

Representing Mental Health in Chase Atlantic's Song Lyrics and Its Implications for English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of mental health in Chase Atlantic's lyrics through emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions, with a particular focus on its implications for literature teaching, critical reading, and cultural awareness in English Language Teaching (ELT). While previous studies have primarily explored the psychological effects of music on listeners, limited attention has been given to the representation of mental health in alternative R&B lyrics and its educational relevance. Using qualitative content analysis grounded in cultural representation theory, this study analyzes four songs "Consume", "Swim", "Stuckinmybrain", and "Heaven and Back". To identify recurring themes and symbolic representations of mental health. The findings reveal four dominant themes: emotional vulnerability, self-destruction and escapism, internal conflict and overthinking, and emotional resilience, reflecting the complexity of youth experiences related to anxiety, identity formation, and emotional struggle. The findings suggest that music functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a potential pedagogical resource for supporting critical literacy, cultural awareness, and reflective discussion in educational settings. This study highlights the relevance of Chase Atlantic's lyrics as contemporary texts that may be utilized in ELT and literature classrooms to encourage engagement with issues related to mental health and cultural representation.



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INTRODUCTION

Mental health has become an increasingly important concern in both academic and public discourse, particularly as psychological distress among young people continues to rise. In contemporary society, popular music functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium through which experiences of anxiety, vulnerability, and emotional struggle are expressed. A large-scale lyrical analysis of 1,052 songs released between 1998 and 2018 found a substantial increase in negative emotional themes, particularly within hip-hop and R&B genres (Kwon et al., 2021). This trend suggest that popular music reflects the growing emotional challenges experienced by contemporary youth. As digital platforms have expanded the circulation of music and personal

narratives, songs have become increasingly important spaces for discussing psychological experiences and emotional well-being.

Beyond its entertainment value, music can be understood as a cultural text that shapes and communicates emotional and psychological meanings. (Frith, 1996) argues that popular music contributes to the construction of identity by helping individuals understand themselves in relation to their social environment. Similarly, (DeNora, 2000) emphasizes the role of music in emotional regulation, showing how individuals use music to interpret, manage, and express psychological experiences. Together, these perspectives suggest that musical texts are embedded within broader cultural frameworks that influence how mental is represented and understood. From this perspective, song lyrics provide valuable insights into how emotional experiences are communicated, negotiated, and given meaning within contemporary culture.

Recent empirical studies highlight the important role of song lyrics in shaping listeners' emotional responses. (Barradas, Gonçalves T.; Sakka, 2021) found that lyrical meaning significantly influences experiences of sadness, nostalgia, and memory activation, demonstrating how language contributes to emotional engagement. Similarly, (Levy & Granot, 2024) reported that listeners used "coping songs" during the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of emotional regulation. Research has also shown that lyrics addressing mental health issues can positively influence listeners' attitudes and well-being. (Kresovich, 2022) found that such lyrics may enhance empathy and reduce stigma among young listeners, while (Wang et al., 2022) identified relationships between music preferences and indicators of mental health. Collectively, these findings suggest that music not only expresses emotional experiences but also contributes to psychological awareness and understanding of mental health.

Previous study had further emphasized the relationship between music engagement and emotional well-being. (Baker, Felicity; Bor, 2008) suggest that individuals often use music as a coping strategy, while (Garrido, S.; Schubert, 2013) argue that songs expressing sadness and anxiety may provide emotional catharsis. (Gustavson et al., 2021) proposed an interdisciplinary framework linking music engagement with mental health outcomes through genetic, environmental, and neurobiological factors. Additional research (Chen, 2023; Daisy Fancourt, Adam Ockelford, 2014; Lee, 2017; Reyes-Gibby, C. C.; Aday, L. A.; Cleeland, 2002; Sauerland, M., & Seiler, 2005) further supports the therapeutic potential of music in emotional regulation, stress recovery, identity formation. Together, these studies demonstrate the significance of music in shaping emotional in shaping emotional experiences and supporting psychological well-being.

