

Unpacking the Lyrics: An Analysis of Meaning and Message in *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny

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Abstract

This study provides a semantic analysis of *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny, examining the meaning and message conveyed through its lyrics, metaphors, and symbolism. The song explores themes of self-worth, body image, and societal pressure, particularly the unrealistic beauty standards imposed on individuals. The protagonist's internal struggle with not fitting into the idealized "prom queen" image serves as a critique of societal expectations, while also emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance. By unpacking the lyrics and analyzing the symbolism of "prom" and "queen," this research sheds light on how the song addresses the emotional impact of societal beauty standards and the pursuit of personal empowerment. The study fills a gap in the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of how contemporary pop songs, like *Prom Queen*, use narrative and metaphor to address social issues and offer empowering messages to listeners.

Keywords: beach bunny, body image, lyrics analysis, *prom queen*, self-acceptance

Introduction

Released in 2020, *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny quickly became an anthem for young listeners grappling with themes of self-image, societal expectations, and the pressures of conforming to a standard of beauty and popularity. With its catchy melody and emotionally charged lyrics, the song stands out as a powerful reflection of the struggles that many individuals face during their adolescent years, particularly in a world that often prioritizes superficiality over authenticity. Through its lyrics and tone, *Prom Queen* conveys a complex message about identity, body image, and the quest for validation.

The narrative in *Prom Queen* is told from the perspective of someone who feels left out, judged, and pressured by societal ideals of beauty and success. The protagonist's inner conflict, fueled by feelings of inadequacy, is juxtaposed with the unrealistic standards set by society, often symbolized through the imagery of prom, a quintessential high school event. In this context, prom becomes a metaphor for societal approval, where external validation is sought in a world that increasingly values appearance and social status over personal worth. The song's lyrical approach speaks to a universal experience, offering listeners a chance to reflect on the impact of societal expectations on self-esteem and personal growth.

Previous studies on music and lyrics have examined how songs convey messages related to personal identity, societal norms, and mental health. For example, Toleuzhan et al. (2023) explored how music can reflect and shape individual identity, emphasizing how lyrics resonate with listeners' experiences. Similarly, studies on body image and self-esteem in the media, such as those by Susam-Saraeva, (2015) have highlighted how popular culture influences perceptions of beauty and self-worth. While music has often been discussed as a platform for expressing personal struggles, few studies have focused specifically on how songs like *Prom Queen* utilize metaphor and narrative to tackle issues of social pressure and body image within a broader cultural context.

Despite the growing body of literature on music and its social implications, a significant gap remains in the semantic analysis of modern pop songs like *Prom Queen*, particularly in how they address contemporary issues such as body image, societal pressure, and self-acceptance (Simatupang & Heryono, 2022). While there has been much research on music's influence on identity and emotional expression, there is limited exploration into how these songs use specific metaphors and narrative devices to communicate messages related to societal expectations (Engh, 2013). Additionally, few studies have analyzed how songs with a youthful, contemporary appeal, like *Prom Queen*, engage with and reflect current social struggles.

This study aims to fill that gap by providing a semantic and thematic analysis of the song *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny. By examining the lyrics, tone, and symbolism in the song, this research seeks to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in the narrative and explore how the song's message resonates with its audience. The analysis will also consider the broader cultural implications of the song, particularly how it addresses contemporary concerns related to beauty standards, societal pressure, and the personal challenges of navigating adolescent life in the modern world (Nurjanah et al., 2018).

Ultimately, this study will demonstrate how *Prom Queen* serves as more than just an emotional expression—it is a commentary on the unrealistic expectations placed on individuals, particularly young women, and the journey toward self-acceptance in a world that often fails to value authenticity. By unpacking the layers of meaning within the song, this research will offer insight into the ways in which music can provide a platform for social commentary, personal reflection, and emotional catharsis.

Music has long been studied as a reflection of societal values and personal identity. In the context of pop music, lyrics are often seen as a direct expression of the personal struggles, desires, and emotions of the artist, as well as a way to connect with listeners (Engh, 2013). Music plays a significant role in shaping individual identity, serving as both a mirror and a mold for societal norms. For young listeners, especially, pop music provides a platform for exploring self-perception and societal expectations. The lyrics in *Prom Queen* resonate with the experience of seeking validation and the struggle with body image, reflecting a broader trend in music to address the challenges of self-worth and societal standards.

