

COLLECTIVE ANXIETY IN GEN Z AS DEPICTED IN DOECHII'S SONG 'ANXIETY': A CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRAK

Lagu *Anxiety* karya Doechii memperoleh perhatian luas di media sosial dan tangga lagu internasional, menandakan meningkatnya visibilitas isu kesehatan mental, khususnya kecemasan, dalam budaya populer kontemporer. Fenomena ini sangat mencolok di kalangan Generasi Z, generasi yang tumbuh dalam lingkungan digital di mana ekspresi emosional dan tekanan psikologis menjadi semakin relevan. Sebagai rapper perempuan berkulit hitam dari Generasi Z, Doechii merepresentasikan persilangan antara dinamika identitas kultural dan generasional dalam isu ini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana lagu *Anxiety* membentuk narasi tentang kecemasan sebagai pengalaman generasional melalui pendekatan kajian budaya. Teori representasi Stuart Hall digunakan untuk menelaah konstruksi makna kecemasan dalam lirik lagu, sedangkan pendekatan semiotik Roland Barthes mengungkap makna simbolik dan sistem tanda yang membentuk pesan emosional dalam teks. Kerangka konseptual John Storey turut digunakan untuk melihat budaya populer sebagai arena negosiasi ideologis dan pembentukan identitas generasi muda. Dengan metode kualitatif deskriptif, hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa *Anxiety* bukan sekadar narasi pribadi, melainkan juga cerminan represi emosi, identitas performatif, tekanan sosial-politik, dan pengawasan digital atas diri. Lagu ini mengkritik sekaligus merepresentasikan proses komodifikasi emosi dalam industri musik, dan memosisikan musik sebagai ruang penting untuk merundingkan identitas dan kerja emosional dalam kehidupan anak muda kontemporer.

Kata kunci

Budaya Populer, Gen Z, Kecemasan Kolektif, Representasi, Semiotik

ABSTRACT

Anxiety by Doechii has gained widespread attention across social media platforms and international music charts, signaling a growing visibility of mental health issues particularly anxiety as a central theme in contemporary popular culture. This phenomenon is especially prominent among Generation Z, a cohort raised in a digital and social media ecosystem where emotional expression and psychological pressure are highly relevant. Doechii, a Black female rapper from Generation Z, embodies the intersection of cultural and generational dynamics within this discourse. This study aims to analyze how *Anxiety* constructs a narrative of anxiety as a generational experience through a cultural studies approach. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is employed to examine how collective anxiety is linguistically constructed in the lyrics, while Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is used to decode symbolic meanings and sign systems embedded in the text. Additionally, John Storey's conceptual framework—which views popular culture as a space of ideological negotiation and identity formation is applied to contextualize the analysis. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the findings reveal that *Anxiety* is not merely a personal account, but a representation of emotional repression,

performative identity, socio-political pressure, and digital self-surveillance. The song simultaneously critiques and participates in the commodification of emotion, positioning music as a vital space for negotiating identity and emotional labor in youth culture.

Keywords

Collective Anxiety, Gen Z, Popular Culture, Representation, Semiotics

Introduction

Mental health refers to a state of psychological well-being that enables individuals to cope with everyday challenges, recognize their abilities, pursue personal development, and actively contribute to their communities. It is a vital aspect of overall health, influencing decision-making, relationship building, and one's ability to engage with and shape the social environment. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), mental health is a fundamental human right and a crucial factor for individual development, societal well-being, and economic progress. Various factors contribute to mental health disorders, particularly depression, including low self-esteem, traumatic experiences, substance abuse, comorbid mental illnesses, and wider social and environmental influences (WHO, 2022).

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward how these mental health challenges impact Generation Z a cohort born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, currently aged between 18 and 26 years. Compared to previous generations, Gen Z experiences nearly twice the level of psychological distress (Deloitte, 2023). A study by the Alvara Research Center (2024) reports that anxiety levels among Gen Z range from 45% to 72%, with approximately 25% diagnosed with a mental disorder. Their main concerns include the rising cost of living (53%), unemployment (22%), climate change (21%), mental health (19%), and personal safety (17%) (Deloitte, 2023). These findings reveal a generation increasingly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Given these conditions, it is crucial to investigate how Gen Z's psychological struggles are processed and expressed within the cultural narratives they produce and consume.

