

Self-Empathy in TikTok Comments: A Thematic Analysis of Responses to “Mirrorball”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how listeners express self-empathy in TikTok comments responding to Taylor Swift’s song *Mirrorball*. While previous research has explored emotional responses to music on digital platforms, limited attention has been given to how individuals direct empathy toward themselves through brief online expressions. Drawing on Neff’s self-compassion framework, this study focuses on three aspects of self-empathy: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, twelve TikTok comments were purposively selected and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that each aspect of self-empathy is equally represented in the data, with four comments categorized under self-reflection, four under emotional awareness, and four under self-validation. These findings show that listeners use the song as a reflective space to recognize themselves, become aware of their emotional states, and validate their feelings through everyday language. These findings suggest that TikTok functions not only as a platform for music consumption but also as a space where individuals articulate and process self-related emotions through brief digital expressions.

Keywords: Emotional Expression; Self-Compassion; Self-Empathy; Mirrorball; Tiktok Comments

INTRODUCTION

Music often plays a role in people’s lives that goes beyond entertainment. For many listeners, certain songs become spaces where personal emotions are not only felt, but also recognized and reflected upon. With the rise of digital platforms, this reflective process has become increasingly visible, as listeners express their thoughts and feelings through social media, particularly in comment sections. One song that frequently evokes such responses is *Mirrorball* by Taylor Swift, which explores themes of vulnerability, emotional sensitivity, and the pressure to meet others’ expectations. These themes resonate with listeners who relate to feelings of

instability or the need to constantly adapt themselves. As a result, TikTok comment sections featuring the song often include responses such as “this is about me” or “so this is my mental health huh?”. These expressions suggest that listeners are not only reacting to the song, but also engaging in a process of self-reflection.

In digital environments like TikTok, emotional responses are often expressed in brief and spontaneous forms. Unlike traditional forms of communication, these short comments allow individuals to externalize personal experiences quickly without extended explanation. Previous research has shown that music can facilitate emotional reflection and identity-related thinking, while social media platforms make these internal processes more visible through user-generated content. In addition, recent discussions in digital communication studies highlight that platforms such as TikTok function as spaces where users express emotions, construct identity, and engage in self-reflection through short-form interactions.

However, most previous research has primarily focused on general emotional responses, audience engagement, or interaction patterns, rather than on how individuals process their own emotions in a self-directed way. More specifically, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how individuals direct empathy toward themselves through brief and self-referential digital expressions. While concepts such as emotional expression and self-compassion have been widely discussed, limited attention has been given to how self-empathy is linguistically expressed in short online comments. In other words, although it is well established that people respond emotionally to music, it remains unclear how they recognize, interpret, and validate their own emotional experiences in digital contexts.

To address this gap, this study examines how self-empathy is expressed in TikTok comments responding to *Mirrorball*. Drawing on Neff’s framework of self-compassion, self-empathy in this study is understood through three interconnected aspects: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. By focusing on brief linguistic expressions, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how individuals relate to their own emotional experiences in digital environments, highlighting the role of music as a trigger for self-directed emotional processing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music has long been understood as a medium that facilitates emotional expression and personal reflection. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, song lyrics often provide a space where listeners interpret and make sense of their emotional experiences (Limbaugh et al., 2019). When lyrics are perceived as personally relevant, they can trigger self-referential thinking related to identity, vulnerability, and inner struggles (Sedighimornani et al., 2019). In this sense, music not only conveys emotion but also encourages individuals to engage in deeper reflection about themselves.

With the emergence of digital platforms, this reflective process has become more visible. Social media enables individuals to externalize their emotional responses, transforming internal experiences into observable forms through user-generated content (Schafer et al., 2025). In particular, short-form platforms such as TikTok allow users to express emotions quickly and spontaneously (Sadler, 2022). As a result, even brief comments can carry meaningful emotional content, reflecting immediate and often unfiltered reactions to music.

While both strands of research music and digital communication highlight the role of emotional expression, they tend to approach the phenomenon from different angles. Studies on music primarily emphasize how listeners experience and interpret emotions internally, whereas studies on digital platforms focus more on how emotions are expressed and shared externally. However, these perspectives are rarely integrated, leaving limited understanding of how individuals connect internal emotional processing with external expression, especially in brief digital interactions (Barta & Andalibi, 2021).

