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Negotiating Identity and Agency of Female Singers in the Contemporary Toba Batak Popular Music Industry

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Toba Batak popular music industry (2000–2025) is marked by a surge in the visibility of female singers in both public spheres and digital spaces. This phenomenon is particularly compelling as it operates under the hegemony of a patrilineal social structure deeply rooted in the *Dalihan Na Tolu* philosophy and the idealistic doctrine of *Tiga H* (*Hamoraon, Hagabeon, Hasangapon*). This scientific article aims to analyze in-depth how female singers articulate their agency and negotiate gender identity amidst the pull of music industry capitalism and strict customary social control. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive-analytical method with a case study approach, this research examines field data through the theoretical lenses of Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism, Howard S. Becker's Sociology of Art, and Antonio Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with female musicians, producers, and cultural experts in Medan, where A total of 17 singers were interviewed, divided into six groups. Among these groups, four are Batak trios, and one is a duo, A total of four producers were interviewed as research informants, while secondary data were gathered through content analysis of digital music videos and netnographic tracking of YouTube comment sections with total of 23 music videos were analyzed, comprising 19 works by female musicians and 4 by male musicians, the number of YouTube comments varied, with a total of 7,661 comments observed for analysis. The results indicate that digital spaces offer significant opportunities for disintermediation, thereby strengthening the financial agency (*Hamoraon*) of female musicians independently. Nevertheless, this agency is not absolute but rather manifests as a fluid negotiation. Toba Batak female singers consciously adopt and reproduce a modest domestic image (*immanence*) as both a commercial strategy and a cultural shield to win the critical reception of the audience, evade customary resistance, and maintain their professional autonomy in the public sphere (*transcendence*).

Keywords: *Agency, Existentialist feminism, Toba Batak popular music, Identity negotiation, Female singers*

1. Introduction

Toba Batak popular music holds a crucial place in the culture of its people. Music is not merely a means of commercial entertainment, but also a medium for expressing identity, preserving regional languages, and conveying socio-cultural values, both in their homeland (*Bona Pasogit)* and in diaspora (Nettl, 2005; Titon, 2020). However, the production and appreciation of this music are inextricably linked to the Toba Batak community's patrilineal kinship system (*paternal lineage*) and guided by the *Dalihan Na Tolu* philosophy (Vergouwen, 1964). This system indirectly shapes a gender hierarchy that places men in a dominant position as the successors of the clan and the primary spokespersons of *adat* (*Raja Parhata*). Through the Three H (*Hamoraon, Hagabeon, Hasangapon*) philosophy, the position of sons is highly prioritized, while the role of women (*Boru or Inang*) is often restricted to the domestic sphere or in a state of "immanence" (their existence is judged solely by their relationships with others) (Harahap & Siahaan, 1987; Beauvoir, 2011).

Although the philosophy of *Hamoraon* (material wealth) opens opportunities for Toba Batak women to actively work in the public sphere to support their families' finances, this economic involvement has historically been viewed as a supplementary role (Rodenburg, 1997). This economic activity has not been fully viewed as a manifestation of "transcendence"—that is, a real struggle to become independent, autonomous, and sovereign individuals over their life choices. This tension between household obligations and the demands of earning a living outside the home creates a highly dynamic space for identity negotiation. This cultural tension is evident in the contemporary Toba Batak popular music industry (2000–2025), which is currently experiencing a boom in popularity and a rapid increase in the number of female singers, both as soloists and in vocal groups (female trios), after a long period of male dominance.

The presence and dominance of female singers in the local music industry today serves as an important symbol of resistance. The performance stage places women at the forefront of the public sphere as independent economic actors and key figures in cultural expression. Through their professional careers, Toba Batak female singers strive for transcendence, transcend traditional domestic boundaries, and demand recognition for their artistic talent. However, this heightened popularity also exposes them to criticism, public scrutiny, and far stricter customary and gender-biased practices than male musicians. Their stage performances, choice of lyrics, and even their attire are constantly evaluated by society to determine whether they uphold the traditional honor of their role as Boru ni Raja or are deemed to have transgressed cultural norms.

This identity struggle has become increasingly complex due to the development of digital media technology between 2000 and 2025. The shift from physical formats like cassettes and VCDs to digital ecosystems like YouTube, Spotify, and TikTok has opened up opportunities for "disintermediation" (the disappearance of traditional intermediaries like major record labels) (Sipayung & Nelson, 2025). This opportunity greatly benefits female singers, increasing their structural autonomy and bargaining power, both in determining their songs' creative concepts and managing their finances independently. However, the digital era also brings new challenges through the critical assessment mechanism of audiences in the comments section, which functions as a digital watchdog. Social pressures based on patrilineal ideology in cyberspace often force female singers to limit their freedom of expression on stage and revert to performances that conform to traditional moral standards.