Despite growing concerns surrounding mental health issues among Generation Z, there remains a limited scholarly understanding of how their collective anxiety and emotional struggles are represented and negotiated within contemporary popular culture particularly through music, which serves as a critical medium of youth expression. As digital natives, Gen Z is characterized by high technological fluency, inclusivity, and strong social awareness (Jayatissa, 2023). They actively use digital platforms not only for communication but also for identity construction and emotional articulation (Daffa, Rahmawati, S Nugroho, 2024). This generation openly engages with issues such as anxiety and self-discovery, often favoring expressive, visual, and interactive media formats that resonate with their lived experiences (Bejan, 2023). Social media, in particular, plays a central role in shaping their emotional landscapes and self-perceptions (Zilka, 2023). While such digital immersion fosters global connectedness with 84% of Gen Z reporting strong identification as global citizens it also contributes to heightened anxiety, increased social comparison, and risks of digital dependency (Bejan, 2023; Zilka, 2023). These intertwined realities call for a deeper examination of how Gen Z negotiates psychological distress through expressive outlets like popular music. Although music's role in emotional expression is well-documented, its specific function in shaping and reflecting Gen Z's collective anxiety through lyrical content remains underexplored.

The research gap in this study is particularly evident in discussions about how song lyrics reflect and construct the collective psychological struggles, such as anxiety and identity crises, that characterize Gen Z's lived experiences. In the broader realm of popular culture, music has become a significant expressive platform that reflects a wide range of social issues and collective emotional experiences. Beyond its function as entertainment, music operates as a symbolic medium that communicates social dynamics, cultural values, and generational identities (Kong, 1995). Song lyrics, in particular, represent a vital object of analysis, as they encapsulate embedded ideologies, emotions, and lived realities of specific communities (Way, 2017). Popular music plays a strategic role not only in reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies but also in articulating collective anxieties and fostering forms of social resistance. While music has historically been employed by institutions to promote national identity and ideological conformity (Kong, 1995), it equally serves as a counter-hegemonic force against oppressive norms and policies (Way, 2017). Within the context of social movements, music becomes a powerful tool for shaping collective identities, redistributing agency, and voicing shared critiques (Roscigno, Danaher, S Summers-Effler, 2002). Various genres including rock, folk, and rap have historically functioned as arenas for ideological struggle, particularly in the age of digital media (Way, 2017). For instance, Austro-Pop has been used in Austria to critique homogenizing cultural discourses and dominant social representations (Karner, 2002). Among the many musical genres that have served as sites of ideological resistance, hip hop has gained particular prominence in recent decades for its deep resonance with youth culture and its dynamic adaptation to digital platforms.

Within this cultural landscape, hip hop has emerged as one of the most prominent and influential mediums for youth expression and identity construction. Studies indicate that hip hop communities provide marginalized groups—particularly young people—with spaces to articulate social critiques, lived experiences, and explorations of identity (Lubis, 2019; Hansen Djulianto S Sukendro, 2022). The genre's resonance among Millennials and Generation Z has intensified with the rise of cultural globalization and digital connectivity, offering authentic narratives and expressive forms that align with youth sensibilities (Rahim, 2024). Moreover, hip hop subcultures and aesthetics have shaped youth lifestyles, influencing both self-perception and worldview (Hansen Djulianto S Sukendro, 2022). In the digital age, social media platforms amplify the circulation of hip hop content and shape how youth engage with cultural and social values (Rahim, 2024). Importantly, the intersection of hip hop, digital technology, and youth culture has brought renewed scholarly attention to how cultural texts mediate issues such as identity, activism, and mental health (Daffa, Rahmawati, S Nugroho, 2024). Given the genre's capacity to articulate marginalized voices and its resonance with digital-native youth, hip hop is increasingly relevant for understanding how contemporary generations—especially Generation Z—process emotional turbulence and mental health concerns. Yet, the psychological dimensions of this cultural expression remain underexplored, particularly in relation to the collective anxieties of digital-era youth.

Yet, despite the growing scholarship on hip hop and youth culture, little research has examined how its lyrics represent Gen Z's collective psychological struggles. In particular, there is a notable lack of research that explores the ways in which Gen Z's collective anxiety is expressed, constructed, and mediated through popular hip hop

music. This study analyzes Doechi's 2025 song *Anxiety* as a cultural text articulating Gen Z's emotional landscape. By focusing on the semiotic dimensions of its lyrics, this research contributes to broader discussions on youth mental health, digital popular culture, and symbolic representation in contemporary music.

