



# Social Critique and Cultural Commentary in Kendrick Lamar's 'Not Like Us'

Imas Dwi Madina<sup>1\*</sup>, Muhammad Hafiz Kurniawan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> English Literature Department, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, 55191, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> [imasdwi510@gmail.com](mailto:imasdwi510@gmail.com) \*; <sup>2</sup> [muhammad.kurniawan@enlitera.uad.ac.id](mailto:muhammad.kurniawan@enlitera.uad.ac.id)

Correspondent email author: [imasdwi510@gmail.com](mailto:imasdwi510@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Social Critique  
Cultural Commentary  
Kendrick Lamar  
Not Like Us

This study investigates the social critique and cultural commentary presented in Kendrick Lamar's song "Not Like Us." As one of the most influential voices in modern hip hop, Lamar often addresses pressing social issues such as racial inequality, systemic oppression, and the socio-economic struggles of marginalized communities. Through a detailed analysis of the lyrics, this research delves into the themes of identity, resistance, and alienation that Lamar articulates in his work. Employing a discourse analysis framework, the study explores how Lamar utilizes narrative techniques, metaphorical language, and cultural references to convey his critique of societal structures and cultural norms. By placing "Not Like Us" within the larger context of African American cultural and political discourse, the research highlights the song's contribution to contemporary discussions on race, power, and social justice. The findings reveal that "Not Like Us" functions as both an artistic expression and a critical commentary, challenging dominant societal narratives and advocating for systemic change.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



## 1. Introduction

In today's global society, issues of racial inequality, systemic oppression, and social injustice continue to be of paramount concern to researchers across disciplines (Ames et al., 2013). These issues are often reflected in the cultural expressions of marginalized communities, particularly through the medium of music (Bennett Andy, 1999). Hip-hop, as a genre, has evolved as a powerful platform for artists to critique societal structures, voice the struggles of oppressed groups, and advocate for change (Rita et al., 2019). Kendrick Lamar, a highly influential figure in contemporary hip-hop, uses his music to address these pressing social issues. Researchers have explored various approaches to understanding the relationship between music and social critique, focusing on discourse analysis, cultural studies, and critical race theory. Several studies have highlighted the role of hip-hop in challenging dominant narratives (Greg 2009), advocating for marginalized communities (DeSantis 2008), and fostering social movements (Gordon 2015). While there has been extensive research on Lamar's previous works, his song "Not Like Us" presents a unique opportunity for further investigation due to its complex commentary on identity, alienation, and systemic injustice.

From an academic perspective, the study of music as a form of social critique is a growing field that intersects with disciplines such as sociology (David G 2016), cultural studies, and African American studies (Talmadge et al; 2007). Analyzing Lamar's "Not Like Us" contributes to this body of knowledge by offering a specific case study of how music can challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative viewpoints. Socially, this analysis is justified by the pressing need to address the issues highlighted in Lamar's music. By engaging with these topics through the lens of popular culture,

this study seeks to make these complex issues more accessible and to encourage a deeper understanding of the forces that shape contemporary society.

Music has always been a powerful medium for expressing ideas, emotions and social concerns. (Turino2008). Throughout history, artists have used their work to challenge social norms, highlight injustices, and inspire change. In the context of contemporary music, few artists are as influential as Kendrick Lamar in this regard. Known for his thought-provoking lyrics and deep exploration of complex social issues, Lamar has established himself as a voice for marginalized communities and a commentator on the socio-political landscape of modern America(Nick 2022).

Kendrick Lamar's music often delves into topics such as racial inequality, systemic oppression, and the struggles of African Americans in a society that frequently marginalizes them. His work is not just music; it is a form of social commentary that resonates with listeners worldwide. The song "Not Like Us" serves as a poignant example of Lamar's ability to weave social critique into his music, offering listeners both a reflection on their reality and a call to action. In Lamar's world, the beat transcends mere rhythm—it becomes a vehicle for storytelling and a powerful agent of change. His journey from Compton's streets to global acclaim serves as a testament to the transformative power of authenticity and the role music can play in social transformation. (Jakob Bloss, 2023)

The choice to analyze "Not Like Us" stems from the song's rich layers of meaning and its relevance to ongoing social discourses. As societies across the globe grapple with issues of race, identity, and justice, Lamar's work provides a cultural lens through which these issues can be examined and understood (Johnson2019). By dissecting the lyrics and underlying messages of "Not Like Us," this study aims to uncover the ways in which Lamar critiques social structures and cultural norms. Furthermore, studying Kendrick Lamar's work is essential not only for understanding contemporary music but also for gaining insight into the broader cultural and political contexts that shape the lives of millions. His music, especially tracks like "Not Like Us," serves as a mirror to society, reflecting both its flaws and its potential for growth.

