



*International Journal of Humanity Studies*  
<http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJHS>  
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

## **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON TAYLOR SWIFT'S *YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN* MUSIC VIDEO: SEMIOTIC APPROACH**

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**DOI:** 10.24071/ijhs.v5i1.3634

received 27 August 2021; accepted 23 September 2021

### **Abstract**

As a mode of expression, music video involves the process of meaning making. Its unique method of assembling symbolic codes should be apprehended differently from film even though some film technical terms are found applicable. This research takes Taylor Swift's music video for her song *You Need to Calm Down* (YNTCD) which won two MTV VMA as Video of the Year and Video for Good in 2019. Barthes's theory of semiotics is firstly applied to scrutinise the music video which are done by answering how the denotation and connotation meaning is made to respond these issues. Discourse analysis is then applied to study what discourses are influential in the signification system of the music video. As a response to issues of hate speech, LGBTQ, and media toxic contestation, meaning in this video is built by (1) the objects symbolising personal experiences, (2) borrowing meaning from iconic show, (3) cameos demonstrating social conflict, (4) stage-setting exemplifying media toxic contestation, and (5) the painting indicating historical context. Thus, YNTCD music video symbolically voices a counter discourse to the mentioned social problems.

Keywords: discourse, music video, semiotics, connotation, denotation

### **Introduction**

Launched for the first time was an ironic music video entitled *Video Killed the Radio Star* by The Buggles on MTV channel aired on 1 August 1981 in the US (Business Insider, 2015). This was a game changer in the music world. Having both audio and visual representation of the musical art, singers now have limitless possibility of demonstrating the meaning of the songs even though the lyric itself has been already condensed with meaning. The visual representation on music video to a song is a tool of meaning making where visual images are encoded to shift the experience of enjoying the lyrical music. Thus, the birth of music video is considered as cultural phenomena.

*You Need to Calm down* (YNTCD) music video won two awards in both categories of Video of the Year and Video for Good. Having viewed by more than 240 million YouTube audiences throughout the world, this music video is mainly conversed on its power to picture the issues of hate speech, LGBTQ, and toxic media

contestation. Taylor Swift points out how mass media addressing the hatred toward LGBTQ people and throwing shades among female artists. She breaks the record as the first female singer with three Grammy awards for Album of the Year nomination following two other male singers like Frank Sinatra and Stevie Wonder. She is also the only woman ever rewarded the Brit Global 2021 Icon so far joining Elton John and David Bowie. Her own experience becomes the source of her creativity in lyric creation accompanied by her outstanding musical performance. This research, furthermore, wants to uncover the discourse that are influential in the making of the music video as an artistic yet critical work as a response to the society's attitude on hate speech, LGBTQ, and toxic media contestation.

When music is muted, music videos principally work as silent short films in which the visual story is emanated from the central idea in the lyric (Morrow, 2020). If music video, then, may borrowed the montage of cinema by how (moving) images are linearly arranged to form a story, then it must work like 'language'. Because Metz argued that, cinema is seen as language because of its capability to tell story (Metz, 1974). However, a story in music video does not have to be causally plotted in a narrative way since as Vernallis pointed out, "videos follow the song's form, which tends to be cyclical and episodic rather than sequentially directed" (2004). He added that an image works through a symbolic, indexical, or iconic resemblance; which is placed in a metaphorical relation (Vernallis, 2013).

The resourceful attempt on music video making can be called as a form of writing that results in 'text' (in general term). To understand the 'writing' of videos, as Roland Barthes suggested is to see it as the expression of an ideological commitment of the author so that one may start to scrutinize how the producer of the text is responding to social and the political reality by making choice of unique form of expression (Allen, 2003).

Roland Barthes borrowed the notion from Hjelmslev about different orders of signification where denotation is on the first level while connotation is a second order of signification. The emphasis is on the connotation since he argued that the separation between the ideological and the literal is no longer an easy thing to do (1977). Berger noted that "denotation involves a literal and detailed description of the meaning of a word or the measurements of objects. Connotation, involves the cultural meanings while myths connected to words and to things (2010). The similar way of looking at visual representation as language may still question the division of word and image. Van Leeuwen, quoting Berger (1972), stated that word gives explanation to the facts while image furnishes the interpretation, ideologically coloured angles that is done implicitly by connotation (2008). Therefore, images are discursive. They are constructed to develop signification enabling the production of intended meaning upon reality they try to picture. Thus, this research is derived from such perspective to look for what commitment is chosen in the making of YNTCD video in responding the indicated issues in the light of discourse analysis with semiotic approach.

