

From Lyric to Meaning: Self-Healing in Tulus' "Diri" Through Barthes' Semiotics

Nayla Maulidita^{1*}, Rocky Prasetyo Jati²

^{1,2}Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Communication and Creative Design,
Universitas Budi Luhur, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: ¹⁾ naylamaulidita31@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study analyzed the lyrics of "Diri" by Tulus using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to explore how the song constructs and conveys the concept of self-healing. Released in 2022 during a period of emotional transition for Indonesian youth following the COVID-19 pandemic, the song presented themes of self-acceptance, emotional honesty, and psychological resilience. The research applied Barthes' three-tier model of meaning—denotation, connotation, and myth to uncover how symbolic messages in the lyrics represent both individual emotional experiences and broader cultural narratives. The lyrical content was examined through qualitative content analysis, with each selected verse interpreted for its literal, emotional, and ideological significance. The findings revealed that "Diri" serves as more than personal reflection; it also functions as a cultural artifact that reinforces emerging values of emotional independence and mental well-being in urban Indonesian society. Through verses that encourage forgiveness, self-talk, and emotional boundaries, the song communicates ideals that resonate with contemporary youth. However, it also reflects the tension between personal responsibility and collective support in the process of healing. This study demonstrated the relevance of semiotic analysis in interpreting psychological discourse within popular music. It contributed to expanding the application of Barthes' theory beyond Western contexts and offered insights into how music can shape and reflect emotional culture. The results may serve as a foundation for future research in cultural studies, media psychology, and the role of art in mental health awareness.

Keywords: Emotional Resilience, Indonesian Pop Culture, Lyrical Meaning, Self-Healing, Semiotic Analysis.

1. Introduction

Music has long served as a symbolic mode of communication that conveys literal messages and profound emotional and cultural meanings (Cespedes-Guevara & Eerola, 2018; Inskip et al., 2008; Schütz, 2015). In contemporary society, particularly among urban youth, music increasingly functions as a reflective medium that expresses personal and collective psychological experiences (Ansdell, 2016; Groarke & Hogan, 2016; Jati, 2024; Leman, 2016; Stige et al., 2017). One notable example is the song "Diri" by Indonesian singer Tulus, released in 2022 as part of his album *Manusia* (Mario & Setuningsih, 2022). The song explores self-acceptance, emotional healing, and personal reconciliation—issues that resonate strongly with growing public awareness of mental health in Indonesia and beyond (Siagian et al., 2023).

The lyrics of "Diri" invite listeners to reflect on their past, to forgive themselves, and to embrace emotional wholeness (Juwita et al., 2022; Nurfauliyah & Alipya, 2022). This thematic structure positions the song as a narrative of self-healing, a process through which individuals attain psychological balance by reconciling with their inner selves. In a cultural context where mental health issues are often stigmatised and underdiscussed (Ahad et al., 2023; Kreps, 2017), the articulation of such themes in mainstream music marks a significant



discursive shift. Despite its cultural relevance, the symbolic construction and ideological implications of self-healing in Indonesian song lyrics remain underexplored in academic literature, particularly through rigorous semiotic analysis.

To address this gap, the present study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which categorises meaning into three interconnected levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (associative meaning), and myth (culturally constructed ideologies) (Gravells, 2017; Szekely, 2006; Tarasti, 2011, 2012). According to Barthes, signs are not neutral entities (Barthes et al., 1967; Chambers, 2007); social conventions shape them and reflect dominant cultural narratives. From this perspective, "Diri" becomes a site of meaning production that communicates individual emotion and encodes broader cultural values surrounding emotional resilience, self-worth, and authenticity. Barthes' framework is particularly suitable for interpreting popular music texts, as it allows for structural and ideological readings of lyrical language.

While prior studies have analysed song lyrics using semiotic approaches—such as Ginting et al. (2024) on moral messages and Cintia (2022) on national identity—there has been limited attention to how psychological and emotional themes like self-healing are symbolically constructed. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to the expanding discourse on music as a cultural and psychological text by examining how meaning operates within a contemporary Indonesian song that addresses mental well-being.

