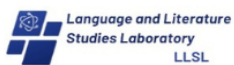


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Music as a Reflection of Female Struggles: Semiotic Analysis of 'Girls Like Us'

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Abstract

This article examines the meaning in Zoe Wees' song "Girls Like Us" through semiotic analysis, highlighting the representation of issues faced by women in the current cultural and social context. In this research, the researcher uses a qualitative descriptive method to collect data from various sources such as books, e-books, journals, and internet news sources, and applies a quantitative algorithm using NVivo 14 Plus for word frequency analysis in the lyrics of "Girls Like Us." The analysis shows that the song "Girls Like Us" depicts the emotional and psychological struggles of women. Semiotic analysis of dominant words such as "know," "like," "girls," and "hard" reveals themes of identity search, social challenges, and resilience. These words reflect Zoe's personal experiences while also representing the conditions faced by many young women worldwide. Through symbols and metaphors like "red lights in the darkness" and "heart in a cage," Wees portrays feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and the desire for recognition and acceptance. The message in these lyrics highlights the importance of understanding and empathy towards women's struggles, both in social and emotional contexts.

Keyword: Music; Female struggles; Semiotic; Ferdinand de Saussure

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INTRODUCTION

Music is not just entertainment; it is also a powerful medium for expressing cultural values, worldviews, and aspirations of various societal groups. Popular songs often reflect the social realities faced by different communities (Kablova & Teteria, 2020; Rhodes & Post, 2021). In this context, pop songs often mirror the perspectives and aspirations of the working class, revealing class values and gender constructions (Rodger, 2020). Songs in the working-class movement exert a stronger influence than arguments, as they raise moral issues that ground and evoke a sense of solidarity within the culture (Wallis, 2020). One issue frequently addressed in music is the struggles experienced by women. Music serves not only as entertainment but also as a platform for feminist resistance against dominant patriarchal structures. For instance, Ghadery (2022) observes that music often advocates for changing gender inequalities through lyrics that raise awareness of women's rights. More than mere documentation, music also becomes a form of escape from the racial and patriarchal oppression experienced by women (Khoza, 2020).

The song "Girls Like Us" portrays various emotional and social challenges faced by young women in their quest for identity and self-confidence. Its lyrics touch on personal issues while embracing broader societal expectations placed on women. However, in-depth research examining the representation of women in pop songs, particularly using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, remains relatively rare. Ferdinand de Saussure is a renowned linguist known for his contributions to the development of structuralism and semiotics (Fanani, 2013). His semiotic approach posits that meanings in language are not fixed or inherent but are determined by their relationships with other signs within the language system (Casas Gómez & Hummel, 2021). According to Saussure, language consists of two main components: *langue* (the language system) and *parole* (the actual use of language in concrete speech) (Zhi-ping, 2002).

In the context of semiotic analysis, Saussure's approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the relationship between signs and the concepts they represent (Stawarska, 2020). A sign itself consists of two parts: the signifier (the physical form of the sign, such as a word or image) and the signified (the concept or meaning associated with the sign) (Aranovich, 2016). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is not natural or direct but is determined by conventions and social contexts within the language system (Akbar, 2023; Senen, 2024; Qamari; Andryrestu, 2024; Maisari, 2024).

In the context of analyzing the lyrics of "Girls Like Us," Saussure's semiotic approach can be used to identify how words and phrases in the lyrics form complex meanings that reflect the social reality of women. For example, the analysis would focus on how words like "trust," "love," "pain," and "identity" are understood and interpreted within the song's context. Thus, Saussure's semiotic approach provides a strong theoretical framework for exploring how these meanings are constructed and communicated through the organized language structure in music lyrics. The goal of this research is to analyze how the issues experienced by women are represented in the song "Girls Like Us" through semiotic analysis. This study also aims to uncover hidden meanings in the lyrics and how these meanings reflect the social realities faced by women (Cristina, 2024; Munidar, 2024; Paull, 2024; Rahmadani, 2024; Johan, 2024; Ibrahi, 2024).

This research is crucial as it provides a deeper understanding of how women and their struggles are represented in popular music. By analyzing the song "Girls Like Us" using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, hidden meanings that may not be immediately apparent can be uncovered. This can help researchers, musicians, and readers alike better understand and appreciate the complexity of women's experiences as reflected in music. Most

research on popular music and gender representation tends to focus on general lyric analysis or from feminist perspectives. However, there is a gap in literature utilizing Ferdinand de Saussure's structural semiotic analysis to explore how meanings are created and communicated in songs that highlight women's issues. This study aims to address that gap.

