

Feminist Meanings in Selected Taylor Swift Songs: A Semiotic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Popular music serves as a powerful cultural medium through which social ideologies, identities, and gender relations are expressed and contested, and the songs of Taylor Swift offer a compelling site for feminist meaning-making in contemporary popular culture. This study examined the feminist meanings embedded in selected Taylor Swift songs, *The Man*, *Shake It Off*, *Bejeweled*, *Clean*, and *You're On Your Own, Kid*, using a qualitative textual analysis grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. Specifically, the study aimed to identify key signifiers related to gender, power, and identity; interpret the signified meanings of these signifiers through

semiotic analysis; and discuss their implications for contemporary understandings of feminism. Guided by Saussure's signifier–signified framework, the analysis revealed that Swift's lyrics were rich in culturally loaded signs that exposed gendered double standards, challenged patriarchal norms, and articulated female selfhood. Signifiers such as *man*, *boss*, *bitch*, *diamonds*, *penthouse*, *clean*, and *on your own* functioned not merely as stylistic elements but as semiotic tools that conveyed broader social meanings related to inequality, emotional autonomy, resilience, and empowerment. The signified meanings of these signs reflected feminist concerns about women's marginalization, the policing of female behavior, and the pursuit of agency in both personal and public spheres. The findings further suggested that Swift's music reframed vulnerability as strength and self-worth as a feminist act. Ultimately, the study demonstrated that popular music can serve as a significant cultural site where feminism is represented as lived, emotional, and accessible, thereby shaping contemporary feminist discourse through personal yet collective narratives.

Keywords: *Popular music, feminism, semiotic analysis, gender representation, Taylor Swift*

INTRODUCTION

Popular music functions not only as entertainment but also as a potent cultural text that reflects, reinforces, and at times challenges dominant social ideologies (Frith, 1996; Middleton, 1990). Songs often communicate societal norms, values, and tensions, making them an essential site for understanding how culture shapes and is shaped by lived experiences. In contemporary popular culture, female artists increasingly use music as a platform to articulate resistance against patriarchal norms, gender stereotyping, and restrictive expectations imposed upon women. Within this landscape, Taylor Swift has emerged as a prominent cultural figure whose songwriting has evolved from personal romantic narratives to self-aware, reflexive, and socially grounded commentaries on womanhood, agency, and empowerment (Hutson, 2019; Railton & Watson, 2011).

Swift's oeuvre is characterized by its rich use of symbolic language, recurring metaphors, and culturally loaded signs that invite interpretation beyond their surface meanings. Early songs such as "Love Story" (2008) reflect conventional romantic ideals, often filtered through the lens of youthful innocence and longing. However, in later works, Swift demonstrates an increasing engagement with themes of autonomy, empowerment, and gendered critique. For instance, "The Man" (2019) directly addresses the double standards faced by women in both personal and professional spheres, questioning why assertive behaviors praised in men are often criticized in women. Similarly, tracks like "You Need to Calm Down" (2019) and "Mad Woman" (2020) utilize sharp lyrical imagery and metaphor to confront sexism, social judgment, and the policing of female emotion. These symbolic and metaphorical elements render Swift's work suitable for semiotic analysis, which examines how meaning is produced through signs, including words, images, and metaphors (Chandler, 2017).

Through a feminist lens, Swift's lyrics can be interpreted as articulations of women's struggles against sexism, double standards, and internalized oppression, as well as affirmations of self-worth, resilience, and agency (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In songs like "The Archer" (2019), the lyrics explore vulnerability and self-reflection, revealing the tension between private emotional experiences and public perceptions of female strength. Meanwhile, "Shake It Off" (2014) employs playful repetition and cultural references to subvert criticism and encourage self-assertion, illustrating how empowerment can be both celebratory and defiant.

Feminism, as a critical framework, seeks to uncover how texts represent gender relations, power structures, and social inequities (Moi, 2002). Feminist criticism of popular music emphasizes how women artists negotiate identity, voice, and authority within male-dominated industries, often contesting societal expectations and resisting objectification (Railton, 2001; Bayton, 1998). Taylor Swift's music provides a fertile ground for exploring the interplay between vulnerability, strength, and public scrutiny. Her lyrics reveal the tension between intimate, personal expression and broader socio-political commentary, reflecting a conscious negotiation of female subjectivity in popular culture.

