



**SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL ADVOCACY IN NIGERIA:  
A CASE STUDY OF ONYEKA OWENU'S ONE LOVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Music has long served as a powerful medium for shaping public awareness and responding to social realities in Nigeria. Within this tradition, Onyeka Onwenu, an influential singer, journalist, and advocate known for her socially conscious artistry, emerges as a key voice in national conversations on unity and justice. This study examines how her song One Love communicates social consciousness and political advocacy within Nigeria's socio-political climate. Using a qualitative research design, the study undertakes a multi-layered analysis combining semiotic examination of the song's lyrics and music video with cultural interpretation of its public reception in media and scholarship. Semiotic analysis is used to identify the musical, visual, and textual signs through which meaning is encoded, while cultural interpretation situates these signs within Nigeria's historical and political context. The study also draws on secondary materials to deepen contextual understanding and triangulate interpretations. The analysis is guided by Cultural Studies Theory, which explains how the song reflects and challenges dominant social narratives; Semiotic Musicology Theory, which interprets the symbolic and expressive codes embedded in the music; and Social Movement Theory, which situates One Love within broader traditions of musical activism and collective mobilisation. Findings show that One Love functions as a cultural text that critiques social division, promotes unity, and encourages civic responsibility. The study also highlights Onwenu's role as a pioneering female artist whose work challenges patriarchal and political boundaries. Overall, the research demonstrates the enduring power of music to shape social consciousness and inspire collective action in contemporary Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Onyeka Onwenu, One Love, Social Consciousness, Political Advocacy, Nigerian Music, Social Justice, Music and Activism.



## INTRODUCTION

Music has long been understood as a powerful force for shaping public awareness, expressing collective emotions, and responding to social and political realities. In African societies, music functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural text through which communities negotiate identity, memory, and shared values (Nketia, 1974; Agawu, 2003). Nigerian popular music has played a central role in reflecting the nation's struggles with governance, inequality, and social cohesion. From the politically charged Afrobeat of Fela Kuti to the socially conscious works of Sonny Okosun and Ras Kimono, musicians have consistently used their art to comment on national issues and mobilise public sentiment (Olaniyan, 2004; Nwachukwu, 2025). Within this tradition, Onyeka Onwenu stands out as a distinctive figure whose music blends artistic expression with social advocacy, especially in her iconic song *One Love*.

Released during a period marked by political uncertainty and social fragmentation, *One Love* emerged as a call for unity, empathy, and collective responsibility. Scholars have noted that songs that promote social consciousness often become part of a society's moral imagination, helping listeners reflect on their shared challenges and aspirations (Eyerma & Jamison, 1998; Turino, 2008). Recent scholarships also highlight the importance of culturally grounded musical frameworks in shaping public understanding. Authority (2025) argues that African musical expressions often serve as epistemic tools that help communities interpret their social realities and imagine new possibilities for justice and cohesion. This perspective reinforces the significance of Onwenu's work, which draws on indigenous values of solidarity and compassion to address national concerns.

Onwenu's contributions are particularly noteworthy because they intersect with broader conversations about gender, activism, and national identity. As a pioneering female artist, journalist, and advocate, she has used her platform to challenge dominant narratives and highlight issues affecting ordinary Nigerians (The Conversation, 2024). Her music, therefore, provides a rich site for examining how artistic expression can influence political awareness and contribute to social change.

Although several studies have explored the political dimensions of Nigerian music, there remains limited scholarly attention on *One Love* as a case study of social consciousness and political advocacy. This gap is important because the song continues to resonate across generations, suggesting that its message holds enduring relevance in Nigeria's ongoing search for unity and justice. To address this gap, the present study seeks to understand how *One Love* reflects and shapes public awareness of social issues, and how Onyeka Onwenu's artistic choices contribute to broader conversations about political engagement in Nigeria. In this regard, the study is guided by two central research questions: how does *One Love* communicate themes of social consciousness within the Nigerian sociopolitical context, and in what ways does the song function as a form of political advocacy that encourages collective action? Correspondingly, the study aims to examine the lyrical and cultural elements through which



One Love expresses social and political concerns, and to analyse how Onyeka Onwenu's artistic identity and public influence enhance the song's role as a tool for social mobilisation.