For example, Aprilia & Neisyia (2022) examined lyrics representing women's images using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). They found that the song "Pretty Girl" by Maggie Lindemann contains discourse rejecting stereotypes of women. Rahmawati & Suyudi (2023) also revealed in their research that music can serve as a medium for representing women or feminism. Their study on the music video "God Is a Woman" by Ariana Grande found symbolism of postmodern feminist ideology. The analysis showed that the video depicted a main character (a woman) who had the freedom to express herself, full authority over her body, and the strength to confront patriarchy. Additionally, the music video portrayed radical feminist ideology by depicting female superiority over males.

Yazid et al., (2019) in their research using CDA by Sara Mills as their analytical approach also revealed representations of women in Minang song lyrics titled "Laki den Hobi Baburu". Their analysis reconstructed Minang women based on patriarchal ideology, where women are often marginalized because they have husbands who enjoy hunting wild boars. The author also shows her closeness to Minang women, known for provocation written in song lyrics, thus this is a paradox to the position of Minang women who are marginalized in lyrics because of matrilineal tradition and culture. Dworsky (2019) also examined how women are portrayed in music videos. The analysis through semiotic signs, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis, the music video popularized by Janelle Monae shows engagement and exploration of femininity, feminism, and female anger through lyrics and music videos from the album *Dirty Computer*. Each video includes themes of gender equality, acceptance of sexual preferences and fluidity, political messages, self-love and self-acceptance, and struggles for racial equality.

This research is significant in the field of study as it provides a deep understanding of how women and their challenges are represented in popular music. The novelty of this research lies in the semiotic analysis approach used. By applying Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, this research not only looks at the surface of song lyrics but also delves deeper into the structures and signs used to convey specific messages. Thus, this study not only fills a gap in the literature on the representation of women in popular music but also opens new paths for a deeper understanding of the complexity of women's experiences in current cultural and social contexts. Based on the background presented above, the main questions formulated to be answered in this research are: 1) how are women's struggles represented in the song "Girls Like Us"?; 2) what semiotic meanings can be uncovered from the lyrics of the song?; 3) how does the semiotic structure of the lyrics reflect the issues faced by women?

METHOD

The research method used in this study is qualitative and quantitative through a semiotic analysis approach. According to Mukhtar, qualitative descriptive research is a method used by researchers to discover knowledge or research theories at a particular time (Mukhtar, 2013). In collecting qualitative data, the researcher refers to books, e-books, journals, and internet news sources related to the song "Girls Like Us". For quantitative data, the researcher utilized the NVivo 14 Plus application algorithm to calculate the frequency of word occurrences in the song

lyrics. In this research, Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis approach is applied. Using Saussure's theory of signs, the researcher seeks to understand the meanings and purposes of messages conveyed through images or sounds in the song "Girls Like Us". The researcher then explores the elements of issues faced by women mentioned in the song using Saussure's semiotic approach. The subject of this research is the song "Girls Like Us" by Zoe Wees, while the object of the study is the representation of women's issues in the song. For data analysis, the researcher used content analysis techniques to identify signs and symbols in the song lyrics. Data validity was obtained through source triangulation by comparing and verifying information from various references such as books, journals, news articles, and through discussions with experts in semiotics and gender studies.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

You In the analysis using NVivo 14 Plus, the researcher found four key words that frequently appear in the song "Girls Like Us": "know, like, girls, hard". In the Tree Map visualization provided, these words are displayed in the largest boxes, indicating their dominance within the song lyrics. This suggests that the songwriter (Zoe Wees) likely had specific considerations in selecting these words to compose the lyrics that have become phenomenal. Below is the Tree Map visualization of the word frequency in the lyrics of "Girls Like Us", generated using the Word Frequency feature in NVivo 14 Plus.



Figure 1. Tree Maps form the Lyrics of Song Girls Like Us

Therefore, the writer chose to sample 20 words mentioned earlier and create a graph to make it easier for readers to see how often these words appear. Below is the graphical image displaying the frequently occurring words in the song "Girls Like Us."