## **Method**

The object of the study in this research as mentioned in the title is the music video of Taylor Swift's song entitled You Need to Calm Down. It was published on YouTube platform on 17 June 2019 from the respective artist channel. Taylor Swift, the singer and the songwriter, and Drew Kirsch directed the music video. The music

video is portraying the response to those issues above with a colourful yet symbolic visualization. It is symbolic since it raises the images in which meaning is interpreted not only for the denotation, they inherently bring but also for the connotation given by the cultural society. Therefore, the semiotics of Roland Barthes is considered as the best approach to demystifying the denotative and the connotative meaning that builds the discourse of the music video. This study applies qualitative research. Shank (Shank,1995) argues that qualitative investigation is a systematic empirical inquest into meaning. It is then foundationally dependent upon the concepts and implications of semiotics.

In collecting data, the researcher uses several steps, namely: (1) watching the music video several times and (2) collecting the important scene by taking screenshots to isolate the video into individually meaningful images. Then, an additional step to have the secondary data is taken by (3) conducting a literature study by gathering data from various sources like books, scientific journals, and the internet. In analysing data, Barthes's level of signification is used where it displays directly the denotative and the connotative meaning as well as the produced sign supported by the secondary data.

### Findings and Discussion

This part gives the result of the analysis of the YNTCD music video scenes. The figures are put as orderly as the sequence of appearance in the music video. It starts with displaying the images as the denotation level as it works as an icon and the connotative meaning is then described. After that, the connotative meaning is described as the second level. Then, the surrounding discourses supporting the meaning making are explored.



Figure 1: Denotation of a waking up

Connotation: This overall framing suggests an interpretation of someone being comfortable in her sleep as the sunrise from the east touches her face. The pinkish colour scheme gives a calming ambiance. The camera angle with bird view shows the vulnerability of the person in the scene but as the whole situation is calm, there is nothing to be worried about. This is strengthened by the embroidered phrase 'calm down' that is quite imperative.

Discourse: The shape of the sleeping mask is like the blue one Audrey Hepburn was wearing in a waking-up scene of the film entitled *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). The film talks about an independent woman, Holly Golightly, who has trouble being attached to somebody and tends to live on her own. Her disdain for commitment and fixed identity is figuratively told by the way she does not give her cat a pet name since she believes she cannot have a settled relationship with anything and call him "a poor slob without a name" (Anglis, 2019). However, in the end, she is encouraged to believe in herself by the right person who understands her. The whole sense of this

film presents in only one sleeping mask, but the audiences who share the pretext somehow spontaneously relate its meaning to Taylor Swift's personal story.



Figure 2. Denotation of a wall painting

Connotation: The flower pattern, pink paint, and lace ribbon give the impression that this room belongs to a woman. In the beginning, it is like a contradiction looking at the phrase 'a man' in the quote inside the frame. The perspective used in this scene is a statement saying that a woman can be as rich as a man can.

Discourse: There is something special in the line "Mom, I am a rich man". In the American music industry, this line is an iconic word from a singer named Cher (Cherilyn Sarkisian) born May 20, 1946, El Centro, California, U.S. (Britannica.com). In 1996, "the goddess of the music industry" was interviewed by Jane Paul and this line is the highlight of her story. She talked about how men were not a necessity for women where they could have the same success as men did (Lobanova, 2016). Therefore, again, by borrowing this line, Taylor Swift brings the legacy of successful women of the US music industry.



Figure 3. Denotation of a wristwatch

Connotation: The number 7 and the light in this scene imply that the setting is early in the morning. It is the time where most people are just getting ready for the day. The red color symbolizes a cautious yet energetic sense.

Discourse: As it is a close shot, the number 13 is displayed clearly. It is known too as Taylor Swift's birthday. The cat printed on the dial is also known as Benjamin Button, Swift's third kitten, a ragdoll breed, that formerly appeared in Lover music video. Thus, this is a personally customized watch that gives an impression of how the person in the video Taylor Swift could do anything that she loves for her career. The glance of red lace, for the fans, recalls the theme of Red, her fourth album, which statistically was not as successful as her other albums, yet she wears it proudly as part of her career growth.



