

Mediating Meanings in African Popular Music Studies

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of mediating meanings within the field of popular music studies, highlighting the intricate processes through which African popular music is created, disseminated, and interpreted. Through a mixed method of content and discourse analyses in examining the roles of various stakeholders—including artists, producers, audiences, and critics—the paper investigates how meanings are constructed and negotiated in the context of popular music. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from musicology, cultural studies, sociology, and media studies, the author analyses the cultural, social, and historical factors that influence these mediation processes. This study aims to illuminate the ways in which African popular music serves as a site of meaning-making, reflecting and shaping societal values, identities, and power dynamics. In the end, it argues that understanding the mediation of meanings in popular music is essential for comprehending its impact on contemporary culture and its role in the broader social discourse.

Keywords: *African Popular Music Studies, Meaning-Making, Stakeholders, Power Dynamics, Content Analysis, Discourse Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Popular music studies is a vibrant interdisciplinary field that examines the cultural, social, and historical contexts of popular music. This field draws from various disciplines, including musicology, cultural studies, sociology, and media studies, to analyse how African popular (Afropop) music functions within society. One of the central concerns of Afropop music studies is the mediation of meanings, which encompasses the processes through which music is created, disseminated, and interpreted by different stakeholders, including artists, producers, audiences, and critics.

The mediation of meanings in Afropop music involves understanding how music is not just a product of artistic expression but also a complex interplay of cultural narratives and social dynamics. According to Frith (1996), popular music is a site of cultural negotiation where meanings are constructed and contested. This negotiation occurs through various channels, including the music industry, media representations, and audience interpretations.

The creation of popular music is influenced by a range of factors, including technological advancements, market demands, and cultural trends. Producers and record labels play a significant role in shaping the sound and style of music, often prioritizing commercial viability over artistic integrity (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Onwuegbuna, 2013a). Popular music is frequently regarded as a business, with its commercial worth established during production. At this stage, choices regarding ideology, structure, aesthetics, packaging, and presentation are influenced by the product's marketability. It is primarily motivated by profit and commercial gain, rather than artistic ambition. Additionally, popular music is created by industry leaders—such as record companies, radio programmers, and concert promoters—rather than emerging

organically from grassroots efforts. Thus, popular music is not a DIY genre; it is produced and packaged by professionals (Chernoff, 1979; Frith, 2001; Onwuegbuna, 2006). This commercialization can lead to a homogenization of music, where unique cultural expressions are diluted in favour of mainstream appeal.

Moreover, the dissemination of popular music has transformed dramatically with the advent of digital technologies. Platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and social media have altered how music is distributed and consumed, allowing for greater accessibility and diversity in music choices (Bennett, 2018; Onwuegbuna, 2022a). However, this shift also raises questions about the quality of music and the implications of algorithm-driven recommendations, which can create echo chambers and limit exposure to diverse musical styles (Tschmuck, 2016).

The interpretation of popular music is a dynamic process involving various stakeholders. Artists infuse their work with personal and cultural meanings, while audiences bring their own experiences and contexts to their interpretations (Onwuegbuna, 2006). As Negus (1999) notes, audiences are not passive consumers; they actively engage with music, creating meanings that can differ significantly from the artists' intentions. This interaction is further complicated by the role of critics and media, who often frame music within specific narratives that can influence public perception (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011).

Critics and scholars also contribute to the mediation of meanings by analysing and contextualizing music within broader cultural and historical frameworks (Born & Barry, 2018). For instance, the rise of hip-hop has been studied not only as a musical genre but also as a cultural movement that reflects and responds to social issues such as race, class, and identity (Rose, 1994; Onwuegbuna, 2015). This critical engagement helps to illuminate the ways in which popular music can serve as a form of social commentary and resistance (Onwuegbuna, 2011a).

The mediation of meanings in Afropop music is a multilayered process that involves the interplay of creation, dissemination, and interpretation by various stakeholders. Popular music studies provide valuable insights into how music functions as a cultural artifact, reflecting and shaping societal values and norms. As the landscape of popular music continues to evolve, ongoing research in this field will be essential for understanding the complexities of music in contemporary society (Onwuegbuna, 2006).

Mediation of Meanings in Popular Music

The mediation of meanings in popular music involves a complex interplay of interpretations and reinterpretations among various stakeholders, including artists, audiences, and the media. This multifaceted process highlights how meanings are not fixed but are instead fluid and subject to change based on context and perspective (Born & Barry, 2018). For example, an artist may intend to convey a particular message or theme through their music, but the audience may interpret it in a different way. Similarly, the media and music industry shape the way popular music is presented and consumed, influencing the meanings that are attributed to it (Okolie & Onwuegbuna, 2024).

The creation of music is often a deliberate act of communication, with artists embedding specific messages, themes, and narratives within their work. These intentions may stem from personal experiences, responses to social issues, or the desire to express cultural identity. However, as Simon Frith (1996) argues, the meanings intended by artists are not always the meanings received by audiences. This divergence, far from being a failure of communication, is a crucial aspect of how music functions within society, creating a rich and multifaceted

tapestry of interpretation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the diverse landscape of Afropop music, where artists grapple with complex social, political, and cultural realities, and audiences respond through the lens of their own lived experiences.

The music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, for example, serves as a potent illustration of this dynamic. Intended as a direct challenge to corruption, colonialism, and military rule in Nigeria, Fela's Afrobeat became a dialogue for revolution in the eyes of many. Supporters found in his music a voice for the marginalized, an inspiration for activism, and a rallying cry against oppressive regimes. Yet, for the government and elite, Fela's message was a subversive threat, justifying censorship, persecution, and attempts to silence his voice. Even among ordinary listeners, interpretations varied. Some were drawn to the music and spectacle without fully engaging with the political message, while others interpreted it through a lens of cultural pride rather than direct political action. Today, younger generations view Fela as a historical figure, his music a symbol of a past struggle, its direct relevance to the present a matter of ongoing debate.

Likewise, Miriam Makeba's music became inextricably linked with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Her songs were intended to raise awareness about the injustices of apartheid and to celebrate African culture, becoming a powerful symbol of resistance on the global stage. Within South Africa, her music offered hope and inspiration to Black South Africans, but also represented a dangerous act of defiance that invite severe repercussions. In the post-apartheid era, Makeba is celebrated as a national icon, but the extent to which her music's political message continues to resonate in a fundamentally altered social context is a question worthy of consideration.

Even in less overtly political music, the interplay between intended and received meaning remains crucial. Youssou N'Dour, for instance, blends traditional Senegalese sounds with contemporary pop, often addressing social issues and promoting unity. While generally receiving positive reception as an ambassador for Senegal and Africa, some critics argue that his music has become too commercialized and that it does not sufficiently address the complexities of social problems. Internationally, his message has been interpreted through a Western lens, potentially overlooking the nuances of Senegalese culture and society. The Kwaito music scene that emerged in post-apartheid South Africa provides another compelling example. Intended to express the experiences and aspirations of a new generation in a democratic South Africa, Kwaito was embraced by youth as a voice for their generation, a soundtrack to their lives. However, older generations sometimes viewed it as lacking substance, promoting materialism, or even contributing to social problems. Outside South Africa, Kwaito has been misinterpreted as simply a local form of hip-hop, without a full understanding of its cultural and historical significance (Onwuegbuna, 2015a).

These examples from Afropop music demonstrate that meaning is not inherent in the music itself, but rather is actively constructed in the interaction between artist, music, and listener. The artist's intentions provide a starting point, but the audience's background, experiences, and the broader social and political context all play a crucial role in shaping the final interpretation. Understanding this dynamic interplay is essential for a nuanced and comprehensive appreciation of Afropop music and its significance within society (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

The role of media and the music industry in shaping the presentation and consumption of Afropop music cannot be overstated. Media outlets, including radio, television, and online

platforms, play a crucial role in framing how music is marketed and understood (Okolie & Onwuegbuna, 2024). As Bennett (2018) notes, the media often emphasizes certain narratives or themes, which can influence public perception and interpretation. For example, the portrayal of artists in the media often affects how their music is received; an artist's image may overshadow the actual content of their work, leading to interpretations that align more with their public persona than with the music itself.

Moreover, the music industry employs various marketing strategies that can shape the meanings attributed to songs. For instance, promotional campaigns highlight specific themes and messages that align with current cultural trends, thereby guiding audience interpretations. This commercialization sometimes leads to a dilution of the original message, as the focus shifts from artistic expression to marketability (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011).

