

## Women's Empowerment in English Songs

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### Abstract

The qualitative and comparative research analyzes the lyrics of 30 popular English songs by female artists released between 2010 and 2023. The three objectives are 1) to explore the English used in the songs, 2) to examine the rhetorical message of women's empowerment in the lyrics, and 3) to investigate the social context and perspectives of the lyrics, focusing on contemporary social views and issues that affect and involve women, particularly in terms of power relations, ideologies, and more. The investigation relies on language and discourse analysis, with an emphasis on symbolism and metaphors. A feminist lens is an approach employed to reveal the thematic feminist expressions, highlighting female power and voice within the context of 'women's empowerment,' especially in the face of today's gender inequality. As a result, the songs reflect modern English usage, and English grammatical elements relevant to the contemporary world. The prevalent empowering techniques include narratives of positive transformation and occasional use of sarcasm and dark humor. Importantly, the songs are embedded with explicit and implicit meanings, centered around the rhetorical theme of 'women's empowerment'—a theme arguably shaped by the current global feminist movement. The women's empowerment can be understood through the proposed categories with themes and sub-themes showcasing the complexity and diversity of female-empowering messages. From a more sophisticated perspective, these notable characteristics suggest that the music can be viewed as 'feminist resistance' to patriarchy and gender inequality while addressing broader social issues that women face, such as political challenges, mental health, sexual violence, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings provide valuable insights from the selected set of songs, emphasizing women's power, the connection between music and social reality, and the profound social and cultural significance of music.

**Keywords:** English, English Songs, Feminist Thoughts, Women's Empowerment

### Introduction

Since the late 2010s, 'women's empowering songs,' known by the names of 'feminist anthems' or 'girl power songs,' have significantly grown in the American and global popular music industry. Primary singers within this genre are female soloists who represent women's empowerment messages through personal and critical narratives. Addressed in this music are also individual experiences, including political and social issues such as patriarchy, LGBTQI+ exclusion, mental health, the COVID-

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19 pandemic, and challenges women face. Consequently, this music genre has risen in popularity, audience number, as well as recognition at music awards (Franke, 2024; Fuentes & Williams, 2023; Logan, 2021). Outstanding examples of the female-empowering artists are Alessia Cara, Ariana Grande, Avril Lavigne, Demi Lovato, Katy Perry, Meghan Trainor, Miley Cyrus, MLICK, Rachel Platten, Sia, and Taylor Swift (Franke, 2024; Fuentes & Williams, 2023; Logan, 2021). In addition to those soloists is Disney Music—an entertainment source that influences young female audiences worldwide with its female-empowering representations (Barber, 2016). In recognition of the rise of these ‘women’s empowering songs,’ this research investigates the phenomenon.

## Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted in response to the following objectives of:

1. To examine the English language used in the songs.
2. To explore rhetorical English discourse as a reflection of women’s empowerment.
3. To investigate the social context and perspectives within the lyrics in relation to contemporary social outlooks and issues affecting and involving women.

The primary data consisted of 30 female empowering pop songs by female artists. These tracks with a theme of female empowerment were produced between 2010 and 2023 and available on YouTube as accessed on June 1, 2024. YouTube was chosen due to its status as a leading video-sharing platform (Ceci, 2021). Another selection criterion was over one million views rationalizing for popularity, cultural value, and relevancy. Within the total number of 30 songs, there were 24 songs from 5 female artists well-known for their series of female-empowering tracks (4 songs from each artist), 4 songs from Disney Music recognized for fostering empowerment to young females, and an additional 6 songs were from other female artists.

The secondary data included a variety of sources such as websites, online articles, reviews, and critiques. The songs’ popularity was also confirmed by investigating their existence in two reliable sources: 'Billboard Global 200' and 'Hot 100 Billboard Chart.'

The language and discourse analysis method, with a focus on symbolism and metaphor allowed the researcher to observe the English language usage and explore the themes/sub-themes conveyed in the narratives, particularly those related to the feminist voice—a prominent global movement. The process primarily involved a thorough examination of lyrical representations, and secondary to it was an investigation of their visual representations from YouTube for deeper interpretation.

## Literature Review

The research relies on these following theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which are essential context and background to the approach: 1) Language and discourse analysis, 2) Feminist thoughts, and 3) Women’s empowerment.

## 1. Language and Discourse Analysis Devices

In literary studies, these devices facilitate the understanding of the rhetorical meanings of themes and underlying messages the texts attempt to communicate and convey. To comprehend the lyrics and bring them into deeper discussion, the researcher utilizes these three major devices in the interpretation.

**Sign:** A unit that contains meanings or stands for something with absolute meaning. Sign signifies or reminds readers of certain things, objects, and issues. Content in signs are varieties of words, images, objects, shapes, sounds, acts, etc. However, a sign itself does not have a meaning, and it requires interpretation from readers (Chandler, 2002, pp. 13–17, 260; Gee, 1999, pp. 20–21).

**Symbol/symbolic:** Words, phrases, clauses, or sentences in language that signify certain things to readers or imply/provide clues to meanings, ideas, and beliefs. They demand complex interpretation, common knowledge, and shared experiences for readers to understand and are attached with multiple levels of meanings (Chandler, 2002, pp. 36–38, 262).

**Metaphor:** A figure of speech that has symbolic meaning to something else, usually in an abstract or indirect manner, implying meanings and/or making comparisons between things. Metaphors can be observed in pieces of literature or text where writers carefully craft words or sentences to signify something in an indirect way. The use of metaphor adds pleasure to readers because it requires quite complex literal and artistic sense and imagination to interpret and comprehend (Chandler, 2002, pp. 126–129, p. 253).

## 2. Feminist Thoughts

Since the 18th century, feminisms have been a social movement that empowers women against ‘patriarchy’ and ‘gender inequality.’ Although in recent years, these movements have evolved into more varied and complex forms of understanding and complex policies (exemplified by the #Metoo movement and Women’s March movement, Murphy, 2019), patriarchy and gender inequality central concerns for feminists (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, pp. 4-45; Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2004; Lorber, 1997, pp. 4-45; Murphy, 2019, pp. 63-65; Walker, 1994, pp. 401-409; “Women’s March,” 2024). The logic behind most feminist theories is built on the argument that ‘patriarchy’ is a social institution that leads to ‘gender inequality.’ Patriarchy is a set of beliefs in men’s superiority, where men have superior power over women. Consequences of patriarchal systems and practices are gender hegemony and the marginalization of female populations, where women become disadvantaged. These advantages appear in many aspects such as rights, security, abilities, opportunities, and experiences including politically, socially, physically, and economically. Moreover, patriarchal power legitimates maltreatments in all myriads of women’s lives, such as domestic violence, prostitution, pornography, unequal pay rates, and discrimination against women (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, pp. 4-45; Leigh, 1997, pp. 225-231; Women’s March, 2024).