On a personal level, the decision to focus on "Not Like Us" is driven by a deep appreciation for Kendrick Lamar's artistry and the impact of his work on both individual listeners and society at large. His ability to articulate the struggles of those who are often voiceless in mainstream discourse is both inspiring and essential. This study is motivated by a desire to explore and share the significance of his contributions to social and cultural commentary. In conclusion, the background for choosing this subject lies in the intersection of music, culture, and social justice. Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" is not just a song; it is a cultural artifact that encapsulates the struggles and aspirations of a community. This study aims to illuminate the ways in which Lamar uses his platform to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

## 2. Metod

The problem of social injustice and inequality, as expressed in "Not Like Us", was explored using a qualitative discourse analysis method. This study will employ qualitative research methods with a focus on content analysis. The goal is to analyze the song's lyrics, themes, and cultural context to uncover the layers of social critique and cultural commentary embedded within the song(jane2013). The research will rely on interpretative analysis to deconstruct Lamar's lyrics and understand the broader societal implications of his commentary.

The primary data for this research refers to the direct source of analysis, which is the song itself both its lyrical content and contextual elements. The main primary data sources include: Lyrics of "Not Like Us" The main body of text for analysis will be the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar's song "Not Like Us(Nalley2021)." The lyrics will be obtained from reputable platforms such as Genius or directly from official album liner notes, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the text.

Secondary data provides additional context, interpretation, and academic backing to support the analysis of the primary data (Sandoval2021). It includes relevant literature, media commentary, and theoretical frameworks that will provide a foundation for understanding Lamar's work. The secondary data will come from: Articles on Hip-Hop and Social Critique, Academic Papers and Articles on Kendrick Lamar, Kendrick Lamar's Interviews and Public Statements, Music Criticism and Media Analysis, Social and Historical Context.

Data collection methods Data serve as the foundation for a research study. In qualitative research, the relevant data derive from four field-based activities: observing, collecting and examining (materials). According to Robert K. Yin, potential data collection activities are: Observation can be a valuable method of data collection because what you see with your eyes and feel with your senses is not filtered by what you report to others (yourself) or what the document's creator sees. In this sense, your observations are a type of primary data that should be highly valued. The purpose of observational data gathering is to write about your decisions and any potential repercussions in your own journal. "Collecting" Observation can be a valuable method of data collection because what you see with your eyes and feel with your senses is not filtered by what you report to others (yourself) or what the document's creator sees. In this sense, your observations are a type of primary data that should be highly valued. In this qualitative research approach, research Gathering and Checking to collect data by "Surfing" and "Googling" for relevant information, but the vast amount of information available tends to have few or even lots of useful hints for research. When using web-based information, your first priority is to take notes and fully understand and be aware of your sources. Since the researcher is studying music lyrics, the data to be studied are audiovisual and digital materials that are qualitative in nature. Since the researcher is studying music lyrics, the data to be studied are audiovisual and digital materials that are qualitative in nature. The steps of data collection are: 1) Watching video music, 2) Identifying Data, 3) Classifying Data, and 4) Data Reduction. The first step the researcher took was to watch the video music "Not Like Us".

To understand the content and meaning of the lyrics, researchers need to watch the video music at least 4 times. After watching and understanding the meaning, the next step is to identify the data. will be identified to identify and record the lyrics to be analyzed. The identified data can be in the form of relevant lyrics. Classifying means grouping the data based on the questions asked. This technique is used with the aim of making it easier to analyze the data. Data grouping is done based on the formulation of the problem. And the last step is, the data that has been collected will be reduced by selectively selecting the lyrics in the video music. The collected data is selected because of its relevance to the topic of the research discussion.