The meanings of popular music can also evolve over time, as cultural contexts change and new generations engage with the music. A song that was once a protest anthem may be reinterpreted by future audiences in light of contemporary issues, demonstrating how meanings are not static but are continually negotiated. (Rose, 1994).

Many Afropop musicians have songs that have evolved in meaning over time, reflecting changing cultural contexts and new social movements. Originally released in 1976, *Zombie*, by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, is a powerful protest song against the Nigerian military regime, criticizing the obedience and brutality of soldiers. In recent years, the song has been revisited and embraced by contemporary movements advocating for social justice in Nigeria and across Africa. Its themes of resistance resonate with today's youth, especially in the face of ongoing governmental oppression and corruption. *Jerusalema* by Master KG featuring Nomcebo Zikode, initially released in 2019, is a song about finding hope and joy in spirituality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it gained global popularity as a dance challenge, symbolizing unity and resilience amidst adversity. The song's original message has been celebrated in various contexts, emphasizing how music can foster connection and positivity in challenging times.

The mediation of meanings in popular music is a dynamic and complex process influenced by the intentions of artists, the interpretations of audiences, and the framing provided by the media and music industry. This interplay creates a rich landscape of meanings that can shift over time, reflecting broader cultural and social changes. Understanding these layers of interpretation is essential for appreciating the multifaceted nature of popular music and its role in society.

Key Concepts

There are several key concepts that are relevant to the mediation of meanings in popular music studies. These include:

1. Encoding and Decoding

This describes how artists and producers encode meanings into popular music, which audiences then decode. The concepts of encoding and decoding in popular music are pivotal to understanding how meanings are constructed and interpreted within this cultural form. These processes, articulated by Stuart Hall (1973), highlight the dynamic relationship between creators and audiences, emphasizing that meanings are not simply transmitted but are actively negotiated.

Encoding in Popular Music

Encoding refers to the ways in which artists and producers embed meanings into their music. This process involves various elements, including lyrics, melodies, instrumentation, and production techniques. Artists often draw from personal experiences, cultural contexts, and social issues to convey specific messages or themes (Onwuegbuna, 2016). For instance, a song may address topics such as love, identity, or political resistance, with the artist using metaphor, symbolism, and narrative to encode these meanings.

Producers also play a crucial role in encoding meanings, as they make decisions about the sound and style of a track. Their choices regarding instrumentation, arrangement, and production techniques can significantly influence how a song is perceived. For example, a producer might use a particular genre's conventions to evoke specific emotions or cultural associations, thereby shaping the audience's understanding of the music (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

Decoding by Audiences

Decoding, on the other hand, refers to how audiences interpret and make sense of the encoded meanings in popular music. This process is inherently subjective and influenced by various factors, including individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts. As Hall (1973) suggests, audiences may decode meanings in ways that align with, oppose, or reinterpret the artist's original intentions.

The journey from artistic intention to audience reception is rarely a straightforward one. Artists encode messages, emotions, and cultural narratives within their work, but the process of decoding these meanings is inherently subjective, shaped by the listener's individual experiences, cultural background, and social context. Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model provides a valuable framework for understanding this dynamic interplay, highlighting how audiences may interpret and engage with music in ways that align with, diverge from, or even actively oppose the artist's original intentions. A compelling case study for exploring this dynamic can be found in the global success of *Essence* by Wizkid featuring Tems, a contemporary Afrobeats track that transcended its Nigerian roots to become a worldwide sensation.

Released during the global pandemic, *Essence* offered a sonic escape, a smooth and sensual exploration of love, longing, and connection. Wizkid and Tems, the artists behind the track, likely intended to create a vibe of relaxed intimacy and romantic connection. The lyrics, while relatively simple, evoke a feeling of being irresistibly drawn to someone, the desire for closeness, and the intoxicating nature of love. Beyond the specific themes of the song, *Essence* also participates in a broader Afrobeats narrative, encoding a celebration of Nigerian and African culture, a fusion of local sounds with global pop sensibilities, and a sense of optimism and aspiration. The mellow tempo, smooth production, and the artists' deliberate blending of English and Pidgin English further contribute to this multifaceted encoding.

Upon its release, *Essence* resonated with a vast and diverse audience, achieving what could be described as a largely dominant or preferred decoding. Many listeners, both in Nigeria and globally, interpreted the song as a feel-good anthem about love and connection, appreciating its smooth vibe, catchy melody, and the undeniable chemistry between Wizkid and Tems. For many, it became the 'song of the summer,' representing a sense of joy and escape during a challenging time. The celebration of African love and beauty was also positively received, contributing to the song's widespread appeal and solidifying its status as a

cultural phenomenon. This alignment between intended and received meaning underscores the artists' success in effectively communicating their message of love, connection, and cultural pride.

However, not all listeners engaged with *Essence* in the same way. Some may have adopted a negotiated decoding, enjoying the song's sound and vibe while being less invested in the romantic themes. These listeners might appreciate the song's production, its cultural representation, and its infectious rhythm without necessarily relating to the lyrics about love and longing. Instead, they might focus on the song's broader message of cultural pride and global connection, finding in it a celebration of African identity and a testament to the growing influence of Afrobeats on the world stage. This negotiated decoding highlights the ability of audiences to selectively engage with different aspects of a song, constructing their own meaning based on their individual preferences and experiences.

While *Essence* generally elicited positive responses, it is also possible to imagine instances of oppositional decoding. Some listeners, for example, might have found the lyrics too repetitive or lacking in depth, opposing the intended message of profound connection and seeing the song as superficial or overly simplistic. Others, particularly in Western contexts, might have raised concerns about cultural appropriation, questioning whether the song's success leads to genuine understanding and appreciation of African culture or simply contributes to its exoticization. This critical oppositional decoding reflects a growing awareness of the complexities of cultural exchange and the potential for misrepresentation or exploitation.

The story of *Essence*, therefore, provides a compelling illustration of the encoding/decoding model in action. While Wizkid and Tems encoded their song with specific intentions—to create a vibe of relaxed intimacy, to celebrate African culture, and to connect with listeners on a global scale—the ultimate meaning of the song was shaped by the diverse audiences who decoded it through the lens of their own experiences and perspectives.

The widespread success of *Essence* suggests a largely successful transmission of the artists' intended message, but the potential for negotiated and oppositional decodings underscores the inherent subjectivity of the interpretive process and the dynamic interplay between artist, music, and listener. By examining these different modes of decoding, we gain a deeper understanding of how music functions as a cultural force, shaping identities, fostering connections, and sparking conversations across cultural boundaries (Onwuegbuna, 2015a).

The Role of Context

The context in which music is consumed also plays a significant role in the encoding and decoding processes. Factors such as the cultural environment, historical moment, and technological advancements can shape how music is understood. For instance, the rise of social media has transformed how audiences engage with music, allowing for immediate feedback and reinterpretation of songs in real-time.

This has led to construction of new meanings as audiences share their interpretations and experiences online (Bennett, 2018; Onwuegbuna, 2022a). Moreover, the marketing and promotion of music can influence audience decoding. The narratives crafted by the music industry, including artist branding and media representation, can frame how a song is perceived and understood (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011; Onwuegbuna, 2013a).

The complexities of encoding, decoding, and context in contemporary Afropop music are vividly illustrated by the case of Kelvyn Boy's *Down Flat*, a Ghanaian Afrobeats song that achieved considerable international acclaim. Released in 2022, *Down Flat* arrived at a time of growing global interest in Afrobeats and a desire for feel-good music after the disruptions of the pandemic. This historical moment undoubtedly influenced the song's reception, creating a receptive audience eager for upbeat and relatable music. Kelvyn Boy, the artist behind the track, likely intended to create a relatable love song that celebrates the feeling of being completely smitten with someone. The lyrics, expressing vulnerability and a willingness to do anything for the person he loves ("I go go down flat for you"), resonate with universal themes of love and devotion. Furthermore, the song's blend of Afrobeats with highlife influences encodes a distinctly Ghanaian cultural identity, showcasing Kelvyn Boy's heritage and contributing to the ongoing narrative of Ghanaian music on the global stage. The catchy, mid-tempo beat, combined with Kelvyn Boy's smooth vocals, further enhances the song's accessibility and appeal.

The success of *Down Flat* can be attributed, in part, to a largely dominant or preferred decoding among its listeners. Many, particularly in Ghana and other parts of Africa, interpreted the song as a genuine expression of love and devotion, connecting with the relatable lyrics and the infectious beat. It became a popular choice for romantic dedications and celebrations, solidifying its status as a feel-good anthem. The Ghanaian highlife influences were also likely appreciated, reinforcing a sense of cultural pride and contributing to the song's local appeal. This alignment between intended and received meaning suggests that Kelvyn Boy effectively communicated his message of love, vulnerability, and cultural identity.