For feminists, it is impossible to completely eradicate patriarchy and gender inequality and so to counter women’s subordination, they offer several suggestions, strategies, and solutions. One of the most common policies is ‘women’s empowerment,’ which can be done by supporting women in self-worth, abilities, and freedom of making personal choices. Meanwhile, law and social structure adjustment are also advised. Although women’s empowerment is not a complete answer to gender injustice, the policy enriches the life of women by supporting them to reach their full

potential (Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2004; Lorber, 1997, pp. 4–45; Walker, 1994, pp. 401–409; “Women’s March,” 2024).

### **3. Women’s Empowerment**

Women’s empowerment is the most shared ground among feminists which can be implemented in multiple aspects. The examples are women’s uniting and supporting each other, celebrating female individualism, supporting a sense of value, self-worth, and self-love, encouraging women, creating a chance for women to develop confidence, independence, and a feeling of strength and power, and recognizing personal potential (Kalsem & Williams, 2010, p. 131; Steinem, 2015; “Women’s March,” 2024). The understanding of women’s empowerment through feminist lens is a significant approach in this study and next are previous studies.

### **Previous Studies**

The research is built on the recognition that in a global historical context, the value of music is beyond entertainment because humans have used it to mobilize socio-politics in several themes and create cultural transformations and new cultural identities (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998, pp. 6–25; Post & Rhodes, 2019, p. 5). This view can be understood in two following aspects of 1) music and social movements, and 2) feminist movements in music.

#### **1. Music and Social Movements**

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) suggest music and songs are unique media for social movements. Examining folk-country music, Black music, music of the 1960s movements, and European music of progressive movements, the songs embody non-traditional values and are socially demanded (pp. 6–25). Special responsibilities of music and songs are: 1) to construct, deliver, and circulate content of social movements with various key messages of protest, resistance, and disagreement, 2) to inform people about the issues and supply doubts, questions, and frustrations leading to solutions or main advocacies 3) to form public knowledge and interests about the social issues and advocacy and sustain public recognition and continuity of the movements 4) to open a door to new approaches with inventive disciplines as well as intellectual and practical activities. In short, music and songs do not only reflect social problems, but they also have power in mobilizing social movements in response to ongoing social debates and issues (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998, pp. 6–25). Music and songs have been a place where people have shown their socio-political thoughts by various means of opposing, resisting, disapproving, disagreeing, questioning, and so on. Next, among all the social movements, ‘feminist movements’ is one of the significant song themes that have arisen in the past 80 years.

#### **2. Feminist Movements in Music**

The following existing studies confirm the close relationship between feminist movements and popular music. Each of them has categorized feminist values/themes/variations in accordance with their specific sources. The section will end with a previous study that brings significant questions regarding songs in the genre of whether they are empowering or exploitative to women. This knowledge is applied to develop related but distinctive findings on the selected songs and respond to the question of women’s empowerment.

First, in *Lyrical Geographies and the Topography of Social Resistance in Popular Music in the United States*, Post and Rhodes (2019) raise that those popular English songs in the USA present

unique socio-political structures and social resistance. Examining 80 American pop songs since the beginning of the American pop music industry until 2019, the analysis uses a meta-analysis method relying on software. Consequently, they discover the FOUR shared global and transnational contemporary values: 1) Antiwar (freedom VS forces), 2) Feminism (men VS women), 3) Environmental awareness (conscious VS neglected), and 4) Civil rights (privilege VS underprivilege) (Post & Rhodes, 2019, pp. 5-7). The researchers present the themes through a metaphor of the human ‘body’ where bodies in the lyrics metaphorize humans’ abilities in coping with contemporary issues. These findings are divided into THREE challenges: 1). Mobility 2). Positionality of power, and 3). Violence (pp. 12-17). Importantly, the study suggests that feminism is one of the core values in popular music that should be brought into more discussion.

Second, the *Popular Music Lyrics and Musician’s Gender over Time: A Computational Approach* (2019) by Anglada-Tort, Krause, & North (2021, pp. 426-444) supports alternative views on music and their societal factors (p. 427–429, 439–440). The researchers investigate 4,222 songs in the UK weekly top 5 sales charts from March 1960 to December 2015. By using a computational approach with DICTION software, the results show 36 lyrical themes and variations as follows: “total words, numerical terms, ambivalence, self-reference, tenacity, leveling, collectives, praise, satisfaction, inspiration, blame, hardship, aggression, accomplishment, communication, cognitive terms, passivity, spatial awareness, familiarity, temporal awareness, present concern, human interest, concreteness, past concern, centrality, rapport, cooperation, diversity, exclusion, liberation, denial, motion, insistence, embellishment, variety, and complexity” (pp. 426–431). The researchers add that the UK popular music industry at that time lacked gender diversity and was dominated by male artists (pp. 427–429, 440). Therefore, the growth of ‘female artists’ was continually on the rise since 1980, crucially owing to feminist movements and women’s social involvements in many spheres such as economics, sciences, education, and politics (particularly Margaret Thatcher as a prime minister) (pp. 439–440).