In response to this research gap, the present study aims to examine the representation of collective anxiety experienced by Generation Z through the lyrics of Doechi's song *Anxiety* (2025). Released in 2025 and gaining widespread popularity across various social media platforms (Alvara Research Center, 2025), the song serves as a critical object for understanding the emotional, ideological, and social dynamics of young people within contemporary popular culture (Rahim, 2024). The research focuses on analyzing the textual and symbolic components of the song as a medium reflecting the shared emotional experiences of Generation Z and the construction of their shared emotional burden (Bejan, 2023; Daffa, Rahmawati, S Nugroho, 2024). Thus, this study aims to provide a critical perspective on how the psychological tension common among Gen Z is shaped and articulated through popular music (Way, 2017). In doing so, it highlights the broader academic and practical importance of understanding music as a site of emotional and cultural expression.

By focusing on how popular music conveys the emotional realities of Generation Z, this research contributes to the broader academic conversation on youth emotional well-being and the role of popular culture in shaping generational consciousness. By examining music as a form of cultural expression, the study underscores how lyrical narratives can articulate shared emotional tensions and provide insight into the identity formation of digital-native youth. Furthermore, the findings offer practical relevance for educators, mental health professionals, and cultural researchers interested in understanding the psychosocial challenges facing Generation Z. To investigate how collective anxiety is articulated through lyrical narratives, particularly in hip hop music, a methodological framework capable of interpreting symbolic meanings is essential.

To explore how music reflects emotional and cultural expressions, this study employs a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is well-suited for interpreting symbolic meanings and uncovering underlying themes in cultural artifacts such as song lyrics (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2017). Specifically, content analysis is adopted as the main method because it offers a systematic way to examine recurring patterns, themes, and representations within textual data (Fauziana, 2024). This method allows for a nuanced understanding of both the overt messages and the deeper social and emotional implications conveyed through the lyrics (Pekkala, 2024; Primadany, Hasanah, S Suryani, 2021). Content analysis has been widely used in music studies, demonstrating its effectiveness in revealing how songs serve as a medium for expressing collective experiences and engaging with broader societal concerns. Given the study's focus on collective anxiety as represented in song lyrics, content analysis provides the methodological tools necessary to examine both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the text.

Understanding the emotional struggles of Generation Z through the lens of popular music also requires a strong conceptual foundation. This study adopts an interpretive framework grounded in cultural studies, drawing particularly from Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, both situated within the broader tradition of cultural studies. These frameworks enable an analysis of how

meaning is constructed, negotiated, and circulated within popular culture texts, particularly those engaging with youth identity and collective emotion.

Barthes's semiotic theory provides a means of decoding the multilayered signs present in cultural products. His distinction between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated cultural or emotional meaning) allows for a critical reading of how lyrics, imagery, and performance communicate deeper symbolic messages. This perspective is especially relevant to popular music, where meanings often operate simultaneously on literal and metaphorical levels, reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies (Griffin, 2019; Nandana, 2023).

In parallel, Stuart Hall's theory of representation offers insight into how discourse produces meaning within specific cultural and historical contexts. Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation is not merely about reflecting reality but about shaping how reality is understood. Within this view, identity and emotion—such as anxiety—are not expressed in isolation but are constructed through discursive systems that mediate power, ideology, and culture.

Further supporting this analysis is John Storey's (2021) conceptualization of popular culture as a contested space where ideological struggles unfold. According to Storey, popular music like hip hop is not only entertainment but also a cultural battleground where meanings are negotiated and identities are affirmed or challenged. This is particularly salient for Gen Z, whose emotional experiences are increasingly expressed and politicized through digital and musical forms.

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive lens to examine how Anxiety articulates collective emotional experiences, reflects cultural identity, and engages with the broader ideological structures that shape Gen Z's engagement with popular media.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis to examine how collective anxiety is expressed in Doechii's *Anxiety*, using an interpretive approach informed by the conceptual framework. The song, released in 2025 and widely circulated across platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Alvara Research Center, 2025), serves as a contemporary cultural artifact reflecting Generation Z's emotional landscape.