By situating *One Love* within the wider landscape of Nigerian popular music and social activism, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how music can challenge injustice, inspire reflection, and promote national unity. It also highlights the significance of female agency in political discourse, demonstrating how women artists like Onyeka Onwenu use their voices to shape public consciousness and advocate for a more equitable society. Ultimately, this introduction sets the stage for a critical exploration of music as a transformative force in Nigeria's cultural and political life.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have long recognised that music in African societies functions not only as entertainment but also as a social text that communicates values, identities, and collective experiences. Nketia (1974) explains that African music operates as a cultural archive through which communities preserve memory and negotiate meaning. In a similar way, Agawu (2003) argues that musical expression in Africa is deeply connected to social life, identity, and political realities. These perspectives show that music is a powerful medium through which people interpret their world and respond to social challenges. Turino (2008) adds that music often becomes a participatory space where individuals form shared consciousness and emotional bonds, making it an important tool for shaping public awareness.

The idea of social consciousness itself has been explored within cultural studies and sociology. Hall (1996) notes that cultural expressions help people understand who they are and how they relate to society, while Eyerman and Jamison (1998) show that music can act as a catalyst for collective identity and political engagement. McLeod (2013) further explains that songs often frame social issues in ways that encourage reflection and action. These arguments highlight the close relationship between music, identity formation, and public consciousness, especially in societies facing political or social instability.

Within the Nigerian context, popular music has historically played a central role in political advocacy. From the era of highlife to the rise of Afrobeat, musicians have used their art to comment on corruption, inequality, and state power. Olaniyan (2004) describes Fela Kuti's music as a form of "rebel art" that challenged authoritarian rule and exposed social injustice. Other musicians such as Sonny Okosun, Ras Kimono, and African China also used their songs to address national unity, poverty, and human rights (Nwachukwu, 2025). More recently, Afrobeats artists have contributed to political discourse, especially during movements such as #EndSARS, where music became a rallying point for youth activism (Bermejo Gago, 2024). These examples show that Nigerian musicians have consistently used their platforms to influence public debate and mobilise citizens.



Music as a tool for protest and resistance has also been widely discussed in global scholarship. Duncombe (2017) describes cultural resistance as a way in which ordinary people challenge dominant power structures through creative expression. In Nigeria, Okujeni et al. (2024) argue that music remains a communicative instrument for social change, especially in times of political tension. Stokes (2014) adds that songs often create emotional connections that strengthen solidarity among listeners. These insights help to explain why certain songs become symbols of resistance and why they continue to resonate long after their release.

The role of women in Nigerian music and political advocacy is another important area of scholarship. African feminist and womanist theories provide useful frameworks for understanding how female artists negotiate gender expectations while participating in public discourse. Nkealah (2016) explains that African feminism focuses on social justice, community, and cultural identity, while Dosekun (2015) highlights how African women in popular culture challenge patriarchal norms through their creative work. These perspectives are relevant to understanding Onyeka Onwenu's contributions, as she has consistently used her music and public presence to address issues affecting women and society at large.

Studies on female agency in Nigerian music show that women have often faced marginalisation within the industry, yet many have carved out influential roles. The Conversation (2024) describes Onwenu as a pioneering figure whose music and activism have shaped national conversations on unity and social justice. AkpanObong (2023) also notes that women in Nigerian folk and popular music frequently challenge gender stereotypes through their artistic choices. Rens (2021) adds that female musicians use visual and lyrical strategies to assert empowerment and visibility. These studies help to situate Onwenu within a broader history of women who have used music as a platform for advocacy.

Theoretical perspectives from cultural studies further illuminate how songs communicate political meaning. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model shows that audiences interpret messages in different ways depending on their social experiences, while Hebdige (1979) explains how popular culture can resist dominant ideologies. These ideas help to frame "One Love" as a cultural text that invites multiple interpretations related to unity, justice, and national identity.

