authenticity, affective linguistics, music empathy, and the fusion of music and lyrics. The study's specific goals are then described, along with the mixed-methods research design, data-gathering techniques, and analytical strategies. Descriptive statistics and correlation data are presented in the following sections, after which the results are discussed in light of previous research. The article's conclusion highlights theoretical advancements, real-world applications for mental health and education, and limitations along with suggestions for further research.

Affective linguistics (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff; & Johnson, 1980), music empathy (Clarke; et al., 2015; Greenberg et al., 2015), authenticity (defined as perceived sincerity and genuineness in artistic expression in the digital era; Alleyne, 2024; Windsor & Puy, 2026), and the thematic and linguistic construction of loneliness in popular music (Mustakim & Wibowo, 2026; Sulistyowati & Jati, 2023). Together, these ideas offer a framework for comprehending how *Lonely*'s words and structure convey meaning, how listeners understand and experience those messages, and why some aspects of the song resonate more strongly than others.

First-person narrative and vulnerable disclosure that foster intimacy and encourage identification; conceptual metaphors that map abstract emotions onto concrete experiences (e.g., framing sadness as a physical weight); and lyrical tone and musical elements like tempo, key, and arrangement, where emotional congruence between words and sound amplifies resonance, are some of the interconnected processes that underlie the mechanisms through which song lyrics produce emotional impact (Batthyany & Mokoena, 2025; Stwora, 2025). These mechanisms work in tandem with more general listener dynamics, such as how individual experiences, preconceived notions, and preconceived notions about musicians influence whether listeners relate to a song's message, relate it to their own lives, or are inspired to embrace new viewpoints.

This study's two main goals are to build on this body of work. The first goal is to determine and quantify the emotional values that university students detect in the lyrics of *Lonely*, such as melancholy, empathy, inspiration, and authenticity. With a focus on implications for educational practice and youth development, the second goal is to assess how much the song's linguistic and musical components influence students' sympathetic reactions, desire to endorse the work, and perspective shift.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative survey-based data collection and qualitative linguistic analysis. The quantitative component measures emotional values (sadness, empathy, inspiration, authenticity, perspective change, melodic contribution, and recommendation likelihood) reported by 35 university students in Indonesia after listening to Justin Bieber's "*Lonely*." In contrast, the qualitative component analyzes the song's lyrics to identify lexical,

metaphorical, and narrative features contributing to these emotional responses. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms consisting of 11 questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale in Indonesian. The questionnaire measured 11 variables: sadness, empathy, reflection, connection to lyrics, inspiration, emotional resonance, authenticity, perspective change, lyrics-music effectiveness, melody contribution, and likelihood to recommend the song.

The data collection procedure involved preparing the online questionnaire, distributing it through digital communication channels, instructing participants to listen to “Lonely” via a provided link, and collecting responses automatically through Google Forms. Of the 35 responses received, 35 were identified as complete and valid, with data collection occurring between January 21 and January 23, 2025. For data analysis, qualitative analysis employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Systemic Functional Linguistics to identify linguistic features including first-person pronouns, conceptual metaphors, contrastive structures, repetition, negative emotional vocabulary, and rhetorical questions. Quantitative analysis employs descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), frequency distributions (counts and percentages), and Pearson's correlation analysis to examine relationships between variables such as authenticity and empathy, sadness and empathy, empathy and perspective change, lyrics-music effectiveness and recommendation likelihood, and melody contribution and empathy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Results

Emotional Values Perceived by Students

To provide a comprehensive overview of all emotional values measured in this study, Table 1 below summarizes the descriptive statistics for each variable, including the mean, standard deviation, and the percentage of participants who rated each emotional value as high (scores 4 or 5) or low (scores 1 or 2).

Table 1. Summary of Descriptive Statistics for All Emotional Values

Emotional Value	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	% High (4 or 5)	% Low (1 or 2)
Authenticity	4.03	0.92	71.4%	8.6%
Inspiration	3.49	1.15	54.3%	20.0%
Sadness	3.37	1.06	45.8%	22.9%
Empathy	3.34	1.14	42.9%	22.8%
Reflection	3.31	0.96	45.7%	20.0%
Connection to Lyrics	3.14	1.17	40.0%	31.4%