The objectives of this study are threefold: to analyse the lyrics of "Diri" using Barthes' semiotic theory, to uncover the multilayered meanings literal, associative, and ideological which embedded in the text, and to contextualise these findings within broader discourses of mental health and emotional expression in Indonesian culture. This article contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies, media and communication, and mental health awareness by offering a nuanced interpretation of song lyrics as ideological texts. It also extends the application of Barthesian semiotics beyond its traditional Western context, demonstrating its relevance in analysing cultural productions in Southeast Asia.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on selected lyrics from the song "Diri". These are examined across the three levels of Barthes' signification model. As the study is based on textual material rather than empirical data from human subjects, validation is conducted through interpretive consistency and theoretical triangulation. This approach allows for a detailed, contextualised understanding of how language, music, and ideology intersect in creating meaning. Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate how popular music can serve as a vehicle for self-reflection, emotional healing, and cultural negotiation.

2. Literature Review

Popular music has increasingly become a subject of scholarly attention due to its rich potential for representing cultural values, emotional experiences, and ideological messages (Carbone & Mijs, 2022; Weinstock, 2021). Scholars in media studies, cultural studies, and semiotics have recognized song lyrics as more than aesthetic or artistic expressions—they are symbolic texts embedded within complex social discourses (Moore, 2016; Poliakova, 2023; Way & McKerrell, 2017). Within this interdisciplinary framework, the present study situates itself at the intersection of semiotics and psychology, particularly in examining how Indonesian popular music constructs and communicates the notion of self-healing.

Several studies have addressed the symbolic function of music in constructing emotional and cultural meanings. For example, Frith (2017) argues that music helps individuals

articulate their identities and emotional realities about social expectations. Similarly, Tagg (2016) emphasizes that popular music encodes social values in ways often implicit yet widely understood by its audience. These insights underscore the importance of analyzing musical texts for their entertainment value and the ideological and psychological meanings they produce. In the Indonesian context, studies on music and meaning have begun to gain ground, although often with limited theoretical depth in semiotics.

Previous research that employs semiotic analysis on Indonesian music has largely focused on moral messages, social critique, or symbolic interpretations of culture and nature. For instance, Batubara et al. (2022) analyzed the musical composition *Alam Menyapa*, which combines Western and traditional musical elements with natural environmental sounds such as birds, wind, and river water. Inspired by therapeutic music practices, their study explored how these natural soundscapes—when merged with digital instrumentation—symbolically represent balance, simplicity, and ecological harmony. Using Roland Barthes’ theory of meaning, the study identified symbolic messages conveyed through natural sounds and their integration into digital music as part of a broader aesthetic and educational value. Although their work effectively applies Barthes’ semiotic lens, the focus remains on the symbolic representation of nature and music aesthetics, rather than emotional or psychological themes. Similarly, Cintia (2022) explored national identity through the lyrics of the band Efek Rumah Kaca using a semiotic framework. Her research highlights how Barthes’ model can be used to interpret cultural and political ideologies encoded in music. Both studies confirm the relevance of semiotic analysis in Indonesian popular music; however, they predominantly center on external or collective themes—such as environmental symbolism or national identity, rather than introspective narratives related to mental health and self-healing.

In contrast, research on the symbolic representation of psychological processes, such as self-healing, emotional recovery, or mental well-being, within Indonesian music is still sparse. A notable exception is the work by Juwita et al. (2022), which analyses Tulus’ “*Diri*” using Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics. While the study explores motivational messages in the lyrics, it lacks the ideological depth offered by Barthes’ concept of myth, which would allow for a broader cultural reading of the song’s meaning. This gap highlights the need for a more layered semiotic approach that does not stop at literal or emotional interpretations but also explores how cultural ideologies are naturalized through music.

Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory provides an advantageous framework for this kind of analysis. In his model, signs operate on two orders of signification: the first is denotation, the basic or literal meaning of a sign, and the second is connotation, which includes the emotional and cultural associations. Beyond these two levels, Barthes introduces the concept of myth, a third level where meanings become ideologically charged and normalized within culture. According to Barthes (2007), myths are not lies but “depoliticized speech” that present cultural values as natural, common-sense truths (Bazzul, 2015). This concept is crucial for understanding how self-healing, which involves psychological resilience, forgiveness, and emotional independence, might be constructed as a cultural ideal in contemporary Indonesian society.

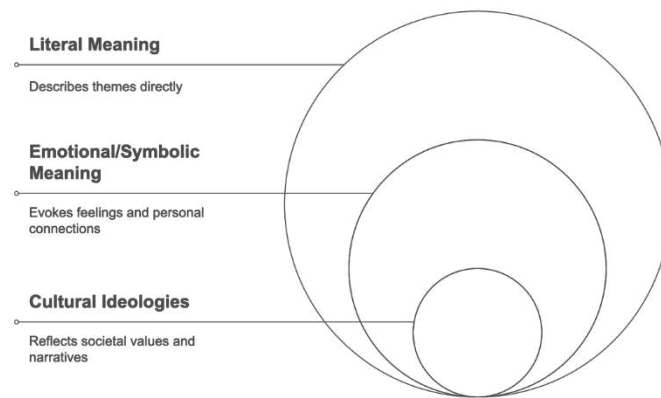


Figure 1. Semiotic Analysis of “Diri”
Source: Processed by Author

The concept of self-healing itself has been widely discussed in psychological literature. Vignesh et al. (2019) define self-healing as a self-initiated process of recovery from emotional trauma or psychological imbalance, often grounded in introspection, forgiveness, and the reconfiguration of personal meaning. In cultural studies, however, self-healing is increasingly seen as part of a broader discourse on emotional wellness that intersects with media, lifestyle, and popular narratives. In this light, Tulus’ “Diri” can be understood as an artistic expression and a reflection of, and contribution to, these evolving discourses.

These studies indicate that while semiotic analysis has been applied to Indonesian music, the specific theme of self-healing remains under-researched. Moreover, few works have applied Barthes’ complete tripartite framework including myth to explore how such themes are expressed and ideologically constructed. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing “Diri” through Barthes’ semiotic lens, focusing on how the song encodes a narrative of self-healing that resonates with contemporary cultural values and psychological ideals.

By doing so, the article contributes to the body of literature on Indonesian popular music and expands the use of semiotics to capture the interplay between language, emotion, and ideology. It offers a critical perspective on how cultural products like music shape societal understandings of mental health and emotional resilience which is topics that are becoming increasingly relevant in academic and everyday discourses.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach focusing on textual analysis (Chandler, 2022; Way & McKerrell, 2017), specifically content analysis of song lyrics. Qualitative research is suitable for exploring the depth and complexity of meaning in cultural texts, particularly when the goal is to uncover symbolic, emotional, and ideological messages. In this context, the study seeks to interpret how the lyrics of “Diri” by Tulus convey self-healing through multiple layers of meaning using Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory.

This study’s analysis unit is the lyrical content of the song “Diri”. The researcher examines the lyrics at three levels of signification, as proposed by Barthes: denotation (the literal meaning of the sign), connotation (the emotional or associative meaning), and myth (the ideological meaning constructed by culture) (Barthes, 2007). These three dimensions offer a structured yet interpretive lens for analysing how language in music constructs emotional experiences and embeds social values. The primary data collection method is documentation, focusing on the official, published song lyrics. Since the object of study is

textual and not behavioural, direct observation or participant engagement is not applicable. Instead, this research relies on careful textual examination and interpretive reasoning to identify linguistic signs and their meanings. Content analysis is used as the operational method to systematically identify, code, and interpret patterns in the lyrics that correspond to the conceptual framework of Barthes' semiotics.