Applying Saussurean semiotic theory (Saussure, 1916/1983) allows researchers to analyze how meaning is constructed through the relationship between signifiers, the words, images, and symbols used in lyrics, and the signified concepts they represent, such as empowerment, resistance, or self-definition. Songs like “The Man,” “Clean,” “Bejeweled,” “Shake It Off,” and “You’re on Your Own, Kid,” which served as primary data of the study, contained signifiers, critiquing patriarchal norms and social expectations. Semiotics provided a systematic way to decode these meanings, while a feminist perspective contextualized them within ongoing cultural debates about gender equality, autonomy, and female agency.

Despite the widespread popularity and cultural influence of Taylor Swift, there remains a gap in scholarly analysis that combines feminist theory with semiotic approaches to her lyrics. While numerous studies have examined her as a pop icon, celebrity figure, or commercial entity (Hutson, 2019; Lederer, 2020), few have systematically analyzed how feminist meanings are encoded and communicated through her lyrical and symbolic language. Therefore, this study sought to identify key signifiers related to gender, power, and identity in the selected songs; interpret the signified meanings of these signifiers using semiotic analysis; and discuss the impact of these feminist meanings on contemporary understandings of feminism.

In sum, Taylor Swift’s music provides a rich canvas for exploring how popular songs operate as texts that encode cultural meanings and social critiques. By combining feminist theory with Saussurean semiotics, this study illuminates the ways in which her lyrics engage with issues of gender, power, and identity, offering both aesthetic enjoyment and a meaningful contribution to ongoing conversations about women’s empowerment in contemporary society. Selected tracks serve as examples of how feminist discourse can be embedded in mainstream music, demonstrating that popular songs are not merely entertainment but also influential sites of cultural production and social reflection.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to analyze selected Taylor Swift songs using Saussurean semiotic theory in order to uncover feminist meanings embedded in the lyrics. By decoding signifiers and their corresponding signified concepts, the study aimed to demonstrate how linguistic and symbolic elements contribute to the construction of feminist discourse within popular music. The research further situated Swift’s songs within cultural and feminist contexts, revealing how popular music functions as both personal expression and social critique.

This research holds significance for several academic and practical reasons. First, it contributes to literary and cultural criticism by demonstrating that popular song lyrics can be analyzed as serious cultural texts, rather than purely entertainment artifacts (Middleton, 1990; Frith, 1996). Second, the study offers valuable insights for students and scholars of feminist studies, cultural studies, media studies, and semiotics, highlighting the relevance of these frameworks in analyzing contemporary media. Third, by examining

Taylor Swift's songs, the research underscores the potential of popular music as a site for feminist discourse, showing how it can challenge gender norms, amplify marginalized voices, and foster awareness about issues of autonomy and agency. Finally, this study encourages further scholarly exploration of the intersections between popular culture, semiotics, and gender studies, promoting a more critical and nuanced understanding of music as a medium of social commentary.

OBJECTIVES

1. identifying key signifiers related to gender, power, and identity in the selected songs;
2. interpreting the signified meanings of these signifiers using semiotic analysis; and
3. discussing the impact of these feminist meanings on contemporary understandings of feminism.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design, describes the data used in the study, and details the procedures for data collection and analysis. The purpose of this section is to present how the study was conducted in a systematic and organized manner.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis, an approach that emphasized the interpretation of meanings embedded within texts rather than numerical measurement. Qualitative textual analysis is particularly suitable for examining how language and symbols functioned to construct and communicate meaning within cultural texts, allowing for an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of the data (Creswell, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was guided by Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which conceptualized meaning as arising from the relationship between the signifier (the form of a sign) and the signified (the concept it represented). Through this framework, Taylor Swift's songs were examined as systems of signs whose meanings were socially constructed and culturally negotiated rather than fixed or inherent (Saussure, 2011).

Data Description

The primary data of the study consisted of the official lyrics of five Taylor Swift songs: *The Man* (2019) from the album *Lover*, *Shake It Off* (2014) from *1989*, *Bejeweled* (2022) from *Midnights*, *Clean* (2014) from *1989*, and *You're on Your Own, Kid* (2022) from *Midnights*. These songs were selected due to

their engagement with themes of gender, identity, independence, and resilience, which made them suitable for qualitative textual and semiotic analysis.