With the highest mean score ($M = 4.03$), the highest percentage of high ratings (71.4%), the lowest percentage of low ratings (8.6%), and the second-lowest standard deviation ($SD = 0.92$), authenticity stands out as the most strongly perceived emotional value, as shown in Table 1. With a

mean score of 3.49 and 54.3% of participants rating it as high, inspiration comes in second, significantly outperforming both melancholy and empathy. This shows that, ironically, listening to a candid revelation of loneliness might inspire rather than depress listeners. Similar high-rating percentages (45.8% and 42.9%) and nearly identical mean scores (3.37 and 3.34, respectively) for sadness and empathy demonstrate that these two emotional values co-occur in listeners and support the theory of emotional contagion, which holds that feeling sad from the lyrics encourages empathy toward the artist. With a mean of 3.31 and the lowest standard deviation (0.96), reflection demonstrates the highest degree of agreement among participants that the music promotes more in-depth reflection. Lastly, connection to lyrics has the highest standard deviation (1.17) and the lowest mean score (3.14), indicating significant variation in how personally relatable students found the lyrics, with the particular experience of “fame-based loneliness” possibly being less universally relatable to college students.

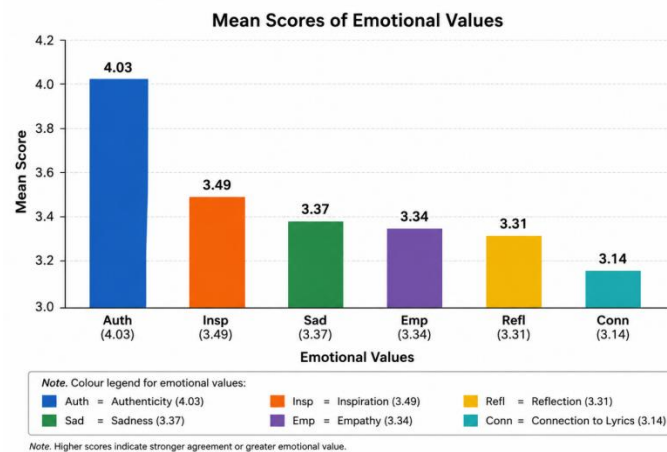


Figure 1. Mean Comparison of All Emotional Values

Figure 1 provides a visual comparison of the mean scores for all six emotional values, clearly illustrating that authenticity stands out as the dominant emotional value perceived by students, followed by inspiration, while connection to lyrics ranks lowest. The figure confirms the hierarchy of emotional responses, with authenticity substantially outperforming all other variables, and demonstrates the relatively close clustering of sadness, empathy, and reflection around the 3.3 to 3.4 range.

Contribution of Linguistic and Musical Elements to Empathy and Recommendation Likelihood

To provide a comprehensive overview of all correlation results, Table 2 below summarizes the correlation coefficients, strength of relationships, and significance levels for all correlation pairs analyzed in this study.

Table 2. Summary of Correlation Analysis

Correlation Pair	Correlation (r)	Strength	Significance
Sadness → Empathy	0.61	Strong	$p < 0.01$

Authenticity → Empathy	0.58	Strong	$p < 0.01$
Lyrics-Music Effectiveness → Likelihood to Recommend	0.55	Strong	$p < 0.01$
Empathy → Perspective Change	0.53	Strong	$p < 0.01$
Authenticity → Likelihood to Recommend	0.52	Strong	$p < 0.01$
Reflection → Perspective Change	0.51	Strong	$p < 0.01$
Lyrics-Music Effectiveness → Empathy	0.49	Moderate-Strong	$p < 0.01$
Connection to Lyrics → Empathy	0.48	Moderate	$p < 0.01$
Melody Contribution → Empathy	0.44	Moderate	$p < 0.01$
Sadness → Inspiration	0.35	Moderate	$p < 0.05$

All relationships, which range in intensity from moderate to strong, are positive and statistically significant, as shown in Table 2. Sadness and empathy had the largest correlation ($r = 0.61$), indicating that emotional contagion is the main route to sympathetic engagement. Authenticity is a major factor influencing emotional and behavioral reactions, as evidenced by its substantial relationships with empathy ($r = 0.58$) and propensity to suggest ($r = 0.52$). Strong correlations with recommendation likelihood ($r = 0.55$) and a moderate-strong link with empathy ($r = 0.49$) show how powerful the lyrics-music combination is, underscoring the significance of combining both verbal and musical elements. Furthermore, there is a strong link between perspective change and empathy ($r = 0.53$) and introspection ($r = 0.51$), indicating that cognitive engagement promotes shifts in understanding. In comparison to authenticity and melancholy, melody contribution and link to lyrics have relatively smaller but still significant relationships with empathy ($r = 0.44$ and $r = 0.48$, respectively). Overall, our results show that musical elements — specifically, the blending of lyrics and music — and language elements — specifically, perceived genuineness and sadness—combine to promote recommendation intentions and sympathetic reactions.