Meinawati et al. (2020) explored how the media, including music, contributes to shaping perceptions of beauty and self-esteem. She noted that the portrayal of idealized beauty standards, often seen in pop culture, can have a lasting impact on the audience's body image and self-esteem. *Prom Queen* aligns with this concept by highlighting the societal pressure to conform to specific

beauty ideals, particularly in the context of high school events like prom, which are often viewed as milestones of social acceptance. Through its lyrics, the song addresses the internal conflict between personal identity and external expectations, portraying the pressures felt by individuals, particularly young women, who do not conform to these ideals.

The intersection of body image, self-esteem, and music has been analyzed in studies, particularly regarding pop music's portrayal of beauty standards. Research indicates that pop music reflects cultural ideals and shapes listeners' perceptions concerning body image and self-esteem. For instance, the portrayal of women in music videos often idealizes thinness, which can evoke feelings of inadequacy among viewers. Tiggemann and Slater (2003) highlight this by stating, "music videos may serve as a source of social comparison, leading to body dissatisfaction and the internalization of a thin ideal". This finding aligns with evidence suggesting that exposure to unrealistic body images through media can foster damaging self-perceptions, particularly among young women (Yamout et al., 2019).

Furthermore, research by Prasetyaning et al. (2019) emphasizes the impact of media on body dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescents. Music videos and lyrics are often intertwined with visual representations of body image, reinforcing societal expectations. While *Prom Queen* itself does not feature a music video explicitly, the song's lyrics serve a similar function by communicating a narrative that reflects the internal struggle of fitting into society's beauty standards. The message of *Prom Queen* provides an important counter-narrative to the often-presented image of the "perfect" prom queen, offering a relatable and empowering message for those who feel excluded by such ideals.

Metaphor plays a critical role in music, often serving as a tool to express complex emotions and social commentary. According to Raheem (2022); Beynen (2020) metaphors are not merely linguistic tools but also shape the way we conceptualize and understand the world. In the case of *Prom Queen*, the imagery of prom serves as a powerful metaphor for societal validation and the internal conflict associated with trying to meet unrealistic standards. Prom, as a social event, is often seen as the pinnacle of social success in high school, and in *Prom Queen*, it becomes a symbol of the external validation that many individuals seek. However, this idealized image of prom also reflects the limitations and superficiality of such validation, suggesting that true self-worth cannot be measured by external approval.

Additionally, the concept of "queen" in *Prom Queen* symbolizes societal ideals of beauty and popularity. In the song, the protagonist struggles with the idea of being excluded from this idealized version of success, leading to feelings of inadequacy and alienation. The use of metaphor in the song invites listeners to reflect on the broader implications of social expectations, encouraging a deeper understanding of the societal forces that shape individual self-perception (Al-Amer et al., 2016).

Music has long been a medium for social commentary, providing artists with a platform to address cultural and societal issues. *Prom Queen* exemplifies this by using personal experience to reflect broader societal pressures, particularly those related to beauty standards and self-worth. Research by Susam-Saraeva, (2015); Engh, (2013) on the role of music in social movements suggests that music can serve as a catalyst for change by voicing collective experiences and raising awareness about social issues. Through *Prom Queen*, Beach Buny taps into the collective experience of feeling alienated by societal beauty standards, providing a voice for individuals who may feel marginalized

by these unrealistic ideals.

Furthermore, *Prom Queen* fits into a larger tradition of pop music that critiques societal pressures and explores themes of self-empowerment. Songs like *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera and *Who Says* by Selena Gomez similarly challenge beauty standards and encourage listeners to embrace their authentic selves. *Prom Queen* contributes to this ongoing dialogue in pop music, emphasizing that personal worth should not be determined by external validation or societal approval, but by one's own sense of self (Saed et al., 2021).