Social movement theory also provides useful insights into how music supports political action. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) argue that songs help movements create shared narratives, while Jasper (2014) explains that music can shape emotions and motivations that drive collective action. These theories help to explain why certain songs become associated with political struggles and why they continue to inspire activism.

Decolonial musicology adds another layer to the discussion by emphasising the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural autonomy. Mignolo (2011) argues that decolonial thought challenges Western dominance in knowledge production, while NdlovuGatsheni (2018) highlights the need for epistemic freedom in African societies. Agawu (2003) similarly critiques the ways African music has been represented in Western scholarship. These



perspectives support the idea that Nigerian music, including Onwenu's work, reflects indigenous values and resists cultural marginalisation.

Onyeka Onwenu's artistic career demonstrates the intersection of music, activism, and national identity. Her work as a musician, journalist, and advocate has positioned her as a significant voice in Nigerian cultural and political life. The Conversation (2024) notes that her documentary *Nigeria: A Squandering of Riches* offered a bold critique of governance, while Ugwu (2024) highlights her long-standing commitment to national unity and social justice. *One Love* has become a cultural symbol associated with peace, hope, and collective responsibility.

Scholars have also examined how music contributes to nation-building and social reform. Ndubuaku and Taoh (2025) argue that African music fosters unity and helps address social instability, while Agbo and Onyishi (2025) show that folk music promotes social integration. Adejunmobi (2011) adds that media technologies have expanded the reach of Nigerian music, allowing songs to influence public discourse more effectively. Jenkins (2006) similarly explains that convergence culture enables audiences to engage with music across multiple platforms, increasing its social impact.

Taken together, the literature shows that music in Nigeria is deeply connected to social consciousness, political advocacy, and cultural identity. It also highlights the important role of female artists such as Onyeka Onwenu, whose work challenges dominant narratives and promotes social change. However, there is limited scholarship that focuses specifically on *One Love* as a case study of political advocacy and social consciousness. This gap justifies the need for a detailed examination of the song's cultural significance, lyrical themes, and enduring impact on Nigerian society.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is guided by three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Cultural Studies Theory, Semiotic Musicology Theory, and Social Movement Theory. Together, they provide a strong foundation for understanding how Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* communicates social meaning, shapes public consciousness, and contributes to political advocacy in Nigeria.

Cultural Studies Theory, associated with scholars such as Stuart Hall, emphasises how cultural texts reflect and reproduce social identities, ideologies, and power relations (Hall, 1996). This perspective is relevant to the present study because *One Love* operates as a cultural artefact that expresses concerns about unity, justice, and national identity. Through this lens, the song is understood not merely as entertainment but as a site where meanings about Nigeria's political atmosphere are produced and contested. Cultural Studies, therefore, helps to explain how audiences interpret the song within their lived experiences of inequality, political tension, and social change.



Semiotic Musicology Theory provides a second analytical layer by focusing on how music communicates meaning through signs, symbols, and expressive codes. Scholars such as JeanJacques Nattiez and Eero Tarasti argue that musical structures, lyrical choices, and performance elements function as semiotic systems that convey social and emotional messages (Nattiez, 1990; Tarasti, 2002). This theory is particularly useful for analysing *One Love* because the song's melodic patterns, lyrical themes, and visual imagery work together to symbolise unity, hope, and collective responsibility. Semiotic analysis allows the study to uncover how Onwenu encodes political messages in both the musical and textual dimensions of the work.

Social Movement Theory, advanced by scholars like Eyerman and Jamison (1998), further strengthens the framework by explaining how cultural expressions support collective action and political mobilisation. According to this theory, music plays a central role in shaping shared identities, framing social issues, and inspiring public engagement. This is directly relevant to *One Love*, which has long been associated with calls for national unity and social justice. By applying Social Movement Theory, the study examines how the song functions as a tool for political advocacy and how it contributes to broader conversations about civic responsibility in Nigeria.

