

## **Unravelling Gender Inequality: A Semiotic Analysis of Taylor Swift's Song Lyrics**

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### **Abstrak**

Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi representasi semiotik tentang ketidaksetaraan gender dalam lirik lagu Taylor Swift. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, studi ini menganalisis signifier dan signified yang tersemat dalam musiknya. Mengacu pada teori semiotik Ferdinand de Saussure, studi ini menggali aspek-aspek materi dari bahasa—apa yang terlihat, terdengar, atau dibaca (signifier)—dan gambaran mental atau konsep yang sesuai (signified). Melalui analisis komprehensif terhadap lagu-lagu Swift, termasuk "The Man," "Mad Woman," dan "Look What You Made Me Do," penelitian ini mengungkap kesenjangan gender yang merajalela dan perlakuan yang tidak adil yang dihadapi oleh perempuan dalam berbagai konteks sosial. Pengumpulan data melibatkan mendengarkan lagu-lagu tersebut, memahami maknanya, dan mengamati contoh diskriminasi terhadap perempuan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, yang bersumber dari artikel dan jurnal online. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya musik Swift sebagai platform untuk diskusi tentang ketidaksetaraan gender, menyelami perjuangan berkelanjutan untuk hak-hak perempuan dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

**Kata Kunci:** Semiotika, Lirik Lagu, Ketidaksetaraan Gender, Lagu Taylor Swift

### **Abstract**

This study aims to explore the semiotic representations of gender inequality within Taylor Swift's song lyrics. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method, it analyses the signifier and signified embedded in her music. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, the study delves into the material aspects of language—what is seen, heard, or read (signifier)—and the corresponding mental images or concepts (signified). Through a comprehensive analysis of Swift's songs, including "The Man," "Mad Woman," and "Look What You Made Me Do," the research uncovers the pervasive gender gap and mistreatment faced by women in various societal contexts. Data collection involves listening to the songs, understanding their meaning, and observing instances of discrimination against women in daily life. The findings highlight the significance of Swift's music as a platform for discourse on gender inequality, shedding light on the ongoing struggle for women's rights in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Song Lyrics, Gender Inequality, Taylor Swift's song

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of language in songs demonstrates its adaptability and dynamic nature. As individuals modify their language use across different contexts and situations, they also integrate cultural insights with linguistic proficiency, providing a unique perspective on how language and societal norms interact (Indra et al., 2024). This adaptability of language highlights its role beyond mere communication. According to Fauzi & Hakim (2022),

language embodies the attitudes and values of its speakers, symbolizing social or collective identity and expressing group membership and unity. Language evolves with societal progress, continuously adapting and exhibiting diverse uses across different regions globally, thereby underscoring its inseparability from societal dynamics (Goziyah et al., 2022). Songs are powerful tools for persuasion that reflect the writer's experiences and broader human life, captivating listeners and effectively conveying messages (Mahmud et al., 2022).

Gender inequality within popular music has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, reflecting broader societal dynamics and power structures. Research by Krause & North (2019) delves into the evolving landscape of gender representation in popular music lyrics, uncovering significant disparities over time. Their analysis spanning from 1972 to 1982 revealed entrenched gender stereotypes, with males portrayed as competent and proactive, while females were often relegated to seductive roles.

Building upon this foundation, Setiawati & Maryani (2018) further explored the historical evolution of gender portrayal in pop music lyrics. Their findings underscored the persistence of highly sex-typed male and female roles, illuminating the enduring nature of gender stereotypes in music. Such insights contextualize the need for nuanced examinations of contemporary artists like Taylor Swift, whose work intersects with broader discourses on gender and power (Desmarais, 2021). Moreover, Swari (2023) critical discourse analysis of Taylor Swift's "Woman of the Decade" speech on the Billboard platform offers a poignant critique of the music industry's treatment of women. Through dissecting Swift's address, Swari unpacks the systemic challenges and inequalities faced by female artists, providing crucial context for understanding the complexities of gender dynamics within the music industry.