However, not all listeners engaged with *Down Flat* in the same way. Some adopted a negotiated decoding, enjoying the song's infectious rhythm and danceability without fully embracing the romantic message. These listeners see it as a fun, upbeat track for dancing and socializing, rather than a deeply emotional expression of love. They also focus on the song's broader representation of Ghanaian music and culture, appreciating its contribution to the global Afrobeats scene and its role in promoting Ghanaian identity on an international stage. This negotiated decoding highlights the ability of audiences to selectively engage with different aspects of a song, constructing their own meaning based on their individual preferences and priorities.

While *Down Flat* generally elicited positive responses, it is also possible to imagine instances of oppositional decoding. Some listeners, for example, might have found the lyrics too simplistic or cliché, opposing the intended message of genuine emotion and seeing the song as insincere or lacking in originality. Others, depending on their perspective, might interpret the line "I go go down flat for you" as reinforcing traditional gender roles, with the man expressing a willingness to be submissive to the woman. This could lead to a critical oppositional decoding, particularly among listeners who advocate for gender equality and challenge traditional power dynamics.

The context in which *Down Flat* was consumed also played a significant role in shaping its meaning. The song gained significant traction on social media platforms like TikTok, where users created dance challenges and shared their own interpretations of the song. This user-generated content contributed to the song's virality and further shaped its meaning, associating it with themes of fun, celebration, and cultural pride. Furthermore, the song's success reflects the growing strength and visibility of the Ghanaian music industry, with Kelvyn Boy's achievement contributing to the broader narrative of Ghanaian artists making their mark on the

global stage. Finally, *Down Flat* benefited from the increasing global popularity of Afrobeats, with its catchy beat and relatable lyrics making it accessible to a wide audience and contributing to its international success.

The story of *Down Flat* provides a compelling illustration of the encoding/decoding model in action, highlighting the complex interplay between artistic intention, audience interpretation, and the broader cultural context. While Kelvyn Boy encoded his song with specific meanings—to express love and vulnerability, to showcase Ghanaian culture, and to connect with listeners on a global scale—the ultimate meaning of the song was shaped by the diverse audiences who decoded it through the lens of their own experiences and perspectives. The widespread success of *Down Flat* suggests a largely successful transmission of the artist's intended message, but the potential for negotiated and oppositional decodings underscores the inherent subjectivity of the interpretive process and the dynamic relationship between artist, music, listener, and the surrounding cultural landscape. By examining these different modes of decoding, we gain a deeper understanding of how music functions as a cultural force, shaping identities, fostering connections, and contributing to the ongoing evolution of African popular music on the global stage.

2. Representation

Representation refers to the ways in which popular music represents different social groups, cultures, and identities. Representation in popular music is a critical concept that examines how various social groups, cultures, and identities are portrayed and understood through musical expression. This representation can significantly influence public perceptions and contribute to the construction of cultural narratives. By analysing how different identities are represented in popular music, scholars can uncover the complexities of power dynamics, cultural appropriation, and the negotiation of identity within society.

Representation of Social Groups and Cultures

Popular music serves as a platform for diverse social groups to express their identities, experiences, and struggles. Artists often draw from their cultural backgrounds to create music that reflects their realities. For instance, hip-hop has emerged as a powerful medium for African American artists to articulate their experiences with systemic racism, poverty, and social injustice. As Rose (1994) notes, hip-hop culture provides a voice for marginalized communities, allowing them to challenge dominant narratives and assert their identities.

However, representation in popular music is not always straightforward. The music industry often prioritizes commercial viability, which can lead to the commodification of cultural expressions. This commodification may result in the oversimplification or stereotyping of certain identities (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

The global rise of African popular music has brought with it both celebration and scrutiny. While the increased visibility of artists from across the continent is undoubtedly a positive development, it also raises important questions about representation, commodification, and the dynamics of cultural exchange. These themes of representation, commodification, and the dynamics of cultural exchange can be viewed through the lens of Francophone African music, examining two specific examples: *Premier Gaou* by Magic System from Côte d'Ivoire and *Chaise Électrique* by Fally Ipupa from the Democratic Republic of Congo. These songs, while distinct in their style and context, offer insights into the interplay between artistic intention, audience interpretation, and the ever-present forces of commercialization and representation.

In the late 1990s, Magic System's *Premier Gaou* emerged from Côte d'Ivoire as more than just a catchy tune; it was a cultural phenomenon. Rooted in the zouglou genre, a form of social commentary and youth expression, the song told a humorous story of heartbreak and social climbing. Magic System, the group that recorded the track, likely intended to create a relatable narrative that resonated with the experiences of ordinary Ivorians. Zouglou, as a genre, often encodes social critiques, addressing issues of poverty, inequality, and political corruption. *Premier Gaou* used humour to critique materialism and the superficiality of some relationships, while also celebrating Ivorian slang and street culture. The song's encoding, therefore, was multifaceted, blending entertainment with social commentary and cultural pride.

However, the song's massive commercial success inevitably raised questions about its representation of Ivorian culture. While *Premier Gaou* authentically captured certain aspects of Ivorian life, its widespread popularity may have led to a simplification or commodification of its message. The song's humorous portrayal of social dynamics, while relatable, could also be interpreted as reinforcing certain stereotypes or overlooking the deeper structural inequalities that contribute to social stratification. This tension between authentic representation and commercial appeal is a recurring theme in the analysis of African popular music.

Listeners, in turn, decoded *Premier Gaou* in a variety of ways. Many in Côte d'Ivoire and across Francophone Africa embraced the song as a humorous and relatable story, appreciating its catchy melody, its use of Ivorian slang, and its light-hearted critique of materialism. The song became an anthem for those who had experienced similar situations, offering a sense of solidarity and shared experience. However, some listeners may have negotiated the meaning, enjoying the song's upbeat rhythm without fully engaging with its social commentary. Others may have engaged in oppositional decoding, criticizing the song for its portrayal of women or questioning the commercialization of zouglou. These diverse interpretations highlight the subjective nature of the decoding process and the influence of individual perspectives and cultural contexts.

Moving to Central Africa, Fally Ipupa's *Chaise Électrique*, released in the early 2010s, offers a different perspective on the complexities of representation in Francophone African music. This Congolese rumba/soukous song, featuring American R&B singer Olivia, was a deliberate attempt to bridge cultural divides and reach a wider international audience. Fally Ipupa likely intended to create a romantic and danceable track that would showcase Congolese music on a global stage. The blending of languages (Lingala, French, and English) and musical styles was a key element of this strategy.

However, the collaboration with an American artist also raised questions about cultural authenticity and the potential for Congolese music to be diluted or misrepresented. Some listeners criticized the collaboration, seeing it as a sellout or a compromise of Congolese artistic integrity. Others raised concerns about cultural appropriation, questioning whether Olivia's presence in the song was respectful of Congolese culture or simply an attempt to capitalize on its popularity. These criticisms highlight the challenges of navigating cultural exchange in a globalized music industry, where the desire for international recognition can sometimes clash with the need to preserve cultural authenticity.

Listeners decoded *Chaise Électrique* in a variety of ways, reflecting these underlying tensions. Many in the DRC and across Africa embraced the song as a romantic and upbeat track that showcased Fally Ipupa's talent and the vibrancy of Congolese music. The collaboration

with Olivia was seen by some as a positive step towards international recognition. However, others may have negotiated the meaning, enjoying the song's catchy beat without fully appreciating the cultural nuances of the Lingala lyrics. Still others may have engaged in oppositional decoding, questioning the authenticity of the collaboration or raising concerns about cultural appropriation.

The stories of *Premier Gaou* and *Chaise Électrique* provide vital illustrations of the encoding/decoding model in action, highlighting the complex interplay between artistic intention, audience interpretation, and the broader cultural context in Francophone African music. While artists strive to encode their work with specific meanings and cultural references, the ultimate meaning of a song is shaped by the diverse audiences who decode it through the lens of their own experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, these examples underscore the challenges of representation and commodification in the global music industry, raising important questions about cultural authenticity, artistic integrity, and the power dynamics of cultural exchange. As African popular music continues to gain global prominence, it is crucial to engage with these complexities in a critical and nuanced way, recognizing the potential for both celebration and exploitation. By examining the different modes of decoding and the underlying forces that shape them, we can gain a deeper understanding of how music functions as a cultural force, shaping identities, fostering connections, and contributing to the ongoing evolution of African popular music on the world stage.