The increase of female popular artists has been supported by feminist movements and is confirmed by Emma Mayhew (2001) in *The Representation of the Feminine, Feminist and Musical Subject in Popular Music Culture*. Unlike the previous studies limited to the USA and UK, Mayhew analyzes the phenomenon on a global level and associates it with the peak of feminist music in the 1980s-1990s. Focused on ‘women’s subjectivity’ in popular music culture, the researcher utilizes the concepts of discourse and deconstruction upon THREE sources, 1) music texts 2) narratives of women in fan talk, and 3) mainstream press (pp. 12–23). Mayhew’s discussion is divided into TWO aspects: 1) the popular music industry reflects patriarchy; however, 2) the music demonstrates feminist power (pp. 28–41, 96–11, 171–180). To highlight the perpetual gender inequality in the popular music industry, Mayhew (2001) raises that male manipulation is shown in the representation of FOUR ‘femininity stereotypes’: 1) the mother 2) the child 3) the femme fatale/whore, and 4) androgyny (pp. 96–132, 188–206). On another aspect, the feminist movements influence a negotiation, and resistance to the patriarchal culture reinforces. As a result, the THREE feminist identities are: 1) riot grrls/rebel grrls 2) angry women, and 3) girl power (pp. 188–206). Despite the negative labels, Mayhew argues that the identities strengthen feminist movements—they are inclusive and empower women in general. Owing to these identities, women have secured a place in the industry and fostered hope for female empowerment and gender equality (pp. 188–206).

The ambiguity of female representations in popular music continues, and Glantz J. (2013) attempts to justify it. In *Women in Popular Music Media: Empowered or Exploited*, Glantz conducts an interview based on whether popular music empowers or exploits women (p. 8, pp. 1–31). After interviewing 70 participants who were female students at an American university, the researcher discovered two opposite opinions among the young female interviewees: 1) the hypersexual representations of women in music media betray women's equality resonating with deep-rooted patriarchal culture (pp. 19–26), and 2) women's hypersexualized representations can be empowering but only when the productions present women as androgynous figures (pp. 26–28).

These previous studies demonstrate an essential influence of feminist movements toward songs by female artists shown in the history of the USA, UK, and global music industry. Therefore, they left room regarding the value of 'women's empowerment' in resources. Besides, there is a lack of updated analysis for recent female popular songs in relevance to women's empowerment, an essence in feminist points of view. Consequently, this research attempts to fill the gap.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis will be presented alphabetically, beginning with female artists with multiple female-empowering songs, followed by those in the Disney Music category, and then female singers with only one song represented. It is important to note that full research, including an extensive examination and analysis, has already been conducted. However, due to the limitations of the paper, only a conclusive discussion of each song will be presented. Afterwards, the analysis will be brought into an overview conclusion. In the upcoming presentation, the terms 'empowerment theme' and 'empowerment sub-theme' will be used to indicate the intensity of the female empowering message. An 'empowerment theme' refers to the key messages, goals and central challenges addressed in the songs. In contrast, an 'empowerment sub-themes' refer to the subtle undertones, supporting elements, and contextual factors such as related realities, settings, incidents, or events that enhance the songs' message.

**1. Ariana Grande (2018a) (*God Is a Woman*, 400 million views)** relies on a major metaphor of women being 'God,' a male-oriented highest figure in various religious beliefs who is the creator and sustainer of human beings and nature. The metaphor challenges patriarchal culture and its conventional gender norms and social expectations that limit the roles and capabilities of women. Enriched with female empowerment, its theme celebrates 'female power' with the sub-themes of 'women's sexual power' and 'femininity,' representing women as strong role models. Not only does the song challenge cultural and societal norms about stereotypes of women but also fosters inclusivity among female audiences.

**2. Ariana Grande (2018b) (*No Tears Left to Cry*, 1.1 billion views)** symbolically raises awareness of gender discrimination, inspired by the gender-based terrorist attack Grande experienced in 2017 (Leszkiewicz, 2018; Snapes, 2018). The song conveys a sense of hope rather than an accusatory or scornful tone, strengthening the empowering theme of 'strength' and 'resilience.' Its sub-themes include 'sexism,' 'mental well-being awareness,' 'female power,' 'women's solidarity,' 'individuality,' 'positivity,' and 'courage.' To combat these challenges of sexism and women's mental well-being and promote female power, the lyrics emphasize women's solidarity with an inclusive tone. Women's

solidarity is crucial in opposing patriarchal suppression as well as in fostering womanhood and sisterhood, which uplift one another through difficult times. Consequently, overall representation fosters individuality, positivity, and fearlessness to live life.

**3. Ariana Grande (2018c) (*Thank You Next*, 809 million views)** speaks to the bravery of accepting what life offers, embracing both sorrow and joy, and having the courage to start anew with pride. Inspired by Grande's failed love relationship (Comunale, 2019), the major metaphor is the term 'next' that identifies a welcoming note to the next lover. Grande's openness and acceptance over the failures offer the empowering themes of 'strength,' 'resilience,' 'independence,' and 'self-love,' which position it as a representation of 'post-breakup recovery' (identified as a sub-theme). The music video adds more value to its female empowerment and should be a good source of optimism for anyone who is seeking it.

**4. Ariana Grande (2019) (*7 Rings*, 1.3 billion views)** contains complex, empowering connotations in both the lyrics and depiction, extending beyond the obsessions with material possessions suggested by its title. Its empowerment is deeply rooted in symbols and metaphors, with the central metaphor being '7 rings'—gifts Grande purchased for herself and her six close friends after a breakup (Comunale, 2019). The song empowers women by celebrating the themes of 'female power' and 'women's financial independence.' The sub-themes encourage 'self-love,' emphasizing positive actions in prioritizing and nurturing oneself. Also included in the sub-themes are 'sexual independence,' as the song challenges taboos surrounding women's sexual freedom, along with an encouragement to 'kindness' and 'gratitude' toward those who support them—friends and family.

**5. Demi Lovato (2011) (*Skyscraper*, 289 million views)** provides a sense of empowerment by reflecting on a journey to an achievement of recovery. 'Strength' and 'resilience' are the key empowering themes the song conveys. The lyrics combine an interesting metaphoric use of 'skyscraper' (e.g., "Like I'm made of glass," "All my windows") and its construction, describing an ability to ascend. To that extent, the sub-theme suggests 'emotional recovery'—the ability to heal, overcome obstacles, and reach beyond one's boundaries. Although the music video does not utilize a skyscraper as a key symbol, its representation still conveys essential related meanings to empowerment.

**6. Demi Lovato (2014) (*Warrior*, 34 million views)** is set within the empowering themes of 'strength' and 'resilience' and unlike other songs in this study, it addresses 'sexual violence' (identified as a primary sub-theme), drawing from Lovato's personal experience (Demi Lovato, 2021). The lyrics contain meaningful metaphors, portraying a 'warrior,' who overcomes 'mental health issues caused by past emotional traumas,' and in turn, focuses on 'personal growth' and 'self-love' (the last three sub-themes). The structural dynamic unfolds as Lovato speaks up, breaks the silence, and reaches an empowered stage where she fully embraces her own strength as a warrior. The visual representation also provides compelling meaning to its lyrics.