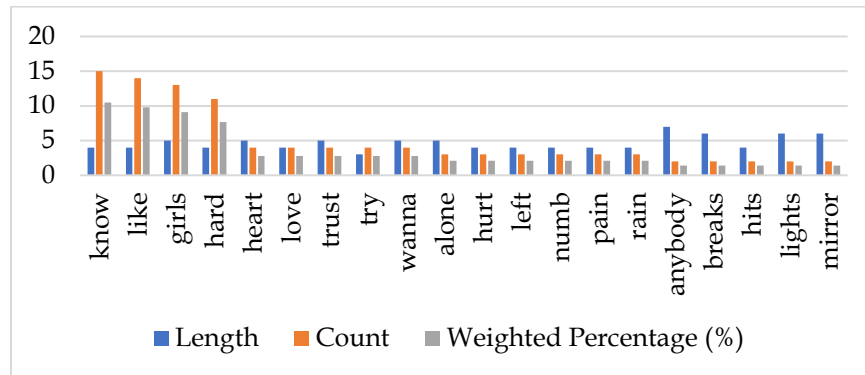


Figure 2. Chart of Word Frequency Query Result of Girls Like Us Lyrics

In the graph, it can be seen that the word "know" appears 15 times, accounting for 10% of the total, "like" also appears 14 times, also 10%, "girls" appears 13 times, accounting for 9%, "hard" appears 11 times, making up 8%, "heart" appears 4 times, accounting for 3%, "love" appears 4 times, also 3%, "trust" appears 4 times, also 3%, "try" appears 4 times, also 3%, "wanna" appears 4 times, also 3%, "alone" appears 3 times, making up 2%, "hurt" appears 3 times, also 2%, "left" once with 2%, "numb" once with 2%, "pain" appears 3 times, 2%, "anybody" twice with 1%, "breaks" hits twice with 1%, "lights" twice with 1%, and "mirror" twice with 1%. To make it easier for readers, here are the frequently occurring words in the lyrics of "Girls Like Us" displayed in tabular form.

Table 1. Girls Like Us lyrics, based on NVivo 14 Plus analysis

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
know	4	15	10%
like	4	14	10%
girls	5	13	9%
hard	4	11	8%
heart	5	4	3%
love	4	4	3%
trust	5	4	3%
try	3	4	3%
wanna	5	4	3%
alone	5	3	2%
hurt	4	3	2%
left	4	3	2%
numb	4	3	2%
pain	4	3	2%
rain	4	3	2%
anybody	7	2	1%

know	Appears as a dominant word in the lyrics. This word signifies the desire to understand or discover truths about oneself or the environment. It also reflects women's efforts to overcome uncertainty and find depth in their life experiences.
like	Indicates a search for identity or similarity with others. It also reflects the need for women to feel accepted or recognized in various social and personal contexts.
girls	"Girls" directly refers to gender identity, highlighting gender-specific experiences and struggles young women face in finding their place in society.
hard	Means difficult or challenging. It denotes the challenges faced, both emotionally and socially, portraying resilience and strength needed to confront various obstacles.
heart	Refers to emotions, desires, or motives underlying someone's actions, often related to expressions of feelings in contexts of love, loss, or emotional struggle.
love	"Love" encompasses a spectrum of positive emotions related to affection, relationships, or romantic aspirations, but it can also reflect vulnerability and pain in romantic contexts.
trust	Highlights the importance of trust in interpersonal relationships, whether in romantic relationships, friendships, or social support, and how this trust can be tested or betrayed.
try	"Try" means an effort or attempt to overcome challenges or pursue personal goals, reflecting the spirit to persevere and overcome obstacles.
wanna	Refers to desires or aspirations, often related to hopes or desires for change or fulfillment in life.
alone	Expresses feelings of loneliness or isolation, reflecting women's experiences in facing moments of solitude or the need to be independent in overcoming life challenges.
hurt	Implies experiences of pain, both physical and emotional, experienced in interpersonal relationships or difficult life experiences.
left	"Left" indicates feeling abandoned or neglected, depicting women's experiences in coping with loss or disappointment in relationships or social life.
numb	Denotes an emotional state where one loses sensation or sensitivity to feelings, reflecting women's experiences in dealing with trauma or emotional unresponsiveness.
pain	Expresses pain, both physical and emotional, experienced by women in facing life challenges or difficulties in relationships.
rain	It can reflect metaphors of sadness or difficulties that occur in life, often used to express melancholic or sad feelings.
anybody	It shows a desire to be loved or noticed by others, reflecting the need to feel accepted or acknowledged in society.
breaks	It reflects experiences of failure or separation, often in the context of romantic relationships or friendships, indicating the pain and difficulty in coping with change or loss.
hits	It can refer to experiences of trauma or conflict, both physical and emotional, that women experience in their daily lives.
lights	It can reflect enlightenment or revelation, often used as a metaphor for finding solutions or gaining new understanding in overcoming problems.

mirror	Reflects introspection or self-reflection, showing efforts to understand oneself or explore identity in social or personal contexts.
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Furthermore, semiotic analysis of these lyrics helps us understand how language, symbols, and metaphors are used to create a narrative about women's struggles. Each line in this song captures nuances of women's feelings and experiences, thus becoming a profound reflection of their emotional and psychological conditions. This is evident from the opening line, "It's hard for girls like us." This opening line directly highlights the difficulties faced by women in navigating life. These difficulties may encompass various aspects such as social pressures, societal expectations, and personal challenges. Subsequently, in the lyric "We don't know who we trust," it depicts a deep sense of mistrust. Women often find it difficult to trust others due to previous negative experiences or fear of betrayal. Followed by the lyric "Not even the ones we love," indicating that this distrust even extends to those they love. This suggests deep emotional wounds and an inability to feel safe even around loved ones.