Analyzing social critique and cultural commentary in Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" can be approached through various methods and techniques (Page 2024). Here's a structured outline for conducting a thorough analysis According to Robert K. Yin (178-179), there are three phases of Analysis: Interetual Analysis Identify other cultural texts (literature, Musoc vidio, other music) referenced in the song. Analyze how these connections enhance the critique. And Compare Lamar's work with that of other artists who address similar themes, discussing how different approaches affect the commentary. Visual and Media Context, : If applicable, analyze the music video (if there is one) for visual storytelling and its relationship to the song's themes.

By employing these methods, you can develop a comprehensive analysis of the social critique and cultural commentary present in Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us." This approach will allow you to explore not only the lyrics but also the broader societal implications of his work.

**Literature Review**, Analyzing Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" through a theoretical lens can deepen our understanding of the social critique and cultural commentary embedded in the song. Here are several theoretical approaches that can be applied: **Critical Race Theory**, This framework can be used to examine how Lamar addresses systemic racism, identity, and the experiences of Black individuals in America. Critical Race Theory focuses on the intersections of race, law, and power, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how Lamar navigates his identity and critiques societal structures that perpetuate inequality. "Not Like Us" encapsulates Kendrick Lamar's unique ability to blend personal narrative with broader social commentary. Through his thought-provoking lyrics, he invites listeners to engage with complex themes, encouraging reflection on identity, oppression, and the collective responsibility we share in shaping our culture.

His work remains a powerful catalyst for discussion and change within both the music industry and society at large. The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which

embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado, 2001).

### 3. Result and Discussion

"Not Like Us" sets historic streaming records en route to a No. 1 debut. The song, which reached No. 1 on the Hot 100, is Lamar's second song of the year from the long-running feud, and it's already firmly embedded in pop culture. Is this the most memorable diss track you've ever heard in your life? Lamar's critique of systemic oppression in "Not Like Us" aligns with the core principles of Critical Race Theory, which argues that racial inequality is embedded in the fabric of social structures. The song's exploration of identity and authenticity also reflects broader cultural discussions about the pressures faced by individuals in marginalized communities to conform to societal expectations. Lamar's critique of systemic oppression in "Not Like Us" aligns with the core principles of Critical Race Theory, which argues that racial inequality is embedded in the fabric of social structures.

The song's exploration of identity and authenticity also reflects broader cultural discussions about the pressures faced by individuals in marginalized communities to conform to societal expectations. Through his lyrics, Lamar challenges the idea that success in mainstream culture is a universal aspiration, suggesting instead that true empowerment comes from resisting these pressures and embracing one's cultural identity. His commentary on alienation and exclusion resonates with listeners who share similar experiences, making the song not just a reflection of societal issues, but also a call for solidarity and resistance. The results of this study suggest that Lamar's work is deeply connected to the broader social and political struggles of marginalized communities. His ability to merge artistic expression with activism highlights the transformative power of music in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for social justice.

The song "Not Like US" released on the Interscope label is known to be Kendrick's answer to popular rapper Drake. The addictive rhythm and poetic lyrics of the song "Not Like Us" also tell the dramatic story of Kendrick's personal journey. It refers to black or African people in general where many people die because of the food crisis while white people always waste money and refers to the lyrics. (Psst, I see dead people). Kendrick Lamar tells Drake about new diss track 'Not Like Us': 'I heard you like 'Em Young'. In his third diss on Drake, Lamar attacked the Canadian rapper for his alleged penchant for young women and even called him a pedophile. This song reminds us not to be fooled by the glamorous lifestyle that celebrities tend to promote, because in America there is a lot of social inequality and a lot of homeless people, they don't care about people in need. They not like us, they not like us, they not like us.



**Figure 1.** Ferrari from Kendrick Lamar MV "Not like us"  
Source: Kendrick Lamar MV "not like us"

The Picture of Ferrari Car from Kendrick Lamar MV "Not Like Us" Is the Representation Of How Kendrick Satirizes The Rich Or Hedon People That They Don't Really Care About Homeless Or People In Need.