This study did not involve human participants; thus, its validity relied on theoretical consistency and interpretive rigor. The analysis was based on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, using established concepts and supported by related studies. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing textual meaning, theoretical constructs, and cultural context. The researcher identified key signifiers in the song's lyrics, interpreted their literal meanings (denotation), explored emotional and cultural associations (connotation), and examined how these meanings form broader cultural ideologies (myth), especially regarding self-healing and emotional identity in contemporary Indonesian society.

This methodological approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the lyrical text, acknowledging that meaning is not fixed but shaped by context, interpretation, and cultural assumptions. By employing Barthes' tripartite model of meaning, this study moves beyond surface-level interpretation to reveal how popular music functions as a symbolic medium through which individuals and cultures express, negotiate, and naturalise psychological and ideological narratives. The scope of this research is limited to the lyrical content of a single song; as such, findings are not intended to be generalised but to provide an in-depth case analysis. The depth of textual interpretation and the theoretical framework acknowledge and balance this limitation. Future studies may consider extending the analysis to multiple songs or incorporating audience reception data to understand better meaning construction in popular music.

4. Result and Discussion

This article analyzes the lyrics of "Diri" by Tulus as a cultural text that represents the process of emotional recovery (self-healing) through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. In this framework, lyrics are read as a system of signs operating on three levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (emotional or symbolic meaning), and myth (ideological meaning constructed by culture). According to Barthes (2007), myth is a second-order system of signification that transforms historical values into seemingly natural truths. In this context, a song becomes not merely an expression of individual emotion but a medium for the transmission of cultural and psychological norms.

"Diri" serves as a pertinent object of analysis because it explicitly articulates self-healing, a theme increasingly prominent in contemporary Indonesian society. Through semiotic interpretation, the lyrics are viewed as symbolic constructs that communicate concepts such as self-acceptance, forgiveness, and emotional autonomy—values that resonate strongly within urban cultural discourse.

4.1. Verse Analysis

The following section presents a detailed semiotic analysis of selected verses from "Diri" by Tulus, applying Roland Barthes' three-level model of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Each verse is examined not only for its literal content, but also for the emotional nuances and deeper cultural ideologies it conveys. This layered interpretation allows a richer understanding of how the lyrics function as personal expression and cultural narrative. By breaking down the song verse by verse, the analysis highlights how meanings related to self-healing, emotional resilience, and self-acceptance are encoded and

communicated to listeners, particularly within the context of post-pandemic Indonesian youth culture.

Verse 1

Hari ini / kau berdamai dengan dirimu
(Today / you are at peace with yourself)

- a. Denotation: Literally describes someone who has resolved inner conflict and chosen to make peace with themselves.
- b. Connotation: Suggests an emotional healing process involving full acceptance of one's imperfections and strengths.
- c. Myth: Reinforces the ideological notion that inner peace is a normative life goal. This mirrors how urban society has internalized self-acceptance as a new standard of mental health.

This verse subtly illustrates how psychological values such as acceptance have become culturally embedded, though in reality, such values are socially constructed and reinforced through emotional discourse. The normalization of inner peace as an ideal reflects a broader cultural narrative that positions self-acceptance not just as personal growth, but as a societal expectation for emotional maturity.

Verse 2

Kau memaafkan / semua salahmu, maafkan dirimu
You forgive / all your mistakes, forgive yourself

- a. Denotation: A clear call to forgive oneself for past wrongdoings.
- b. Connotation: Reflects a process of self-reconciliation, acknowledging and letting go of guilt and regret.
- c. Myth: Establishes the idea that self-forgiveness is essential for emotional liberation—a core belief in modern self-help narratives.

This portrayal demonstrates how popular psychological discourse promotes forgiveness as a moral norm, regardless of individual contexts or emotional capacity. It presents self-forgiveness not only as a personal virtue, but as a culturally endorsed obligation. In doing so, the lyric contributes to a broader ideology that frames healing as a self-driven ethical responsibility.