The lyric "Cause they don't know" implies that others often do not understand or realize the feelings and experiences women go through. This misunderstanding can exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness. The lyric "Stuck here" describes the feeling of being trapped in difficult or painful situations. This feeling can refer to emotional, social, or even physical conditions. This is further clarified by the metaphorical lyric "Stuck here in these waters," depicting feeling trapped in overwhelming emotions like sadness, anxiety, or deep-seated fear. Continuing with the lyric "So sick to my stomach," which metaphorically expresses deep physical discomfort or anxiety. This nausea reflects the intensity of feelings of anxiety or discomfort experienced.

The lyric "Red lights" symbolizes danger or warning. In this context, it could refer to threatening situations or people who need to be cautious of. Then "Red lights in the darkness" combines the symbol of danger with darkness, indicating uncertainty and fear. This describes risky and challenging situations. The lyric "Is anybody there?" indicates a sense of loneliness and the search for support. Then, the lyric "Everyone's so heartless" suggests a perception that people around are ruthless or indifferent to someone's feelings. This reinforces feelings of isolation and lack of emotional support. "Does anybody care?" shows a sense of desperation in seeking empathy or attention from others. Women often feel that no one truly cares about what they are going through.

The lyric "It's hard to explain" indicates the difficulty women feel in expressing or explaining their feelings or experiences. Complex emotions are often challenging to articulate. This is followed by the metaphorical lyric "With your heart in a cage," depicting a feeling of being restrained or imprisoned in difficult emotions. Women often feel unable to freely express their feelings due to anxiety. This is supported by findings from Merikangas et al., (2013) that women are more vulnerable to anxiety disorders than men. They face challenges in seeking mental health care despite higher prevalence of anxiety disorders.

"Only whisper but you wanna shout" is a lyric referring to the desire to scream or express oneself freely, albeit limited by circumstances or social norms. This illustrates the tension between the desire for freedom and the pressure to remain silent. Overall, the song "Girls Like Us" portrays the feeling that "life is hard for girls like us." While seemingly addressing a specific group of women, Zoe Wees actually explores broader social and psychological realities. She highlights that women like herself find it difficult to trust others, as noted in the first verse where

she regrets how "everyone is so heartless." This reflects Zoe's perception that people can be indifferent and therefore untrustworthy, affecting her and others like her.

The second verse explores issues of self-image, expressing doubts about her own beauty. This mindset is partly influenced by social norms and personal experiences, underscoring Zoe's childhood where she felt unaccepted, exacerbated by her epilepsy during childhood. Ultimately, Zoe's message reflects the challenges faced by young women worldwide, gaining international recognition for her deep portrayal. Zoe Wees, as a solo female singer of German-African descent, made her debut with the hit single "Control" in 2020 before releasing "Girls Like Us" on January 12, 2021, as a significant milestone in her career under Capitol Records.

CONCLUSION

The song "Girls Like Us" by Zoe Wees portrays the emotional and psychological struggles of women through its richly meaningful lyrics. A semiotic analysis of dominant words such as "know," "like," "girls," and "hard" reveals the main themes of identity search, social challenges, and resilience. These words not only reflect Zoe's personal experiences but also represent the conditions experienced by many young women worldwide. Through the use of symbols and metaphors, such as "red lights in the darkness" and "heart in a cage," Wees depicts feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and the desire for recognition and acceptance. The message in these lyrics highlights the importance of understanding and empathy towards women's struggles, both socially and emotionally. Zoe Wees successfully combines her personal experiences with social observations in this song, making it a powerful voice in raising awareness about women's issues. Thus, "Girls Like Us" is not just a song but also a narrative that invites listeners to be more sensitive to the realities faced by women across the globe.

Recommendation for Future Research

For further research, researcher can continue analyzing this song using an interdisciplinary approach involving psychology, sociology, and gender studies to gain a deeper understanding of the lyrics' impact on female listeners. This study can explore how the lyrics might influence self-perception, emotional well-being, and gender identity.

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