**7. Demi Lovato (2015) (*Confident*, 261 million views)** is a self-empowerment song supporting 'individuality' with insecurity to reach beyond their limits by promoting one's 'strength,' 'resilience,' and 'confidence,' all of which are key themes. Strategies to the embracement of a stronger self are the acceptance of 'authenticity' (a sub-theme) leading up to assertion of power and defying societal norms. A major metaphor is the question, "What's wrong with being confident?" which is repeated



throughout to support confidence in non-conforming actions and embracing uniqueness. An additional empowering message is the confidence to challenge past misjudgments and take charge of one's own life.

8. Demi Lovato (2020) (*I Love Me*, 59 million views) contains an empowering message with a centric theme of 'self-love' with its sub-themes of 'body positivity,' 'self-acceptance,' and 'authenticity.' The lyrics reflect that there are no supreme standards for how a person should behave. Further is the appreciation over non-mainstream body images, which is drawn from Lovato's struggle with eating disorders and victimization caused by beauty standards, as highlighted by "Way too good at camouflage," "I'm guilty 'bout everything that I eat," and more. The sub-themes are 'self-love' and embracing 'authenticity,' stemming from appreciating oneself in all aspects, forming a solid foundation for pushing boundaries with passion.

9. Katy Perry (2010) (*Firework*, 14 billion views) empowers listeners through a profound symbolic use of 'firework' and its related empowering terms and expressions. Once the song has enticed listeners on the shared intense emotional dilemma, its dynamic shifts into empowerment, symbolized by the 'firework'—encouraging listeners to exhibit their hidden qualities of positive energy, vibrancy, and beauty. The lyrics and visual representation empower the audience with the themes of 'strength,' 'resilience,' and a celebration of 'self-worth' and 'individuality,' which inspire us to rise above a state of pessimism and embrace our uniqueness. Additionally, its sub-theme highlights the importance of 'self-love' and 'authenticity,' which are essential in the pursuit of a happy life.

10. Katy Perry (2012) (*Part of Me*, 970 million views) is a symbolic representation under the themes of 'female power' and 'gender equality.' These essences are reflected in a symbolic lyrical expression of positive transformation, while gender equality can apparently be observed through the music video. Especially, the portrayal of Perry is in reference to the film *G.I. Jane*, a strong female who champions her power. Examples of the metaphoric expressions are 'your sticks and your stones' and 'your bombs and your blows,' which refer to life adversity. Consequently, the sub-themes can be understood as 'post-breakup recovery' and 'self-discovery,' with 'strength' and 'resilience' serving as idealized qualities in this process.

11. Katy Perry (2013) (*Roar*, 4 billion views) celebrates self-empowerment to a broad audience with supportive themes of 'strength' and 'resilience.' The lyrical and visual expressions contribute to the 'self-revolution' sub-theme, reinforcing the idea of transformation as a means of becoming a stronger version of oneself. Metaphorical terms and expressions related to wild animals such as 'tiger' and 'lion,' and their roaring are heavily used. These animals represent an innate strength that is both born with and without force. English metaphorical terms for the possessed fighting spirit are 'fighter' and 'champion,' emphasizing the powerful capacity.

12. Katy Perry (2016) (*Rise*, 215 million views) delivers a self-empowerment message under the themes of 'strength,' 'resilience,' and 'self-belief.' The sub-theme tone of 'self-recovery' evokes an inherent ability and the existing power for personal triumph. As examined, the song makes extensive use of metaphorical language surrounded by the word 'rise' to demonstrate the ability to hold on to individuality, resist conformity, and express the intense passion to overcome pressure. The



song and its visual representation are well-suited for the intended purpose, offering meaningful empowerment for a broad audience.

**13. Meghan Trainor (2014) (*All About That Bass*, 2.6 billion views)** empowers listeners, especially female audiences, through the themes of ‘self-acceptance’ and ‘confidence.’ With the sub-themes of ‘body positivity,’ ‘femininity,’ and ‘self-pride.’ The song uses the metaphors to plus-size women to convey the appreciation to women’s voluptuous figures (drawn from Trainor’s personal experience and personality (Cyprus, 2017; McKinney, 2014; Raymer, 2014). The appreciation is symbolically reinforced through the sounds of ‘bass,’ ‘junk,’ and ‘booty,’ highlighting the empowerment and confidence. The lyrics and the music video emphasize the importance of embracing one’s own beauty with pride despite criticism. The specific empowering connotation hardly exists in the American pop music industry, which makes the song stand out.

**14. Meghan Trainor (2016a) (*Me Too*, 766 million views)** metaphorically conveys the audience to themes of ‘self-love,’ ‘self-confidence,’ ‘self-worth,’ and ‘self-reliance.’ The sub-themes are ‘individuality,’ ‘inclusivity,’ and ‘diversity.’ Individuality is presented as a value to be embraced and celebrated, while the inclusive and diversified tone resonates with people of various shapes, sizes, genders, races, and ethnicities. The English unreal conditional ‘if-clause’ is found in “If I was you, I’d wanna be me too.” The phrase strongly conveys a message of self-worth—highlighting admiration for everyone’s uniqueness and suggesting that such distinctive qualities are worthy of being embraced. The English use and metaphors (e.g., ‘V.I.P’ symbolizes privileges, ‘Tom Cruise’ symbolizes adventure) are effectively constructed and fit its message.

**15. Meghan Trainor (2016b) (*No*, 657 million views)** is relevant today in the context of ‘gender equality,’ strongly embodying an empowerment message centered on ‘women’s sexual consent’—respect associated with women’s sexual rights’ (identified as key themes). The metaphor ‘No’ addresses personal boundaries by explaining the decision for sexual intimacy is a fundamental right of individuals. Through this, the song conveys sub-theme meanings to ‘patriarchal culture’ and ‘personal boundaries,’ suggesting women should not feel pressured to comply with men’s demands or engage in a relationship against their will. Although the lyrics seem to communicate with male counterparts, their meaning can expand to anyone. When all the connotations are considered, the song highly contains feminist voice and statement.