The lyrics were obtained from Genius.com and cross-verified with the official YouTube release to ensure textual accuracy. Analysis proceeded through several structured stages: (1) Text Familiarization: The lyrics were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative, emotional tone, and stylistic devices; (2) Identification of Analytical Units: Metaphors, emotionally charged phrases, repeated motifs, and other salient linguistic features were selected as units of analysis, with a focus on those suggesting generational anxiety, vulnerability, and resistance; (3) Coding and Theme Development: Initial codes were generated based on observed patterns. These codes were grouped into broader thematic categories aligned with the study's focus on identity, emotional struggle, and cultural tension; (4) Interpretation of Meaning: Signs and symbols were interpreted in terms of both literal (denotative) and implied (connotative) meanings, followed by positioning these meanings within broader cultural discourses; (5) Theoretical Integration: The emergent themes were examined through iterative reflection, guided by the theoretical perspectives outlined in the conceptual

framework. This step ensured that insights were aligned with broader interpretive logics of signification, representation, and ideological critique.

Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge the researcher’s interpretive position, and triangulation was applied by cross-referencing interpretations across theoretical concepts. The final analysis reveals how Anxiety functions as a site of emotional and cultural meaning-making, articulating collective experiences specific to Gen Z within a popular media context.

Result and Discussion

Doechii’s *Anxiety* captures Gen Z’s emotional and social struggles through symbolic, layered lyrics. The tables below highlight key lyrics, themes, and figurative devices, showing how collective anxiety is shaped through narrative and language.

Table 1. Figurative Findings, Representation, and Semiotic Meaning

Lyrics	Literary	Representation	Denotative	Connotative
“Anxiety, keep on trying me. I feel it quietly, Tryin’ to silence me, yeah”	Personification	Internal Anxiety and Emotional Suppression	Anxiety is shown as a silent, stealthy threat.	Anxiety acts as a repressive force shaped by a culture that silences emotions.
“Anxiety, Keep it Quiet, keep it tired,”	Imperative, Thematic Repetition		A call to silence and suppress anxiety.	Represents pressure to hide mental health struggles, especially for women and marginalized groups. “Quiet” shows emotional silencing; “tired” reflects exhaustion from holding it in.
“Can’t shake it off of me, shake, shake it off of me. It’s my anxiety...”	Repetition, Embodied Metaphor		Expresses the individual’s struggle to rid themselves of something.	Anxiety is shown as a heavy, hard-to-remove burden. Repeating “shake” reflects panic or trauma, highlighting the body’s role in emotional struggle.
“It’s my anxiety, can’t let it conquer me...”	Possession, Resistance Metaphor		The speaker owns their anxiety but refuses to let it win.	Shows an inner battle where the speaker faces anxiety as an enemy. “My anxiety” shows both ownership and weight, while “conquer” frames it as a fight for control and strength.
“Unhappy, no	Coded	Toxic	Shows sadness	Exposes toxic

homo”	Language, Irony	Masculinity and Masked Vulnerability	while distancing from being seen as homosexual.	masculinity that shames men for showing emotion. “No homo” ironically shows the pressure to reject softness and follow rigid gender norms.
“Somebody's watchin' me, It's my anxiety, yeah (Brrah)”	Surveillance Metaphor	Digital Surveillance and Hypervisibility	The speaker feels watched and links that feeling to anxiety.	The lyric shows anxiety as constant, unseen pressure, like being watched—reflecting Gen Z's social stress.
“Okay, next thing, my life is a wet dream. I call it sex scene, the back is a nice tease”	Hyperbole, Sexual Metaphor		The speaker portrays their life as sensual and visually appealing.	Using irony and exaggeration, the line suggests objectification and critiques how private life is exposed to public view.
“Quiet on the set, please Rolling ‘Anxiety’ In three, two, one”	Meta-narrative, Performance Language		A film scene is set up, with “Anxiety” as its focus.	The lyric shows anxiety as a performance, highlighting how mental health is turned into a spectacle in social media culture.
“I tried to escape, my life is a X-rate. I'm sorry, a sex tape, you only get one take”	Cinematic Metaphor, Fatalism	Hypersexualization and Loss of Privacy	The individual likens their life to a sex tape, suggesting it's exposed and irreversible.	The lyric uses film-like, fatalistic imagery to show life as public, exposed, and final—reflecting anxiety from constant scrutiny and pressure to perform.
“I bounce back, no pogo”	Metaphor, Wordplay	Emotional Resilience and Resistance	The individual says they bounce back on their own, without relying on external help.	The metaphor shows real resilience—“no pogo” means the strength to recover is genuine, not forced.
“It's my anxiety, can't let it conquer me...”	Conflict Metaphor		The individual sees anxiety as a threat they need to fight.	Anxiety is seen as an enemy, symbolizing Gen Z's inner fight with mental health struggles.