Verse 3

Maafkan semua yang lalu / maafkan hatimu
Forgive all the past / forgive your heart

- a. Denotation: An invitation to release emotional burdens from the past.
- b. Connotation: Symbolizes inner reconciliation and the process of healing emotional wounds.
- c. Myth: Conveys the belief that happiness and inner peace are achievable through individual emotional labor, reflecting the rising influence of individualism in urban societies.

This representation positions emotional healing as an entirely personal responsibility, often overlooking the need for community or structural support systems. It reinforces the notion that true peace can only be achieved through solitary emotional work, thereby

marginalizing collective forms of healing and the importance of relational, social, and institutional support in psychological recovery.

Verse 4

Bilang pada dirimu / semua akan baik-baik saja
Tell yourself / everything will be okay

- a. Denotation: A verbal reassurance addressed to oneself.
- b. Connotation: Represents self-affirmation as a coping mechanism to manage emotional distress.
- c. Myth: Suggests that positive thinking is the main solution to overcoming adversity—an increasingly dominant paradigm in contemporary urban mental health discourse.

The lyric illustrates how internal affirmation is adopted as a substitute for more comprehensive support systems, reinforcing self-regulation as the preferred emotional model. It reflects a cultural trend that equates emotional strength with the ability to self-soothe, potentially minimizing the role of interpersonal connection, therapy, or communal care in overcoming psychological distress.

Verse 5

Bersuara / bilang padanya, jangan paksakan apa pun
Speak up / tell him, don't force anything

- a. Denotation: Urges honest expression without coercion.
- b. Connotation: Emphasizes the value of open communication and emotional boundaries.
- c. Myth: Embeds the ideology that voicing one's feelings is a sign of emotional maturity and psychological strength.

This lyric highlights a cultural shift away from emotional suppression toward the valorization of expressive authenticity and personal boundary-setting. It promotes the idea that openly articulating feelings is both healthy and necessary, framing emotional expression as a marker of self-awareness and strength in navigating interpersonal relationships and internal emotional balance.

Verse 6

Bersuara / ingat aku arti cukup
Speak / remember me, the meaning of enough

- a. Denotation: A reminder to embrace the value of “enoughness” in life.
- b. Connotation: Encourages contentment and emotional sufficiency without constant striving.
- c. Myth: Challenges consumerist ideals and perfectionist tendencies by presenting enoughness as a source of true inner peace.

This verse reflects a broader cultural reevaluation of conventional notions of success and happiness, presenting balance and self-acceptance as preferable to unceasing ambition. It elevates the concept of “enough” as both an emotional and existential achievement, offering a critical counter-narrative to productivity-centric ideals by framing contentment, self-worth, and emotional stability as markers of authentic well-being.

4.2. Cultural and Psychological Reflection

This semiotic reading of "Diri" reveals that the lyrics operate on multiple levels: they tell personal stories of emotional struggle and healing, and function as cultural tools that help shape how society understands and talks about mental health. Through the symbolic language embedded in each verse, the song expresses values such as self-acceptance, emotional honesty, and the ability to forgive oneself, ideas increasingly important in maintaining psychological balance.

The song not only speaks to the individual's internal experience but also reflects a larger social trend. Today, more people especially in urban areas are becoming aware of emotional well-being and beginning to engage with self-healing. This term, once unfamiliar to many, now frequently appears in conversations, social media, and even popular music. Self-healing is often described as understanding one's emotions, facing inner wounds, and fully accepting oneself. What "Diri" captures so clearly is that this process can begin not through professional therapy alone, but through small, personal acts talking to oneself, forgiving past mistakes, or simply acknowledging that one is doing their best.