While there has been significant research on the impact of music on identity, body image, and self-esteem, limited studies have specifically focused on the semantic analysis of modern pop songs that tackle these issues. Much of the existing literature centers on general themes of body image and beauty standards in the media, with fewer studies examining how these themes are expressed through music lyrics and metaphors. Additionally, while there are studies on social commentary in music, there is a lack of in-depth analysis regarding how songs like *Prom Queen* use metaphor and symbolism to engage with contemporary concerns about beauty and societal expectations. This research seeks to address that gap by providing a detailed semantic analysis of *Prom Queen* and exploring how its lyrics function as both a personal narrative and a critique of societal pressures.

Results and Discussion

Meaning and Message in the Lyrics

At its core, *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny articulates the emotional and psychological tension associated with body image and societal pressures, particularly in the context of beauty standards. The protagonist's struggle to reconcile her self-perception with societal expectations forms the heart of the song's message. The recurring line "I'm not a prom queen" is a poignant declaration that encapsulates the protagonist's feeling of alienation. This phrase, simple yet powerful, serves as both an acknowledgment of societal expectations and a rejection of those very standards. The "prom queen" is a metaphor for the idealized female figure: someone who is not only beautiful but socially successful and admired. For the protagonist, failing to live up to this standard becomes a source of emotional turmoil and self-doubt, which is a central theme of the song.

The semantic depth of this lyric lies in its universal resonance. The "prom queen" is not just a high school figure; it symbolizes the broader societal archetype of "perfection"-the woman who meets all beauty standards and possesses social approval. The song critiques this ideal by framing it as unattainable for the protagonist, who instead finds herself struggling with self-esteem and feelings of exclusion. Through the repetition of "I'm not a prom queen," the song's lyrics emphasize the emotional impact of societal pressure, highlighting how damaging these expectations can be on an individual's mental health and sense of worth.

Furthermore, Beach Bunny uses the term "prom" in the context of a highly ritualized social event where youth often experience pressure to conform. In high school culture, prom is more than just a dance-it's an event laden with expectations surrounding appearance, popularity, and social status. By placing this event at the center of the song, Beach Bunny taps into the universal experience of adolescence, where social success is often measured by physical beauty and societal approval.

Through the lens of the protagonist, the song exposes the flaws and pressures inherent in this system, offering a critique of how such social rituals contribute to feelings of inadequacy for those who do not meet the standard.

Symbolism of "Prom" and the "Queen"

The symbolic use of "prom" and "queen" in the song plays a pivotal role in conveying the broader critique of societal ideals. Prom, as a high school event, is often a defining moment where individuals are placed in competition for status, popularity, and beauty. The prom queen, typically portrayed as the epitome of social success, is a figure who embodies the idealized female form—attractive, confident, and admired by all. In *Prom Queen*, Beach Bunny deconstructs this image by presenting the protagonist, who does not fit into this mold, as a character struggling with feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. This contrast between the ideal and the real is a significant thematic element of the song.

By invoking the imagery of "queen," the song further criticizes societal standards that elevate a particular type of beauty and social success. The "queen" symbolizes the idealized, often unattainable standard that society holds up as the pinnacle of success. The protagonist's inability to measure up to this ideal is portrayed as an internal struggle that leaves her feeling inadequate and unworthy of social acceptance. This symbolism extends beyond the specific event of prom, representing how societal pressures to conform to beauty and social standards pervade all aspects of a person's life, especially for young women. The song's message becomes not just a personal narrative but a social critique, urging listeners to recognize the dangers of such unattainable ideals.

The Protagonist's Struggle with Self-Worth

The emotional conflict of the protagonist is central to the song's narrative. Lyrics such as "I'm so tired of feeling this way" encapsulate the exhaustion that comes from constantly striving to meet societal expectations. The fatigue referenced here is both emotional and psychological, stemming from the internal battle between the protagonist's self-worth and the external pressures she faces. This line speaks directly to the audience, resonating with those who have experienced similar struggles with body image, self-esteem, and societal approval. The protagonist's feelings of inadequacy, symbolized by her inability to be the "prom queen," reflect a broader societal issue: the tendency to equate personal value with external appearance and social status.

In the context of adolescent development, body image is a critical factor in self-perception and self-worth. Research has shown that young people, particularly young women, often internalize societal beauty standards, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem when they are unable to meet those standards (*Prom Queen* taps into this emotional landscape by presenting a protagonist who is caught in the struggle between conforming to societal expectations and embracing her true self. The protagonist's self-doubt and the emotional burden of feeling "not enough" are relatable to many, especially those who have grown up with societal pressures to conform to beauty ideals.