Amidst this significant phenomenon, academic research on Toba Batak popular music has so far been limited to general explanations, the history of musical instruments, or simply analyses of song lyrics, leaving a significant research gap (Purba, 2007). This article aims to examine the agency of Toba Batak female singers as active social actors (the subjects) in negotiating their identities within patrilineal structures and digital modernity, by observing data from 17 singers which were interviewed, divided into six groups. Among these groups, four are Batak trios, and one is a duo, four producers were interviewed as research informants, while secondary data were gathered through content analysis of digital music videos and netnographic tracking of YouTube comment sections with total of 23 music videos were analyzed, comprising 19 works by female musicians and 4 by male musicians, the number of YouTube comments varied, with a total of 7,661 comments observed for analysis. To address this academic gap, this research formulates three key questions: (1) how is the agency and negotiation of gender identity of female singers articulated within the structure of *Dalihan Na Tolu*; (2) how are the dynamics of creative control and structural autonomy exercised under the influence of a patriarchal industry; and (3) how does the use of digital platforms influence women's strategies for achieving financial independence while responding to digital social control from audiences.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach with a case study to gain an in-depth, interpretive, and contextual understanding of the gender identity negotiations and agency of Toba Batak female singers. The research focuses on the contemporary popular music industry ecosystem between 2000 and 2025. Through this design, the researcher presents a broad and in-depth narrative overview based on real-world data. The data is then critically analyzed using a combination of Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism (Beauvoir, 2011), Howard S. Becker's Sociology of Art (Becker, 2008), Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony (1971), and Stuart Hall's Reception Theory.

The research location is Medan City, the physical operational center of the Toba Batak music industry, while digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify serve as virtual research locations. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling techniques combined with snowball sampling to identify appropriate informants. The research subjects were divided into two main groups: key informants consisting of solo singers and members of Trio Perempuan (Women's Trio) across generations, and supporting informants including local music producers, artist managers, songwriters, Toba Batak cultural figures, and music observers.

The data collection technique in this study employed the principle of triangulation, combining three primary

methods to ensure the validity and richness of the data. The first method involved in-depth, targeted interviews with musicians, producers, and cultural figures to explore their subjective perspectives (*dirohakki*) and financial independence. The data of participants described in the table below.

Table 1. Participant Table

No	Partisipant	Total person	Cateogry	Contribution for this researc
1	Senada Sister	3 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	The Batak trio, whose career spans from 2012 to the present, demonstrates experience and independence regarding structural, artistic, and financial autonomy
2	Divamora Sister	3 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	Active since the early digital era of 2015, this Batak trio brings valuable experience to their engagement within the Toba Batak Pop music industry
3	Duo Naimarata	2 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	This vocal duo began their career in the current era, amidst the pervasive digitalization of the Toba Batak music industry, bringing relevant experience to their involvement in the Batak music ecosystem.
4	B-Three Star	3 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	A young trio belonging to Generation Z, recognized as the most relevant trio within the contemporary music ecosystem
5	Melody Sister	3 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	This enduring Batak trio began their career during the pre-digital era, a period when music distribution relied on conventional physical media like CDs. Having sustained their career to the present, they bring a wealth of experience from their long-standing involvement in the Toba Batak music industry across various eras
6	The Heart (Simatupang Sister)	3 persons	Women Bataknese Vocal Group	This enduring Batak trio began their career during the pre-digital era, a period when music distribution relied on conventional physical media like CDs. Having sustained their career to the present, they bring a wealth of experience from their long-standing involvement in the Toba Batak music industry across various eras.
7	Billy Simarmata	1 person	Bataknese Music Producer	The experience of producing Batak artists ar providing insights into the development of th Toba Batak music industry, as well as th contributions of women within it
8	Triboy Simanjuntak	1 person	Bataknese Music Producer	The experience of producing Batak artists and providing insights into the development of the Toba Batak music industry, as well as the contributions of women within it
9	Joner Situmorang	1 person	Bataknese Music Producer	The experience of producing Batak artists and providing insights into the development of the Toba Batak music industry, as well as the contributions of women within it
10	Gumontar Nainggolan	1 person	Bataknese Music Producer	The experience of producing Batak artists and providing insights into the development of the Toba Batak music industry, as well as the contributions of women within it

The second method involved content analysis of a sample of popular female singers' music videos on YouTube to examine the meaning of clothing, body language, and song lyrics. The third method involved netnography, which involved online observation of YouTube comment sections to capture concrete data about audience responses and digital social control (Kozinets, 2020).

Table. 2. List of Youtube Video

No	Song	Artist	Producer	Total Comments
Periode: 2000-2010 (Pra Digital)				
1	Uju di Ngolukkon	Putri br Silitonga	Richard Sianturi	760
2	Sada Talenta	Ermin Br Simbolon	Bram Sudirman	1019
3	Alani Sarjana	Jhony Manurung	Maulina Br Silaen	64
4	Anakkon Hi Do Hamoraon	Charles Simbolon ft Juli Br Manurung	Bram Sudirman	26
5	Boru Panggoaran	Tagor Tampubolon	Maulina Br Silaen	35
6	Anak Medan	Trio Lamanta	Sadar Siahaan	823
7	Na di dia do ho	The Heart (Simatupang Sister)	A. Sianturi	80
8	Sai Anju Ma Au	Nainggolan Sister	Sadar Siahaan	62
9	Jamila from Toba Dream 2003	Viky Sianipar	Viky Sianipar	487
Period: 2010-2020 (Early Digital Era)				
10	Padao Holso	Margareth Siagian	Maulina Silaen	176
11	Cintaki Cinta Mati	Artha Sister	Erni Br Simanjuntak	1385
12	Nomor Sada Doho di Au	Silaen Sister	Maulina Br Silaen	85
13	Didia Rokappi	Dewi Marpaung	Muchtar Simanjuntak	175
14	Parcuma Do	Paskah Panjaitan	Marihot Pasaribu	273
15	Mabalu di Mangolu	Divamora Sister	Parulian Hutauruk	237
16	Janda Milineal	Melody Sister	M Sitanggang	90
17	Dang Tarpilit Au di Ho	Senada Sister	Daniel Steven	603
Period: 2020-2025 (Currently Digital Era)				
18	Hirim Marianakkon	Duo Naimarata	Marihot Pasaribu	1005
19	Dongan Matua	Lestari Hutasoit	Maulina br Silaen	23
20	Tangis Ni Boru Siakangan	B-Three Star	Radiapoh Hasiolan Sinaga	253
21	Tarpaima	Osen Hutasoit	Edward Panjaitan	5706
22	Rohaku	Jun Munthe	Jun Munthe	2128
23	Hasian	Shine Voice	Josman Harianja	107
Grand Total Comments				7661