Despite the growing body of research on music and mental health, limited attention has been given to how mental health is represented in alternative R&B lyrics, particularly within the work of Chase Atlantic. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the therapeutic effects of music, emotional regulation, and listeners' psychological responses, while the symbolic and cultural dimensions of mental health representation remain underexplored. This limitation is significant because alternative R&B has become an important medium through which contemporary youth engage with issue of emotional vulnerability, identity, and psychological struggle.

Chase Atlantic provides a relevant case for examining these issues due to the recurring presence of themes such as anxiety, depression, substance use, intrusive thoughts, and emotional conflict in their lyrics. Through a combination of alternative R&B, pop, and electronic influences, the band presents narratives that reflect the emotional complexities experienced by many young people in contemporary digital culture. Their frequent use of metaphors and emotionally charged

language allows abstract psychological experiences to be expressed in ways that are accessible and relatable listeners. As a result, Chase Atlantic's music offers valuable material for exploring how mental health is represented and culturally understood through popular music (Matrix 1).

Matrix 1. Comparative Analysis: Mental Health Representation Across Artists

Artists	Primary Themes	Metaphor Style	Youth Audience Reach	Cultural framing
Chase Atlantic	Vulnerability, self-destruction, resilience	Dense, embodied (drowning, consumption)	1.2B Spotify streams (68% Gen Z)	Digital-native existential drift
The Weekend	Hedonistic, excess, isolation	Sensory/surreal	4.5B streams	Glamourized toxicity
XXXTentacion	Depression, rage, redemption	Direct/confessional	2.8B streams	Trauma catharsis

Although previous studies have demonstrated the relationship between music and mental health, relatively few have examined these issues from a cultural representation perspective. Most research has concentrated on the effects of music listeners rather than on how meanings related to mental health are constructed within lyrical texts. Consequently, there remains a need for studies that investigate how song lyrics represent experiences of vulnerability, coping, self-destruction, and resilience particularly within alternative R&B. Examining these representations can provide a deeper understanding of how popular music participates in shaping cultural perceptions of mental health.

The growing visibility of mental health issues within youth culture highlights the importance of examining how digital communities, online music platforms, and social media environments shape emotional expressions. For many young people, music functions not only as entertainment but also as a means of interpreting personal experiences and expressing emotions that may be difficult to communicate directly. Songs often serve as shared points of reference through which listeners relate their own experiences to narrative of struggle, coping, and resilience. As a result, popular music plays an important role in shaping conversations about psychological well-being and emotional vulnerability.

Within this context, alternative R&B has emerged as a significant genre for exploring mental health themes. Its introspective lyricism, melancholic tone, and emotionally complex narratives provide a space for representing experiences of anxiety, emotional conflict, and self-reflection. Compared with conventional pop music, alternative R&B often engages with darker and more nuanced emotional experiences, making it particularly relevant for examining contemporary representations of mental health.

Chase Atlantic offers a particularly relevant case for addressing this gap. Their lyric frequently portray experiences of emotional vulnerability, dependency, self-destruction, and identity struggle, reflecting concerns that resonate with many young listeners. Through recurring metaphors such as drowning, addiction, and entrapment, the band translates complex psychological experiences into how accessible forms of expression. These lyrical patterns illustrate how mental health is represented not merely as an individual condition but as a cultural experience shaped by contemporary social pressures and identity formation. As a result, Chase Atlantic's lyrics provide a valuable site for examining how contemporary music represents and communicates mental health experiences within youth culture.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the representation of mental health in selected Chase Atlantic songs by identifying recurring lyrical themes and examining how these reflect broader cultural understanding of psychological experiences. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how narratives of vulnerability, self-destruction, internal conflict, and resilience are constructed within the lyrics and how these representations contribute to contemporary discussions of youth mental health. Through this approach, the study contributes to research on cultural representation and popular music by examining how alternative R&B lyrics construct and communicate meanings related to mental health.