Together, these three theories offer a comprehensive approach to understanding the cultural, musical, and political significance of *One Love*. Cultural Studies explains the social meanings embedded in the song, Semiotic Musicology reveals how those meanings are encoded and communicated, and Social Movement Theory clarifies how the song inspires collective consciousness and action. Their combined use ensures a holistic interpretation of Onyeka Onwenu's work as both an artistic creation and a catalyst for social transformation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* communicates social consciousness and political advocacy within the Nigerian socio-political context. A qualitative approach is suitable because the study focuses on interpreting meaning, symbolism, and cultural significance rather than quantifying variables. The analysis draws on three purposively selected data sources: the song's lyrics, the official music video, and documented cultural responses in media and scholarly commentary, all of which offer direct insight into the song's artistic and political messages.

Data collection involved accessing publicly available versions of the song, verified lyric transcriptions, and relevant visual and textual materials from the music video. Secondary sources, including academic publications, interviews, and cultural analyses, were consulted to provide contextual depth. As the study does not involve human participants, no personal data or interviews were collected.



Data were analysed through semiotic analysis, cultural interpretation, and thematic analysis. Semiotic analysis, informed by Semiotic Musicology, was used to identify musical and visual signs that convey meaning. Cultural interpretation, grounded in Cultural Studies Theory, guided the examination of how the song reflects themes of identity, unity, and social justice. Thematic analysis helped to organise recurring ideas across lyrics, video imagery, and cultural discourse, while Social Movement Theory provided an additional lens for understanding the song's role in mobilisation and public engagement.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, comparing insights from the lyrics, video, and secondary sources to strengthen credibility and minimise bias. All materials were cross-checked for accuracy, and analytical decisions were documented to maintain transparency. Ethical standards were upheld by relying solely on publicly accessible materials, acknowledging all sources, and avoiding the reproduction of copyrighted lyrics.

**Reflexivity Statement:** As researchers trained in music and cultural studies, we recognise that our disciplinary background and appreciation for African musical traditions may shape our interpretations. To address this, we maintained reflective notes, questioned our assumptions, and ensured that all interpretations were grounded in the data rather than personal expectations. This reflexive practice enhanced the objectivity and credibility of the study.

Overall, this methodology provides a concise yet rigorous framework for analysing *One Love* as a cultural text that reflects and shapes social consciousness in Nigeria.

### **Musical and Textual Analysis of One Love**

A close examination of *One Love* reveals that its social power lies not only in its message but also in the stylistic choices through which that message is communicated. The song's lyrical construction, musical arrangement, and performance aesthetics work together to produce a coherent ethical appeal centred on unity, empathy, and collective responsibility. By combining accessible language with a warm, steady musical texture, Onyeka Onwenu crafts a piece that invites reflection while encouraging communal participation. This section therefore undertakes a detailed textual and musical analysis of *One Love*, demonstrating how its lyrical economy, repetitive structures, and Afro-influenced stylistic features contribute to its enduring role as a cultural text of social consciousness and political advocacy in Nigeria.

### **Textual / Lyrical Analysis**

The lyrics of *One Love* foreground themes of togetherness, mutual recognition, and shared humanity. They contain a lyrical economy, moral address, repetition and collective participation.

Let's take a view of the entire lyrics:

    Hmm wow uh wow oh hmm  
    Don't be sad understand



Everybody has a day when the sun stays away  
Take heart in a new tomorrow  
Living one love between looks for a brighter day  
You never need worry let one love set you free  
One love keep us together  
Living in a world it's a struggle to staying alive  
One love keep us together  
Living in a world it's a struggle to staying alive  
Somebody tell me  
Oh why do we fight it  
One love can set us free if we just let it be  
Take heart in a brand-new day  
When love is all we need to chase the past away  
You never need worry If you just let it be  
One love keep us together  
Living in a world it's a struggle to staying alive  
One love keep us together  
Living in a world it's a struggle to staying alive  
You never need worry no no  
Let one love set you free  
Hmm wow uh wow ooh  
One love one love keep us together  
Hmm hmmhmm one love  
One love one love keep us together  
Don't you worry nananana one love keep us together  
One love one love one love keep us together  
one love, one love, one love, one love, one love, one love  
Uh uh  
One love keep us together keep us together  
Somebody tell me one love keep us together  
Oh why  
Why do we fight it one love keep us together  
Why do we fight it  
Why do we fight it