For music videos released between 2000 and 2015, nine videos were analyzed, featuring artists such as Viky Sianipar, The Heart (Simatupang Sisters), Putri Br Silitonga, Ermin Br Simbolon, Jhony S. Manurung, Nainggolan Sisters, Charles Simbolon ft. Juli Br Manurung, Tagor Tampubolon, and Trio Lamanta. During this period, distribution relied on physical media (CDs and cassettes) and record labels. However, since the digital era began in 2010, these videos and songs have been uploaded to YouTube, maintaining accessibility for contemporary audiences. For the 2016–2020 period, eight videos were analyzed, including works by Senada Sisters, Margareth Siagian, Paskah Panjaitan, Melody Sisters, Divamora Sisters, Artha Sisters, Silaen Sisters, and Dewi Marpaung. This era marked a shift where YouTube and social media overtook mass media platforms, leading to the massive distribution and sales of popular music via YouTube. For the 2020–2026 period, six videos were analyzed, namely by Duo Naimarata, Be Three Star, Shine Voice, Lestari Hutasoit, Osen Hutasoit, and Jun Munthe. Digital sales surged drastically during this timeframe due to heightened digital media awareness. This transition peaked in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the shift toward digital platforms. The frequent use of YouTube and TikTok driven by public demand prompted music producers and creators to intensively market their work on YouTube. In total, 23 music videos were analyzed,

comprising 19 works by female musicians and 4 by male musicians. The volume of YouTube comments exhibited variation. In total, 7,661 comments were observed for analysis.

The data analysis process employed an interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three interrelated stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, raw data from interviews, field notes, and YouTube comments were filtered, selected, and grouped using codes based on theoretical variables such as immanence, transcendence, artistic autonomy, structural autonomy, and types of audience responses. The data were then presented in an organized narrative explanation and conceptual comparison tables. In the final stage, the researchers analyzed sociocultural trends to formulate preliminary conclusions, which were continuously checked for their alignment with field data and critical theory.

To ensure the validity (trustworthiness) and reliability of the research results and to meet journal publication standards, the researcher used data verification techniques through source triangulation and method triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gapur et al., 2024). Source triangulation was carried out by comparing interview data from various perspectives (singers, producers, and cultural figures), while method triangulation was carried out by testing the correspondence between interview results, the meaning of video clips, and audience comments. Furthermore, the researcher conducted broader observations (prolonged engagement) online and within the local music community in Medan City to avoid one-sided judgments and build deep emotional connections with informants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Agency and Performativity of Female Singers' Identity within a Patrilineal Structure

Based on my field research in Medan, the way contemporary Toba Batak female singers (2000–2025) express their agency is actually not through radical confrontation or frontal rejection of their society's patrilineal value system. Instead, the operating form of agency is a fluid and strategic Identity Negotiation. Batak female singers consciously understand that to enter the public sphere and achieve economic success (*Hamoraon*) through a music career, they must first secure social and cultural legitimacy from the customary community, which acts as the primary consumer market for their work. If they present an image of transcendence that is overly aggressive, liberated, or extremely deviant from customary morality, they will immediately face market rejection and moral stigmatization that can dismantle their professional careers.

Therefore, I argue that these female singers are performing a dynamic method called tactical identity performativity. This concept is derived from developing Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactics within a theoretical dialogue. Butler (1990) explains how gender is constructed through the repeated embodiment of socially regulated norms, whereas de Certeau (1984) conceptualizes tactics as actions performed within spaces governed by forces beyond individual control. They utilize the performance stage to achieve professional and financial transcendence; however, the aesthetic material they present actually reinforces the traditional values of Immanence desired by the patriarchal cultural hegemony. This is highly evident in the thematic mapping of their musical works over the past 25 years. Based on a textual content analysis of song lyrics performed by both soloists and female vocal groups (*Trio Perempuan*), there is a dominance of narratives that position women within the ideal domestic stereotypes according to customary Batak 'common sense' (Hall, 1997). These song themes can be classified into three primary axes:

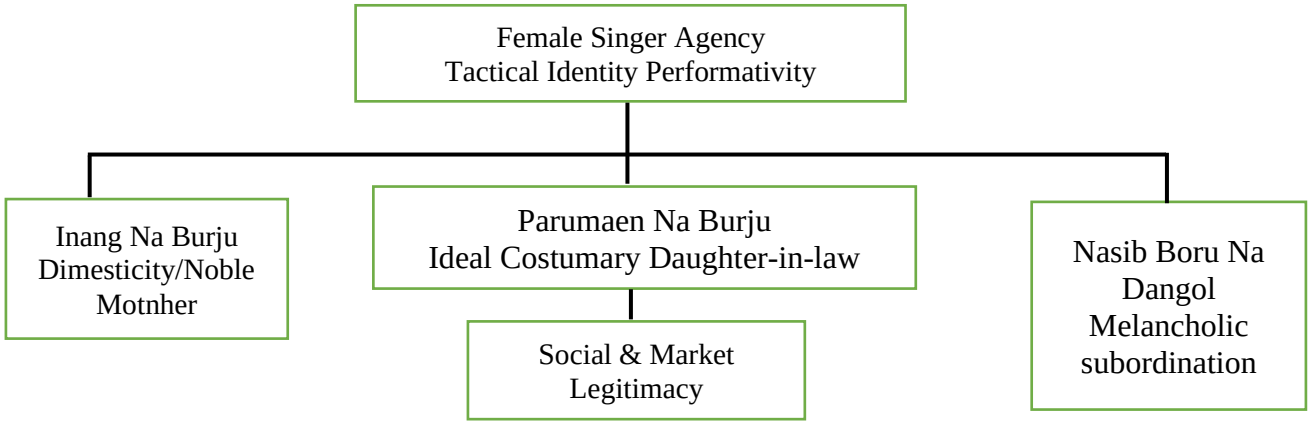


Figure 1. Diagram of the tactical identity performativity strategy of Toba Batak female singers to gain market legitimacy.
(Source : Analyzed Data Output, 2025)

The Theme of *Inang na Burju* (The Good and Noble Mother): The lyrics depict the struggles of an elderly mother who sacrifices her entire life, working hard in the fields (*marbako/marsuan*) to finance her children's education (particularly sons) so they can succeed in the migratory lands (*tanah pangarantoan*) (Simbolon, 1998). Here, the agency of the female voice is borrowed to glorify domesticity and female self-sacrifice for the success of men, thereby serving the attainment of the clan's *Hagabeon* and *Hasangapon*. The Theme of *Parumaen na Burju* (The Obedient Daughter-in-Law): The lyrics emphasize a wife's or future daughter-in-law's commitment to being polite, loving her parents-in-law (*matua*), obeying the rules of the husband's extended family (*Hula-hula*), and maintaining domestic honor (Bovill, 1985). The Theme of *Nasib Boru na Dangol* (The Lamentation of Women's Suffering): The lyrics exploit sadness, resignation, and female fortitude in facing poverty, heartbreak, or being abandoned helplessly by a lover or husband without the power to resist.

Through the selection of melancholic lyric themes laden with values of obedience, Batak female singers are fundamentally engaging in an existential negotiation. They deliberately "wrap" their acts of public transcendence (professional singing, earning an income, taking the stage) within culturally safe narratives of immanence. In-depth interviews with several members of female trios in Medan confirmed this strategy:

" *Kalau kami bawakan lagu yang liriknya terlalu bebas, menantang laki-laki, atau sok mandiri, orang Batak kurang suka; dibilang kita garang atau pemberontak. Tapi kalau nyanyi lagu ratapan ibu, kesetiaan istri, atau susahnya hidup, penonton langsung tersentuh hatinya, dan VCD atau YouTube kita langsung meledak penjualannya. Jadi, biarlah di lagu kita mengalah dan menangis, yang penting panggung jalan terus, job pesta padat, dan kita bisa hidup mandiri dari uang itu*" *(Interview with a member of Trio Senada Sister, August 2025).*

The interview excerpt above proves the operation of existential agency. Batak women utilize the sacrifice of their text-based image (*The Other*) as an economic instrument to seize positions as sovereign subjects (*The Subject*) in real life. They are willing to reinforce the myth of immanence in the aesthetic realm to fund their projects of transcendence in the domestic and financial realms.

3.2 Dynamics of Creative Control and Behind-the-Scenes Structural Autonomy in the Music Industry

Even though Toba Batak female singers nowadays have huge visibility and become the main commodity driving financial profits on stage, an investigation into the behind-the-scenes ecosystem of the local music industry reveals a contrasting portrait. Utilizing Howard S. Becker's sociology of art framework, the level of Artistic Autonomy and Structural Autonomy possessed by female singers generally remains low to moderate, indicating the tight grip of Patriarchal Hegemony controlling the music production chain from end to end.

Looking at the artistic autonomy aspect, the contemporary Batak female singers are mostly placed only as technical executors rather than creators of discourse. Based on discography data and copyright tracking of hundreds of popular songs performed by female singers between 2000 and 2025, empirical facts show that nearly 85% to 90% of these songs were created, written, and arranged by male musicians. Male songwriters and arrangers act as gatekeepers who dictate the aesthetic direction of the musical works. This can be demonstrated through a sample analysis of musical works from the 2000–2025 period. The author divides this timeframe into three distinct periods: the pre-digital period (2000–2010), the early digital period (2010–2020), and the contemporary digital period (2020–2025).

During the pre-digital period (2000–2010), popular musicians, singers, and vocal groups comprised several acts, including Viky Sianipar, Putri Br Silitonga, Nainggolan Sisters, Trio Lamanta, Tagor Tampubolon, Charles Simbolon, Juli Manurung, Ermin Br Simbolon, Jhonny Manurung, and The Heart. Each of these artists performed songs composed and produced by men. In fact, hit songs by female singers or vocal groups, such as Putri Br Silitonga, Ermin Br Simbolon, Nainggolan Sisters, Juli Manurung, and The Heart (Simatupang Sisters), were also composed and produced by men.

In the early digital period (2010–2020), popular Batak musicians, singers, and vocal groups included Margareth Siagian, Artha Sisters, Silaen Sisters, Dewi Marpaung, Paskah Panjaitan, Divamora Sisters, and Senada Sisters. The songs they popularized were also primarily composed or produced by men, although there were a few exceptions, such as Senada Sisters who composed their own music, and Artha Sisters and Silaen Sisters whose works were produced by women. However, their numbers remained minimal compared to other trios or groups.