Figure 4. Denotation of morning activity

Connotation: If this picture tells part of a kitchen table where some of the stuff on it is kind of out of its place, like the shoe and the cocktail glass, which commonly place separately from the other daily utensils. Cotton candy and other types of sweets are also uncommon for breakfast. Again, this unusual placement of things implies that everyone can have his or her own typical day-to-day living without being dictated on being normal.

Discourse: The ankle-strap shoe on the table is one of the pairs she wore in her video music for the single entitled Our Song (Fearless Album) with more or less themed in the same colour palate. It implies her bringing a piece of her music career history. Fearless, her second album, in 2009 brought her the first award for Album of the Year in 52nd Grammy.



Figure 5. Denotation of swimming in pool

Connotation: With a bird view angle, the artist seems small and vulnerable to the open surrounding. The burning caravan behind her pool suggests a sense of danger but the way she floats on the buoy looks uninterrupted, calm, and steady in the middle of the pool. She does not swim facing the caravan or turn her head to see the condition and this means she just does not care about the way she lives being destroyed. Small parts of the other two dwellings give an indication that she lives in a community, surrounded by other people that share the same environment. It implies that she is not alone though still maintaining privacy as indicated by the fence around her.

Discourse: The style that Taylor Swift wears in the pool gives a remark to her video clip for her song entitled Look What You Made Me Do (LWYMMD) that can be implied from the familiar style of her fur coat, sunglasses, and hairdo. It may not be familiar for everyone and that is why this fact-checking is important. The video music for LWYMMD also suggests an important story of her recreated reputation

after experiencing severe media criticism of her changing of music genres. Bringing the same look, Taylor appears more colourful and calmer in this video suggests that she is now in peace with whatever she is identified with.



Figure 6. Denotation of caravan blocks

Connotation: The long shot with a slight tilt angle shows the whole surrounding that was only partially seen in the pool scene. It implies that Taylor Swift lives as part of a community. The morning view indicates that the happenings last at the same timing as the previous scene discussing. It means that those people are starting their day just as Taylor is. This implies that everyone has his or her own way to start the morning routines and live them throughout the day.

Discourse: In addition, a community that lives in caravans and trailer boxes provide a sense of insecurity in a term of stabile living hood but at the same time deliver the idea of being free and dynamic. The festive rainbow flags are the cultural symbol of the LGBTQ community, called as Pride Flag.



Figure 7. Denotation of protesters

Connotation: After several scenes that show us the peaceful neighbourhood, there some sporadic people held some protest movement in that environment. They are clearly from outside the community as implied by how different they dress. The small circle movement indicates that they just hold on to some issued that is being addressed by only a small amount of people. The dress they wear evokes a muter colour scheme related to those citizens who are strict, traditional, and conservative. The timing of protesting just right before noon implies how they come uninvited in the middle of people's lives.

Discourse: The way the poster is misspelled is a kind of sarcastic critic to them as they should be more literate about the idea of homosexuality before they act to reject it. The word sin written in red shows how they relate their protest to a certain religious belief. In June 2019, Glaad's survey found that there is a notable decline in

LGBTQ acceptance among American youngsters (Harvey, 2019). Glaad survey learns that even youngsters are now more aware of worldwide issues such as global warming and climate change, there are still not enough discourses as a way to get them more acknowledge to the existence and the rights of LBGTO people.



Figure 8. Denotation of a same-sex wedding

Connotation: This scene appears after the scene of the protesters who reject the idea of homosexuality. In a logic of filmic shot, the happenings are going on at the same time. Thus, the protesters' act does not bother the same-sex couple's wedding and the rest of the attendances are celebrating it in a joyful ambiance.

Discourse: The point of interest in this video is the cameos. The same-sex couple in the scene is Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Justin Mikita. They are a real-life celebrity couple who officially married in July 2013. Ciara Maguire, on the other hand, is seen in the scene to officiate the wedding. She is a lesbian feminist activist, the chair of Free Pride, where she said that the organization is accessible for everyone in Glasgow (The Young Women's Movement, 2017). Several other cameos are in real life the activists or celebrities that belong to the LGBTQ community such as Adam Lambert from American idol 2009, Ellen DeGeneres, Billy Porter, Dexter Mayfield, and so on (Grady, 2019). Taylor Swift is considering them as allies to voice her political statement, which was not much heard from her before.