Drawing from these seminal works, a semiotic analysis of Taylor Swift's song lyrics emerges as a potent lens through which to examine the intricate interplay of gender, language, and power (Firdaus, 2013). By analyzing Swift's lyrical content and the semiotic elements embedded within, this study aims to unravel the multifaceted layers of gender representation in popular music. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate how Swift's use of figurative language contributes to the construction and perpetuation of gender norms, shedding light on broader patterns of gender inequality within the music industry.

In synthesizing the insights gleaned above, this research endeavours to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary music, paving the way for informed discussions and potential avenues for addressing gender inequality within the industry.

Gender representation in popular music lyrics is a complex interplay of societal norms and artistic expression. As Logan et al. (2004) suggest, that songs serve as a medium for conveying emotions and messages, functioning as a form of non-verbal communication through tone and melody. Each song encapsulates a unique narrative, inviting listeners to interpret its lyrics through their own experiences and knowledge, thus forming varied perceptions (Desmarais, 2021),

The comprehension of song lyrics hinges on the understanding of signs, a cornerstone of semiotics. Chandler (2017) defines semiotics as the study of signs and their meanings, encompassing various forms such as words, images, sounds, and behaviours. In this context, song lyrics serve as signs imbued with meaning by their creators, facilitating communication and interpretation.

Semiotics provides a theoretical framework for analysing songs, offering insights into the underlying meanings encoded within them (Yakin & Totu, 2014). It elucidates the

significance of signs and symbols in human communication, underscoring their role in conveying complex ideas and emotions. Art, including music, serves as a vehicle for symbolic expression, engaging audiences in the interpretation of signs (Sovič & Hus, 2016).

In contemporary society, gender inequality persists as a pervasive issue, perpetuating negative stereotypes and disparities in various spheres, including the music industry (Rokhimah, 2015). In society, women often face negative stereotypes, being perceived as weak, emotional, and sometimes merely as objects of sexuality within relationships. The gender pay gap is a prevalent issue, with men typically dominating high-level positions, such as CEOs of major American companies (Macis, 2017). This inequality has fuelled the feminist movement, where women advocate for equal rights. These stereotypes have also influenced the music industry, leading to the creation of feminist songs. Addressing the issue of gender inequality, various musicians have begun to highlight these disparities in their works, using their music as a platform for social commentary and change. The issue of gender inequality has also appeared in Taylor Swift's work.

Taylor Swift has emerged as a vocal critic of gender inequality, using their platform to address societal injustices through their music. Swift's songs, such as "The Man" and "Mad Woman," serve as poignant reflections on gender dynamics and societal expectations (Macis, 2017). Swift's repertoire encompasses a diverse range of themes, from personal experiences to broader social commentary. Songs like "Look What You Made Me Do" from her album "Reputation" exemplify her confrontational stance against public scrutiny and gender-based criticism.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the representation of gender inequality in Taylor Swift's song lyrics, drawing upon semiotic theory guided by Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic principles (Mahmud et al., 2022) to decipher the meanings embedded within her compositions. Specifically, it seeks to address fundamental research questions as follows:

1. How is Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotics interpreted in Taylor Swift's songs?
2. How does the 'signifier' represent the value of feminism and gender inequality in the lyrics of songs popularised by Taylor Swift?
3. How does the 'signified' represent the value of feminism and gender inequality in the lyrics of songs popularised by Taylor Swift?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

To examine the semiotic dimensions of Taylor Swift's songs, this study employs a descriptive qualitative method, focusing on analysing the form of descriptions rather than numerical relationships between variables (Gerring, 2017). This qualitative approach entails gathering data in the form of vocabulary, sentences, and images imbued with meaning, aligning with the anthological nature of qualitative research.

The objects of inquiry in this study are Taylor Swift's songs, namely 'The Man,' 'Mad Woman,' and 'Look What You Made Me Do,' chosen for their thematic exploration of gender inequality. Through a descriptive qualitative method, the song lyrics are subjected to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis, with a specific focus on the interplay between the signifier and signified inherent within Swift's lyrical narratives.