“Can’t shake it off of me...”	Repetition, Physical Struggle		The individual struggles to remove or escape something.	A metaphor for o impossible.
“And it’s like, I get this tightness in my chest. Like an elephant is standing on me. And I just let it take over”	Somatic Metaphor	Physical and Sensory Manifestations of Anxiety	The speaker uses an elephant on the chest as a metaphor for intense pressure from anxiety.	A body-based metaphor for panic: the elephant represents the heavy, paralyzing feeling of intense anxiety.
“New brands, no logos”	Minimalist Metaphor, Symbolism	Anti-Consumerism and Cultural Identity	The speaker uses new items without visible branding.	A simple metaphor rejecting brands to show individuality and resist consumer culture.
“No limits, no borders / What’s in that new world order?”	Political Symbolism, Rhetorical Question	Global Anxiety and Identity Politics	The individual rejects limits and challenges global control systems.	A political metaphor that questions global power, showing Gen Z’s criticism of authoritarianism, nationalism, and neoliberalism.
“Marco, polo. Negro run from popo...”	Cultural Code, Rhyme, Symbolism	Racial Trauma and Fear of Policing	A wordplay on the game “Marco Polo” linked to the reality of Black people running from police.	The lyric uses wordplay and symbols to highlight racial profiling and oppression, mixing childhood play with the harsh reality of Black trauma under police surveillance.

Source : Processed by author (2025)

Table 1 shows how figurative language in *Anxiety* conveys both emotional struggle and social critique. Using personification, metaphor, repetition, and symbolism, the lyrics depict anxiety as a personal burden shaped by culture. Lines like “Anxiety, keep on trying me” and “Can’t shake it off of me” express emotional pain and repression. Other lyrics, like “Unhappy, no homo” and “Somebody’s watching me,” critique gender norms, media pressure, and hypervisibility. References to surveillance and spectacle reflect Gen

Z's experience of being exposed and commodified. Still, lines like "I bounce back, no pogo" show resilience and agency. Overall, the song blends personal emotion with cultural commentary.

Doechii's "Anxiety" reveals four central themes that encapsulate the emotional, cultural, and political dimensions of Gen Z's collective anxiety described below:

Emotional Suppression and Internal Conflict

This examines internalized distress, cultural silencing, and the social pressure to repress emotion.

"Anxiety, keep on trying me. I feel it quietly, Tryin' to silence me, yeah"

The lyric personifies anxiety as a persistent external force that silently undermines emotional stability. It shows anxiety not just as a personal feeling but as a social experience shaped by cultural pressures to stay composed and silent.

Using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the lyric reflects how emotions like anxiety are socially constructed, revealing how societal norms suppress emotional expression. Roland Barthes' semiotics deepens this reading:

- Denotatively, it shows someone quietly struggling with anxiety.
- Connotatively, it highlights the pressure to hide vulnerability.
- Mythologically, it critiques the belief that silence equals strength, a view common in performance-driven societies.

The lyric challenges this myth, presenting anxiety as a shared generational burden—especially for Gen Z, who face high expectations for emotional control. Doechii's lyric becomes both a personal testimony and a cultural critique, resisting norms that discourage openness about mental health and calling for more honest discussions in popular culture.

"Anxiety, Keep it Quiet, keep it tired,"

Gen Z faces a paradox in expressing emotion online: social media promotes openness about mental health, yet also enforces emotional control through performativity and surveillance (Bejan, 2023; Liu et al., 2018). This creates "digital anxiety," where authenticity is shaped by what is socially and algorithmically acceptable.

Doechii's lyric, "Anxiety, keep it quiet, keep it tired," captures this tension. The command-like tone reflects cultural pressure to suppress emotions and maintain composure. According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the lyric frames anxiety not just as a personal issue, but a social threat to norms of stability and control (Atkinson, 2024).