Figure 9. Denotation of the protesters' close up

Connotation: The middle shot does the job to indicate a look that is almost intimate in the term of space closeness. This scene, then, implies the resistance of the protesters that are getting intense to the community who live in the caravans and trailers area. The sign they bring shows how their hatred toward same-sex marriage as they only accept the heterosexual marriage. The house displayed in the background shows a more solid building structure that infers more settlement on the conservative belief. The protesters stand on the side of having not many choices,

refuse the new ways of living, lack of dynamic to maintain the social standard which is no longer applicable to be forced on everyone.

Discourse: The woman's shirt with the American flag printed on it reveals their act on the behalf of American nationalists. Meanwhile, the couple in the background is the representation of what is acceptable for the normal marriage system. The contrastive look of the way the protesters dress has now suggested a contrastive view on the society on LGBTQ. The disapproval sent to the LGBTQ community leads to persecution embedded homophobia for ages and also alerted entire populations to the existence of difference (Morris, 2019). This condition is caused by a belief that homosexual activity or any deviance from established gender roles/dress was not aligned to the law or traditional custom.



Figure 10. Denotation of the couple buying ice cream

Connotation: The couple seems to be heterosexual who are enjoying the ice cream that implies the way the situation is cooling down as they want to get into the LGBTQ environment. There, the seller is pictured to be one of the members of the community that lives in the caravan as well. This shot is significant to say that even the LGBTQ community has no problem accepting the heterosexual people who have the will to know more about them and they just can live in peace side by side.

Discourse: An openly gay Olympics athlete, the figure skater named Adam Rippon, stars the ice cream vendor. Once the audience knows more about him, it gives an open chance to acknowledge that those of the LGBTQ community can have their position to score a valuable achievement in the various arena including sports. He once said in the interview that being in the Olympics had given him a platform to resonate his success story with the young kids all over the country (Perez, 2018). It is just a liberating act to stay true to oneself and this message is tight to well in the music video as well.



Figure 11. Denotation of the protesters' confrontation to the LGBTQ



Connotation: This long shot seems to have an imaginary separation between the left and the right side as inferred by the different colours of the ground. The LGBTQ community is having a peaceful time minding their own business while the protesters are coming with their protest posters shouting and judging the people in front of them. The woman walks in the middle walks elegantly and looks like that she about to stop the confrontation, but the scene just stops there.

Discourse: The LGBTQ movements through years were once ignited by a riot such as the repressive police act in the Stonewall more than 50 years ago that dehumanized their dignity as humans. However, the way this community presents its voice today is always by nonviolent approaches like peaceful long-march or oral speeches and artistic works. The Cameo in this scene is known as Billy Porter, a transgender figure who also actively voices the need for equal treatment that he sees as the underlying value of the US Constitution (Noveck, 2020).



Figure 12. Denotation of women contest stage

Connotation: This frame suggests a situation of a pageant contest where the participants are all women. The iconic looks brought by the cameos can be identified as (from left to right): Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga, Adele, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B. These names are real-life female popstars, which often being compared to each other in term of their skin colours, body shapes, performance, success, and lifestyle. The media that is represented by the cameos under the stage are looking for the information that can fill the news feed. The people enjoying the show are presented by one cameo facing the laptop consuming the online feed.

Discourse: For young teenage Taylor, she was not aware of the negativity in the music industry. However, later in her early 30s, she achieved an award as Billboard's Woman of the Decade in December 2019. In her acceptance speech, she voiced how women in the music industry are condemned and assessed up to each other for their romantic lives, their fashion, or several other vocabularies that never appears when it is about to discuss male musicians (Schiller, 2019). Moreover, to get to the top of their achievement, women must accelerate to prove that they deserve it too. She also talked about the struggle to advocate for women behind the scenes of the music industry to have a chance to be recognizable as the men are. This issue is also raised in her music video for the song The Man.