**16. Meghan Trainor (2017) (*I’m a Lady*, 78 million views)** celebrates the theme of ‘female power’ by embodying ‘authenticity’ and portraying ‘modernized women’ (also identified as key themes). Through these qualities, the song reinforces the evolving image of women, contrasting with traditional representations while highlighting sub-themes of ‘individuality,’ ‘respectfulness,’ ‘lovingness,’ ‘strength,’ and ‘resilience.’ As a result, every woman can become ‘a lady’—an iconic and symbolic figure who owns her unique identity and pursues her path with pride. Being a soundtrack of *Smurfs: The Lost Village* (Kelly, 2017), the song well matches the liberal depiction of the animation and the female character Smurfette as a courageous, intelligent, and loving individual.

**17. Taylor Swift (2014) (*Shake It Off*, 3.4 billion views)** incorporates an empowerment message in its lyrics and visual representation under the themes of ‘self-acceptance’ and ‘confidence.’ Inspired by Swift’s experience (Songfact; n.d.-a), the song demonstrates that personal growth can be built from biases, criticism, or negative comments. Compelling metaphors and language

are thoroughly present, with a particular focus on the phrase “Shake It Off,” which is used repeatedly. This metaphor conveys sub-themes of ‘positivity’ and ‘liberation,’ stemming from the acceptance of reality and confidence, which pave the way to moving forward with a pressure-free mind. Interestingly, the song employs metaphoric personality archetypes from contemporary English, such as ‘players,’ ‘haters,’ ‘heartbreakers,’ and ‘fakers,’ to describe undesirable individuals.

**18. Taylor Swift *Do* (2017) (*Look What You Made Me*, 1.4 billion views)** contains an empowerment message on the themes of ‘female power,’ ‘gender equality,’ and ‘gender discrimination.’ Through Swift’s perspective, the song reflects her past experiences of exploitation by men, including being verbally and publicly assaulted by Kanye West in 2009 and sexually harassed by DJ David Mueller in 2013 (Acuna, 2017; Wilson, 2020). The sub-themes of the ‘rejection of victimhood of patriarchal culture,’ ‘strength,’ and ‘resilience’ are presented through a metaphoric narrative of triumph over ‘the little game.’ The visual representation adds a sub-theme of a celebration of ‘wealth’—a symbolic award bestowed upon women who overcome such traumatic and unfair treatments. The overall metaphors, including prominent sarcasm and dark humor in both lyrics and visuals, offer emotional support to women and beyond.

**19. Taylor Swift (2019) (*You Need to Calm Down*, 345 million views)** presents a high level of empowering message under the themes of ‘gender equality focusing on women and the LGBTQI+ community,’ as well as the celebration of ‘individuality,’ ‘inclusivity,’ and ‘diversity’ in both lyrical and visual representations. Irony is the key approach of the lyrics, with several creative uses of symbolic and metaphoric expressions. The question “You need to calm down?” serves as a major satire, conveying the righteousness of the female victims of gender inequality to fight back and reclaim what belongs to them. Through this satirical empowerment, the sub-theme of the ‘rejection of the anti-LGBTQI+ movement’ emerges. A prominent highlight of this aspect is the question, “When you could be GLAAD?”—where GLAAD stands for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Organization—explicitly supports the community.

**20. Taylor Swift (2020) (*The Man*, 1000 million views)** is empowering on the themes of ‘gender equality’ and ‘patriarchal culture’ because of its direct protest against male superiority, which forces, manipulates, and exploits women as incompetent counterparts. Through sarcasm and metaphors, both the lyrics and visual representation convey a sub-theme narrative of ‘male superiority,’ alongside sub-themes of ‘gender double standards,’ ‘gender stereotypes,’ and ‘gender biases.’ Included in the lyrical and visual portrayal is how men abuse their privileges in personal and professional life, including within partnerships. The term ‘the man’ metaphorically refers to men who are entitled to the dominant, manipulative nature. The unreal if-clause statement “If I was a man” stands for women’s resentment towards such hegemony and encourages a fairer perspective on gender dynamics.

**21. Disney Music (2013) (*Let It Go*, 630 million views/Sing-along version, 34 billion views)** from Disney animation *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) is centered around empowerment theme of ‘female power,’ which is equally demonstrated through the themes of ‘self-acceptance,’ ‘individuality,’ and ‘freedom.’ The lyrics and visual representation convey their meanings through symbolic vocabulary and expressions of frozen atmosphere, such as ‘snow,’ ‘fractals,’ and ‘swirling storm,’ which imply the above empowering messages. The description relies on Elsa’s transformation (the protagonist)

from the feeling of unbelonging and loneliness to the full trust of her competencies. Consequently, the song supports a sense of ‘courage’ to embody ‘strength’ and navigate personal paths with ‘resilience’ and ‘authenticity,’ all of which serve as sub-themes.

**22. Disney Music (2016) (*How Far I’ll Go*, 286 million views /Sing-along version, 1.3 billion views)** from Disney animation *Moana* (Clements, Musker, Hall & Williams, 2016) presents metaphoric lyrics embedded with symbols that conveys empowering themes of ‘courage,’ ‘strength,’ ‘resilience,’ ‘self-discovery,’ and ‘self-worth.’ The sub-themes of ‘independence,’ ‘determination,’ and ‘positivity’ are highlighted in Moana’s character, especially her unwavering will to embark on a solitary journey, symbolized by ‘the edge of water’ and ‘the sea.’ All these qualities are in contrast with the unfavorable judgment of an immoral, selfish, or irresponsible person, as the storyline may lead her to be misperceived. The portrayal of personal conflicts makes the character more relatable, highlighting that self-doubt and questions about one’s worthiness are common struggles. Listeners are assured that they are not alone and encouraged to find the courage to embark on personal journeys.

**23. Disney Music (2019) (*Speechless*, 378 million views)** from Disney live-action film *Aladdin* (Ritchie, 2019) is based on the empowering theme of ‘female power’ by conveying a resistance to ‘patriarchal culture’ and empowering women to strive for ‘gender equality’ in the form of justice. Not only does the song represent and reinforce female power, but it also inspires the importance of standing up for oneself and speaking out for what one deserves. By realizing one’s power (demonstrated through Jasmine, the protagonist), subsequently, the song complies with the sub-themes of ‘determination,’ ‘courage,’ ‘independence,’ ‘strength,’ and ‘resilience.’ The use of the metaphoric words ‘speechless’ and ‘silenced’ highlights female agency as a resistance to male supremacy, which compels women to submit to its power.