Barthes' semiotics offers deeper insight:

- Denotatively, the lyric tells anxiety to be silent and weak.
- Connotatively, it reflects the emotional fatigue from constant self-restraint.
- Mythologically, it critiques the cultural belief that strength means hiding pain.

This line becomes a subtle act of resistance, exposing how modern culture silences mental health struggles while demanding curated emotional presence. Doechii's song thus critiques the emotional contradictions of digital life and reclaims space for emotional honesty.

"Can't shake it off of me, shake, shake it off of me. It's my anxiety..."

The lyric uses repetition and metaphor to show anxiety as something deeply attached to the body—persistent, physical, and hard to escape. Instead of a passing emotion, anxiety is portrayed as a lived, embodied experience that shapes identity (Gouveia, 2022).

Stuart Hall's theory of representation shows how this lyric frames anxiety not just as personal, but socially constructed and culturally meaningful. The repeated phrase conveys both desperation and the impossibility of removing anxiety, echoing the physical symptoms and emotional pressure to appear in control (Daffa et al., 2024).

Barthes' semiotics unpacks the meaning further:

- Denotatively, it describes the act of trying to shake anxiety off.
- Connotatively, it reflects the exhausting, visible effects of distress.
- Mythologically, it critiques the false idea that mental health issues can be solved through willpower alone.

By declaring "It's my anxiety," the lyric resists stigma and reclaims emotional struggle as part of Gen Z identity. It turns vulnerability into strength, showing how popular music can challenge cultural norms and offer solidarity through shared emotional truth.

"It's my anxiety, can't let it conquer me..."

The lyric presents anxiety as both a personal part of the self and a force to resist. The phrase shows possession ("my anxiety") while also expressing struggle ("can't let it conquer me"), framing anxiety as both internal and adversarial.

According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this lyric acknowledges anxiety as part of one's identity, while also resisting its control. Barthes' semiotic analysis deepens this:

- Denotatively, the speaker has anxiety but refuses defeat.
- Connotatively, anxiety is a battle—using war language like "conquer" to show inner conflict.
- Mythologically, it reflects cultural ideals of strength, where overcoming mental health struggles is seen as a personal victory.

While it mirrors the myth of the self-reliant individual, the lyric also offers a more empowering view—showing the speaker as active and capable. In this way, it becomes a symbolic act of resistance against stigma, reclaiming agency in mental health through popular culture.

"Unhappy, no homo"

The lyric uses irony and coded language to reveal how masculinity is shaped by emotional repression and fear of being seen as unmanly. According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, it shows how male vulnerability is quickly dismissed to maintain a heteronormative image.

Barthes' semiotics unpacks this further:

- Denotatively, it states sadness, then immediately distances that emotion from homosexuality.
- Connotatively, it reflects the pressure for men to hide feelings to avoid being labeled as weak or feminine.
- Mythologically, it critiques the cultural belief that real masculinity means emotional silence and heterosexual toughness.

The lyric highlights the conflict between honest emotion and rigid gender norms. Its ironic tone critiques how popular culture both reinforces and mocks toxic masculinity, showing the emotional cost of performing manhood under restrictive social rules.

Mediated Visibility and the Performance of Self

This explores hidden distress and pressure to stay silent, as shown in Mediated Visibility and the Performance of Self.

“Somebody’s watchin’ me, It’s my anxiety, yeah (Brrah)”

The lyric “Somebody’s watchin’ me, it’s my anxiety” uses a surveillance metaphor to show how anxiety feels like constant monitoring. According to Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, this suggests anxiety is not just personal but shaped by social pressures—especially from digital culture and social media (Marwick, 2012; Bejan, 2023).

Drawing on Foucault’s idea of the panopticon, the lyric shows how people internalize the gaze of others and self-regulate, leading to emotional strain. Barthes’ semiotic analysis adds depth:

- Denotatively, it describes the feeling of being watched.
- Connotatively, it reflects Gen Z’s anxiety from living under constant digital scrutiny.
- Mythologically, it critiques the myth that digital visibility is empowering, exposing the emotional cost of always performing and self-curating.

The phrase “Keep it quiet” highlights the stigma around expressing mental health struggles online. Overall, the lyric critiques how digital culture fuels anxiety, turning popular music into a space of resistance and emotional truth.