Figure 13. Denotation of the painting

Connotation: The male cameo is somehow pictured as getting inspiration by looking at the rustic trailer box. The rustic trailer box indicated that the dwelling is getting old and abandoned but it might mean a lot to people who once lived there as it was their only shelter. But he is drawing something else than the thing in front of him. It means that the male cameo is inspired by the trailer box that just invites him to paint something else.

Discourse: In the scene, the cameo is known as Ryan Reynolds, a Canadian American actor who is famous for his leading role in the superhero film *Deadpool*. In that film, he played an openly gay hero character although he is straight. So, in this scene, he takes his contribution to supporting the issue. What he paints is the Stonewall building. Stonewall Inn was the most well-known gay bar in NYC that accepted drag queens and was a shelter for runaway and homeless LGBTQ adolescence. It was in June of 1969 when the police brutally pulled employees and patrons out of the bar. It results in a series of demonstrations and clashes against the cops for six days (Borge, 2020). This was the moment of catalyst for the next LGBTQ rights movements in the US and the world.



Figure 14. Denotation of the protesters' calming down

Connotation: This scene appears almost at the end of the video where it comes like a resolution to what has happened since the beginning. The face of the boy and the girl in the front line of the protesters are saying that they are done with all the protests. The boy now doubts himself and is no longer confident in the words he puts on the signboard. The girl in the plaid shirt is throwing away her sign. Both the boy and the girl are presenting some of the people who realize that no matter how hard they resist the existence of the LGBTQ community. If the rest of the protesters are still on fire to reject the community's existence, it connotes that there is a divided voice among themselves.

Discourse: In the context of American's view on LGBTQ, the more conservative citizens and part of the Republicans have now shown some acceptance of the rights of LGBTQ for some reasons. Cited from Freedom, there are several reasons they finally accept them. First is that conservatives avoid discrimination for all Americans because it is part of American values that promise individual liberty, hard work, and freedom for all. So that, protection for the LGBTQ is called a reflection of those values. Second is the economic reason which points out that discrimination is bad for the industry since a healthy company is those who can value the workers with dignity and respect. LGBTQ people are also known to be highly educated, innovative, and creative which are good for the work environment. The third reason is related to faith itself where people are taught to treat others as they want to be treated. So that, to safeguard religious freedom is not the opposite of protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination (Freedom for All Americans, 2021). It was in the way Trump held his running for the presidency in 2016 that the heated discussion of LGBTQ rights caused a divided view from his party Republican. As Lerer (2020) notes, Republican voters have expressed support for LGBTQ people to the Supreme Court. However, the attitude change could not erase the fact that transgender Americans are still the target of hate crimes, violence, and discrimination.

Taylor Swift as today's generation is one of us to be aware of the use of internet platforms such as YouTube to reach wider audiences to spread ideas with her music videos. Any deed like painting, writing, or video making is an act of representation. It means it turns meaning into form. The internet has made it possible for individuals to create their own representation of meaning. The Internet has become an essential, if not critical, means of aligning with others and maintaining a sense of identity and community for many lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, especially those located in remote or small settlements (Alexander and Losh, 2010: 39). The music video can elevate inquiries of causal relation, that it becomes the engine to mobilize people, objects, and environments (Vernallis, 2013).

Here, in her music video of the song You Need to Calm Down, Taylor Swift manages several ways to develop the discourse that voice three main issues which are hate speech, LGBTQ, and toxic media contestation. That means she encodes the meaning into visual images, equally seen as text, which is needed to be decoded for the audience to grasp the idea. Decoding such enveloped meanings relies heavily on semiotics. In semiotics, denotation is presented only to reveal the connotation it brings to construct the messages. The connotation is raised by the ideological preference which means other discourses are needed to be the pretext.

So, the interpretation of YNTCD music video as text must not only stop on the connotation raised in the eyes of the audiences but must be understood in the discourse where the text is produced. It is because discourse is only evoked for, they are never openly articulated (Gunther and van Leeuwen, 2001). Here are the methods she employs to construct the meaning on the related issues mentioned above.

### ***Personal Experiences are Signified by The Objects in The Scenes.***

Experiences are complex, but to make it into a statement, some objects could be useful to evoke them. They appear in scenes such as the waking up, the wristwatch, the morning activity, and the pool scene. It means the audiences that have sufficient information about her career journey can explore more relations of meaning from the music videos. For example, there is an association of some objects to her previous

music albums. She uses the technique to mainly respond to the issue of hate speech she has been received on her musical ability and personal life.