To bridge this gap, the concept of self-compassion provides a relevant theoretical foundation. According to Neff, self-compassion involves how individuals relate to themselves during emotional experiences, particularly through processes of awareness, understanding, and acceptance. In this study, these processes are approached through the lens of self-empathy, which is operationalized into three aspects: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation (Neff, 2026). These aspects represent different ways individuals engage with their own emotions, from recognizing personal experiences to acknowledging and accepting them.

From a linguistic perspective, emotional engagement can be observed through patterns of language use. The frequent use of first-person expressions such as “I,” “me,” and “my” reflects a focus on the self and indicates internal processing (Neff et al., 2018). In digital contexts, where communication is often brief and spontaneous, such linguistic features become particularly significant, as they provide direct insight into how individuals interpret and articulate their emotional experiences.

Taken together, previous research has demonstrated that music can evoke emotional reflection, that digital platforms make these expressions visible, and that language can reveal internal emotional processes. However, there is still limited understanding of how these elements intersect in relation to self-empathy, particularly in the context of brief, self-referential comments on platforms like TikTok. This study addresses this gap by examining how self-empathy is expressed linguistically in response to emotionally resonant song lyrics.

Previous Related Study

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between music and emotional experience from different perspectives. (Sedighimornani et al., 2019) and

show that music plays a significant role in emotional processing and self-reflection, particularly when listeners perceive songs as personally meaningful. Similarly, (Sari, 2025) explains that music can evoke complex emotional responses that are closely related to personal memories and identity.

In digital contexts, research has shown that social media platforms enable users to externalize their emotional responses. Studies by (Anna Madison, 2024) indicate that platforms such as TikTok allow users to express emotions, construct identity, and engage in self-reflection through short-form videos and comments. These expressions are often brief and spontaneous, reflecting immediate and relatively unfiltered emotional reactions.

However, despite these insights, most previous studies tend to focus on general emotional responses, audience engagement, or interaction patterns. Limited attention has been given to how individuals engage with their own emotions in a self-directed manner, particularly through short and self-referential comments. In other words, while existing research explains how people respond emotionally to music and how these responses are expressed online, it does not sufficiently explain how individuals recognize, interpret, and validate their own emotional experiences in digital spaces.

Self-Empathy

This study focuses on the concept of self-empathy as a form of self-directed emotional understanding. While self-empathy is closely related to self-compassion, the two concepts are not identical. Self-compassion, as defined by Neff, refers to how individuals treat themselves with kindness, recognize shared human experiences, and maintain balanced awareness during emotional difficulties (Neff et al., 2018). It is often discussed in broader psychological contexts such as well-being and emotional regulation.

In contrast, self-empathy in this study is understood as a more immediate and expressive process, in which individuals recognize, interpret, and respond to their own emotional experiences through language. Rather than focusing on long-term emotional attitudes, self-empathy emphasizes how individuals momentarily relate to themselves, particularly in spontaneous and brief expressions such as social media comments. Therefore, while self-compassion provides the theoretical foundation, self-empathy is used here as a more context-specific lens to analyze linguistic expressions in digital environments.

To operationalize this concept, self-empathy in this study is categorized into three main aspects: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. Self-reflection refers to the ability of individuals to recognize themselves in relation to an experience. In this study, it is identified through expressions where individuals explicitly relate the content to themselves, such as statements indicating “this is about me” or “this represents who I am.”(Loureiro et al., 2024) These expressions