Data Collection Analysis

The lyrics were obtained from officially released versions of the songs. The researchers conducted repeated close readings to identify recurring words, phrases, metaphors, and images that functioned as signifiers of feminist meaning. The data were analyzed by identifying significant signifiers within the lyrics, interpreting their corresponding signified meanings within relevant social and cultural contexts through semiotic analysis, and examining how these meanings contributed to contemporary understandings of feminism. Interpretations were further strengthened by supporting them with related scholarly literature and findings from previous studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis of selected Taylor Swift songs, namely, *The Man*, *Shake It Off*, *Bejeweled*, *Clean*, and *You're On Your Own, Kid*, and discusses their feminist meanings. Anchored in de Saussure's semiotic theory, the analysis examines the relationship between signifiers (words, phrases, metaphors, and images present in the lyrics) and their corresponding signified meanings, with particular attention to how these meanings contribute to contemporary feminist discourse.

1. Identification of Key Signifiers Related to Gender, Power, and Identity

The analysis reveals a rich network of recurring signifiers associated with gender inequality, social power, female identity, and self-worth across the selected songs.

In *The Man*, prominent signifiers include "man," "boss," "alpha type," "bitch," and "baller." These linguistic signs are culturally loaded and directly reference patriarchal structures that privilege masculinity. The repeated conditional phrase "If I was a man" functions as a critical signifier that foregrounds gender as a determinant of social perception and success. Similar observations were made by Railton and Watson (2011), who argue that popular music often encodes gendered power relations through everyday language that appears naturalized.

In *Shake It Off*, signifiers such as "players," "haters," "dates," and "dancing on my own" reflect societal surveillance of women's behavior, particularly in relation to romance and public image. These signs echo what Gill (2007) identifies as the "postfeminist sensibility," where women are simultaneously empowered and scrutinized.

Bejeweled introduces material and spatial signifiers like “diamonds,” “shimmer,” “penthouse,” and “basement.” These signs symbolically represent visibility versus marginalization, suggesting hierarchies of value placed upon women within romantic and social relationships. According to Mulvey (2009), such symbolic contrasts often operate as visual and linguistic metaphors for power and desirability.

In *Clean*, natural elements such as “rain,” “drought,” “flood,” and “clean” function as signifiers of emotional struggle and renewal. These signs move away from overt gender binaries and instead focus on internal transformation, aligning with feminist narratives of healing and self-redefinition (Hooks, 2000).

Finally, *You’re On Your Own, Kid* employs signifiers like “ashes,” “pages turned,” “blood, sweat, and tears,” and “on your own.” These signify isolation, sacrifice, and personal growth. The recurrence of transitional imagery emphasizes identity formation through struggle, a theme common in feminist coming-of-age narratives (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Collectively, these signifiers demonstrate how Swift’s lyrics consistently encode issues of gender, power, and identity, making them suitable for feminist semiotic analysis.

2. Interpretation of the Signified Meanings Using Semiotic Analysis

Applying Saussure’s concept of the *signified*, the identified signifiers are interpreted as carriers of socially constructed meanings shaped by cultural context.

In *The Man*, the signified meaning of “man” extends beyond biological sex to represent *authority, legitimacy, and freedom from moral scrutiny*. Conversely, the signifier “bitch” signifies social punishment imposed on women who display traits admired in men. This binary reveals what Beauvoir (2011) describes as woman’s positioning as the “Other,” whose behavior is judged against male norms.

The signified meaning of resistance emerges strongly in *Shake It Off*. The act of “shaking off” criticism signifies reclaiming agency by refusing internalization of misogynistic judgments. This aligns with Butler’s (1999) notion that gender norms can be destabilized through repeated acts of defiance.

In *Bejeweled*, the signified meaning of “shimmer” and “diamonds” is not mere vanity but self-recognition and *autonomy*. The penthouse-basement opposition signifies a woman’s refusal to accept emotional neglect. From a semiotic standpoint, space here becomes a sign system representing hierarchical relationships (Chandler, 2017).

Clean signifies liberation from emotional dependence. The repeated reference to being “clean” signifies *autonomy and self-control* rather than loss. Feminist scholars argue that narratives of recovery are crucial in challenging romantic ideologies that define women through relationships (Gill, 2007).

Meanwhile, *You're On Your Own, Kid* signifies feminist *self-realization*. The acceptance of solitude becomes a signified meaning of *empowerment* rather than abandonment. The transformation of loss into strength reflects what Hooks (2000) identifies as feminism's emphasis on self-definition.