Intersectionality and Identity

Representation in popular music is also shaped by the concept of intersectionality, which recognizes that individuals hold multiple identities that intersect and influence their experiences. For example, the representation of women in popular music can vary widely based on race, class, and sexuality. While some female artists challenge traditional gender roles and assert their agency, others may be subjected to objectification and narrow portrayals that reinforce patriarchal norms (McRobbie, 2004).

The rise of female artists in Nigeria's vibrant music scene has been a powerful force, challenging traditional gender roles and offering new perspectives on love, relationships, and social life. While these artists are often celebrated for their empowering messages, a deeper analysis reveals the complexities of representation, shaped by the forces of commercialization, cultural context, and the crucial lens of intersectionality. To understand how these artists encode meanings into their work, how audiences decode these meanings based on their own experiences and perspectives, and how the broader cultural context shapes the entire process; this essay explores these themes through the lens of two prominent Nigerian female artists: Tiwa Savage and Yemi Alade. By examining their songs *Kele Kele Love* and *Johnny*, respectively, we can gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between artistic intention, audience interpretation, the complexities of representation, and the crucial role of intersectionality in shaping their narratives.

Tiwa Savage's *Kele Kele Love*, released in 2010, marked a significant moment in the evolution of Nigerian Afropop. The song, with its catchy beat and direct lyrics, signaled a shift towards greater female agency and the open expression of female desire. Tiwa Savage, as the artist, likely intended to create a relatable and empowering anthem for women, challenging traditional notions of female passivity and celebrating female sexuality. The song's encoding, therefore, was a deliberate act of pushing boundaries and asserting female autonomy within a cultural context that often restricts female expression.

However, the song's representation of female sexuality is not without its complexities. From an intersectional perspective, it is crucial to consider how Tiwa Savage's identity as a Nigerian woman in a patriarchal society shapes her artistic choices. The song navigates the delicate balance between expressing female desire and adhering to cultural norms. Does the song truly challenge traditional gender roles, or does it inadvertently reinforce certain stereotypes? Does it acknowledge the diverse experiences and identities of women in Nigeria, taking into account factors such as class, ethnicity, and religion? These are crucial questions to consider when analysing the song's representation of gender. Furthermore, Tiwa Savage's image and music are also influenced by global beauty standards and the pressures of the music industry, adding another layer of complexity to her representation of female identity.

Listeners, in turn, decoded *Kele Kele Love* in a variety of ways. Many young women in Nigeria embraced the song as an empowering anthem, connecting with its directness and its message of female agency. However, some listeners may have negotiated the meaning, enjoying the song's catchy beat without fully embracing its message of female empowerment. Others may have engaged in oppositional decoding, criticizing the song for its explicit lyrics or raising concerns about objectification. These diverse interpretations highlight the subjective nature of the decoding process and the influence of individual perspectives and cultural contexts. An intersectional analysis would further consider how a listener's own gender identity, social class, and cultural background might influence their interpretation of the song's message.

Yemi Alade's *Johnny*, released in 2014, offers a different perspective on the complexities of representation in Nigerian female music. The song, with its engaging narrative and catchy beat, tells the story of a woman searching for her missing boyfriend, Johnny, who is known for his womanizing ways. Yemi Alade, as the artist, likely intended to create a humorous and relatable song about relationships and infidelity, while also empowering women to take control of their own narratives.

However, the song's representation of gender roles is not without its ambiguities. While the woman in the song is assertive and independent, she is still searching for a man who is known to be unfaithful. This raises questions about the song's ultimate message. Does it truly challenge traditional gender roles, or does it inadvertently reinforce the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her relationship with a man? From an intersectional perspective, it is important to consider how Yemi Alade's identity as a Nigerian woman shapes her portrayal of relationships and infidelity. Does the song reflect the realities of gender inequality in Nigerian society, or does it offer a more idealized view of relationships? Furthermore, Yemi Alade's image and music are also influenced by her African identity and her desire to represent African culture on a global stage, adding another layer of complexity to her representation of female identity.

Listeners decoded *Johnny* in a variety of ways, reflecting these underlying tensions. Many listeners, both male and female, embraced the song as a humorous and relatable story about relationships and infidelity. However, some male listeners may have criticized the song for its portrayal of men as unfaithful and unreliable. Others may have argued that the song's message is ultimately ambivalent, as the woman is still searching for a man who is known to be unfaithful. An intersectional analysis would consider how a listener's own gender identity, cultural background, and experiences with relationships might influence their interpretation of the song's message.

The stories of *Kele Kele Love* and *Johnny* provide persuasive pictures of the encoding/decoding model in action, highlighting the complex interplay between artistic intention, audience interpretation, the broader cultural context, and the crucial lens of intersectionality in the music of Nigerian female artists. While these artists strive to encode their work with messages of empowerment and female agency, the ultimate meaning of their songs is shaped by the diverse audiences who decode them through the lens of their own experiences and perspectives, taking into account the multiple and intersecting identities that shape their understanding of the world. By examining these different modes of decoding and the underlying forces that shape them, we can gain a deeper understanding of how music functions as a cultural force, shaping identities, fostering connections, and contributing to the ongoing evolution of Nigerian popular music, while also remaining critically aware of the potential for commodification, misrepresentation, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. A nuanced understanding of intersectionality is essential for navigating these complexities and promoting more equitable and authentic representations in popular music, allowing us to move beyond simplistic notions of empowerment and engage with the rich and multifaceted narratives of African female artists.

Cultural Appropriation and Authenticity

The issue of cultural appropriation is another critical aspect of representation in popular music. Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of one culture are adopted by another, often without proper acknowledgment or respect for their origins. This can lead to the commodification of cultural symbols and practices, stripping them of their original meanings. For example, the appropriation of reggae music by mainstream artists can dilute its cultural significance and reduce it to a commercial product (Tschmuck, 2016).

Authenticity plays a crucial role in discussions of representation, as audiences often seek genuine expressions of identity in music. When artists are perceived as inauthentic or exploitative, it can lead to backlash and criticism. This highlights the importance of understanding the cultural contexts from which music emerges and the responsibilities of artists in representing those cultures accurately and respectfully.

Representation in popular music is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses the portrayal of social groups, cultures, and identities. While popular music can serve as a powerful platform for marginalized voices, it can also perpetuate stereotypes and commodify cultural expressions. By critically examining representation in popular music, scholars and audiences can better understand the dynamics of power, identity, and cultural negotiation within society.

3. Identity

Identity in popular music is a crucial area of study that explores how music serves as a medium for individuals and groups to construct, negotiate, and express their identities. This process involves various dimensions, including gender, race, class, and sexuality, and highlights the ways in which music reflects and shapes cultural narratives and personal experiences.

Gender and Identity

Popular music has long been a site for the exploration and expression of gender identities. Female artists, in particular, have used music to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their agency. Female artists have navigated the complexities of femininity and empowerment

in their work. Their music and personalities are often marked by provocative imagery and themes that question societal norms regarding female sexuality, while addressing issues of empowerment, self-acceptance, and feminism (McRobbie, 2004).

African female singers like Angélique Kidjo and Onyeka Onwenu have made significant contributions to the exploration of gender identities and empowerment through their music. Angélique Kidjo, a Beninois singer-songwriter, often incorporates elements of her African heritage into her work. Her songs celebrate African culture and identity, challenging Western stereotypes about Africa. For instance, her album *Djin Djin* features collaborations with various international artists, showcasing the richness of African music while asserting her place in the global music scene.

Kidjo is also a vocal advocate for women's rights and education in Africa. Her song *Agolo* addresses environmental issues and the importance of preserving African culture, while her activism extends beyond music. She has worked with organizations like UNICEF to promote education for girls, using her platform to empower women and girls across the continent. In her music and public persona, Kidjo challenges traditional gender roles by presenting herself as a strong, independent woman. Her performances often convey a sense of confidence and assertiveness, encouraging women to embrace their power and identity.

Onyeka Onwenu, a Nigerian singer, actress, and activist, is known for her powerful voice and commitment to social issues. Her music often reflects themes of love, unity, and cultural pride. Songs like *One Love* promote harmony and togetherness while also addressing the importance of women's roles in society. Onwenu's song *I Will Survive* serves as an anthem of resilience and empowerment, encouraging women to overcome challenges and assert their independence. This message resonates with many women who face societal pressures and expectations, reinforcing the idea that they can rise above adversity.