"I Go to Some Parts of The World, And They're Singing It in The Street," He Says Of "Alright," Which Became the Movement's Unofficial Anthem. "When You Play It Outside of a Concert, You'll Know That It's A Little Better Than Just A Song. It's More Than Just a Record. It's Something That People Live — Your Words." – Kendrick Lamar In The New York Times.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" is a powerful critique of racial inequality and systemic oppression. Through his nuanced use of language and storytelling, Lamar presents a compelling commentary on the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly African Americans. The analysis reveals that the song not only reflects the alienation and struggles faced by these groups but also serves as a call for action and change. In line with the research objectives, this study demonstrates how Lamar uses his platform to challenge societal norms and advocate for a more just and equitable society. His work contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse on race, identity, and social justice in contemporary music.

"Not Like Us" could indicate themes of difference and exclusion, where a group of people are seen as different and not accepted in the larger society. Kendrick Lamar often explores the concept of racial inequality and marginalization, so a song with this title could be talking about how certain groups (especially the black community) are treated differently, or how they feel separated from the social norm.

#### 5. References

- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Uneversity Press. New York.
- Putra, Gilang Wikra. (2024). Benarkah Makna Lagu Not Like Us Kendrick Lamar Lebih dari Sekadar Diss Track Biasa? Simak Penjelasannya. Voxyouths. <https://www.voxyouths.com/musik/51391500/benarkah-makna-lagu-not-like-us-kendrick-lamar-lebih-dari-sekadar-diss-track-biasa-simak-penjelasannya>
- Wilkes Emma.(2024). Kendrick Lamar tells Drake "I hear you like 'em young" on fresh diss track 'Not Like Us'.NEM. <https://www.nme.com/news/music/kendrick-lamar-tells-drake-i-hear-you-like-em-young-on-fresh-diss-track-not-like-us-3753559>
- Denis Kyle, Diaz Angel, Unterberger Andrew, Lamarre Carl, Lipshutz Jason.(2024). What Will the Commercial Success of 'Not Like Us' Mean for Kendrick Lamar's Career — Or Drake's?. Billboard. <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/kendrick-not-like-us-drake-beef-charts-five-burning-questions-1235682403/>
- Prasetya Ananda Dimas.(2024). Kendrick Lamar Hadirkan Video Musik 'Not Like Us', Penuh Makna Tersirat. Berita Terkini. <https://www.merahputih.com/post/read/kendrick-lamar-hadirkan-video-musik-not-like-us-penuh-makna-tersirat>
- Apol Brandon.(2016). Sing About Me: Kendrick Lamar in Posterity, digitalcommons . [https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research\\_scholarship\\_symposium/2016/podium\\_presentations/16/](https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium/2016/podium_presentations/16/)
- Moore Marcus J.(2021). The Butterfly Effect: How Kendrick Lamar Ignited the Soul of Black America, Atria. [https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=HZ1BEAAQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=kendrick+lamar+not+like+us&ots=ZBSI7i0ZjA&sig=txijlAQ8aPVPLUW3Ur\\_iv6e2sgM&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=kendrick%20lamar%20not%20like%20us&f=false](https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=HZ1BEAAQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=kendrick+lamar+not+like+us&ots=ZBSI7i0ZjA&sig=txijlAQ8aPVPLUW3Ur_iv6e2sgM&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=kendrick%20lamar%20not%20like%20us&f=false)
- Ethan Hein.(2020). Chris Thile, Kendrick Lamar, and the problem of the white rap cover, digitalcommons. <https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/vrme/vol35/iss1/14/>
- Lowman Nicole,(2022). The Political Efficacy of Kendrick Lamar's Performance Rhetoric, Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric. [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lowman\\_12\\_2\\_3.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lowman_12_2_3.pdf)