**Lyrical Economy and Moral Address:** The lyrical construction of *One Love* is marked by economy and clarity. Rather than dense metaphor or partisan rhetoric, the song employs direct, accessible language that foregrounds shared humanity and mutual responsibility. The absence of accusatory tones or named political actors allows the song to function as a moral address directed at the collective rather than a polemic aimed at specific elites. This stylistic choice broadens the song's appeal and enhances its longevity within Nigeria's public consciousness.



**Repetition and Collective Participation:** Repetition functions as a central stylistic device in *One Love*. The recurring chorus reinforces the song's ethical message while facilitating memorability and communal singing. In performance contexts, this repetition transforms listeners from passive audiences into active participants, symbolically enacting the unity the song advocates. Such participatory potential strengthens the song's civic function and aligns musical form with political intent.

**Musical Simplicity and Emotional Accessibility:** Musically, *One Love* adopts a restrained arrangement characterized by a steady rhythm, melodic warmth, and minimal ornamentation. This simplicity enhances emotional accessibility and allows the song's message to remain foregrounded. Rather than overwhelming the listener with virtuosity, the musical structure supports reflection, empathy, and collective identification. The affective tone thus complements the song's moral framing and reinforces its advocacy function.

Taken together, the lyrical and musical features of *One Love* reveal style itself as a strategic choice. By privileging clarity, repetition, and accessibility, Onyeka Onwenu constructs a form of advocacy that operates through inclusion rather than antagonism. The song's stylistic restraint is therefore not a sign of political neutrality but a deliberate means of sustaining relevance and moral authority across diverse audiences.

### Figure 1.

Excerpt from Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love*

#### ONE LOVE

Onyeka Onwenu

Voice

Don't be sad un-der-stand Ev-ery-bo-dy has a day\_ when the

4

sun stays a-way Take heart in a new to-mor-row liv-ing one love be-tween

8

looks for a bright-er day you nev-er need wor-ry let one love set you free

11

One love keep us to-get-her Liv-ing in a world it's a strug-gle to stay-ing a-live (gliss)

Choir

One love keep us to-get-her

15

One love keep us to-get-her Liv-ing in a world it's a strug-gle to stay-ing a-live

Choir

One love keep us to-get-her



## Musical Analysis

Musically, *One Love* is built on a simple and memorable melody supported by a repetitive structure that encourages collective participation. This musical accessibility has helped the song travel widely and remain relevant across generations. Its use in civic events, media programmes, and moments of national reflection further strengthens its position as a cultural resource through which Nigerians imagine unity and shared purpose. As Onwuegbuna (2009:3) notes, musical analysis involves examining the different components of a composition in order to understand their nature, function, and contribution to the whole.

From a stylistic perspective, popular music scholars such as Ikenna Onwuegbuna<sup>1</sup> classify *One Love* within the Afro Funk tradition. He explains that Funk is typically marked by an emphatic rhythmic feel built on a syncopated groove, with strong downbeats and “funky” off beat accents created through tight interaction between bass and drums. The style often features interlocking guitar and horn riffs that produce a clock-like rhythmic pattern, as well as repetitive, hypnotic grooves that develop through subtle variations rather than a strict verse–chorus structure. The bass tends to employ sharp, percussive tones, while the drums make use of ghost notes and syncopation. Harmonically, Funk draws on modal or pentatonic ideas with sparse chordal movement, allowing the rhythm section to dominate.

Its form usually unfolds as a narrative groove with sections such as introductions, verses, horn or lead interjections, bridges, solos, and vamps, often supported by call and response patterns between vocals and instruments. The overall texture is dense and tightly interwoven, with rhythm guitar, bass, drums, and horns contributing percussive layers that prioritise rhythmic precision over melodic complexity. As Onwuegbuna (2025) observes, interpreting popular music is a dynamic process shaped by multiple stakeholders and influenced by both personal and cultural perspectives.