Data acquisition involves comprehensive listening to the songs, capturing the nuances of Swift's lyrical expressions from the introduction to the conclusion. Subsequently, data is gathered from journals and studies sourced from the internet to supplement the analysis.

Following data collection, the analysis proceeds by Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic framework. The data analysis technique, inspired by Miles et al. (2014), encompasses three stages: word reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

In the reduction stage, collected data is meticulously examined, coded, and classified to identify salient themes and patterns within the song lyrics. This process ensures that the analysis remains firmly rooted in the text, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Swift's semiotic strategies. Subsequently, data presentation involves organizing the selected data into coherent units of information, aligning with the research problem at hand. This presentation facilitates the assessment of signifier and signified, enabling the interpretation of meaning embedded within the lyrics.

Drawing conclusions based on the interpreted data completes the analytical process, allowing for insights into how Swift utilizes semiotic elements to convey messages of gender inequality within her music. Through this methodological approach, the study aims to unravel the intricate layers of meaning within Taylor Swift's songs, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in popular music.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research conducts a comprehensive analysis of Taylor Swift's songs, including "The Man," "Mad Woman," and "Look What You Made Me Do," to explore the semiotic representations of gender inequality and female empowerment embedded within the lyrics. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, the study uncovers the nuanced meanings conveyed through the interplay of signifier and signified within Swift's music (Arum, 2021).

### Semiotic Analysis of "The Man" Song

"The Man" is a track from Taylor Swift's 2019 album, *Lover*, penned by Swift herself. It serves as a commentary on the gender inequalities prevalent in society, drawing from Swift's personal experiences of unfair treatment due to her gender. As noted by Swift on Billboard.com, the song critiques media and societal attitudes that perpetuate differential treatment based on gender.

Swift visually depicts the song's themes in its music video, released on February 27, 2020, which she directed and starred in. The video garnered significant attention, addressing issues such as patriarchy, double standards, gender inequality, and toxic masculinity. With 77 million views and 1.9 million likes, it resonated positively with fans and earned the "Best Direction" award at the MTV Video Music Awards.

The following analysis applies Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic theory of "The Man" Song:

Table 1. Analysis "The Man" Song

Signifier	Signified
Every conquest I make would make me more of a boss to you	The greater the achievements, the more impressive one's reputation becomes.
I'd be an alpha type	Refers to exhibiting leadership, assertiveness, and dominance typical of an alpha male.

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Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man	Expresses frustration at the gender inequality prevalent in workplaces.
Cause if I was a man, I'd be the man	Implies that if Swift were a man, she would exceed societal expectations of masculinity.
They wouldn't shake their heads and question how of this I deserve	Reflects on the disparity in recognition and reward between genders for similar achievements.
What I was wearing, if I was rude. Could all be separated from my good ideas and power move	Highlights the disparate treatment of men and women regarding their attire and behaviour.
And they would toast to me, oh let the players play	Suggests that men are celebrated for assertive behaviour, whereas women are judged harshly.
What's it like to brag about drinking and dollars	Criticizes the societal double standard regarding boasting between genders.
If I was out flashing my dollars, I'd be a bitch not a baller	Illustrates the negative perception faced by women who display wealth and success.
They'd paint me out to be bad	Depicts the tendency to vilify assertive women.
So, it's okay that I'm mad	Affirms the validity of women's anger in the face of societal injustice.

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Table 1 shows that in the song "The Man", Swift adopts a male perspective to underscore societal discrepancies in treatment between genders. She critiques the preferential treatment afforded to men in various contexts, juxtaposed with the scrutiny and criticism faced by women for similar behaviours. Swift also addresses societal expectations and gender stereotypes, highlighting the disparity in opportunities and treatment between men and women. The lyrics evoke a sense of frustration and disillusionment with the double standards imposed on women, particularly in the workplace. Through phrases like "I'd be an alpha type" and "Cause if I was a man, I'd be the man," Swift critiques the societal norms that dictate women's roles and limit their potential. These lyrics serve as a poignant commentary on the persistent gender inequalities faced by women in various facets of life.