- Feagin Joe, Elias Sean(2013). Rethinking racial formation theory: a systemic racism critique, tandfonline. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.2012.669839>
- Ames Daniel L,(2013). Outcome dependency alters the neural substrates of impression formation, sciencedirect. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2013.07.001>
- Bennett Andy,(1999). Hip hop am Main: the localization of rap music and hip hop culture, SageJournals. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016344399021001004>
- Dhungel Rita,Lama Shanti,Khadka Auska,K.C, Mendo Sherpa Sharda,Limbu Pratima, Limbu Ghaynu, Rai Monika, Shrestha Sweata,(2019). Hearing our Voices: Pathways from Oppression to Liberation through Community-Based Participatory Research. Space and Culture. <https://spaceandculture.in/index.php/spaceandculture/article/view/439>
- Dimitriadis Greg,(2009). Performing Identity/performing Culture. Peterlang. [https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=2HkEnRhRPCkC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Several+studies+have+highlighted+the+role+of+hip-hop+in+challenging+dominant+narratives&ots=eDGTcRWISv&sig=LterLBpGzG2BNwFfm5P9WScFbg&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=2HkEnRhRPCkC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Several+studies+have+highlighted+the+role+of+hip-hop+in+challenging+dominant+narratives&ots=eDGTcRWISv&sig=LterLBpGzG2BNwFfm5P9WScFbg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- DeSantis Gloria C,(2008). A Critical Exploration Of Voluntary Sector Social Policy Advocacy With Marginalized Communities Using A Population Health Lens And Social Justice. Instrepo. <https://instrepo-prod7.cc.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/3490e62a-d03b-440f-ae4e-8dce7c508c10/content>
- Gordon Steven R. Gordon(2015). Fostering Social Movements with Social Media. SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2708079](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2708079)
- Hebert David G.,Abramo Joseph,Dylan Smith Gareth(2016). Epistemological and sociological issues in popular music education, taylorfrancis. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315613444-35/epistemological-sociological-issues-popular-music-education-david-hebert-joseph-abramo-gareth-dylan-smith>
- Anderson Talmadge, Benjamin Stewart James (2007). Introduction to African American Studies. Blackclassicbook. [https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=49tXR1Ok6poC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=cultural+studies,+and+African+American+studies&ots=qPLVP8Is7C&sig=15AUaXzfGjGQMyuJgjnR5JL0mz4&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=cultural%20studies%2C%20and%20African%20American%20studies&f=false](https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=49tXR1Ok6poC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=cultural+studies,+and+African+American+studies&ots=qPLVP8Is7C&sig=15AUaXzfGjGQMyuJgjnR5JL0mz4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=cultural%20studies%2C%20and%20African%20American%20studies&f=false)
- Turino Thomas (2008). Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation. Booksgoogle. [https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=Iy5bQL58m08C&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Music+has+always+been+a+powerful+medium+for+expressing+ideas,+emotions,+and+social+concerns&ots=ahkSQqJoZj&sig=zH5kGZluNMDzGew\\_WIND-QPqEs4&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.id/books?hl=id&lr=&id=Iy5bQL58m08C&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Music+has+always+been+a+powerful+medium+for+expressing+ideas,+emotions,+and+social+concerns&ots=ahkSQqJoZj&sig=zH5kGZluNMDzGew_WIND-QPqEs4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Marx Nick (2022), Productive Self-Advocacy: How Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar Communicate Black Sovereignty. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/70d1f296e7b8ad542a4f7c3171c6513f/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Johnson Lamar L(2019). I Had to Die to Live Again. taylorfrancis. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429027604-18/die-live-lamar-johnson>
- Jane aleshinskaya(2023). Key Components Of Musical Discourse Analysis. archivesciendo. <http://archive.sciendo.com/RELA/rela.2013.11.issue-4/rela-2013-0007/rela-2013-0007.pdf>
- Sandoval Gustavo(2021). Single-Context Recording, Field Interpretation and Reflexivity: An Analysis of Primary Data In Context Sheets. Tandfonline. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00934690.2021.1926700>
- Moss.H and Guarino.L(1995). Gathering and recording data in the field. Cropgenebank. <http://cropgenebank.sgrp.cgiar.org/images/file/procedures/collecting1995/Chapter19.pdf>

- Nalley, Rene Kim(2021). GI Jazz: African Americans as Artists and Occupiers in Post-World War II Germany. University of California, Berkeley ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/195eed20ae12b9a707ded462e3dcf27b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Page, Dismuke Janetta,(2024). Exploring What Works at a Public University: An Asset-Based Programmatic Approach to Black Student Success. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/488b42c4a00c862dd20d19f061da383a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>