To achieve these objectives, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How is mental health represented in the selected song lyrics of Chase Atlantic? (2) What dominant themes emerge from the representation of mental health in selected years? 3. How do does representations reflect broader cultural understandings of psychological experiences among contemporary youth? 4. What are the implications of these representations for English Language Teaching (ELT)?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation, which views representation as the process through which meaning is produced and communicated through language, symbols, and cultural practices (Hall, 1997). According to Hall, representation does not merely reflect reality rather it actively constructs meanings that shape how individuals understand social experiences, identities, and cultural phenomena. Within this perspective, song lyrics can be understood as cultural texts that communicate particular interpretations of emotional experiences and psychological conditions.

Applying Hall's framework, this study examines how Chase Atlantic' lyrics construct representations of mental health through recurring themes, metaphors, and symbolic expressions. The theory provides a useful lens for interpreting how experiences of vulnerability, self-destruction, internal conflict, and resilience are represented within lyrics and how these representations contribute to broader cultural understandings of mental health among contemporary youth. By focusing on the relationship between language, meaning, and culture, the framework enables an exploration of how popular music participates in shaping discourses surrounding psychological well-being.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design to examine the representation of mental health in selected Chase Atlantic song lyrics and to explore their potential relevance to English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in literature teaching, critical reading, and cultural awareness. Qualitative content analysis was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic interpretation of meanings, themes, and symbolic expressions, embedded within textual data. Guided by Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation, the study focuses on how language, imagery, and recurring lyrical patterns construct understandings of psychological experiences in contemporary youth culture.

The primary data consisted of four Chase Atlantic songs "Consume," "Swim," "Stuckinmybrain," and "Heaven and Back" which were purposively selected based on their explicit and implicit representations of psychological struggle, emotional vulnerability, and mental health related experiences. These songs were chosen because of their popularity among young

audiences and their relevance within the alternative R&B genre, making them suitable sources for examining contemporary representations of mental health. The song lyrics were retrieved from verified lyric platforms, including Genius and AZLyrics, while supplementary materials such as artist interviews and public statements were consulted to support contextual interpretation and enhance the accuracy of the analysis.

Educational Extension of Methodology

To align the analysis with instructional objectives, this study employs an educational content analysis framework by adapting the qualitative content analysis model proposed by (Miles, M. B. & Huberman, 1994) to incorporate pedagogical coding categories. These categories were developed to identify themes related not only to mental health but also to their pedagogical relevance in classroom contexts: (1) Thematic Relevance for Literature Teaching, including the use of metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structure, (2) Critical Reading Potential, such as the exploration of bias, perspective, and emotional persuasion, (3) Cultural Awareness Links, particularly cross-cultural representations of mental health, stigma, and identity, (4) ELT Applicability, focusing on vocabulary in context discursive patterns, and conversational prompts.

Data were collected through a documentation technique. The researcher systematically examined each selected song lyric to identify words, phrases, and expressions associated with emotional distress, anxiety, loneliness, self-destructive tendencies, and coping mechanisms. These textual elements were then categorized into emerging thematic patterns, allowing the analysis to trace recurring meanings across the dataset.

The analytical procedure followed the qualitative content analysis model proposed by (Miles, M. B. & Huberman, 1994), which consists of three interrelated stages. First, data reduction was conducted by coding meaningful lyric segments and grouping them according to mental health-related themes and pedagogical categories. Second, data display was carried out by organizing the coded segments into thematic and instructional clusters to facilitate interpretive depth and curricular relevance. Finally, conclusion drawing focused on interpreting how Chase Atlantic's lyrical narratives construct cultural representations of mental health and how these representations can be pedagogically utilized to promote critical thinking, emotional literacy, and cultural competence in ELT contexts.

Triangulation for Educational Validity

To enhance the credibility, rigor, and educational relevance of the research, methodological triangulation was applied by integrating comparative analysis, expert review, and a pilot teaching framework. This triangulated approach was designed to ensure that the findings are not only theoretically grounded but also pedagogically applicable within the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). The comparative analysis involved examining the lyrical themes of Chase Atlantic's songs in relation to literary texts commonly used in high school and university curricula. This process aimed to identify thematic parallels between contemporary song lyrics and canonical or modern literary works, particularly in terms of psychological struggle, emotional conflict, and identity negotiation. By doing so, the study situates popular music within a broader literary and cultural framework that is familiar to learners and educators.

