

Representation of Political System in Song Lyrics of “*Only The Young*”: A John Fiske Semiotic Analysis

Nurlina Ahmad Bully, Ansar Suherman, Harry Fajar Maulana

Communication Science, Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton, 93728, Indonesia

*Corresponding author's email: nurlinahmadbully2704@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Keywords

Communication; John Fiske's Semiotic Analysis; Song Lyrics

This study shows the meaning of the political system in the lyrics of the song "*Only the Young*" using John Fiske's semiotic analysis as a novelty in research. This study uses a qualitative approach that aims to gain an understanding of human or social phenomena by providing an in-depth description that can be explained in words both natural phenomena and human engineering results. This study focuses on the meaning of signs in the text through three levels of semiotics from John Fiske, namely the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology.

1. Introduction

In social, cultural, and political contexts, music often acts as a means to motivate and mobilize change in society at large. Because music is used as an emotional communicator, it is used as a tool to express emotion (Cahya & Sukendro, 2022). In songs, songwriters convey a variety of messages, some of which are about personal experiences, to voicing complex issues around social, cultural, and political issues, about what the songwriter wants to convey. A songwriter can express their emotions or concerns through a work of art and can convey implied messages that are then incorporated into the lyrics of the song (Damara et al., 2023). This is because songs are considered one of the works of art that can be an effective place to convey communication messages from songwriters to listeners. One example of a song considered as an effective medium in voicing various messages including criticism of the existing political system is the song "*Only The Young*" written by Joel Little and Taylor Swift. This song was performed and released on Taylor Swift's YouTube channel, with a two-minute lyric video of the song "*Only The Young*". The song was released on December, 30 - 2020 as the soundtrack to the documentary Miss America. The song "*Only The Young*" was inspired by Swift's feelings of disappointment about the elections that occurred in the United States at that time (Kaufman, 2021). Overall, the lyrics of the song show support for the younger generation that only the younger generation is able to keep fighting for change, encouraging the younger generation to remain optimistic, and brave in taking action despite being in a situation full of obstacles. Swift conveys an important message through the song "*Only The Young*" containing deep meaning and relevance for the younger generation (Tim CNN Indonesia, 2020).

Several previous studies have examined that music is not only an ordinary work of art, but music has also long been used as an effective medium to convey messages in the form of socio-political criticism. Research conducted by (Wiyanti & Hidayat, 2024) analyzed political resistance in Iwan Fals' work. Another research was conducted by (Sekareka, 2022) explores political terms in the lyrics of Barasusara's *Pikiran dan Perjalanan* album. Research

conducted by (Widyaningrum & Pratiwi, 2023) examines how the message of resistance to corruption and corruptors in songs by Slank and shows how music can be an effective medium in delivering moral messages and increasing public awareness. Furthermore, research with similar objects has been conducted by (Alajuuma, 2021) the findings in this study are that metaphors and political contexts can be translated, and translation strategies affect the translation process. This research concentrates on how to maintain the political context in the translation of lyrics and offers solutions to translation problems.

Different from these studies, this research will offer novelty by applying John Fiske's semiotic approach as a dissecting knife in this study to analyze the representation of the political system in the lyrics of the song *"Only The Young"*. This type of approach is still minimally used with song lyrics as a medium for conveying messages, because most of John Fiske's semiotic research is applied to visual media such as advertising posters, films, and video clips. So that this research not only expands the use of John Fiske's semiotic theory on non-visual media but will also provide a new view of song lyrics that can represent the political system in power dynamics. This research is expected to contribute and enrich the study of semiotics in the context of music as a medium of political communication. Although the song *"Only The Young"* has been used in previous research in semiotic analysis, there is no research that uses *"Only The Young"* as a research object using John Fiske's theoretical approach. Therefore, this study aims to fill the void by analyzing how the lyrics of the song *"Only The Young"* represent the political system through social signs and codes analyzed using John Fiske's semiotic approach.