show that individuals are engaging in self-referential thinking. Emotional awareness refers to the recognition and acknowledgment of one's emotional state. It is observed in expressions that reveal how individuals feel, either explicitly through emotional statements (e.g., "this is how I feel") or implicitly through affective markers such as emojis or emotionally loaded language. This aspect indicates that individuals are aware of their internal emotional experiences. Self-validation refers to the acceptance or affirmation of one's emotional experience as meaningful or accurate (Neff et al., 2018). In this study, it is reflected in expressions that confirm or legitimize personal feelings, such as statements indicating agreement, acceptance, or encouragement toward oneself (e.g., "this describes me perfectly" or "I am still trying"). These expressions suggest that individuals are not only aware of their emotions but also accept them as valid.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore how self-empathy is expressed in TikTok comments on the video for the song "Mirrorball." A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because it focused on interpreting meaning and understanding how individuals express their emotional experiences through language. The data consisted of twelve TikTok comments selected from videos featuring the song "Mirrorball." To minimize potential bias, video selection was based on the following criteria: (1) the video prominently featured the song "Mirrorball," with lyrics; (2) the video contained a sufficient number of user comments; and (3) the comments were publicly accessible. This ensured that the data was relevant and representative of natural user interactions on the platform.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select comments that were directly related to the research focus. The selected comments met three criteria: (1) they contain self-referential expressions (e.g., "I," "me," "my"), (2) they reflect personal emotional experiences, and (3) they indicate potential aspects of self-empathy. The use of twelve comments is justified based on the principle of depth over breadth in qualitative research. Rather than aiming for generalization, this study focuses on obtaining rich and detailed insights from a smaller dataset. The selected comments were sufficient to reveal recurring patterns of self-empathy expressions across the three analytical categories.

Instrument and Procedure

The primary instrument of this study was a documentation sheet used to collect and analyze the selected comments. The sheet includes several categories: (1) comment text, (2) self-empathy aspect (self-reflection, emotional awareness, or self-validation), and (3) notes on linguistic features such as pronoun use, emotional expressions, or keywords.

The data collection procedure was conducted in several steps. First, the researcher identified TikTok videos featuring the song *Mirrorball*. Second, the comment sections were observed to locate relevant user responses. Third, comments that met the selection criteria were manually recorded and compiled into the documentation sheet. Finally, each comment was reviewed to ensure its relevance to the research focus before being included in the dataset. Only publicly available comments were used in this study, and no personal user information was recorded, ensuring ethical consideration in data collection.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading the selected comments multiple times to gain an overall understanding. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying key expressions related to self-empathy, such as self-referential statements or emotional indicators. Third, the codes were grouped into broader categories based on similarities in meaning. These categories were then reviewed and refined to ensure consistency with the theoretical framework of self-empathy. Fourth, the categories were developed into themes representing the three aspects of self-empathy: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. Finally, the themes were interpreted and supported with selected data excerpts to illustrate each category. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the coding process was guided by predefined operational definitions, ensuring consistency in categorizing the data.

RESULT

The analysis of twelve selected TikTok comments reveals three aspects of self-empathy: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. Each aspect is represented by four comments, indicating a balanced distribution across the dataset.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection was identified in the data when TikTok users explicitly connected lyrics to their personal identities, thoughts, or psychological states. This suggests that the song serves as a reflective medium, triggering self-referential thinking. For example, the comment "so this is my mental health, huh?" demonstrates a strong self-reflective process. The use of the phrase "my mental health" suggests that listeners interpret the lyrics as a representation of their own emotional state. This suggests that the song activates personal cognitive evaluation, where individuals reassess their emotional state through the lyrics.

Similarly, the comment "is this a song that describes me?" reflects identity-based reflection. The word "I" indicates self-identification, where the listener positions

themselves as the subject represented in the song. This implies that the lyrics serve as a mirror for self-perception, allowing the listener to evaluate whether their emotional experiences align with the lyrics' meaning. Another comment, "who reads my diary?", further reinforces this pattern of self-reflection. Although metaphorical, the phrase "diary" represents private, secret thoughts. By comparing the song to a diary, users suggest that the lyrics expose their inner experiences, demonstrating a sense of psychological transparency between the song and the self.

Furthermore, the statement "I am the mirror ball, that's me" indicates a direct identification with the lyrical symbol of the "mirror ball." The repetition of the word "I" emphasizes self-association, suggesting that listeners view the lyrical metaphor as a direct representation of their identity. This reflects a deeper level of self-reflection, where the lyrics are interpreted as representing the listener's personal emotional identity. Overall, these comments suggest that self-reflection occurs when listeners interpret the lyrics as a representation of their own identity and mental state. The song serves not only as entertainment but also as a cognitive trigger, prompting individuals to evaluate and understand themselves through emotional and linguistic associations.

Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness was identified in comments where listeners expressed recognition of their emotional state in response to the lyrics. This aspect demonstrates how the song serves as a trigger for emotional awareness, allowing listeners to articulate feelings that might be difficult to express directly. The comment "every lyric reflects how I feel." This statement explicitly demonstrates emotional awareness, as the listener directly connects the lyric's content to their internal emotional state. The phrase "how I feel" demonstrates self-recognition of emotion, indicating that the listener is able to identify their emotional experience through the song. This reflects the alignment between external linguistic input (lyrics) and internal emotional processing.

Furthermore, the use of non-verbal expressions such as "😞😞😞" demonstrates emotional awareness through affective symbols. Although no verbal explanation is provided, the repeated sad face emoji clearly indicates the listener's emotional state, specifically sadness or emotional distress. This demonstrates that emotional awareness can also be expressed non-verbally in digital communication, where emojis serve as substitutes for emotional language. Another comment, "gaaaahhhh this is so 😞," reflects an emotional outburst combined with an affective interpretation. The long expression "gaaaahhhh" combined with the pleading face emoji 😞 indicates a strong emotional reaction that is difficult to verbalize in structured language. This suggests that the listener is aware of the emotional stimulus but is expressing it in a fragmented and expressive manner, which is common in emotional online discourse.

Furthermore, the statement "people see me. But they don't see me" indicates a deeper emotional awareness associated with the perception of emotional ambiguity. The repetition of "I" emphasizes the self, while the contrast between "seeing" and "not seeing" suggests emotional conflict. This suggests that listeners are aware of the discrepancy between external perception and internal emotional reality, reflecting a higher level of emotional self-awareness. These findings suggest that emotional awareness emerges when listeners are able to recognize, label, and express their emotional states through both verbal and non-verbal means. Lyrics act as an emotional catalyst, allowing individuals to express feelings that might otherwise remain unexpressed.

Self-Validation

Self-validation was identified in TikTok comments where listeners expressed acceptance, affirmation, or confirmation of their own emotional experiences through the lyrics. This aspect suggests that the song not only elicits emotional recognition but also reinforces listeners' sense of emotional legitimacy and self-acceptance. One example is the comment "nothing describes me as well as this song." This statement reflects strong self-validation, as users position the song as the most accurate representation of their identity. The phrase "describes me" indicates alignment between self-perception and the meaning of the lyrics, while "nothing... as well as this song" indicates exclusivity and strong emotional agreement. This implies that listeners use the song as a benchmark for validating their personal emotional identity.

The comment, "This represents ME," demonstrates a direct self-affirmation. The capitalization of "ME" emphasizes the self-focus and emotional emphasis, indicating that the listener strongly identifies with the lyrics. This reflects an act of validation in which the listener confirms that their personal emotional experiences are accurately reflected in the song, reinforcing a sense of emotional legitimacy. The subsequent comment, "This is the most accurate description of myself I've ever seen in this song," further reinforces this pattern. The repetition of "Myself" highlights a self-centered evaluation, while the phrase "The most accurate description" suggests comparison and judgment. This suggests that the listener actively evaluates various representations and concludes that the song provides the most valid reflection of their identity. This process reflects cognitive validation, where external media are used as reference points for self-understanding.

The study's findings suggest that TikTok's comments section isn't just a place for casual reactions, but also a space where users express empathy in a deeply personal and meaningful way. Three key patterns emerged from the data: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. These patterns suggest that when listeners listen to music like Mirrorball, they not only respond emotionally but also connect the lyrics to their own identities and experiences in a more reflective way. Self-reflection occurs when listeners directly connect song lyrics to their personal situations. Many comments indicate that the song functions almost as a mirror to

their inner thoughts. (Grover, 2024). This aligns with recent research explaining how short-form video platforms like TikTok often encourage identity expression through music-related content (Degener & Ran, 2023), where users interpret lyrics based on their own life experiences.