Beyond her music, Onwenu has been involved in various social causes, including women's rights and political activism. She has used her platform to speak out against gender-based violence and advocate for women's representation in leadership roles, further emphasizing the importance of female empowerment in her work. Both Angélique Kidjo and Onyeka Onwenu exemplify how African female artists use their music to challenge traditional gender roles, celebrate cultural identity, and advocate for women's rights. Their contributions not only enrich the African music landscape but also inspire listeners to embrace their identities and strive for empowerment. Through their artistry, they continue to pave the way for future generations of female musicians in Africa and beyond.

However, the representation of gender in popular music is not without its challenges. Women in the industry often face objectification and are frequently subjected to narrow portrayals that reinforce stereotypes. For instance, female pop stars are often marketed primarily based on their physical appearance rather than their musical talent, which can limit the scope of their artistic expression (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This tension between empowerment and objectification illustrates the complexities of negotiating gender identity within the music industry.

Race and Identity

Race is another critical dimension of identity in popular music. Music genres such as hip-hop, R&B, and reggae have emerged from specific cultural contexts and serve as powerful vehicles for expressing the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. For

example, hip-hop has been instrumental in articulating the realities of systemic racism, poverty, and social injustice faced by African Americans (Rose, 1994).

African musicians like Sonny Okosuns and Lucky Dube have made significant contributions to the exploration of race and identity through their music, addressing social issues and the experiences of marginalized communities.

Sonny Okosuns was a Nigerian musician known for his unique blend of reggae and African rhythms. His music often addressed themes of social justice, political oppression, and the struggles faced by African people. One of his most famous songs, *Fire in Soweto*, speaks directly to the struggles against apartheid in South Africa, highlighting the fight for freedom and equality. Through his lyrics, Okosuns articulated the pain and resilience of marginalized communities, using music as a tool for activism and awareness. Okosuns also emphasized the importance of African unity and identity in his work. His song *African Soldier* celebrates the strength and courage of African people, encouraging listeners to take pride in their heritage. By addressing issues of race and identity, Okosuns contributed to a broader dialogue about the African experience, making his music a powerful vehicle for social change.

Lucky Dube, a South African reggae musician, is renowned for his poignant lyrics that address social issues, including poverty, racism, and the struggles of the Black community during and after apartheid. His song *Different Colours* emphasizes the importance of unity and acceptance among people of different races, advocating for a society free from discrimination and prejudice. Dube's music often reflects his own experiences growing up in a racially divided society, making his messages deeply personal and relatable. In addition to addressing race, Dube's work also explores themes of identity and cultural pride. His album *Soul Taker* features songs that celebrate African culture and heritage while critiquing the socio-political landscape. Dube's ability to blend personal narratives with broader social commentary has made his music resonate with audiences both in Africa and around the world.

Both Sonny Okosuns and Lucky Dube exemplify how African musicians use their art to address issues of race, identity, and social justice. Through their powerful lyrics and engaging melodies, they have created a platform for dialogue around the experiences of marginalized communities. Their contributions not only enrich the African music landscape but also inspire listeners to reflect on the complexities of race and identity in society. Through their artistry, Okosuns and Dube continue to advocate for change and empowerment, leaving a lasting impact on the music world and beyond.

However, the representation of race in popular music can also be fraught with issues of appropriation and misrepresentation. When artists from dominant cultures adopt elements of marginalized cultures without proper acknowledgment or respect, it can lead to cultural appropriation, which dilutes the original meanings and significance of those cultural expressions (Tschmuck, 2016). This dynamic raises important questions about authenticity and the responsibilities of artists in representing diverse identities.

Class and Identity

Class identity is another significant aspect of how popular music constructs and negotiates identity. Various African music genres such as Highlife, hip-hop, Fuji, reggae, makossa, gospel, and Afrobeats have played significant roles in expressing race, identity, and social issues. Highlife, a genre of the middle class that originated in West Africa, blends traditional African rhythms with Western musical elements. Artists like E.T. Mensah and Osibisa have used Highlife to celebrate African culture and identity. For instance, E.T.

Mensah's song *All for You* reflects themes of love and unity, while also promoting pride in African heritage. Highlife music often serves as a medium for social commentary, addressing issues such as colonialism and post-colonial identity (Onwuegbuna, 2022b).

African hip-hop has emerged as a powerful voice of the youth for social change, addressing issues of race, identity, and inequality. Artists like Nasty C and Sarkodie use their music to reflect the realities of life in their respective countries. Nasty C's song *Hell Naw* critiques societal expectations and the struggles faced by young people in South Africa, while Sarkodie's *Adonai* addresses themes of faith and perseverance in the face of adversity. Both artists highlight the complexities of identity and the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Fuji music, which originated from Nigeria, is known for its vibrant rhythms and storytelling. Artists like Wasiu Ayinde Marshall (K1 De Ultimate) have used Fuji to address social issues and celebrate cultural identity. In songs like *Talazo*, K1 discusses the importance of community and unity among the Yoruba people, emphasizing cultural pride and resilience. Fuji music often reflects the experiences of everyday life, making it a relatable genre for many listeners.

Reggae has a rich history of addressing social justice and racial issues, and African artists have embraced this genre to convey their messages. Lucky Dube, as mentioned earlier, used reggae to address apartheid and social inequality in South Africa. His song *Prisoner* speaks to the struggles of those imprisoned by systemic oppression, while also advocating for freedom and justice. Reggae serves as a powerful platform for discussing race and identity in the African context.

Makossa, a popular music genre from Cameroon, blends traditional rhythms with modern influences. Artists like Manu Dibango have used makossa to celebrate African culture and identity. Dibango's hit *Soul Makossa* not only showcases the vibrant sounds of Cameroon but also emphasizes the importance of African unity. The genre often reflects the experiences of Cameroonians and addresses social issues, making it a significant part of the cultural landscape.

Gospel music in Africa often addresses themes of faith, hope, and resilience, while also reflecting the struggles faced by communities. Artists like Sinach and Frank Edwards use their music to inspire and uplift listeners. Sinach's song *Way Maker* speaks to the power of faith in overcoming challenges, resonating with many who face adversity. Gospel music serves as a source of strength and identity for many African communities.

Afrobeats, a contemporary genre that blends African rhythms with global influences, has gained immense popularity worldwide. Artists like Burna Boy and Wizkid use their music to explore themes of identity, culture, and social issues. Burna Boy's song *Anybody* addresses the challenges faced by young people in Nigeria, while also celebrating African culture and resilience. Wizkid's *Joro* reflects on love and relationships, showcasing the complexities of modern identity in a globalized world.

Across these diverse genres, African musicians use their art to address issues of race, identity, and social justice. Through their powerful lyrics and engaging melodies, they create a platform for dialogue around the experiences of marginalized communities. These artists not only enrich the African music landscape but also inspire listeners to reflect on the complexities of identity and the ongoing struggles for equality and empowerment.

The intersection of class with other identities, such as race and gender, further complicates the representation of class in popular music. For example, the experiences of a working-class Black woman may differ significantly from those of a working-class White woman—highlighting the need for an intersectional approach to understanding identity in music (Crenshaw, 1989).

Sexuality and Identity

Popular music plays a vital role in the construction and negotiation of sexual identities, providing a platform for artists to express their experiences, challenge societal norms, and advocate for acceptance. While some artists have increasingly used music as a means of self-expression and advocacy, challenging heteronormative narratives and celebrating diverse sexual identities; others have garnered attention for their candid exploration of sexuality in their music, contributing to broader conversations about acceptance and representation within the industry (Bennett, 2018; Zebrowski, 2018).

Many artists use their music to explore and express their sexual identities openly. For instance, Nneka, a Nigerian-German artist, uses her music to address various social issues, including love, identity, and sexuality. Her song *Heartbeat* reflects on the complexities of relationships and emotional vulnerability. Nneka's lyrics often challenge societal norms and expectations, promoting a message of self-acceptance and authenticity in expressing one's sexual identity.

Popular music often challenges societal norms surrounding sexuality. Artists often use their platforms to advocate for sexual freedom and acceptance. The representation of diverse sexual identities in music has increased significantly, contributing to greater visibility for the so-called deviant individuals. Artists openly discuss their sexual orientations and experiences in their music—addressing the complexities of relationships and identity. This representation helps normalize conversations around sexuality and fosters a sense of belonging for listeners who may feel marginalized. Simphiwe Dana, a South African singer-songwriter, is known for her soulful voice and thought-provoking lyrics. In her song *Ndiredi*, she addresses themes of love and desire, celebrating the beauty of romantic relationships. Dana's music often explores the intersection of sexuality and cultural identity, challenging traditional norms and advocating for self-expression.