**24. Disney Music (2020) (*Reflection*, 47 million views/Sing-along version 28 million views)** from Disney live-action film *Mulan* (Caro, 2020), through the perspective of Mulan (the protagonist), conveys the concept of self-examination, which further encourages one to embrace oneself and live life to one’s own standards. Beyond this, this feminist, positive, and liberating voice strongly encourages women to prioritize their goals over societal demands. Subsequently, the central theme of women’s empowerment focuses on ‘self-acceptance’ and ‘individuality’ in opposition to a ‘patriarchal culture’ (identified as a sub-theme) where women are expected to conform to restricted roles of a good daughter and wife. The metaphoric lyrics focusing on ‘reflection’ eventually communicate a sense of ‘hopefulness’ and ‘liberation’ (identified as additional sub-themes) in which guilt and regret are unneeded.

**25. Rachel Platten (2015) (*Fight Song*, 648 million views)** is a feminist-empowering song under the themes of ‘strength’ and ‘resilience.’ Its main narrative technique relies on the use of symbols that serve as a declaration of one’s inner power (e.g., ‘a small boat on the ocean’ symbolizes a vulnerable individual). Among the moments of mind-struggling, the song’s empowerment is metaphorically centralized by the term and concept of ‘Fight Song,’ a self-empowering anthem for encouragement. The sub-themes of ‘hopefulness’ and ‘determination’ support individuals who struggle with loneliness in our modern society, as conveyed through the lyrical and visual

representation. The narration of everyday situations and common mixed frustrations holds the key to its relatable quality.

**26. Miley Cyrus (2023) (*Flowers*, 792 million views)** is inspired by Cyrus's reality of past divorce (Songfact: n.d.-b). The song honors women through the central theme of 'female power,' while also conveying symbolic meanings of 'self-worth,' including 'strength' and 'resilience' in overcoming a strained relationship (also identified as themes). By celebrating women's power, the portrayal focuses on sub-themes of 'women's abilities and achievements' symbolically expressed through other sub-themes of 'independence' and 'women's financial independence,' including 'self-indulgence,' such as the ability to buy oneself 'flowers' and accomplish many things by one's own capability. The overall production (lyrics and music video) positions the song as a 'post-breakup recovery' (another sub-theme), offering emotional support to those who seek a sense of agency, self-worth, and pride.

**27. MLICK (2017) (*Quiet*, 1.5 million views)** celebrate 'female power' and promote 'gender equality' in the face of 'patriarchal culture,' with all of these being key themes in both the lyrics and visual representation. The narrative involves overcoming adversity under a belief of change, subtly incorporating a political agenda as a part of the Anti-Trump Movement by Women's March during the 2017 US election (Blair, 2019; McDermott, 2018). While the key message advocates speaking up against patriarchal oppression and injustice, the song can be seen as a 'symbolic resistance' to the male-dominated culture. Examples of metaphoric terms are 'monster' (refers to female individual who chooses to speak the inconvenient truth) and 'dry blue pill' is in reference to the action sci-fi film *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) (refers to the necessity to accept the problematic social structures, particularly impacts of male supremacy). Subsequently, its sub-themes can be understood as 'politics,' 'belief in social change,' and promoting 'women's solidarity and mutual support.'

**28. Alessia Cara (2016) (*Scars to Your Beautiful*, 141 million views)** conveys the empowering themes of 'self-acceptance' and 'body positivity,' while also celebrating a sub-theme of 'individuality' through authentic identity and self-worth. The song stands as an opposition to beauty standards that restrict female individuals to the freedom of being themselves. As offered, it narrates an alternative interpretation of 'scars,' imbuing them with a symbolic meaning as presentations of uniqueness rather than irreversible damage that must be covered or forgotten. The lyrics and music video work in harmony to communicate the key messages, liberating listeners with an alternative concept of beauty. Considering the overall components of the production, the song indeed embodies feminist essence, empowering women of all backgrounds while also reaching out to include a wider range of individuals.

**29. Sia (2021) (*Unstoppable*, 388 million views)** provides empowerment with the themes of 'strength,' 'resilience,' and 'confidence.' Lyrics rely on many compelling metaphors, convincing the audience to embrace their own power, centralized by the meaning of 'unstoppable'—something or someone that cannot be stopped, hindered, or defeated. To determine a high-power level, some of the metaphors involved the symbolism of warriors (e.g., 'armor') and machine engines (e.g., "Porsche with no brakes," "I don't need batteries to play"). Distinctively, the song conveys that concealing one's emotion is an act of 'courage,' a trait commonly associated with fighters, which is interpreted as a sub-theme. The lyrics and visuals are aligned representing the powerful message of the song.

**30. Avril Lavigne (2020) (*We Are Warriors*, 12 million views)** unlike other songs in this study, embodies the empowering theme of the ‘COVID-19 crisis,’ emphasizing ‘strength,’ ‘resilience,’ and ‘unity’—reinforcing the power of humanity in overcoming the pandemic (the latter three also interpreted as key themes). The song employs an extensive metaphor of ‘warriors,’ where a reference to warriors is applied with symbolic words such as ‘soldiers,’ ‘Vikings,’ and ‘army,’ along with war-related imagery such as ‘steel,’ ‘shield and sword,’ ‘armor,’ and ‘saddle.’ Therefore, the song fosters a sense of ‘hopefulness’ and ‘optimism’ toward a victory and new beginning (identified as sub-themes). Its representation and message offer a fresh perspective on women’s empowerment in English songs.

After demonstrating the conclusive discussion of each song (30 songs in total), next, the researcher will present **an overview discussion** in TWO parts: 1) Responding to the research objectives and 2) In relevance to the previous studies.

For PART ONE, in response to the FIRST research objective of examining English use, the selected songs are combined with both explicit and implicit English meanings, which require interpretation according to the contexts, backgrounds, and settings of the songs. These elements are likely to contribute to creating a sense of relatability and prepare the audience for the content within context. Audiences who know the artists’ backgrounds and their stories get an advantage in comprehension. Nevertheless, a lack of previous knowledge does not necessarily affect the empowering impact the audience could possibly derive.