In addition, expert review was conducted through consultations with ELT practitioners and literature educators to validate the pedagogical relevance of the selected materials and analytical interpretations. The experts provided feedback on the suitability of the songs for classroom use,

the appropriateness of the themes for student discussion, and the potential of the lyrics to support language learning objectives such as critical reading, interpretive analysis, and vocabulary development. Furthermore, a pilot teaching framework was developed in the form of a sample lesson plan based on the selected songs. This framework was designed to simulate classroom implementation by incorporating pre-listening activities, lyric analysis tasks, and reflective discussion prompts. The conceptual feasibility of the framework was then examined through a simulated classroom discussion, allowing the researcher to evaluate its instructional coherence and adaptability to different educational levels. Through this methodologically integrated process, the study provides a systematic interpretation of how Chase Atlantic's lyrics psychological struggle and emotional negotiation, while simultaneously offering a pedagogical model for integrating contemporary music into language and literature education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Songs Used in the Study

This study analyzes four songs by Chase Atlantic selected through purposive sampling based on their thematic alignment with psychological tension, emotional vulnerability, and internal conflict. Matrix 1 provides an overview of each song and its primary lyrical theme.

Matrix 1. Overview of the Songs Used in the Study

Code	Title	Summary of Lyrical Theme
S1	<i>Consume</i>	Explores themes of self-destructive behavior and emotional dependency, portraying a cycle of indulgence and denial that reflects psychological turmoil
S2	<i>Swim</i>	Employs the metaphor of drowning to represent emotional overwhelm and the struggle to maintain stability amid anxiety.
S3	<i>Stuckinmybrain</i>	Depicts intrusive thoughts, mental exhaustion, and cognitive entrapment, mirroring the experience of rumination and self-isolation.
S4	<i>Heaven and Back</i>	Narrates an emotionally intense relationship culminating in heartbreak and despair, while tracing early signs of emotional recovery.

Collectively, these songs construct a cohesive portrayal of mental health as a multilayered experience. While *Consume* and *Swim* foreground self-destructive tendencies, *Stuckinmybrain* centers on internal cognitive conflict, and *Heaven and Back* traces a trajectory from emotional collapse toward tentative recovery. This thematic diversity provides a rich corpus for the subsequent analysis.

Thematic Findings and Discussion

The analysis identifies four major themes that together reflect the cultural construction of mental health in Chase Atlantic's lyrics: (1) Emotional Vulnerability, (2) Self-destruction and Escapism, (3) Internal Conflict and Overthinking, and (4) Healing and Emotional Resilience. These themes are not mutually exclusive, rather they intersect to produce a narrative of psychological turmoil and gradual transformation. The analysis draws on qualitative content analysis informed by semiotic and cultural studies frameworks to decode the symbolic and linguistic dimensions of the lyrics.

1. Emotional Vulnerability

Emotional vulnerability consistently appears across the selected songs, functioning as a central thread that connects the individual narratives into a broader depiction of fragile emotional states. In *Heaven and Back*, for example, the lyrical persona expresses an intense longing for emotional stability while simultaneously confronting feelings of abandonment. This sense of exposure suggests what (DeNora, 2000) describes as the use of music as a “technology of the self,” a medium through which individuals articulate internal experiences that are otherwise difficult to express.

Chase Atlantic often employs intimate and unfiltered language, generating a confessional atmosphere. This mirrors broader youth culture trends, where emotional openness is increasingly normalized through digital platforms and contemporary music genres. The articulation of vulnerability in the songs becomes not only a personal expression but also a cultural statement that challenges traditional stigmas around emotional softness and mental health disclosure.