Flavour N'abania, a prominent Afropop artist from Nigeria, has several songs that exemplify the exploration of sexual identity and relationships while also challenging societal norms. One notable example is *Nwa Baby (Ashawo Remix)*. The playful lyrics and catchy rhythm highlight flirtation and attraction, using the term *Ashawo*, which often carries a stigma in many African cultures. In this context, however, Flavour uses it to celebrate female sexuality and empowerment, challenging societal judgments and advocating for a more open understanding of sexual expression. Also, his song *Ikwokrikwo* features sexual innuendos and playful banter, making it both entertaining and provocative. It celebrates physical attraction and romantic advances in a fun manner. Its upbeat nature, combined with suggestive lyrics, promotes a sense of freedom regarding sexual expression and encourages listeners to embrace their desires.

However, the representation of sexuality in popular music can be complex and multifaceted. While some artists may embrace their sexual identities openly, others may face backlash or censorship, reflecting societal attitudes toward sexuality. The negotiation of sexual

identity in music often involves navigating these tensions, as artists seek to balance personal expression with commercial viability.

Key Theories and Approaches

Some of the key theories and approaches that are used to study the mediation of meanings in popular music include:

1. Cultural Studies

This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding popular music as a cultural text that reflects and shapes societal values and norms. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes the importance of understanding popular music as a cultural text that reflects and shapes societal values, norms, and identities. This perspective views music not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural artifact that can provide insights into the social dynamics of a given time and place. In Afropop music, this approach examines how music reflects and shapes cultural identities and community narratives. It explores intersections of race, gender, class, and ethnicity, considering how these factors influence the production and reception of music. For instance, the music of artists like Angélique Kidjo and Fela Anikulapo Kuti serves as a platform for discussing socio-political issues and cultural identities (Kebede, 2019).

Popular Music as Cultural Text

In cultural studies, popular music is analysed as a site of meaning-making where various cultural narratives intersect. Scholars examine how music interacts with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, revealing the complexities of identity and power relations within society. For instance, the work of Simon Frith (1996) highlights how popular music can serve as a reflection of cultural anxieties and aspirations, acting as a mirror to societal changes. One key aspect of this approach is the recognition that popular music is produced within specific cultural and historical contexts. For example, the emergence of punk rock in the 1970s can be understood as a response to socio-political conditions, including economic disenfranchisement and disillusionment with mainstream culture (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Born & Barry, 2018). By analysing the cultural context in which music is created and consumed, researchers uncover the ways in which popular music both reflects and influences societal values.

Music and Social Change

Cultural studies also emphasizes the role of popular music in social change. Music has historically been a powerful tool for activism and resistance, providing a platform for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. For example, the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa saw the emergence of songs that addressed issues of racial injustice and equality, such as *Revolution* by Sonny Okosuns. These songs not only reflected the struggles of the time but also inspired collective action and solidarity among activists (Rose, 1994).

Moreover, contemporary popular music continues to engage with social issues, as seen in the works of artists who use their platforms to address topics such as systemic racism, gender inequality, and human rights. By analysing these cultural texts, scholars can explore how popular music contributes to ongoing dialogues about social justice and cultural representation.

The Pan-African movements organized by the educated African elites faced significant discrimination, to the extent that their voices were excluded from discussions on how their

states were governed by white colonialists. This was particularly upsetting for them, as many of these white administrators lacked the qualifications for their roles, while more qualified Africans were overlooked purely based on their skin colour. Amidst this disenchantment, nationalists began publishing newspapers to voice their criticism of the oppressive colonial regime. They also created societies and associations with strong political purposes to mobilize the masses. These organizations effectively engaged the public using chants and simple songs sung in local languages. Over time, these melodies gained national and regional popularity, and professional musicians transformed them into the continent's popular music (Onwuegbuna, 2015a).

2. Semiotics

This approach focuses on the ways in which music uses signs and symbols to convey meanings. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and how they create meaning. In the context of popular music, semiotics focuses on the ways in which music uses various signs—such as lyrics, melodies, visuals, and performance styles—to convey meanings and evoke emotional responses (Bishop, 2014).

Signs and Symbols in Music

Popular music employs a range of signs and symbols that can be analysed to uncover deeper meanings. For example, lyrics often contain metaphors, allusions, and cultural references that enrich the listener's understanding of the song. A semiotic analysis of a song might explore how specific words or phrases evoke particular emotions or cultural associations. For instance, the use of imagery related to nature in a love song may symbolize purity and beauty, while urban imagery in hip-hop may convey themes of struggle and resilience (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011).

In addition to lyrics, the musical elements themselves can serve as signs. The choice of instrumentation, rhythm, and melody can evoke specific feelings and cultural connotations. For example, the use of a minor key has been argued to create a sense of melancholy, while upbeat tempos and major keys evoke joy and celebration. This claim is still in contention amongst music theorists and psychologists. These musical signs work in conjunction with lyrical content to create a cohesive meaning within a song.

Visual Semiotics

Visual elements, such as album artwork, music videos, and performance styles, also play a crucial role in the semiotic analysis of popular music. These visuals can enhance or complicate the meanings conveyed by the music itself. For instance, a music video may use specific imagery to reinforce the themes of a song or to challenge societal norms. The visual representation of an artist can also shape audience perceptions and interpretations, as seen in the carefully crafted personas of artists who use visual aesthetics to convey complex identities and messages (McRobbie, 2004; Onwuegbuna, 2013b). In various video clips of African popular music performances, the creative and artistic approach to presentation is quite apparent. For instance, Jodie's *Kuchikuchi* features characters dressed in elaborate costumes, with women sporting tall, styled hair. In contrast, Chidinma's *Kedike* takes place in a rural village, showcasing scenes that reflect Nigeria's multicultural society. Moo-Eddah's *Louder* incorporates masked dancers, while Keko (featuring Madtraxx) showcases performers dressed as human skeletons who use 'human beings' as skipping ropes during their dance. Additionally, Dancia enhances her sex appeal in *Beriberi* by attaching fake breasts and manipulating the background lighting to achieve an ethereal effect (Onwuegbuna, 2013a).

Both cultural studies and semiotics provide valuable frameworks for analysing popular music as a cultural text that reflects and shapes societal values and norms. Cultural studies emphasizes the importance of context and the role of music in social change, while semiotics focuses on the signs and symbols used in music to convey meanings. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how popular music functions as a significant cultural artifact, revealing the complexities of identity, power, and representation in contemporary society.

3. Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a critical theoretical approach that emphasizes the instability and multiplicity of meanings in texts, including music. This perspective challenges traditional notions of authorship and interpretation, suggesting that meanings are not fixed or inherent in a text but are instead constructed through the interplay of various cultural, social, and historical contexts. In the realm of popular music, poststructuralism offers valuable insights into how songs are created, disseminated, and interpreted, highlighting the complexities of meaning-making in a dynamic cultural landscape.

Instability of Meaning

One of the central tenets of poststructuralism is the idea that meanings are inherently unstable and subject to change. This perspective posits that a single text can generate multiple interpretations, depending on the context in which it is encountered and the perspectives of its audience. In popular music, this instability is evident in how songs can be interpreted differently by various listeners based on their individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts.

This multiplicity of meanings reflects the poststructuralist view that interpretation is not a straightforward process but rather a complex negotiation between the text and its audience. An example of the instability of meaning in African popular music can be seen in the song *Jerusalema* by Master KG featuring Nomcebo Zikode. While many listeners interpret *Jerusalema* as a joyful celebration that encourages unity and dance, those from different cultural backgrounds find various meanings in it. For instance, in South Africa, the song is viewed as an expression of hope and resilience, often associated with the spiritual connection to the city of Jerusalem, symbolizing a place of peace and belonging. In contrast, international audiences appreciate the song simply as a dance trend, focusing on its catchy rhythm and choreography. Furthermore, the accompanying dance challenge on platforms like TikTok shifted the song's meaning from a cultural expression rooted in South African identity to a global phenomenon, where the focus was more on viral entertainment rather than its original contextual significance. This reflects the poststructuralist idea that the interpretation of a song can evolve and vary widely based on listeners' personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts. This multiplicity of meanings reflects the poststructuralist view that interpretation is not a straightforward process but rather a complex negotiation between the text and its audience.

Challenging Authorship

Poststructuralism also challenges traditional notions of authorship, suggesting that the meaning of a text is not solely determined by its creator. Instead, the interpretation of a song is influenced by a range of factors, including cultural context, audience reception, and the broader socio-political landscape. This perspective aligns with Roland Barthes' (1967) concept of 'the

death of the author,' which argues that once a text is released into the world, the author's intentions become secondary to the interpretations made by readers or listeners.