Through semiotic analysis, these songs reveal layered meanings where personal experiences function as signs of broader feminist realities.

3. Impact of Feminist Meanings on Contemporary Understandings of Feminism

Beyond identifying signifiers and interpreting their meanings, the analysis demonstrates that these songs significantly contribute to *contemporary feminist* discourse, particularly within popular culture.

First, the feminist meanings in these songs challenge *patriarchal double standards*. The Man explicitly critiques systemic sexism, making feminism accessible to a mainstream audience. This supports Banet-Weiser's (2018) argument that popular media plays a crucial role in shaping feminist consciousness among younger generations.

Second, the songs promote a form of feminism centered on *self-worth and emotional autonomy*. *Bejeweled* and *Clean* emphasize that empowerment involves recognizing one's value and choosing personal healing. Such narratives resonate with what Gill (2007) terms "choice feminism," where agency is exercised through personal decisions.

Third, the emphasis on *resilience and self-reliance* in *You're On Your Own, Kid* reframes feminism as an ongoing process of self-authorship. The song suggests that women's growth often occurs outside romantic fulfillment, reinforcing feminist critiques of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980).

Lastly, *Shake It Off* contributes to feminism by normalizing *resistance through joy and confidence* rather than anger alone. This diversification of feminist expression aligns with contemporary feminism's inclusivity and multiplicity (Hooks, 2000).

Overall, the feminist meanings embedded in these songs reshape feminism *as both political and personal*, demonstrating how semiotic elements in popular music can influence cultural understandings of gender equality, empowerment, and identity.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

This study examined the feminist meanings embedded in selected Taylor Swift songs, *The Man*, *Shake It Off*, *Bejeweled*, *Clean*, and *You're On Your Own, Kid*, through a qualitative semiotic analysis anchored in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs. Guided by three research objectives, the study identified key signifiers related to gender, power, and identity; interpreted their signified meanings; and discussed their implications for contemporary feminist discourse.

The findings revealed that Swift's lyrics are rich in culturally loaded signifiers that expose gendered double standards, challenge patriarchal norms, and articulate female selfhood. Words and metaphors such as *man*, *boss*, *bitch*, *diamonds*, *penthouse*, *clean*, and *on your own* function not merely as stylistic choices but as semiotic tools that convey broader social meanings. These signifiers consistently point to themes of gender inequality, emotional autonomy, resilience, and self-recognition.

Through semiotic interpretation, the study found that the signified meanings of these signs reflect feminist concerns about women's marginalization, the policing of female behavior, and the struggle for agency within personal and public spheres. The songs reframe vulnerability as strength, independence as empowerment, and self-worth as a feminist act. Using Saussure's signifier–signified relationship, the analysis demonstrated how personal narratives in popular music operate as cultural signs that represent collective feminist experiences.

Finally, the study showed that the feminist meanings in these songs significantly impact contemporary understandings of feminism. Rather than presenting feminism solely as a political movement, the songs portray it as lived, emotional, and deeply personal. Swift's music contributes to a modern feminist discourse that values choice, healing, self-definition, and resistance to patriarchal judgment. In doing so, her songs make feminist ideas accessible to a wide audience and reinforce the role of popular culture as a powerful site of feminist meaning-making.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the study concludes that Taylor Swift's selected songs function as feminist cultural texts that articulate resistance to gender inequality through semiotic means. The application of Saussure's semiotic theory proves effective in uncovering how linguistic and symbolic elements in song lyrics generate layered feminist meanings. These meanings challenge traditional gender roles, expose systemic sexism, and promote female empowerment and autonomy.

Moreover, the study affirms that feminism in contemporary popular music extends beyond protest and confrontation; it also manifests through narratives of self-worth, emotional recovery, and personal growth. Swift's songs illustrate how feminist consciousness can be communicated subtly yet powerfully through everyday language, metaphors, and storytelling.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.Future researchers may expand the scope of analysis by including more songs or comparing Taylor Swift's works with those of other female artists to explore similarities and differences in feminist semiotic representations.
- 2.Further studies may apply alternative theoretical frameworks, such as feminist discourse analysis or poststructuralist feminism, to deepen the understanding of gender representation in popular music.
- 3.Educators and literary scholars may consider incorporating popular music texts into literary and cultural studies curricula to engage students in critical discussions of feminism, identity, and media.
- 4.Additional research may examine audience reception to determine how listeners interpret and internalize feminist meanings conveyed through popular songs.

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