However, while the song beautifully captures the introspective aspect of healing, it also suggests—intentionally or not, that emotional recovery should be done alone. The repeated messages about speaking to oneself and reassuring oneself, while empowering, can risk sending the message that healing is a solitary responsibility. This may reflect the reality for many people who lack access to mental health support, but it also highlights a limitation in the narrative. Emotional healing is deeply personal, yes but it also thrives in the presence of empathy, community, and supportive relationships. In a broader sense, "Diri" reflects how Indonesian youth navigate their emotional lives in a fast-paced and often overwhelming environment. The pressure to be strong, independent, and emotionally composed is high, and songs like "Diri" offer comfort in the form of lyrical affirmation. The song provides language for feelings that are often difficult to express, acting as both a mirror and a guide for those seeking peace within themselves. However, it is also important to recognise that healing can be shared. In addition to inner strength, reaching out, talking to others, and allowing oneself to be supported are equally vital parts of what it means to heal.

The release of "Diri" in 2022 coincided with a crucial moment in the lives of many young Indonesians. That year marked a transition period, as the country emerged from the isolating and emotionally taxing experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic. For many in the younger generation—students, early-career workers, or those redefining their identity, this was a time of emotional recalibration. The Pandemic disrupted routines and opportunities and triggered more profound questions about self-worth, purpose, and mental resilience. In this context, a song like "Diri", with its gentle affirmation and focus on inner healing, resonated profoundly with listeners trying to reconnect with themselves and rebuild their emotional balance.

As an Indonesian pop song embedded within a widely acclaimed album (Manusia), "Diri" offered more than just melody, it provided language and emotional vocabulary for a generation learning to process grief, anxiety, and uncertainty. Its calm tone, minimalistic arrangement, and introspective lyrics made it accessible and emotionally impactful. The themes of self-forgiveness, emotional honesty, and quiet resilience felt deeply personal and timely. In post-pandemic Indonesia, where open conversations about mental health were beginning to gain traction, "Diri" acted as both a cultural expression and a subtle encouragement: that it is okay not to be okay, and that healing can start with acknowledging one's pain. This made the song especially meaningful to the youth, serving as a soundtrack to their collective emotional recovery.

5. Conclusion

The lyrics of "Diri" by Tulus narrate an intimate emotional journey of self-reflection and healing. Through gentle affirmations and introspective expressions, the song articulates the inner process of accepting oneself, both strengths and flaws, and having the courage to forgive past mistakes. Each verse maps out different stages of emotional recovery, from recognition and acceptance to forgiveness and reassurance. This sequence highlights the importance of self-awareness as a foundation for emotional growth and maturity. The song also reflects broader cultural values surrounding self-love and self-healing, which have become increasingly relevant in post-pandemic discourse, especially among Indonesian youth. Symbolic language to promote inner dialogue such as "tell yourself everything will be okay" and "remember me, the meaning of enough", positions the song as a personal reflection and a public articulation of emotional resilience. These lyrics resonate with a generation seeking peace and meaning amid uncertainty, stress, and the evolving expectations of modern life.

In addition, the act of expressing one's emotions and setting personal boundaries both of which are central to the song which reinforces values of emotional independence, self-acceptance, and psychological well-being. The lyricism provides listeners with emotional vocabulary often absent in daily conversation, making "Diri" a meaningful contribution to the growing awareness of mental health in popular culture. Theoretically, this article demonstrates the utility of Roland Barthes' semiotic model as an effective framework for decoding layered meanings within cultural texts, particularly song lyrics. It affirms that songs can function not only as entertainment, but also as vehicles for transmitting ideological narratives around identity, emotion, and psychological ideals. This approach offers valuable insight for future studies in popular culture, media psychology, and discourse analysis.

The findings of this analysis may be useful for mental health educators, cultural researchers, and music practitioners interested in understanding how art and music contribute to emotional literacy. They open the possibility of using music, especially Indonesian pop, as a medium for psychological reflection, emotional education, and therapeutic engagement. Moreover, similar semiotic analyses can be applied to other contemporary songs that carry psychological themes, enabling a broader understanding of how media reflects and shapes the emotional realities of its audience. In conclusion, "Diri" serves not only as an expression of individual healing, but also as an artifact that mirrors the collective emotional landscape of a generation in transition. It is a gentle yet powerful message that continues to echo in the lives of listeners who find comfort and strength in it.

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