The phrase "Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man" encapsulates the gender inequality experienced by women, especially in the workplace, where mistreatment is prevalent. Women often must exert more effort than men to achieve their goals or dreams. Commonly, men are perceived to have more advantages in the workplace due to prevailing laws and social norms, such as promotions. Thus, the songwriter illustrates how, if she were a man, reaching the pinnacle of her career would be easier.



Similarly, the phrase "Cause if I was a man, I'd be the man" suggests that if she were a man, she would excel further. Society places minimal expectations on men to perform well, often glorifying them for even minor achievements. Conversely, women face immense pressure to attain perfection. For instance, in household roles, women are expected to manage familial duties flawlessly, and any mistake is harshly criticized. Conversely, if a man assists with household chores, he is praised extravagantly, highlighting societal biases. These findings are in accord with (Caroline et al., 2023) who says that the words, phrases and sentences used in the song "The Man" highlight the disparities and obstacles women encounter in society, prompting listeners to question and challenge these norms.

### **Semiotic Analysis of The Song "Mad Woman"**

"Mad Woman" features on Taylor Swift's 2020 album, *Folklore*, and addresses themes of gaslighting and manipulation experienced by women. Swift explores societal expectations dictating that women suppress their emotions and conform to traditional gender roles, with the song serving as a response to the controversy surrounding the ownership of her masters.

Below Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic theory of The Song "Mad Woman":

Table 2. Analysis "The Mad Woman" Song

<b>Signifier</b>	<b>Signified</b>
What did you think I'd say to that? Does a scorpion sting when fighting back	Equates Swift to a scorpion, prepared to retaliate when provoked.
They strike to kill, and you know I will	Emphasizes Swift's resolve to confront mistreatment head-on.
Every time you call me crazy, I get more crazy	Illustrates the exacerbation of behavior when labeled as irrational.
What a shame she went mad	Criticizes the societal shaming of female anger.
No one likes a mad woman	Highlights the disdain toward assertive women in society.
And you'll poke that bear 'till her claws come out	Portrays Swift as a bear defending herself when antagonized.

Song "Mad Woman" in Table 2 shows that Swift delves into the consequences of labelling women as "crazy" for asserting themselves. This labelling perpetuates societal expectations and advocates for women's agency in responding to mistreatment. For instance, the phrase "They strike to kill, and you know I will" confronts the pervasive mistreatment and invalidation of women's emotions, highlighting the psychological toll of gaslighting and manipulation.

The song elucidates society's tendency to label women as "mad" or "irrational" for asserting themselves or defending their rights, perpetuating a cycle of victim-blaming and gaslighting. Swift's lyrics, "What a shame she went mad," critique the stigmatization of female

anger and the dismissal of women's grievances. This phrase exposes the inherent sexism and misogyny embedded within societal norms, which dictate how women should behave and express themselves.

Moreover, "Mad Woman" challenges societal expectations for women to suppress their emotions and conform to traditional gender roles. That response is also consistent with the reports of Putri et al., (2022) that the critique of societal norms is supported by the assertion that societal norms often pathologize female anger while dismissing women's grievances. This societal expectation is further scrutinized by Swift's portrayal of female anger and emotional expression as legitimate and justified responses to mistreatment.

Through the semiotic analysis of "Mad Woman," it becomes evident that Swift uses her platform to address broader issues of gender inequality and to advocate for the recognition of women's emotional experiences as valid. Her work challenges the narrative that women should conform to restrictive emotional and behavioural norms, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in contemporary society.

### **Semiotic Analysis of The Song "Look What You Made Me Do"**

"Look What You Made Me Do" marked Taylor Swift's return to the music scene after a hiatus, addressing her public conflicts with figures like Kanye West and Kim Kardashian. Released as part of her 2017 album, *Reputation*, the song reflects Swift's defiance and resilience in the face of adversity.