The language choice of contemporary English is a main strategy in the communication. Common English grammatical components in today’s world can be found, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and language patterns (if-clause, active and passive voice.) Contemporary English idiomatic expressions and sayings are often utilized to communicate meanings such as ‘sticks and your stones’ (*Part of Me*, 2012), ‘wrecking balls’ (*Fight Song*, 2015), ‘dry blue pill’ (*Quiet*, 2017), and ‘Jedi’ (*I Love Me*, 2020), ‘Porsche with no brakes’ (*Unstoppable*, 2021). Relatively, most language use is modern English in the West, widespread in the USA in accordance with the location of the artists. Additionally, the contemporary quality is likely to enhance the sense reliability for the audience, offering emotional connection and impact while further conveying the empowering message.

Regarding narrative style, some of the songs employ a transformation technique of ‘from problem to solution’ or ‘victim to victory’ where the audience can comprehend the speaker’s transition and feel increasingly empowered. Examples of this format can be obviously witnessed in *Skyscraper* (2011), *Part of Me* (2012), *Let It Go* (2013), *Roar* (2013), *Rise* (2016), *Flowers* (2023), and more. Interestingly, some songs rely on sarcasm and dark humor attacking patriarchy and social injustice. A sarcastic tone is heavily presented by Taylor Swift in *Look What You Made Me Do* (2017), *You Need to Calm Down* (2019), and *The Man* (2020).

Toward the SECOND objective, the researcher puts forward that all the English songs are rhetorically driven by and resonate with the concept of feminism and its ‘women’s empowerment.’ It has been clearer that English popular music has been a place for women to express their voice and thoughts where they can be heard and represent their agency, experiences, and perspectives. Having women’s power explored and promoted is in line with feminist thoughts. As explored in the literature review, feminism promotes women’s power in all spheres due to the common belief that

women are vulnerable groups to men's power and gender inequality. The fact that women today can seize a pivotal role in speaking up against men and tackling other social issues underlines female power and that women are powerful in today's social and cultural contexts.

In addition, the 'themes' and 'sub-themes' demonstrate the intensity of the women's empowerment, highlighting significant variations, with some of the empowering terms appearing in both columns, in accordance with their established meanings (see appendix for details). Through this deeper and more complex concept of 'women's empowerment,' the researcher argues that the selected sources represent "female music artists' empowering expressions that empower listeners on humanity and individuality." Beyond patriarchy and gender inequality, the songs speak to the broad human experience, encourage diverse audience (including non-female population) and likely to impact positive changes in a wide scale.

To respond to the THIRD objective of understanding the social context and perspectives within the lyrics, with a focus on contemporary social views and issues that affect and involve women, the concept of 'female power' emerges as a central theme that drives various related topics in contemporary society. Thus, the concept of 'female power' is not just a singular concept; it can be understood through the explicit and implicit expression. Firstly, although all the songs are embedded with this essence, only 10 songs explicitly express the female power by containing extreme intensity, which has been labeled as 'female power'—to identify their intensively explicit and solid celebration of 'female power. The female power message is centralized by the idea of women's strength, capabilities which highlights the opposition to male supremacy and contributes to positive change and the reduction of gender inequality. Moreover, the 'female power' songs offer an extra assertive and advocative tone, representing women with dignity and respect as equal members of society. The 10 songs are *Part of Me* (2012), *Flowers* (2013), *Let It Go* (2013), *I'm a Lady* (2017), *Look What You Made Me Do* (2017), *Quiet* (2017), *God is a Woman* (2018), *No Tears Left to Cry* (2018), *7 Rings* (2019), and *Speechless* (2019).

The secondary support to the meaning of 'female power' used in the empowerment are themes and sub-themes in the realm of the advocacy against patriarchy and gender inequality identified by the words: 'gender equality' (6 places), 'gender double standards' (1 place), 'gender biases' (1 place), 'gender discrimination' (1 place), 'gender stereotypes' (1 place), 'patriarchal culture' (5 places), and 'rejection of victimhood of patriarchal culture' (1 place). Moreover, 'sexism' (1 place) and 'sexual violence' (1 place) also appear as sub-themes to signify that they reflect the past traumas related to gender injustice. In addition, 'women's sexual consent,' which is associated with the respect of sexual rights in *No* (2016), aligns with contemporary feminist politics such as in #MeToo movement. Included in this view is the theme 'gender equality focusing on women and the LGBTQI+ community' (1 place) where the recognition of gender equality extends beyond women, but also to the LGBTQI+ community. Interestingly, two songs offer a solution to the patriarchy through 'women's solidarity and mutual support,' as seen in *No Tears Left to Cry* (2018) and *Quiet* (2017). Subsequently, these words relevant to patriarchal oppression and gender hierarchy, reflect the underlining cause of 'patriarchy'—a deeply rooted culture with a long-standing tradition of male-superiority, compounded by a series of suppressions imposed upon women. From this evidence, the researcher argues that their shared opposition to patriarchal norms not only demonstrates the female power and its



empowerment but can also be interpreted as acts of ‘feminist resistance’—a form of protest expression advancing gender equality.

Related to the view of female power are the themes and sub-themes of ‘body positivity’ shown in 3 songs: *All About that Bass* (2014), *Scars to Your Beautiful* (2016), and *I Love Me* (2020). Produced by different artists in different years, these songs protest the body-shaming culture influenced by male-dominated culture. Their basic ground is to promote self-acceptance and self-pride for a female audience and celebrate individualism with a hint of alternative femininity.

Another relevant context of female power is female sexual freedom identified as ‘women’s sexual power’ (sub-theme of *God is a Woman*, 2018) and ‘women’s sexual independence’ (sub-theme of *7 Rings*, 2019). These songs are considered groundbreaking for challenging social conventions around gender norms of women under patriarchal rules. The songs reflect this essence as a fundamental component of gender equality, where women have choices over their bodies, including sexual expressions.

Adding to the female power—a feminist voice against patriarchal power and gender injustice are the concepts of ‘independence’ (4 places) and ‘women’s financial independence’ (2 places). The songs support women’s abilities to fulfill their lives and achieve financial stability without relying on men, in contrast to the conventional norms. The self-reliant principles also empower women in other areas of life, both personally and professionally, assisting them to achieve a greater sense of happiness in the long term.