In the contemporary digital period (2020–2025), popular Batak musicians, singers, and vocal groups consisted of B-Three Star, Duo Naimarata, Lestari Hutasoit, Osen Hutasoit, Jun Munthe, and Shine Voice. The songs they popularized were generally also composed and produced by men. Although the trio B-Three Star performed a song composed by a woman—specifically "Tangis Ni Boru Siakangan" by Ratnwati Sidabutar—the other groups remained heavily dominated by male composers and producers. To understand the description

above, please refer to the following table:

Table 3. List of Sample Bataknese Pop Songs From 2000-2025

No	Song	Artist	Song Writer	Producer
		Period: 2000-2010 (Pra Digital)		
1	Uju di Ngolukkon	Putri br Silitonga	Denny Siahaan	Richard Sianturi
2	Sada Talenta	Ermin Br Simbolon	Poster Sihotang	Bram Sudirman
3	Alani Sarjana	Jhony Manurung	Jhony Manurung	Maulina Br Silaen
4	Anakkon Hi Do Hamoraon	Charles Simbolon ft Juli Br Manurung	Nahum Situmorang	Bram Sudirman
5	Boru Panggoaran	Tagor Tampubolon	Tagor Tampubolon	Maulina Br Silaen
6	Anak Medan	Trio Lamanta	Freddy Tambunan	Sadar Siahaan
7	Na di dia do ho	The Heart (Simatupang Sister)	Yamin Panjaitan	A. Sianturi
8	Sai Anju Ma Au	Nainggolan Sister	Tigor Gypsi Marpaung	Sadar Siahaan
9	Jamila from Toba Dream 2003	Viky Sianipar	Roy Sagala	Viky Sianipar
		Period: 2010-2020 (Early Digital Era)		
10	Padao Holso	Margareth Siagian	Anton Sialagan	Maulina Silaen
11	Cintaki Cinta Mati	Artha Sister	Billy Simarmata	Erni Br Simanjuntak
12	Nomor Sada Doho di Au	Silaen Sister	Edison Sibuea	Maulina Br Silaen
13	Didia Rokappi	Dewi Marpaung	Dakka Hutagalung	Muchtar Simanjuntak
14	Parcuma Do	Paskah Panjaitan	Jonar Situmorang, Rafael Sitorus	Marihot Pasaribu
15	Mabalu di Mangolu	Divamora Sister	Tumbur Nababan	Parulian Hutauruk
16	Janda Milineal	Melody Sister	Dosmaria Br Situngkir	M Sitanggang
17	Dang Tarpilit Au di Ho	Senada Sister	Nurcahaya Br Manurung	Daniel Steven
		Period: 2020-2025 (Currently Digital Era)		
18	Hirim Marianakkon	Duo Naimarata	Dompak Sinaga	Marihot Pasaribu
19	Dongan Matua	Lestari Hutasoit	Robert Marbun	Maulina br Silaen
20	Tangis Ni Boru Siakangan	B-Three Star	Ratnawati br Sidabutar	Radiapoh Hasiolan Sinaga
21	Tarpaima	Osen Hutasoit	Osen Hutasoit	Edward Panjaitan
22	Rohaku	Jun Munthe	Tiorisma Br Simanullang	Jun Munthe
23	Hasian	Shine Voice	Tumbur Nababan	Josman Harianja

Female singers are rarely involved in the initial conceptual process of song formation. They are only summoned to the recording studio when the song is fully prepared, executing vocals according to the directions of the songwriter and producer. Consequently, the representation of women's feelings, suffering, and desires encapsulated in popular Batak lyrics is not an authentic representation of women's inner voices (*dirohakki*). Instead, it is a fictitious construction of "how women should lament and behave," projected through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Women are objectified into vocal instruments to perpetuate a patriarchal ideology commodified for market profit (Baudrillard, 1998).

A sharper disparity occurs in the dimension of Structural Autonomy. The working relationship between female singers and local conventional management or record labels in Medan is marked by exploitation and power asymmetry. Many female vocal groups (Trios) lack adequate understanding of contract legalities,

copyright protection, or digital royalty mechanisms. The contract system applied by local producers often utilizes a flat-fee system, where singers are paid only once upfront for the entire recording and music video production process. Meanwhile, the ownership of master recordings, song copyrights, and all long-term profits from digital monetization are fully controlled by male producers or capital-owning label owners (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