2. Method

This research will use a descriptive qualitative approach with John Fiske's semiotic analysis method. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive approach is to gain an understanding of human or social phenomena by providing an in-depth or complex picture that can be explained in words, both natural phenomena and human engineering (Alaslan et al., 2023). In addition, the purpose of this approach is to explore and dissect the meaning contained in the lyrics of the song *"Only The Young"* in depth without involving the process of direct interaction with human subjects. This research will focus on the meaning of signs in the text through John Fiske's three levels of semiotics that is, reality, representation and ideology.

In this study the author will analyze the text of the lyrics of the song *"Only The Young"* as a whole, to understand how the political system is represented through music media. this song was chosen because the lyrics contain political messages that are relevant to the political context when the song was released. This research uses primary data and secondary data, primary data in the form of song lyrics *"Only The Young"* which will be the focus of research and will be analyzed using John Fiske's semiotics. Then, secondary data in the form of articles and news about the political context in the United States when the song *"Only The Young"* was released, academic literature, books, journals related to semiotic theory, song lyrics, and political communication.

In this research, data collection used document studies, and data collection techniques using the documentation method without interviews, also data analysis was carried out using John Fiske's semiotic approach. The research will be conducted in conducive places such as libraries, campuses, and homes. The research is conducted online with data collection through digital sources.

3. Result and Discussion

The song "*Only The Young*" written by Joel Little and Taylor Swift, and later performed and made popular by Taylor Swift, describes the state of the political system in the United States during the 2018 general election. This song became one of the soundtracks of the movie *Miss America*. In the song "*Only The Young*", it explains the representation of the political system that existed in the United States at that time.

Song lyrics of only the young

*It keeps me awake
The look on your face
The moment you heard the news
You're screaming inside
And frozen in time
You did all that you could do
The game was rigged, the ref got tricked
The wrong ones
Think they're right
You were outnumbered, this time*

*But only the young
Only the young
Only the young
Only the young
Can run, so run
And run, and run*

*So every day now
You brace for the sound
You've only heard on TV
You go to class scared
Wondering where
The best hiding spot would be
And the big bad man
And his big bad man
Their hands are strained with red
Oh, how quickly, they forget*

*They aren't gonna help us
Too busy helping themselves
They aren't gonna chance this
We've got to do it ourselves
They think that it's over
But it's just begun*

*Only one think can save us
Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young*

*Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young (Only the young)
Only the young*

Only the young (Only the young)
(Don't say you're too tired to fight It's just a metter of time
Up there's the finish line)
Only the young
Can run

Don't say you're too tired to fight
It's just a metter of time (can run)
Up there's the finish line
So run, and run, and run

Only the young
Only the young
Only the young

4.1. Presenting the Results

This research will use the semiotic analysis method and find that in the song "*Only The Young*" there is a meaning structure that can be grouped into three levels. The three levels are as follows:

4.1.1 Reality Level

The reality level reflects the experiences of young people who feel disenfranchised in the existing political system.

It keeps me awake
The look on your face
The moment you heard the news

In the verse of the song lyrics above, it explains the frustration of the younger generation towards the political situation that occurred. The use of the phrase "It keeps me awake" explains the continuous anxiety of the younger generation, regarding the state of the political system that occurred in the United States at that time.

The game was rigged, the ref got tricked
The wrong ones think they're right

In the verse of the song lyrics above, it explains the frustration of the younger generation towards the state of the political system that occurs. The use of the phrase "The wrong ones think they're right" explains the unrest of young people who are not listened to their aspirations or the absence of partiality for the younger generation.

They aren't gonna help us
Too busy helping themselves

The verse of the song above explains a code of reality about the younger generation feeling betrayed by a system that prioritizes the interests of certain groups over the welfare of the people. The word "they" which means "them" refers to political groups that will not help the object "us" which means "we" which refers to the community, because they are "too busy" which means "too busy" helping "themselves" which means "themselves" rather than helping the people.

4.1.2 Representasi Level

The representation level is an action that represents something through something that comes from the level of reality (Elu, 2013). So to get the representation code, it is necessary to use various semiotic codes to compile the meaning of the struggle of the younger generation in the lyrics of Only The young song:

4.1.2.1 Verbal Code

In this song, there is diction that contains a fighting spirit for the younger generation.

Don't say you're too tired to fight

It's just a matter of time

Up there's the finish line

The verse of the song lyrics above contains a collection of phrases used as a form of convincing the listeners of the song, especially the younger generation, that the struggle is not over and must continue to move.