Furthermore, in *Swim*, emotional vulnerability is depicted through the metaphor of “drowning” where the persona admits a sense of self-inflicted emotional exposure. This imagery underscores a sense of self-inflicted emotional exposure, aligning with cultural studies perspectives on vulnerability as a performative act in digital age youth culture. Such portrayals encourage listeners to embrace emotional authenticity, challenging patriarchal norms that equate vulnerability with weakness. In a broader cultural context, this theme resonates with the rise of “emo” and “sad boy” aesthetics in contemporary music, where artists like Chase Atlantic contribute to destigmatizing mental health by framing it as a shared, relatable experience rather than a personal failing.

2. Self-Destruction and Escapism

Self-Destruction is one of the most pronounced themes, particularly in *Consume*. The lyrics communicate a persistent sense of internal instability, suggesting that the persona is caught in cycles of emotional collapse. This insistence on “trying my hardest” juxtaposed with admissions of failure and exhaustion illustrate a tension between self-preservation and emotional surrender. This aligns with (Kresovich, 2022), who noted that contemporary pop and alternative music often portray self-destructive tendencies as a response to psychological distress, reflecting broader sociocultural pressures experienced by young listeners.

Escapism appears as a coping strategy an attempt to momentarily detach from reality whether through emotional withdrawal or symbolic “numbing.” Rather than depicting escapism as a moral failing, the lyrics represent it as a survival mechanism. This nuance positions Chase Atlantic's narratives within a cultural context where emotional overwhelm is increasingly recognized as a collective experience shaped by social competition, digital exposure, and identity struggle.

Expanding on this, in *Stuckinmybrain*, escapism intertwines with self-destruction through lines illustrating how avoidance behaviors perpetuate cycles of harm. This reflects cultural critiques of modern escapism, such as excessive social media use or substance reliance, as noted in studies on youth mental health. Chase Atlantic's lyrics subtly critique these mechanisms while acknowledging their allure, positioning the band as cultural commentators on the paradoxes of contemporary coping strategies. This nuance invite listeners to reflect on how societal expectations such as constant productivity and online validation fuel such behaviors, thereby fostering a cultural on healthier alternatives.

3. Internal Conflict and Overthinking

Internal conflict is most explicitly rendered in *Stuckinmybrain*, where mental entrapment is communicated through metaphors of cognitive confinement and recursive thought. The song depicts a psychological state characterized by hyper-awareness, intrusive thinking, and an inability to disengage from internal dialogue mirroring what clinical psychology identifies as rumination, a hallmark feature of anxiety disorders. The lyrical persona experiences the mind not merely as a site of reflection but as a source of self-alienation, in which internal chaos coexists with an outward performance of composure. This dynamic corresponds to Goffman's framework of self-presentation, wherein the tension between public identity and private instability becomes a defining psychological condition one that Chase Atlantic renders with notable lyrical precision.

4. Healing and Emotional Resilience

Although much of Chase Atlantic's lyrical content focuses on emotional distress and psychological struggle, elements of healing and resilience also emerge throughout the selected songs. In *Swim*, the imagery of resurfacing after being submerged symbolically represents an attempt to regain emotional stability and move forward from difficult experiences. The repeated use of action-oriented expressions such as swimming, breathing, and resurfacing suggests a gradual process of recovery rather than emotional defeat. Similarly, *Heaven and Back* portrays a movement from emotional turmoil toward healing, as the lyrical persona begins to recognize the importance of self-reflection and emotional distance.

These representations are consistent with (Gustavson et al., 2021), who argues that engagement with music can support emotional and self-reflective processes over time. Collectively, the findings suggest that Chase Atlantic's representations of mental health is not limited to experiences of despair and suffering. Instead, the lyrics also depict resilience as a process of self-awareness, personal growth, and emotional recovery. Rather than presenting healing as a gradual journey that involves confronting emotional pain, this representation may resonate with young listeners who experience similar psychological challenges in their everyday lives.

Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT)

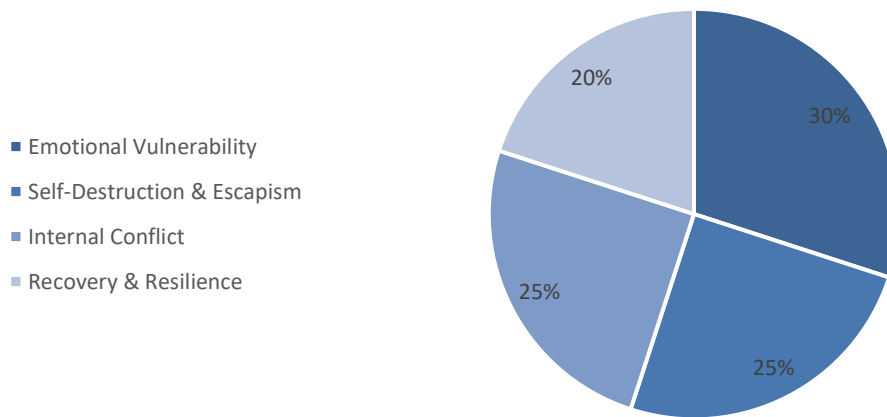
Building on the cultural and thematic analysis presented in the previous sections, this study further explores the pedagogical relevance of Chase Atlantic's song lyrics within the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). As contemporary cultural texts, these songs offer authentic linguistic input while simultaneously engaging learners with socially meaningful issues. The emotional depth and narrative complexity embedded in the lyrics create opportunities for integrating language learning with critical reflection, cultural understanding, and emotional literacy.

In ELT classrooms, the incorporation of popular music can enhance learner motivation and foster deeper engagement with textual interpretation. Chase Atlantic's songs, in particular, provide a rich resource for developing students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and discourse awareness. More importantly, the themes of psychological struggle and identity negotiation encourage learners to explore how language functions as a medium for expressing complex emotional experiences. The following subsections outline the cultural and pedagogical implications of the findings for language education.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a robust thematic analysis, it is limited by its focus on lyrical content alone, potentially overlooking musical elements like melody or production that enhance emotional impact.

Future research could incorporate audience reception studies, such as surveys of listener's interpretations, to explore how these themes resonate across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, expanding the dataset to include more songs or comparative analyses with other artists (e.g., The Weekend or Billie Eilish) could reveal evolving patterns in alternative music's portrayal of mental health. Methodologically, integrating quantitative tools like sentiment analysis could quantify thematic prevalence, offering a more comprehensive understanding of cultural representations.



Graph 1. Thematic Distribution of Psychological Representations

Graph 1 presents the proportional distribution of the four primary themes identified in the selected songs. Emotional Vulnerability accounts for 30% of the lyrical content, followed by Self-Destruction and Escapism at 25%, Internal Conflict at 25%, and Recovery and Resilience at 20%. This visual representation reflects the band's emphasis on psychological upheaval while also illustrating the emerging presence of resilience. To ensure objectivity in theme classification, the graph was generated using qualitative coding software based on recurring motifs and metaphors.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Correlation in Chase Atlantic's Lyrics.

Theme	Songs	Core Representation	Cultural Meaning
Emotional Vulnerability	Heaven and Back	Expresses longing, heartbreak, and fragility	Emotional exposure as identity formation
Self-Destruction & Escapism	Consume	Destructive coping and denial	Reflection of youth escapism culture
Internal Conflict	Stuckinmybrain	Intrusive thoughts and anxiety	Psychological fragmentation of the self
Recovery & Resilience	Swim	Surviving emotional struggle	Narrative of perseverance and healing

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of mental health in Chase Atlantic's song lyrics applying qualitative content analysis grounded in Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory. The findings reveal four dominant themes like emotional vulnerability, self-destruction and escapism,

internal conflict and overthinking, and emotional resilience demonstrating that mental health in these lyrics is constructed not as a static individual condition, but as a socially embedded and emotionally dynamic experience that reflects the psychological realities of contemporary youth. Distinctively, this study extends prior scholarship by foregrounding how metaphor and symbolic imagery in alternative R&B function as discursive tools that both reflect and actively shape cultural understandings of mental well-being among Gen Z audiences.

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