Utilizing Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic theory:

Table 3. Analysis "Look What You Made Me Do" Song

<b>Signifier</b>	<b>Signified</b>
The role you made me play	Addresses false narratives propagated about Swift, portraying her as deceitful.
You said the gun was mine	Symbolizes allegations of misconduct and public falsehoods directed at Swift.
Honey, I rose up from the dead I do it all the time	Asserts Swift's resilience and ability to overcome adversity.
I've got a list of names and yours is in red, underline	Represents Swift's awareness of those who have wronged her, marked for retribution.
Look what you made me do	Challenges those responsible for forcing Swift's hand in responding to their actions.
"I'm sorry the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now"	Symbolizes Swift's evolution and departure from her previous persona.

Table 3 shows that in "Look What You Made Me Do" Taylor Swift confronts her detractors and reclaims her narrative following public scrutiny and defamation. The song serves as a powerful anthem of empowerment, with Swift asserting her agency and resilience

in the face of adversity. The phrase "The role you made me play" underscores Swift's defiance against being misrepresented and vilified by her adversaries.

Furthermore, "Look What You Made Me Do" challenges victim-blaming, shifting the focus onto those who seek to undermine and discredit women. Swift's assertion, "I'm sorry the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now," symbolizes her evolution and empowerment, signalling a departure from her past persona and embracing newfound strength and assertiveness.

In essence, Taylor Swift's songs challenge traditional understandings of power, agency, and identity (Khurshid & Farid, 2023). Through nuanced lyricism and semiotic analysis, Swift unpacks the complexities of gender dynamics and challenges patriarchal norms. Her songs resonate with audiences worldwide, sparking conversations and inspiring empowerment amidst ongoing struggles for gender equality.

These findings suggest that Taylor Swift's music not only entertains but also educates and empowers. By addressing issues of gender inequality, her songs encourage listeners to question and challenge societal norms. Through her music, Swift challenges entrenched norms and advocates for gender equality, amplifying marginalized voices and inspiring empowerment amidst ongoing struggles for social justice. The findings of this research demonstrate the study's results as Putri et al., (2022) states that through her lyrics, Swift conveys women's struggles against domination, their pursuit of goals, and the quest for emancipation.

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, this research unveils the multifaceted meanings embedded within Taylor Swift's songs. "The Man," "Mad Woman," and "Look What You Made Me Do" offer profound insights into the lived experiences of women and the systemic inequalities they confront. By critically examining the signifier and signified within each song, this study sheds light on the pervasive nature of gender inequality and the urgent need for societal change.

## **CONCLUSION**

Synthesizing the semiotic analysis of Taylor Swift's songs, including "The Man," "Mad Woman," and "Look What You Made Me Do," with the understanding of the signifier and signified as the unity of the sign, a comprehensive picture of gender inequality and female empowerment emerges. These songs, guided by Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic principles, offer profound insights into the mistreatment experienced by women in various spheres of life. Swift's lyrics serve as a powerful indictment of societal perceptions, calling for a paradigm shift in how women are perceived and treated.

Furthermore, this research identifies Taylor Swift as a feminist voice utilizing her music to articulate her aspirations for feminism. The examined songs reflect Swift's advocacy for gender equality and liberation from oppressive gender roles. They align with liberal feminist ideals, advocating for women's freedom from restrictive stereotypes and endorsing androgynous education to challenge patriarchal norms. Through her music, Swift effectively communicates messages of freedom, equality, and justice, contributing to ongoing discourse on gender dynamics in society.

In essence, the semiotic analysis of Taylor Swift's songs underscores the transformative power of music as a medium for social commentary and advocacy. Swift's lyrics serve as a rallying cry for change, challenging entrenched gender norms and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. As Swift continues to amplify feminist discourse



through her artistry, her music remains a beacon of inspiration for those striving for gender equality and social justice.

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