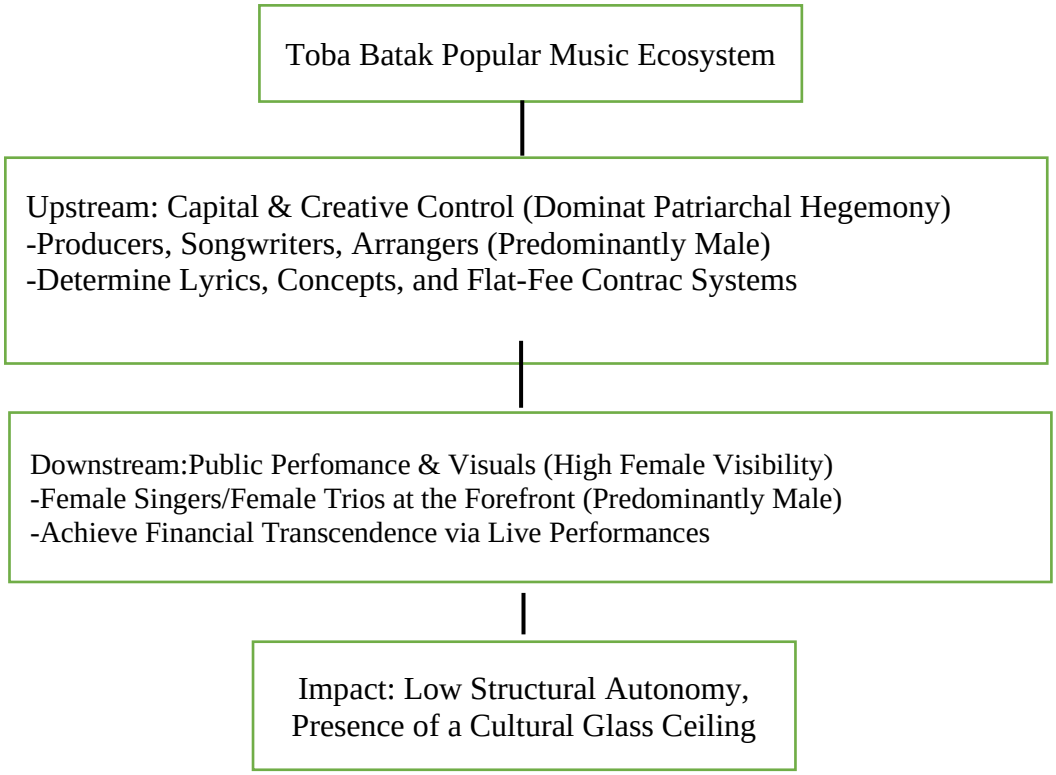


Figure 2. The structural power asymmetry between upstream and downstream sectors in the Toba Batak popular music industry.
(Source: Workflow Analysis of the Medan Recording Industry, 2025)

This clear structural imbalance creates a weird paradox that puts female singers in a very weak position. While their songs' popularity on digital platforms can reach millions of views and generate substantial AdSense revenue for labels, the female singers do not receive a fair share of these digital royalties. To sustain economic survival (*Hamoraon*), these female musicians are forced to rely on income from the live performance sector, such as singing at customary weddings (*pesta unjuk*), funeral rites (*saur matua*), cafe concerts, or clan association events (*pesta bona taon*).

Dependency on live performance stages throws them back into the vortex of direct customary social control. On the custom wedding stage, they must face physical surveillance from village elders, the *Hula-hula*, and the general public, who demand they perform in highly modest attire (wearing traditional sarongs or *Ulos*) and restrict their body movements. This condition confirms the operation of a sosiokultural glass ceiling in the Batak music industry: women are granted the freedom to appear in public and earn money, but their space to control structural capital and make top-tier creative decisions behind the scenes remains restricted by patriarchal barriers (Lieb, 2018).

3.3 Digital Transformation and Cyber Space: Between Financial Disintermediation and the Digital Panopticon

I found that the digital transformation era (2000–2025) in the Toba Batak music industry works like a double-edged sword that simultaneously expands the space of freedom (agency) while tightening the mechanisms of social control over female musicians. This phenomenon presents a new dynamic that distinguishes the contemporary era from the physical cassette and VCD eras of the previous two decades.

On one hand, new media technologies provide extraordinary emancipatory instruments through the process of Disintermediation. Several contemporary Batak female singers with high digital literacy and critical awareness have begun to resist the hegemony of conventional local producers. They utilize platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and digital music aggregators (TuneCore, DistroKid) to bypass traditional record label

bureaucracies (Morris, 2015). By establishing Personal Official Channels on YouTube and managing their careers independently, female musicians have successfully reclaimed full control over their Structural-Financial Autonomy.

It is crucial to emphasize that during the pre-digital sales era, singers were denied access to sales figures, preventing them from filing appeals in cases of unfair revenue distribution. Conversely, in the current digital era, sales data and revenue derived from song streaming on YouTube and other platforms are highly transparent. This transparency enables singers to verify their earnings and ensure alignment with actual sales data. However, not all vocal groups possess financial autonomy. Given that they also lack artistic and structural autonomy in master recording production, few positions are robust enough to challenge the reality where their revenue generation remains budgeted and controlled by the producer. An exception is observed in the Trio Senada Sisters, where Nurcahaya Manurung serves as the executive producer. Consequently, she commands greater power in navigating master production affairs and securing direct financial returns without detrimental interventions.

Regarding branding and public image, however, each vocal group utilizes social media to construct their persona before the public. Based on interviews with the six vocal groups, the pervasive social media trend benefits them by facilitating direct communication with event organizers and building fanbase networks without the mediation of label-regulated management. This contrasts sharply with the pre-digital era, during which artists secured engagements exclusively through entertainment management, possessing minimal financial control and little agency in work-related decision-making. Through social media, female singers can independently establish collaborations, thereby generating revenue without managerial intermediaries, making strategic agreement decisions independently, and receiving direct payments from clients. In this regard, they exercise full control over their finances, completely free from external intervention.

Through this digital disintermediation, all revenues from digital advertisements (YouTube AdSense), Spotify streaming, and brand endorsement contracts flow directly into the independent bank accounts of the female musicians without third-party deductions. This massive financial independence directly strengthens women's existential bargaining power within their extended family's domestic space. By earning substantial incomes—which often surpass those of their husbands or male siblings—Batak female singers successfully invert the dialectic of *The Other*.