### ***Clues from Other Iconic Shows are Presented to Borrow the Meaning***

In the scenes like the waking up and the wall painting, she settles some meaning by associate some iconic clues from a classic film and an interview with a female musician. The film is clued by the use of sleeping wear and the interview by the wall painting. Both of these external sources are lending her a specific meaning to the characterization she has for the public which is about being independent and that she could not be defeated by the social standard that is forced on women of her age.

### ***Social Conflicts are Signified by Cameos***

She chooses cameos intentionally to present her ideas. There are not only people who dress up differently as a separated community. The famous faces she chooses to be in her music video are known to be the most open LGBTQ public figures that have a reputation in each of their arenas. They can be seen in scenes like the caravan blocks, the wedding, the ice cream couple, the painting. To be provided with some information about these people, the audience can relate to the issue and have a positive outlook on the LGBTQ individuals. Meanwhile, for the protesters, she does not choose any famous figures to show that some protests on LGBTQ are mostly anonymous. Most of the time the rejection is done behind certain belief which has no authoritative command so they cannot be justified to a specific part of society, but she highlights the way those cameos appear to be lack of literary knowledge of LGBTQ history. They appear in the scenes like the protester's circle, the protester's close up, and the calming down.

### ***Media Toxic Contestation is Signified by Setting A Stage***

The stage she puts in the music video is not only to denote the beauty contest reality show. She asks the cameos to dress like other female popstars to make people aware of how media frames them in the news, compares their achievements and personal preferences. In a complete scene of the women's contest, there is a crown thrown up in front of the female pop stars in the wish that they are going to wrest for it. But the scene stops where the crown is in the sky and no one is fighting for it since they know they all have their achievements. This is the way Taylor Swift responds to the issue of gender equality in media and even the equality for women of races.

### ***Historical Context is Signified by The Painting***

The biggest issue she responds to in the music video is the discrimination toward the LGBTQ community. It is all packed in the way she puts the Stonewall Inn building on the canvas being painted by a cameo. She does not only put the building image as a reference to the real place but the historicity of the place to the struggle of the LGBTQ people for equal rights. Having no awareness about the historical events surrounding this issue are causing people to not understand why it is so important to the community to have proper law that protects their rights as human being and part of American society. The video itself was released in June, the month of pride celebrated by the LGBTQ movement and 2019 is the year of the 50-year commemoration of the Stone Wall Riot as the result of the oppression act toward the LGBTQ community. Thus, Taylor swift sends the message by having enough

consideration of time, place, and events to give a solid context of the meaning-making in her music video.

### **Conclusion**

Barthes's semiotic has been applied as an approach that works mainly to seek meaning under the relation of the signified/signifier of the presence of the objects to the idea that is being presented by the denotative and the connotative meaning. While Foucault and Van Dijk's view on discourse is applied to see the social-historical context that surrounds the production of meaning. The result shows that Taylor Swift creates a music video that does not only put iconic image but also is sensible in a cultural context so that the sign can discursively signify its message. She develops the message through meaning-making from denotation and the connotation but it takes related discourse to understand the complexity of the meaning. By firstly takes some objects to represent personal experiences, she responds to the hate speech on social media. Secondly, she borrows clues from film and another female musician to associate her story to some underlying meaning related to woman identity in society. Thirdly, she uses cameos to point out the group she is on behalf of. Fourth, she signifies the media's toxic contestation by setting up a stage for women's contests. Then, she puts also another object like the painting that evokes the historical context of the LGBTQ struggle. Though the composition mainly addresses the issue of LGBTQ struggle to fit in the society, she also signifies her personal experiences as a female celebrity surrounded by toxic media. Thus, by YNTCD music video, Taylor Swift asks the audiences and the media, in general, to not alienate the LGBTQ community and to let women have their highest achievement in the music industry without interfering with rumours or unfair comparison. This is why discourse such as media treatment of women in the music industry, especially in the U.S., and also the social-historical context of LGBTQ is needed to understand the music video deeper than just some mode of entertainment despite its great production quality.

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