Among other key words that reinforce female power, ‘strength’ and ‘resilience’—both are themes and sub-themes—are the most frequently occurring, appearing together a total of 18 places. From this, the researcher argues that these two words have a close connection to empowerment that cannot be presented alone or separated. While the duo character determines one’s composure in the face of adversity, ‘resilience’ adds volume to the strength of an individual. The latter suggests an ability to become stronger as an aftermath, signifying personal growth and contributing to a sense of control over future challenges.

Other than the mentioned qualities, these following female power themes and sub-themes are found to serve a sense of empowerment, such as authenticity, courage, determination, diversity, freedom, gratitude, hopefulness, inclusivity, individuality, kindness, liberation, lovingness, optimism, personal growth, positivity, respectfulness, self-acceptance, self-belief, self-confidence, self-discovery, self-indulgence, self-love, self-pride, self-reliance, self-revolution, self-worth, and unity. The definitions given are specifically made to represent the up-to-date female empowering message. As observed, they often appear in the popular and frequently utilized discourse on women’s empowerment in other media and public arenas and are relevant to today’s social and cultural context.

Apart from the above, the following also reflect female power, such as ‘post-breakup recovery,’ giving emotional support to women over a failed relationship and encouraging them to move forward (3 places) and ‘modernized women’ (1 place), offering a newfound idealized image of women centralized by her authenticity. Moreover, female power and its empowerment represented through social issues is shown, such as ‘mental health issues caused by past emotional traumas’ (2 places), the ‘COVID-19 crisis’ (1 place), American ‘politics’ (1 place), and ‘rejection of the anti-LGBTQI+ movement’ (1 place).



Comparing all these songs in relation to their socio-complexity, the chosen songs of Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, and Disney contain the most intensive meanings, regarding patriarchy and gender inequality. The background stories, lyrics, and music videos demonstrate women's socio-complex issues and highlight women's notable power in overcoming them.

In short, we can see the English use in songs supports the centric feminist thought of women's empowerment by advocating against patriarchy and gender inequality and supporting women's lives in many aspects. A close examination of these messages leads us to an understanding that, over the chronological timeline of 2010-2023 (13 years span), these songs essentially communicate various social issues women have faced and experienced, all centered around the emphasis of female power. Additionally, the intensity of empowering messages and the variety of subjects addressed have increased. This leads to an argument that the strong, consistent advocacy and awareness regarding women discovered represent the feminist movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and exist in the form of 'feminist resistance,' a growing non-violent phenomenon. The collective actions of female artists and music producers become advanced by their solidarity and shared ground to strengthen women's power. Consequently, the musical expressions work as they reflect and reinforce women's agenda, oppose injustice, and navigate social interests into ongoing problems women are facing.

PART 2 will demonstrate the connection between the finding and previous studies in the literature review. Firstly, the specific examples confirm the cultural understanding regarding the value of music for being more than an entertainment source but promoting and fostering social and cultural movements. Music has the potential to mobilize society by drawing the attention of the audience to the issues, informing them, sustaining public recognition, and creating new approaches to the subjects (Eyerma & Jamison, 1998, pp. 6–25; Post & Rhodes, 2019, p. 5). This connotation has been witnessed in the chosen songs being a part of feminist movement for promoting women's power, known as 'feminist resistance.' Although their potential regarding social mobility cannot be precisely measured, we can comprehend their progressive progress by sophisticated themes and sub-themes motivated by the core value of gender equality.

Secondly, the study has expanded an understanding about feminism and femininity reflected through songs that were presented with limited categories and timelines in the previous studies (Anglada-Tort, Krause, & North., 2021; Mayhew 2001; Post & Rhodes 2019). This research continues to analyze songs after 2019 as studied. As a result, more various themes and sub-themes relevant to women's representations are found, including in the music videos. Significantly, unlike Mayhew, the researcher avoids putting artists or songs into categories with descriptions of female personalities. The themes and sub-themes rather have been presented with language relevant to the contemporary interests of feminist discussion, compelled with women's empowerment and power, showcasing women's abilities and potential. By doing this, the research is responding to the most current feminist discourse, and at the same time, it has filled in the academic gap.

Lastly, in response to Glantz (2013), who leaves the meaning of women's portrayals in popular music open to interpretation—whether they are exploitative or empowering—while pointing to a potentially degrading representation of women as sex objects to men. From the analysis of these updated sources, the researcher perceives that the songs are not exploitative to women but rather become a celebration of women's sexual power. These songs, on the other hand, are portrayed as a positive dynamic of female power being worthy of and respect women's agency, to the extent that

they liberate women from patriarchal oppressive norms. However, regarding all the discussion, the researcher is aware that the research relies on different sources, different timelines, approaches, and points of view from the earlier studies that have been cited. This distinction can cause the tone of the conversation to vary.

## Conclusion

The study has advanced new knowledge about current English language use in the feminist movement in the form of popular music. Taking a feminist point of view as a key approach, the study has unlocked that the songs are not just reflections for anecdotes of personal stories, traumas, or serve an entertaining purpose. Beyond that is a rhetorical understanding that the music is imbued with ‘women’s empowerment’ and can be taken as a reference to contemporary social and cultural topics concerning women in modern transnational society. In essence, considering that the women’s empowering songs are all performed and/or produced by female artists, they could be viewed as representing feminist perspectives and female power. Essentially, the concept of ‘women’s empowerment’ extends beyond speaking on behalf of women; or supporting women. It is an attempt to support humanity and the society they live in. More to this phenomenon is the increase in number, variety, and intensifying female-empowering messages that represent ‘feminist resistance’ against patriarchal culture and gender inequality, and other issues women care about and are involved in.

In hope, the study should, little of less, remark on the significance of female empowerment and the women’s movement in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, an important time when women rise to be equally respected members of society in the face of all oppressions. The researcher hopes that the research will benefit those who are English learners, educators, and anyone who is interested because feminism is relevant to everyone, regardless of gender. The evidence demonstrates that the essence of the feminist movement deserves to be heard and further studied. For future research, it is recommended to explore a broader variety of songs within the themes, considering the current timeline. A more comprehensive examination, comparing a wider sample of songs through a more complex and comparative approach, would be valuable. The subject of the study could also be further explored in related fields and in an interdisciplinary manner, such as media studies, cultural studies, gender studies, politics, and history studies, in recognition of their values and to raise awareness of the issues represented.

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