In popular music, this idea is particularly relevant in the age of digital media, where songs can be shared, remixed, and reinterpreted by audiences in ways that the original artists may not have anticipated. For instance, the rise of fan-created content, such as covers, remixes, and mashups, exemplifies how listeners actively engage with music, creating new meanings that diverge from the artist's original intent (Bennett, 2018). This participatory culture challenges the notion of a singular, authoritative interpretation of a song, emphasizing the role of the audience in the meaning-making process.

Intertextuality and Cultural Context

Poststructuralism also highlights the importance of intertextuality—the idea that texts are interconnected and that meanings are shaped by their relationships with other texts. In popular music, songs often reference or draw upon other musical works, cultural artifacts, and social discourses, creating a web of meanings that can be explored through analysis. For example, a hip-hop artist may sample a classic rock song, infusing it with new meanings that reflect contemporary social issues, thereby creating a dialogue between different musical genres and cultural contexts (Rose, 1994).

This intertextuality underscores the idea that meanings in popular music are not isolated but are part of a larger cultural conversation. As such, understanding a song requires considering its connections to other texts and the cultural narratives that inform its creation and reception.

Poststructuralism offers a valuable framework for analysing popular music by emphasizing the instability and multiplicity of meanings, challenging traditional notions of authorship, and highlighting the importance of intertextuality and cultural context. This approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of how music functions as a cultural text, revealing the complexities of identity, representation, and meaning-making in contemporary society. By embracing the fluidity of interpretation, scholars and audiences can engage with popular music in ways that reflect its dynamic nature and its role in shaping cultural narratives.

Key Methods

Among the key methods used to study the mediation of meanings in popular music are:

1. Content Analysis

This involves analysing the lyrics, music, and other elements of popular music to identify patterns and themes. Content analysis in popular music is a systematic research method used to analyse the lyrics, music, and other elements of songs to identify patterns, themes, and cultural meanings. This approach allows researchers to explore how music reflects and shapes societal values, norms, and identities. By examining various components of popular music, scholars can gain insights into the cultural significance of songs and the messages they convey.

Analysing Lyrics

One of the primary focuses of content analysis in popular music is the examination of lyrics. Lyrics can reveal a wealth of information about the themes and messages that artists wish to communicate (Onwuegbuna, 2015a). Researchers often categorize lyrics based on various criteria, such as themes (e.g., love, social justice, identity), emotional tone (e.g., positive, negative, ambivalent), and narrative structure (e.g., storytelling, personal reflection).

For example, a study by Kearney (2018) analysed the lyrics of contemporary pop songs to explore themes of empowerment and self-identity among female artists. The findings indicated that many female artists use their lyrics to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their independence, reflecting broader societal shifts toward gender equality. This type of analysis highlights how lyrics can serve as a reflection of cultural attitudes and contribute to ongoing conversations about identity and empowerment.

Musical Elements

In addition to lyrics, content analysis can also encompass the musical elements of popular songs, such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation. These elements can significantly influence the emotional impact of a song and contribute to its overall meaning. For instance, the use of minor keys may evoke feelings of sadness or melancholy, while upbeat tempos and major keys can create a sense of joy or celebration.

Researchers may analyse musical patterns to identify trends within specific genres or time periods. For example, Onwuegbuna (2015) examined the evolution of musical styles in Afropop over several decades, noting how changes in instrumentation and production techniques reflect broader cultural shifts. By analysing these musical elements, researchers can uncover how the sound of popular music is intertwined with its cultural context.

Themes and Patterns

Content analysis also involves identifying recurring themes and patterns across a body of music. This can include examining how certain topics are represented in different genres or how artists respond to social issues through their music. For example, a content analysis of hip-hop lyrics might reveal patterns related to themes of resistance, identity, and social justice, as artists use their music to comment on systemic inequalities (Rose, 1994). Moreover, researchers can explore how popular music reflects and shapes cultural narratives; thereby finding that artists increasingly use their platforms to advocate for acceptance and visibility. This type of analysis highlights how music can serve as a vehicle for social change and contribute to the construction of cultural identities.

Methodological Approaches

Content analysis can employ both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Qualitative approaches may involve close readings of lyrics and musical elements, allowing researchers to interpret meanings and themes in depth. Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, may involve coding lyrics for specific themes or patterns and using statistical methods to analyse the frequency of these themes across a larger dataset.

For example, a quantitative content analysis might involve coding a sample of songs for themes related to violence, love, or empowerment and then analysing the prevalence of these themes across different genres or time periods. This approach can provide valuable insights into how popular music evolves and responds to cultural changes.

By analysing these components, researchers can gain insights into the cultural significance of songs and the messages they convey. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how popular music reflects and shapes societal values, norms, and identities, contributing to ongoing discussions about culture and representation (Onwuegbuna, 2015b).

2. Interviews and Ethnography

This involves conducting interviews with artists, producers, and audiences, and observing the ways in which popular music is created and consumed in different contexts. Interviews and ethnography are qualitative research methods that provide valuable insights into the creation, consumption, and cultural significance of popular music. These approaches allow researchers to explore the lived experiences of artists, producers, and audiences, offering a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and cultural contexts that shape popular music.

Interviews in Popular Music Research

Conducting interviews with artists, producers, and audiences is a powerful way to gather firsthand accounts and perspectives on the music-making process and its impact. Interviews can reveal the motivations, intentions, and experiences of those involved in the creation of music, as well as the ways in which audiences engage with and interpret that music.

Artists and Producers

Interviews with artists and producers can provide insights into the creative process, including how songs are written, produced, and marketed. For example, an artist might discuss the inspiration behind a particular song, the challenges they faced during production, and their thoughts on the reception of their work. This information can illuminate the complexities of artistic expression and the various factors that influence the music industry, such as commercial pressures, cultural trends, and technological advancements.

For instance, an interview with a hip-hop producer might reveal how they incorporate samples from different genres to create a unique sound, reflecting their cultural influences and artistic vision. Such insights can help researchers understand the interplay between creativity and the broader cultural context in which music is produced (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

Audiences

Interviews with audiences can shed light on how listeners engage with music and the meanings they derive from it. By exploring listeners' experiences, researchers can uncover the emotional, social, and cultural significance of music in their lives. For example, an audience member might share how a particular song resonated with their personal experiences or how it played a role in shaping their identity.

These interviews can also reveal how audiences interpret and negotiate the meanings of songs, highlighting the multiplicity of interpretations that arise from individual backgrounds and contexts. For instance, a study of fans of a specific genre, such as punk rock, might explore how their shared values and experiences influence their understanding of the music and its cultural significance (Bennett, 2018).

Ethnography in Popular Music Research

Ethnography involves immersive observation and participation in the cultural practices of a particular group, providing a holistic understanding of how popular music is created and consumed in different contexts. This method allows researchers to capture the nuances of musical practices, social interactions, and cultural meanings that may not be evident through interviews alone.

Observing Music Creation

Ethnographic research can involve observing the music-making process in various settings, such as recording studios, live performances, and songwriting sessions. By immersing themselves in these environments, researchers can gain insights into the collaborative nature of music production, the dynamics between artists and producers, and the influence of technology on the creative process.

For example, an ethnographic study of a local music scene might reveal how musicians collaborate, share resources, and support one another, highlighting the communal aspects of music creation. This approach can also uncover the ways in which cultural and social factors shape the production of music, such as the impact of local traditions or the influence of global trends (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011).

Observing Music Consumption

Ethnography can also focus on how audiences consume and engage with music in various contexts, such as concerts, festivals, and online platforms. By observing audience interactions and behaviours, researchers can explore the social dynamics of music consumption, including how music fosters community, identity, and belonging.

For instance, an ethnographic study of a music festival might examine how attendees interact with one another, the rituals and practices associated with the event, and the ways in which music shapes their experiences. This type of research can reveal the significance of live music in creating shared cultural moments and the role of music in shaping social identities (Bennett, 2018).

Interviews and ethnography are essential methods for exploring the complexities of popular music as a cultural phenomenon. By conducting interviews with artists, producers, and audiences, researchers can gain valuable insights into the creative process and the meanings derived from music. Ethnographic research further enriches this understanding by providing a holistic view of how music is created and consumed in various contexts. Together, these approaches contribute to a deeper appreciation of the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of popular music.

3. Discourse Analysis

Analysing the ways in which popular music is discussed and written about in various contexts, including the media and the music industry, is crucial for understanding its cultural significance and the narratives that shape public perception. This analysis encompasses several dimensions, including media representation, critical discourse, and the role of marketing and promotion in framing music and artists.