4.1.2.2 Social Code

In the song there are stanzas that display symbols of political struggle that refer to young people against the political system.

So every day now

You brace for the sound

You've only heard on TV

The verses of the song above contain phrases that illustrate that young people are starting to be confronted with political reality directly, not just a spectacle on TV but have actually felt it.

4.1.2.3 Technical Code

In this research, the author found the structure of the song lyrics, the repeated chorus, the fast tempo illustrates the strength of the young generation against the existing political system.

Only the young

Only the young can run

The verse of the song above explains that only young people are able to move and have the strength to solve existing problems.

The big bad man and his big clan

Their hands are stained with red

The stanza of song lyrics above refers to the figure or figure of a leader who is considered unable to listen to the complaints of the community and is only selfish.

4.1.3 Ideology Level

The ideology level explains the political message contained in the song. Researchers found that this song illustrates the ideology of participatory democracy, which emphasizes the active role of the younger generation in political change. In addition, this song contains anti-elitism content that rejects the dominance of the ruling group over the democratic process.

4.2. Create a Discussion

In this research on the representation of the political system in the lyrics of the song "Only The Young", the author finds the message that the songwriter wants to convey and represents the political system in the United States at that time, where the political situation is experiencing significant

political polarization and the absence of alignments with the younger generation. This happens because certain political groups only care about themselves without paying attention to the interests of society.

In this research, the author uses John Fiske's semiotic theory, which proposes three types of code levels that are interconnected with each other, namely the first level of reality, the second level of representation, and the last level of ideology (Fiske, 2010). The level of reality describes events or social realities that actually occur, then the level of representation explains the depiction of the level of reality that is poured into a broader work, the last level of ideology explains the beliefs contained in a work of art.

The first level, namely the level of reality, the author finds several stanzas that describe the circumstances or reality events that occur in society (Puspita & Nurhayati, 2019). In the first stanza of the song lyrics, *"It keeps me awake/ The look on your face/ The moment you heard the news"* describes the feelings of frustration and anxiety that the younger generation feels about the future. In this case, the event or reality event in question is about the general election that occurred at that time and at the same time the reason for the creation of this feeling.

Then, at the stage of the representation level, an action is described that involves presenting or representing something with something that is not directly related to itself, such as symbols and signs (Puspita & Nurhayati, 2019). This means that, in this context, the level of song lyrics will focus on how the lyrics are able to depict the level of reality that is expressed in the form of a work of art. Therefore, in order to illustrate the level of reality, the representation level is divided into three parts.

First, there is the verbal code, which can be seen in the lyrics *"Don't say you too tired to fight/ It's just a matter of time/ Up there's the finish line/ So run, and run, and run."* This code aims to convince the younger generation that their struggle is not over yet. Next, there is the social code, which presents the social context being faced, displaying symbols of political struggle that refer to the younger generation fighting against the existing political system. This is found in the song lyrics *"So every day now/You brace for the sound/You've only heard on TV,"* which illustrates a collective awareness about political issues. The last code in the explanation of the representation level is the technical code. This code contains technical elements in the song, such as the melody and musical arrangement used in *"Only The Young,"* which are able to support the message the songwriter wants to convey and can evoke emotional feelings in the listeners.

The final level is the ideological level, which in these song lyrics reflects the beliefs and values present in society (Pah & Darmastuti, 2019). There is a message from the songwriter to the younger generation that they must unite in order to create a stronger force to fight for their rights. This is found in the lyrics, *"Only the young/ Only the young can run so run and run."* This illustrates an ideology that emphasizes the importance of active participation in politics. These song lyrics serve as a call to the younger generation to take action, encouraging them to play an active role in creating change.

4. Conclusion

Song lyrics are not just ordinary works of art, but song lyrics can be a medium to convey messages from songwriters to audiences or song lovers. The song *"Only The Young"* by Taylor Swift and Joel Little describes the representation of the political system through lyrics that highlight the hopes and struggles of the younger generation. This song invites listeners, especially the younger generation, to realize the power they have in creating change, and express dissatisfaction with social and political conditions.

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