What's interesting here is that the lyrics of "Mirrorball" seem to trigger a kind of self-evaluation. Users not only enjoy the song but also ask themselves questions about their emotional state. This state reflects what previous research has described as self-reflection processing, where external stimuli such as music (Herwig et al., 2012) trigger internal reflection. In this case, TikTok serves as a medium that amplifies this process due to its highly personal and expressive commenting culture. Emotional awareness is evident in how listeners express their feelings in brief, sometimes fragmented, forms. Some comments are written in complete sentences, while others rely on emojis or very simple expressions (Dempsey, 2020). Despite this, the emotional meaning remains very clear.

At the same time, this study adds a slightly different perspective. Previous research often addresses emotional expression in structured digital communication, such as messages or general social media posts (Prihodko et al., 2020). In contrast, TikTok's comments section demonstrates a more direct or spontaneous form of emotional awareness. Users don't always construct complete sentences instead, they combine words, repetition, and emojis to express complex feelings in very concise forms. While emotional expression in digital communication has been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to how emotional awareness emerges in very brief, comment-based interactions. This study contributes by demonstrating that even minimal expressions can still carry powerful emotional meaning.

Self-validation occurs when users not only express emotions but also confirm their feelings are real. Many comments indicate that users feel the song accurately represents their emotional identity, indicating a process of emotional acceptance (Demiray & Gençöz, 2018). This reflects the role of self-directed emotional processing, which is closely related to the concept of self-compassion, particularly in terms of accepting one's internal experiences. Compared to previous research, self-validation has been largely discussed in a psychological context as an internal emotional process (Briñol & Petty, 2021). Less attention has been paid to how this process emerges in digital social interactions, particularly on short-form platforms like TikTok.

This reveals a research gap self-validation in online environments is not only an internal psychological process but also a socio-linguistic practice shaped by platform interactions. This study contributes by demonstrating that validation can occur publicly, through short emotional statements influenced by music and digital culture. The findings suggest that TikTok's comment sections function as emotional spaces where users actively engage in self-empathy. These spaces allow users to

self-reflect, acknowledge their emotions, and validate their feelings in a direct and informal way.

Previous studies have explored music-induced emotions and digital communication separately, but this study combines the two by focusing on how emotional processes emerge in TikTok comment interactions. The combination of music, language, and the platform's affordances creates a unique space where self-empathy becomes visible through very brief yet meaningful expressions. This study has several implications for English language teaching (ELT) and psycholinguistics. Teachers can use music and social media content, such as TikTok comments, as authentic learning materials. These materials can help students express personal meanings and emotional responses in English more naturally. From a psycholinguistic perspective, this study shows that language in digital environments is closely linked to emotions and identity construction. Even very brief comments can reflect complex cognitive and emotional processes. This suggests that digital platforms are used not only for communication but also as spaces for emotional and linguistic development.

Despite these contributions, this study also has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the data is limited to TikTok comments on a single song (*Mirrorball* by Taylor Swift), which may not fully represent broader patterns of emotional expression across contexts. Second, because this study used qualitative analysis, there is a degree of subjectivity in interpreting the data, particularly in classifying emotional expressions into categories such as self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. Third, this study did not consider user demographics, which may influence how emotions are expressed in digital spaces. Further research is recommended to expand the dataset, include multiple songs, or compare different social media platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how self-empathy is expressed in TikTok comments responding to the song *Mirrorball*. The findings show that self-empathy appears through three main aspects: self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-validation. These aspects indicate that listeners do not only react emotionally to music, but also engage in recognizing, understanding, and accepting their own emotional experiences. The study highlights the role of TikTok as a space where individuals express self-related emotions through brief and spontaneous comments. Even in short forms, these expressions reveal meaningful processes of self-understanding, showing how music can trigger personal reflection and emotional articulation in digital environments. In terms of implications, this study suggests that future research can explore larger datasets or different songs and platforms to gain a broader understanding of self-empathy in digital contexts. Further studies may also examine how linguistic patterns vary across different emotional themes or user groups. Practically, the findings can contribute to the use of music and social

media as tools for emotional awareness, particularly in educational or psychological contexts where self-expression and emotional understanding are important.

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