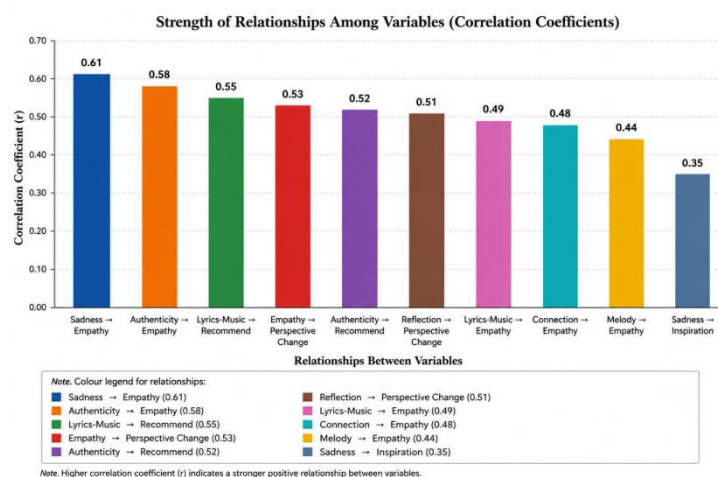


Figure 2. Correlation Coefficients for Key Pairs

Figure 2 provides a visual comparison of all correlation coefficients, clearly illustrating that sadness and empathy show the strongest relationship ($r = 0.61$), followed closely by authenticity and empathy ($r = 0.58$), and lyrics-music effectiveness and likelihood to recommend ($r = 0.55$). The figure

confirms that both linguistic elements (particularly perceived authenticity) and musical elements (particularly the effectiveness of the lyrics-music combination) contribute meaningfully to empathetic responses and recommendation intentions, with sadness serving as a key pathway to empathy through emotional contagion.

Discussions

The study's findings offer empirical support for the research issues mentioned in the background, specifically the dearth of integrated, multi-dimensional emotional measurement in pop lyric research and the lack of questionnaire-based studies that measure emotional reactions to modern pop lyrics. The results show that authenticity had the highest mean score (4.03) and the highest percentage of high ratings (71.4%), which provides strong support for Pekün's (2025) theoretical claims that listeners in the digital music era value authenticity more and expect musicians to establish personal, non-commercial communication. Students in this study overwhelmingly saw "Lonely" as an authentic, honest, and sincere disclosure of personal struggle despite Justin Bieber's status as a commercially manufactured pop star. This suggests that listeners can discern between commercially calculated songs and those that truly express vulnerability. Authenticity serves as a linguistic-emotional bridge, as seen by the strong positive association between authenticity and empathy ($r = 0.58$), where listeners are more inclined to show empathy for the artist if they believe the lyrics are genuine and honest.

Contrary to popular belief regarding the emotional influence of depressing music, inspiration was shown to be the second greatest emotional value with a mean of 3.49, beating both melancholy and empathy. According to the statistics, 54.3% of participants ranked their inspiration as 4 or 5, indicating that seeing a public figure openly share their hardships inspires appreciation, hope, and inspiration rather than causing vicarious suffering. This interpretation is further supported by the moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.35$) between inspiration and sadness, which shows that for many listeners, inspiration coexists with sadness rather than being precluded. This phenomenon has practical implications for mental health messaging in popular music.

The findings also show that students' sympathetic reactions and propensity to suggest the song are influenced by both verbal and musical components in a moderate to significant way. The substantial positive connection between lyrics-music efficacy and likelihood to suggest ($r = 0.55$) supports Elicker's (1997) semiotic approach, which stressed that the emotional meaning of a song develops from the interaction of lyrics and music rather than from either channel alone. There is almost universal agreement that the production choices in "Lonely" are very good, as evidenced by the mean score of 3.77 for lyrics-music effectiveness, with 62.9% of students ranking it as 4 or 5 and no students rating it as 1. The personal lyrical material is complemented by the sparse piano arrangement, slow tempo, minor key, and sensitive vocal delivery, which draws attention to the lyrics

and fosters closeness. The moderately positive correlation between melody contribution and empathy ($r = 0.44$) shows that musical elements contribute significantly to empathetic responses even though they are marginally less influential than perceived authenticity. This confirms that emotion in music is conveyed not only by lyrics but also by acoustical cues like tempo, key, and dynamics that signal sadness across cultures (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010). The high mean score for likelihood to recommend ($M = 4.00$) and the strong correlations with both authenticity ($r = 0.52$) and lyrics-music effectiveness ($r = 0.55$) show that students actively value the song enough to want to share it with others, challenging the notion that only happy, upbeat songs are commercially viable and proving that sad, vulnerable songs can generate strong word-of-mouth promotion when perceived as authentic and well-crafted.

This paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, by providing an integrated framework that links linguistic analysis with affective measurement, this study fills a methodological gap regarding the assumption that lyric sentiment directly “mirrors” listener emotion without empirical verification, contributing to the expanding field of affective linguistics. Second, by operationalizing and measuring authenticity as a linguistic-emotional variable, this study contributes to theoretical discussions regarding the role of authenticity in the reception of music in the digital age, where listeners are increasingly expecting musicians to establish personal, non-commercial communication. It also provides empirical evidence that perceived authenticity correlates strongly with other emotional responses. Third, by capturing both emotional empathy (automatic emotional contagion) and cognitive empathy (perspective-taking), this study advances theoretical understanding of music empathy. The strong correlation between empathy and perspective change ($r = 0.53$) confirms that “Lonely” successfully facilitates both dimensions. The practical ramifications are just as important. The findings imply that “Lonely” can be utilized by music instructors as a teaching tool for conversations about empathy and mental health. According to music therapists, songs that address vulnerability and loneliness may offer clients consolation and validation, with authenticity being a crucial component of therapeutic efficacy. The findings demonstrate that sad songs can elicit strong positive reactions when perceived as genuine and emotionally coherent, and they provide actionable insights for songwriters and music producers that prioritizing authentic, vulnerable lyrics and sparse musical arrangements enhances emotional impact and recommendation intentions.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine and quantify the perceived emotional values that students derive from the lyrics of Justin Bieber's “Lonely” and to investigate the degree to which linguistic and musical components influence students' sympathetic reactions and propensity to suggest the song. According to the study's examination of questionnaire data from 35 university students, students detect six main emotional qualities from the lyrics: melancholy, empathy, contemplation,

connection to lyrics, inspiration, and authenticity. Authenticity is the most strongly rated of these ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.92$), with 71.4% of students giving it a score of 4 or 5. This suggests that the majority of students believe the lyrics are sincere, honest, and truly indicative of Justin Bieber's own experiences with fame and loneliness. A depressing song about loneliness can paradoxically inspire rather than depress listeners, as evidenced by the fact that inspiration is the second most strongly perceived emotional value ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.15$), with 54.3% of students evaluating it as a 4 or 5. While connection to lyrics receives the lowest mean score ($M = 3.14$), indicating that the particular experience of fame-based loneliness is not universally relatable to university students, sadness and empathy are perceived at nearly identical levels ($M = 3.37$ and 3.34 , respectively), confirming that “Lonely” successfully evokes both emotional contagion and emotional empathy.

The study also finds that students' sympathetic reactions and propensity to suggest the song are influenced by both linguistic and musical components in a moderate to significant way. Perceived authenticity is the most important factor influencing emotional and behavioral engagement, as evidenced by its high positive relationships with empathy ($r = 0.58$) and likelihood to recommend ($r = 0.52$). Strong correlations with recommendation likelihood ($r = 0.55$) and a moderate-strong link with empathy ($r = 0.49$) demonstrate the efficacy of the lyrics-music combination, underscoring the significance of combining both linguistic and musical elements. The melody contributes to empathy in a moderate but significant way ($r = 0.44$), demonstrating that lyrics are not the only source of emotion in music. It challenges the notion that only happy songs are commercially viable and shows that sad, vulnerable songs can achieve strong word-of-mouth promotion when perceived as authentic and well-crafted. The high mean score for likelihood to recommend ($M = 4.00$), with 65.7% of students rating it as 4 or 5, indicates that “Lonely” generates strong positive behavioral intentions. The study operationalizes authenticity as a linguistic-emotional variable, advances knowledge of music empathy by capturing both emotional and cognitive dimensions, and theoretically advances affective linguistics by providing an integrated framework linking linguistic analysis and affective measurement. The results show that popular music can be a valid and useful tool for emotional learning and empathy-building in educational and therapeutic situations, which has practical consequences for music educators, music therapists, songwriters, music producers, and the music industry.

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