They no longer depend economically on the family's patrilineal system; instead, they transform into economic backbones (*parjambar*) capable of financing their siblings' education, buying land or houses for their parents, and funding their clan's customary rituals. Digital financial success automatically forces the patriarchal family structure to respect the existence and listen to the decisions of these women in extended family affairs. At this point, digitalization successfully facilitates the achievement of authentic transcendence.

But we cannot close our eyes that this digital freedom also faces a tough wall of surveillance in online spaces, operating through mechanisms of Critical Reception (Foucault, 1995). Based on netnographic tracking of thousands of comment rows on female Batak singers' music videos on YouTube, it is found that digital space functions as a virtual public arena where customary moral hegemony is aggressively enforced by a collective audience. When a female singer attempts to express her bodily agency by wearing modern clothing deemed somewhat revealing (such as sleeveless gowns or tight O-neck tops) or displaying expressive dance choreography in a music video, the comment section is immediately flooded with responses from a gender-biased Oppositional Position.

Table 1. Stuart Hall's Reception Typology in the YouTube Comment Sections of Toba Batak Female Singers' Music Videos.

Reception Category	Audience Response Characteristics	Verbatim Example of Netizen Comments	Sociocultural Impact
1.Dominant-Hegemonic	Total support for the talent, vocal quality, and public existence of the female singer.	*"Proud to see a Batak woman achieving success on YouTube!"*	Provides positive psychological reinforcement.
2. Negotiated	Accepts musical quality and vocals but rejects the visual representation and attire.	*"The voice is 5 stars, but please make the clothes more modest."*	Establishes compromising aesthetic boundaries.
3. Oppositional	Total rejection, moral judgment, and	*"Have some shame! Ruining the image of*	Triggers digital harassment and cyberbullying.

	accusations of ruining customary values.	*Boru ni Raja! Remember your status as an Inang!"*

(Source: Primary Data from Netnographic YouTube Comment Corpus, Accessed 2024-2025)

Negative comments from the oppositional position utilize customary moral narratives—such as demands to protect the clan's *Hasangapon* (honor) and obligations to behave modestly as a *Boru ni Raja*—to execute character assassination and cyberbullying against female musicians. Interestingly, such aggressive cyber condemnation is almost non-existent in the comment sections of male musicians' music videos, even when male musicians perform in casual attire, display suggestive movements, or perform songs themed around drinking traditional palm wine (*mar tuak*). This proves the existence of a moral double standard that applies customary laws more sharply and discriminatingly to control women's bodies in the public sphere.

The vast majority of comments found on social media thus far fully support the presence of female singers within the Toba Batak pop music industry ecosystem. Audiences express support because they perceive the singers as having excellent vocal abilities, attractive appearances, and maintaining Batak cultural attributes, such as using the local language, wearing Batak accessories, or filming music videos on location in the Batak homeland. Most of these commentators no longer reinforce the hegemony that women should be confined to the domestic sphere or are forbidden from occupying positions equal to men. This shift can be interpreted as a form of "acceptance" toward the digital products presented by Toba Batak women.

Negotiated comments were also identified, typically originating from groups holding the view that Toba Batak women face constraints regarding certain behaviors, even though it is now deemed socially acceptable and legitimate for them to perform on stage. Comments such as "great voice, but the attire should be more modest" indicate that while some groups believe women have the right to assume professional roles and achieve fame comparable to men, they must remember that women have historically been expected to maintain modesty in their dress. Consequently, this represents a juncture where women are progressing toward a more advanced position on one hand, yet are still expected to uphold the values ascribed to them on the other.

Oppositional comments were also observed, generally stemming from factions that reject the visible presence of women dominating public spaces. These groups adhere to conservative paradigms regarding the values women ought to uphold, strongly maintaining patriarchal principles and other deeply rooted social hegemonies. Although not dominant in number, these forms of rejection are still detectable. This suggests that digital products exposing the existence of women within the Toba Batak pop music industry ecosystem remain unaccepted by certain segments of society.

This dynamic stands in stark contrast to the comments directed at male singers. The critique received by male artists, even when negative, typically focuses strictly on technical aspects or musical capabilities. There are no comments degrading their attire or invoking hegemonies that restrict them from pursuing careers in the Toba Batak pop music industry. In the comment sections of videos by Jun Munthe, Osen Hutasoit, or Viky Sianipar, no such disparaging remarks were identified

Confronting the pressure of this digital panopticon, the agency of Batak female singers is tested once more. Research findings reveal two patterns of responsive strategies adopted by female musicians: Tactical Accommodation (*Self-Censorship*): Some female singers choose to yield and compromise with netizen demands to maintain market stability. They practice self-censorship in subsequent music video projects by changing their fashion style to be more closed, reducing body movements, and returning to a calm, melancholic image of immanence. Indifferent Digital Resistance (*Indifferent Transcendence*): A small portion of contemporary female singers who already possess independent financial autonomy choose to ignore, delete, or block these negative comments. They remain consistent in maintaining their chosen modern aesthetic concepts, arguing that artwork must evolve with global music industry trends and should not be imprisoned by rigid customary interpretations in the digital era.