The emotional depth of the song is amplified through its honesty, as the protagonist openly expresses her frustration with societal standards. This honesty invites the audience to engage with the song on a personal level, as it encourages self-reflection and challenges listeners to question the cultural norms that dictate their self-worth. The emotional weight of the protagonist's internal

struggle, combined with the upbeat tone of the song, creates a juxtaposition that underscores the tension between societal pressures and personal acceptance.

The Role of Metaphor and Symbolism in the Message

Metaphor plays a critical role in expressing the song's deeper meaning. In addition to the literal struggle with beauty standards, the metaphor of "prom" and "queen" reflects the social dynamics of conformity and exclusion. The idea of prom as a "contest" for social success is a powerful metaphor for how society often frames beauty and worth. By using this metaphor, the song critiques the superficial nature of societal standards, suggesting that true self-worth cannot be measured by external approval or appearance. The protagonist's rejection of the "queen" image represents a reclaiming of self-worth that transcends external validation.

The symbolism of "queen" also plays on the notion of power and hierarchy, where the "queen" represents a position of power and dominance within the social structure. However, the protagonist's failure to achieve this position speaks to the vulnerability and powerlessness that many people feel when they do not conform to these standards. In rejecting the metaphor of the "queen," the song presents a message of empowerment, encouraging listeners to challenge the idea that beauty and success are defined by external markers. This shift in perspective highlights the importance of internal self-worth over external validation, urging individuals to embrace their authentic selves.

Music as a Platform for Social Commentary

Prom Queen serves as a social commentary on the unrealistic beauty standards that dominate contemporary culture. Much like other songs that critique societal norms, such as *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera or *Who Says* by Selena Gomez, *Prom Queen* highlights the harmful effects of idealized beauty standards on self-esteem and body image. However, *Prom Queen* distinguishes itself by focusing on the high school experience, a time when societal pressures to conform to beauty ideals are often at their peak. By using prom, a social event that symbolizes youth, beauty, and popularity, the song directly addresses the emotional and psychological struggles faced by young people who do not conform to these standards.

The song also addresses the broader issue of self-empowerment, encouraging individuals to reject external judgments and embrace their authentic selves. This message is especially important in an era where social media has intensified the pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. The critique embedded in *Prom Queen* reflects a growing cultural awareness of the harmful effects of these standards, offering an empowering message for listeners who may feel excluded or marginalized by societal ideals.

Conclusion

This study has revealed how *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny conveys a powerful message about self-acceptance, societal pressure, and unrealistic beauty standards. Through a semantic analysis of the lyrics, symbolism, and metaphors used in the song, it was found that *Prom Queen* functions as a critique of societal expectations that judge an individual's worth based solely on physical appearance and social popularity. The song depicts the internal struggle of someone who feels inadequate and

marginalized for not meeting the beauty standards set by society, particularly in the context of prom, which symbolizes social success.

The symbolism of prom and "queen" in the song refers not only to the high school prom event but also to the societal pressure to conform to an idealized image of "perfection" set by society. By emphasizing the protagonist's inability to become the "prom queen," the song creates an emotional tension that urges listeners to question their self-worth when faced with superficial societal norms. The protagonist conveys a powerful message about the importance of self-acceptance and the rejection of external validation, which often does not reflect one's true worth.

Through clever use of metaphor and symbolism, *Prom Queen* effectively addresses issues related to body image, social acceptance, and personal empowerment. The song gives a voice to those who feel excluded or disconnected from societal beauty ideals. Its message resonates deeply with the current social climate, where the pressure to conform to beauty standards is often intensified by social media and unrealistic portrayals of beauty.

Overall, *Prom Queen* is more than just an emotionally charged pop song; it is a social commentary that invites listeners to embrace authenticity and reject external judgments based on unattainable standards. This study fills a gap in the literature by providing a semantic analysis of how the song uses symbolism and metaphor to communicate important messages about self-acceptance and the struggle against societal pressures. In doing so, *Prom Queen* encourages listeners to reflect on their own self-worth and empowers them to embrace who they truly are, free from the constraints of unrealistic standards.

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