“Okay, next thing, my life is a wet dream. I call it sex scene, the back is a nice tease”

The lyric uses hyperbole and sexual metaphor—calling life a “wet dream” and “sex scene”—to show how private identity is turned into spectacle. According to Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, it reflects how selfhood is performed and consumed in visual culture, especially through sexualized imagery.

Barthes’ semiotic lens reveals deeper layers:

- Denotatively, it compares life to provocative visuals.
- Connotatively, it critiques how women’s bodies and identities are objectified for visual appeal.
- Mythologically, it exposes the cultural belief that a person’s value lies in being desirable.

The lyric questions whether this display is empowering or a sign of submission to objectification. Overall, it critiques how digital culture eroticizes identity and reduces personal life to a public performance driven by visibility and allure.

“Quiet on the set, please Rolling ‘Anxiety’ In three, two, one”

The lyric uses film-related language—like “in three, two, one”—to portray anxiety as a staged performance. Through Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, it shows how emotional experiences like anxiety are not only felt but also shaped and performed in digital culture.

Barthes’ semiotic analysis adds layers:

- Denotatively, it mimics a film scene setup.
- Connotatively, it suggests that anxiety is performed for an audience, especially on social media.
- Mythologically, it critiques the cultural pressure to present mental health struggles as polished, shareable content.

The lyric challenges the idea that emotional authenticity must be curated for public view, revealing how anxiety becomes part of one’s digital persona. It questions the loss of privacy in favor of performative vulnerability, critiquing how mental health is commodified in the online world.

“I tried to escape, my life is a X-rate. I’m sorry, a sex tape, you only get one take”

The lyric uses a cinematic and fatalistic metaphor—likening life to a one-take “sex tape”—to portray life as overexposed and uneditable. Stuart Hall’s theory highlights how it reflects the loss of privacy in a culture that turns personal experiences into public spectacle.

Barthes’ semiotics explains:

- Denotatively, the lyric refers to a life exposed like an explicit recording.
- Connotatively, it conveys loss of control, shame, and emotional trauma linked to hypervisibility.
- Mythologically, it critiques the cultural belief that exposure equals empowerment, showing instead how it leads to exploitation and identity loss—especially for women and marginalized people.

The lyric ultimately critiques how digital culture turns life into performance, erasing boundaries between the private and the public, and ignoring the emotional cost of constant exposure.

Embodied Anxiety and Affective Resistance

This explores how anxiety is felt in the body and resisted emotionally, as seen in Embodied Anxiety and Affective Resistance.

“I bounce back, no pogo”

The lyric “I bounce back, no pogo” uses metaphor and wordplay to express real, inner resilience. According to Stuart Hall, it shows recovery as self-driven—not reliant on outside help or performative displays.

Barthes’ semiotics reveals:

- Denotatively, it means bouncing back without a pogo stick.
- Connotatively, it rejects quick fixes and artificial coping methods.
- Mythologically, it challenges the cultural myth that healing must be fast, visible, and polished.

Instead, the lyric promotes slow, authentic recovery grounded in personal strength. It critiques the societal pressure to “look healed” and highlights the value of internal, invisible growth.

“It’s my anxiety, can’t let it conquer me...”

The lyric presents anxiety as an inner enemy, framing it as a personal battle. According to Stuart Hall, it reflects how younger generations experience mental pressure but still show resistance.

Using Barthes’ semiotics:

- Denotatively, the speaker says “my anxiety” and vows not to let it conquer them.
- Connotatively, anxiety is portrayed as a fight for control and self-agency.
- Mythologically, it echoes the cultural idea of overcoming mental illness as a personal triumph—often tied to neoliberal beliefs in self-reliance.

While it highlights Gen Z’s resilience, the lyric also prompts reflection on how society frames mental health as a heroic struggle, ignoring deeper systemic causes like social pressure and lack of support.

“Can’t shake it off of me...”

The lyric uses repetition and bodily metaphor to show how anxiety is a deep, ongoing struggle that affects both mind and body. According to Stuart Hall, it represents anxiety as part of personal identity—something that can’t be separated or easily escaped.

Barthes’ semiotic reading breaks it down:

- Denotatively, the speaker can’t “shake it off,” suggesting anxiety clings to them.

- Connotatively, it reflects the exhausting effort to overcome emotional pain.
- Mythologically, it challenges the cultural idea that anxiety can be easily fixed through willpower or positivity.