Media Representation of Popular Music

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping how popular music is perceived and understood. Through reviews, interviews, articles, and social media, the media constructs narratives around artists, genres, and songs, influencing audience interpretations and cultural meanings.

Music Criticism

Music criticism is a significant aspect of how popular music is discussed in the media. Critics often analyse and evaluate music based on various criteria, including lyrical content,

musical composition, and cultural relevance. Afropop music has garnered significant scholarly attention for its cultural significance and societal impact. Literature such as *The African Diaspora: A History through Literature* by Mary Anne D’Addeo explores how Afropop reflects the experiences of the African diaspora, particularly in its storytelling and themes of identity and migration. The genre serves as a means of cultural retention and expression, emphasizing the narratives of individuals affected by displacement (D’Addeo, 2020).

In *Afropop Worldwide: An Illustrated Guide to the Music of Africa*, Sean Barlow and Rachna Joshi provide a comprehensive overview of Afropop, detailing its historical context and evolution. They highlight the genre’s role in cultural expression and resistance, illustrating how artists use music to convey political messages and social issues, thereby influencing global music trends (Barlow & Joshi, 2009).

Critics also engage in broader cultural discussions, contextualizing music within social and political frameworks. For instance, a review of a hip-hop album might explore themes of race and identity, linking the music to contemporary social issues. This critical discourse not only informs audiences but also shapes the cultural narratives surrounding the music.

Media Framing

The way media outlets frame discussions about popular music can also influence public perception. For example, the portrayal of female artists often reflects societal attitudes toward gender. Media narratives may emphasize physical appearance or personal relationships over musical talent, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the scope of how female artists are understood (McRobbie, 2004).

Additionally, the media’s focus on certain genres or artists can shape cultural hierarchies within the music industry. For instance, the prominence of pop music in mainstream media can overshadow alternative genres, affecting their visibility and reception. This selective coverage highlights the power dynamics at play in the music industry and the ways in which certain narratives are privileged over others (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

The Role of the Music Industry

The music industry itself is a key player in how popular music is discussed and marketed. Record labels, promoters, and managers shape the narratives surrounding artists and their work, influencing how music is presented to the public.

Marketing and Promotion

Marketing strategies play a crucial role in framing how music is perceived. The way an album is marketed—through visuals, branding, and promotional campaigns—can significantly impact audience reception. For example, the use of social media platforms allows artists to engage directly with fans, creating a sense of intimacy and authenticity that can enhance their appeal (Bennett, 2018).

Moreover, the music industry often employs specific narratives to construct an artist’s image. This can include emphasizing an artist’s background, personal struggles, or unique sound. For instance, the “rags-to-riches” narrative is commonly used to promote artists who have overcome adversity, appealing to audiences’ emotions and fostering a connection with the artist (Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2011).

Industry Discourse

The discourse within the music industry also shapes how popular music is discussed. Industry professionals, including producers, agents, and executives, contribute to the narratives surrounding music and artists. Their perspectives can influence trends, genre classifications, and the overall direction of the music market.

For example, discussions about the commercialization of music often reflect tensions between artistic integrity and market demands. Industry professionals may debate the balance between creating commercially viable music and maintaining artistic authenticity, highlighting the complexities of navigating the music landscape (Tschmuck, 2016).

Analysing how popular music is talked about and written about in different contexts, including the media and the music industry, is essential for understanding its cultural significance. Media representation, music criticism, marketing strategies, and industry discourse all contribute to the narratives that shape public perception of music and artists.

4. Power Dynamics

The concept of power dynamics in popular music involves the interplay between various stakeholders such as artists, producers, record labels, audiences, and institutions. This discourse often examines how power is not only held but also contested and reshaped through the creation and circulation of music. This refers to the ways in which power is exercised and negotiated in the production, dissemination, and consumption of popular music.

Production

In the production phase, power dynamics can be analysed through the relationships between artists and industry gatekeepers, such as producers and record labels (Onwuegbuna, 2011b). Traditionally, record labels wield significant control over which artists are promoted and how their music is marketed. This concentration of power can marginalize emerging artists and genres that do not fit the commercial mould prioritized by major labels (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). For example, the dominance of mainstream pop in the charts often sidelines diverse musical expressions, leading to a homogenized cultural landscape.

Additionally, the role of producers can be crucial in defining the sound of popular music. They often act as both creative facilitators and decision-makers, influencing which songs are recorded and how they are produced. This power can create tension, particularly when artists wish to assert their vision against commercial pressures (Frith, 2000).

Dissemination and Consumption

Power dynamics extend into the dissemination of music, particularly in how platforms and media dictate visibility and access. The rise of digital streaming services has transformed traditional gatekeeping structures, allowing independent artists to distribute their music globally without the backing of major labels. Yet, this shift has also introduced new forms of power, where algorithms and platform policies can prioritize certain genres or artists over others, often based on commercial viability or user engagement metrics (Bennett, 2020). For instance, Spotify's playlists can significantly influence which songs gain popularity—a factor that not only reflects power but shapes listeners' tastes and cultural trends (Tschmuck, 2020).

Consumer behaviour also plays a role in power dynamics. Audiences actively negotiate their relationship with music, often exercising their power through diverse choices and preferences that can challenge dominant narratives. The emergence of fan cultures and

movements, such as fandoms advocating for underrepresented artists or genres, illustrates how listeners can impact the music landscape by their collective actions and support (Harris, 2018).

Gender and Cultural Power

Furthermore, power dynamics in popular music are significantly influenced by aspects of identity, including gender, race, and sexuality. Female artists, for example, often face unique challenges in industries dominated by male executives and producers. These challenges can result in the reinforcement of stereotypes and the marginalization of women's creative contributions (Negus, 1999). Conversely, female artists who assert their agency demonstrate how individuals can navigate and disrupt these power structures, thereby reclaiming autonomy in their artistic output (McRobbie, 2004).

The power dynamics surrounding the production, dissemination, and consumption of popular music are complex and constantly evolving. These dynamics illustrate the ongoing negotiations of power across various stakeholders in the music industry, revealing not only who holds power but also how that power is expressed, challenged, and redefined. As the landscape of popular music continues to shift with technological advancements and cultural changes, understanding these power dynamics remains crucial for analysing contemporary popular music practices.

CONCLUSION

The discourse has explored the intricate processes of mediating meanings in African popular music (Afropop), emphasizing the roles of various stakeholders such as artists, producers, audiences, and critics in constructing and interpreting cultural narratives. It argues that African popular music reflects and shapes societal values, identities, and power dynamics, serving as a site for meaning-making influenced by cultural, historical, and social factors. The study draws on interdisciplinary approaches, highlighting how commercial interests can homogenize music, while digital technologies have transformed its dissemination, leading to diverse music access yet questioning quality and exposure to varied styles.

Technological advancements have dramatically transformed the dissemination of popular music. Platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and social media have altered how music is distributed and consumed, allowing for greater accessibility and diversity in music choices. The rise of social media has transformed how audiences engage with music, allowing for immediate feedback and reinterpretation of songs in real-time. This can lead to new meanings being constructed as audiences share their interpretations and experiences online. However, this shift also raises questions about the quality of music and the implications of algorithm-driven recommendations, which can create echo chambers and limit exposure to diverse musical styles.

Arguably, commercialization can lead to a homogenization of music, where unique cultural expressions are diluted in favour of mainstream appeal. Producers and record labels often prioritize commercial viability over artistic integrity, influencing choices regarding ideology, structure, aesthetics, packaging, and presentation based on the product's marketability.

Identity in popular music is a dynamic and multifaceted concept that encompasses the construction and negotiation of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Music serves as a powerful medium for individuals and communities to express their identities, challenge societal norms, and engage in cultural dialogue. By critically examining how popular music reflects and shapes

identities, scholars and audiences can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity formation in contemporary society. The stakeholders involved in the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of Afropop music include artists, producers, audiences, and critics. These stakeholders contribute to the mediation of meanings within the music, influencing how it reflects and shapes societal values, identities, and power dynamics. The study concludes that understanding these mediation processes is crucial for grasping the broader cultural impact of popular music.

In sum, the mediation of meanings in popular music studies is a complex and multifaceted field that requires an interdisciplinary approach. By drawing on a range of theories, approaches, and methods, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which popular music is created, disseminated, and interpreted, and the ways in which it shapes and reflects societal values and norms. The analysis underlines that meaning in Afropop music is fluid; interpretations can differ significantly from artists' intentions, as illustrated through the example of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's politically charged Afrobeat that resonated differently among listeners and authorities.

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