4. Discussion

4.1 Theoretical Synthesis of Agency within the Digital Panopticon

The high visibility of female singers in the contemporary Toba Batak popular music industry (2000–2025) does not necessarily translate into structural emancipation from patriarchal relations. Through Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, women's participation in musical performance can be understood as a pursuit of transcendence, although their artistic aspirations may remain constrained by expectations concerning family, marriage, and customary obligations. Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps explain how these expectations become normalized, while Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity illuminates how gender norms are reproduced through repeated representations and social practices. The negotiation of conventional feminine images alongside professional aspirations may therefore represent a form of strategic accommodation,

although its significance for women's agency must be established through empirical evidence rather than assumed.

Becker's concept of *Art Worlds* further demonstrates the importance of examining the distribution of roles and decision-making power within musical production. Female singers' public visibility does not necessarily indicate equivalent control over songwriting, arrangement, production, or revenue. De Certeau's concept of tactics provides an additional perspective for understanding how women pursue artistic opportunities within structures they do not fully control. Bringing these perspectives together, this study proposes *tactical identity performativity* as an analytical synthesis for examining how gendered practices and situated actions interact. However, claims concerning male gatekeeping, financial autonomy, and the reported 85–90% male control of musical works require specific empirical evidence and a clear operational definition of control.

Digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify may expand opportunities for musical circulation and audience engagement, but they do not automatically guarantee economic independence or creative autonomy. Hall's encoding/decoding model helps explain how audiences accept, negotiate, or reject meanings conveyed through songs and audiovisual representations. Combined with Gramsci's theory of hegemony, it provides a framework for examining whether audience responses reproduce or challenge dominant gender expectations. Nevertheless, claims of a digital panopticon or gendered double standards require systematic analysis of comments and comparison between female and male performers.

Taken together, these perspectives conceptualize female singers' agency as a situated process shaped by cultural norms, industrial arrangements, gendered practices, and audience reception. Their participation may involve accommodation, tactical negotiation, or the rejection of particular expectations, without necessarily transforming the structures that constrain them. The central contribution of this study is therefore to distinguish women's visibility from their creative authority and economic autonomy, while examining how they negotiate opportunities and limitations within the contemporary Toba Batak popular music industry.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how female singers negotiate identity and agency within the contemporary Toba Batak popular music industry (2000–2025). The findings indicate that women's participation in public performance and digital music circulation coexists with cultural expectations concerning femininity, family responsibilities, and customary values. The analysis of song lyrics identified recurring representations of maternal sacrifice, the obedient daughter-in-law, and women's suffering. These representations provide a basis for examining the tension between socially prescribed feminine roles and women's pursuit of professional and creative opportunities.

The findings also highlight the importance of distinguishing public visibility from artistic and structural autonomy. The examination of songwriting and production credits, together with interviews with music industry participants, raises questions about female singers' involvement in creative decision-making and control over musical production. Meanwhile, the observed use of digital platforms and the audience responses documented in YouTube comment sections indicate that digital circulation creates opportunities for visibility while also exposing female performers to public judgments concerning their appearance and conformity to gendered expectations. These findings suggest that digital participation should not automatically be equated with financial independence or freedom from customary constraints.

Theoretically, Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, Becker's sociology of art, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Butler's theory of gender performativity, de Certeau's concept of tactics, and Hall's encoding/decoding model provide complementary perspectives for interpreting these dynamics. Together, they help conceptualize women's agency as a process of negotiating cultural expectations, industrial arrangements, professional opportunities, and audience interpretations. This study therefore contributes to understanding female singers not simply through their visibility in popular music, but through the conditions under which they pursue artistic participation and negotiate their social positions. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which these negotiations produce sustained changes in creative authority, economic autonomy, and gender relations within the Toba Batak music industry.

This study recommends that future researchers expand the locus of investigation by conducting comparative quantitative-qualitative studies regarding the differences in financial autonomy levels between female soloists and those bound in female vocal group formats (*Trio Perempuan*). Furthermore, future research should trace the reception dynamics of the Batak diaspora community abroad toward the digital representation of contemporary Batak female musicians' modern identities in the global cyberspace.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted primarily in Medan and focused on six female vocal groups and four music producers. Although these participants provide relevant perspectives on the Toba Batak popular music industry, their experiences cannot be assumed to represent all female singers, producers, or audiences across the wider Batak community and diaspora.

Second, the audiovisual corpus consisted of 23 music videos, comprising 19 works by female performers and four by male performers, alongside 7,661 observed YouTube comments. The unequal number of videos limits the comparability of audience responses across performer genders. Furthermore, the interpretation of audience reception depends on the selection criteria, coding procedures, and contextual interpretation of individual comments. The findings should therefore be understood as patterns within the examined corpus rather than definitive evidence of audience attitudes throughout the industry.

Third, the analysis of creative autonomy relied on a sample of musical works and information obtained from industry participants. The available evidence does not provide a comprehensive measurement of gender distribution across all songwriting, arranging, production, copyright ownership, or revenue-sharing arrangements in the industry. Accordingly, the reported estimate of male control over 85–90% of musical works requires further verification through a clearly defined and systematically documented dataset. Claims concerning financial independence and the redistribution of household decision-making power likewise require more extensive financial and longitudinal evidence.

Finally, the study covers a broad period of industrial and technological change, from 2000 to 2025, using retrospective accounts and selected audiovisual materials. Changes in distribution technologies, platform monetization, and professional practices may vary across artists and periods. The qualitative design provides contextual insight into identity negotiation and agency, but it does not establish causal relationships between digitalization, economic autonomy, and changes in gender relations. Future research could address these limitations through a larger and more balanced comparison of female and male performers, systematic analysis of production credits and audience comments, and longitudinal investigation of contracts, royalties, and creative decision-making.

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