The lyric critiques simplistic views of mental health, showing anxiety as a persistent, embodied experience that defies quick solutions and demands deeper understanding and support.

“And it’s like, I get this tightness in my chest. Like an elephant is standing on me. And I just let it take over”

The lyric uses a somatic metaphor—like “tightness in my chest” and “an elephant is standing on me”—to show how anxiety is felt physically, not just mentally. Through Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, it highlights the body as a visible site of emotional suffering.

Barthes’ semiotic reading reveals:

- Denotatively, it describes chest pain and loss of control.
- Connotatively, the elephant symbolizes overwhelming pressure and helplessness.
- Mythologically, it challenges the idea that mental health is purely psychological, exposing how physical symptoms are often ignored.

The lyric critiques cultural expectations to hide emotional pain and reminds us that anxiety is a real, embodied experience—even when invisible to others.

Societal Critique and Cultural Identity.

“New brands, no logos”

The lyric uses minimalist metaphor to reject consumerism and brand-based identity, promoting authenticity instead. According to Stuart Hall, it shows how identity can be shaped through resisting capitalist symbols.

Barthes’ semiotic reading adds depth:

- Denotatively, it states the speaker wears something with no logo.
- Connotatively, it signals rejection of brand-driven identity and social status.
- Mythologically, it challenges the belief that personal worth is tied to logos and labels.

The phrase becomes a counter-myth, suggesting real identity isn’t defined by brands but by personal meaning. It reflects Gen Z’s move toward minimalist, anti-consumerist values as a protest against branding culture.

“No limits, no borders / What’s in that new world order?”

The lyric uses political symbolism and questioning to challenge global power and borders. Within Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, it reflects Gen Z’s resistance to ideological and political control through popular culture.

Using Barthes’ semiotics:

- Denotatively, it rejects borders and questions the “new world order.”
- Connotatively, it expresses a desire for freedom from control and inequality.
- Mythologically, it critiques the idea that global progress requires centralized power and uniformity.

The lyric turns “new world order” into a symbol of elite dominance and lost autonomy, while voicing Gen Z’s call for global justice and solidarity. It shows how hip hop becomes a space for deep sociopolitical critique.

“Marco, polo. Negro run from popo...”

The lyric uses wordplay and symbolism to express the trauma of racialized fear and structural violence. Referencing the children’s game “Marco Polo” alongside “run from

popo,” it contrasts innocence with the reality of police surveillance faced by Black communities.

Stuart Hall’s theory of representation shows how cultural meaning is shaped by power. The lyric transforms a playful phrase into a symbol of fear, reflecting racial injustice. Barthes’ semiotic model deepens this reading:

- Denotatively, it references a game and fleeing from police.
- Connotatively, it highlights the shift from play to survival.
- Mythologically, it critiques the idea that law enforcement is neutral, exposing how it creates fear in marginalized communities.

By turning childhood imagery into a symbol of racial trauma, the lyric challenges dominant narratives and uses popular culture as a form of resistance.

Conclusion

This study analyzes Doechi’s song *Anxiety* using Stuart Hall’s representation theory and Roland Barthes’ semiotics to show how it reflects Gen Z’s shared emotional struggles. The song presents anxiety not just as a personal issue but as a cultural experience shaped by digital surveillance, social pressures, and racial identity.

Four key themes emerge: 1) emotional suppression and internal conflict anxiety is shown as a silenced, trapped feeling, reflecting both personal pain and societal pressure to hide emotions; 2) mediated visibility and self-performance lyrics highlight how gen z feels constantly watched and must carefully manage their online identity; 3) embodied anxiety and resistance anxiety is experienced physically but also resisted, with the body becoming a site of emotional strength; 4) societal critique and cultural identity the song critiques gender, race, and consumer culture, showing how anxiety is tied to broader social inequalities.

The lyrics work on multiple levels literal, symbolic, and cultural turning personal feelings into a social critique. *Anxiety* shows how music can express and challenge cultural ideas, helping Gen Z connect through shared experiences of vulnerability and resistance. The study suggests future research should explore how youth culture, mental health, and digital media interact, using interdisciplinary methods. It also encourages educators to use song analysis to support emotional understanding and cultural awareness among young people. This approach can help young listeners better understand and question the cultural forces shaping their emotional lives.

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