Looking specifically at Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* he identifies the rhythm as emphatic with hooks (s1 l 1 d l 1 d). He also identifies a steady stamp on the bass drum holding down the 4 notes of the bar while the syncopation comes on the snare drum. Other funk song with similar attributes is *She is Fresh* by Kool and the Gang.

The simple outlay of Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* presents first the rhythmic introduction followed by Onwenu's solo voice, more around the alto range/texture then followed by the Chorus. Regular interjections from solo instruments like the saxophone usually heralds the chorus entry. The rhythm is energized by the perfect interlock between the jazz drum, guitarists, keyboard and bass. See musical excerpt in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.***Excerpt from Onyeka Onwenu's One Love*

**ONE LOVE**

Onyeka Onwenu

$\text{♩} = 100$



Rhythm Guit.

Synth

Electric Bass

Drumset

R. Guit.

Syn.

El. B.

D. Set

R. Guit.

Syn.

El. B.

D. Set

Danlami Baba<sup>1</sup> agrees with this broad classification of Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* but insists on calling it Afro Pop arguing that she brings qualities of reggae, highlife and sometimes a bit of jazz in her works. For him, "she is not just entertaining. She is also preaching. If it were funk it would have been a shed faster than what she did". In all, it is safe to understand Onyeka Onwenu's *One Love* within this framework of Afro Funk or Afro Pop depending on one's perspective of evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> Danlami Baba, Interview with Authors, 12 January, 2026.



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## FINDINGS

The analysis of *One Love* shows that Onyeka Onwenu uses both musical and textual elements to communicate a strong message of unity, empathy, and collective responsibility. The song functions as a cultural text that speaks directly to Nigeria's social realities, especially the challenges of division, inequality, and political tension. Across the lyrics, musical arrangement, and public reception, several key findings emerge.

The lyrical analysis reveals that the song is built around a clear moral appeal. Rather than using complex metaphors or confrontational language, Onwenu adopts simple, direct expressions that encourage listeners to recognise their shared humanity. Phrases that call for understanding, patience, and mutual care present unity as both a personal choice and a collective duty. The absence of blame or political accusation allows the message to reach a wide audience, making the song relevant across different social groups and historical moments. This lyrical economy strengthens the song's emotional impact and supports its role as a tool for social consciousness.

Repetition emerges as another central feature of the song. The recurring chorus, "One love keep us together", acts as a unifying refrain that reinforces the ethical message while encouraging participation. In performance settings, this repetition invites listeners to sing along, turning the song into a shared experience rather than a private reflection. This participatory quality mirrors the unity the song promotes and helps explain why *One Love* has remained popular in civic events, media broadcasts, and national celebrations.

The musical analysis shows that the song's arrangement supports its social message through simplicity and accessibility. The steady rhythm, warm melodic line, and minimal ornamentation create a calm and reflective atmosphere. This musical restraint allows the lyrics to remain at the centre of attention, ensuring that the message of unity is not overshadowed by technical complexity. The interplay between the rhythm section, gentle instrumental interjections, and Onwenu's expressive vocal delivery produces a sound that is both inviting and emotionally grounding.

Stylistically, the song draws from Afro Funk and Afro Pop traditions, combining rhythmic emphasis with melodic clarity. The groove is steady and lightly syncopated, supported by interlocking instrumental patterns that create a sense of cohesion. This stylistic blend contributes to the song's broad appeal, allowing it to resonate with listeners who identify with different musical traditions. The musical structure, which moves smoothly between solo lines, choral responses, and instrumental cues, reinforces the theme of togetherness by presenting unity as both a musical and social ideal.

The cultural interpretation further shows that *One Love* has become more than a popular song; it has evolved into a symbol of national hope and collective aspiration. Its frequent use in public gatherings, charity campaigns, and media programmes demonstrates how audiences have adopted the song as a reminder of shared responsibility. Many listeners interpret the song as a



call to rise above ethnic, political, and economic divisions, reflecting the broader social desire for peace and stability in Nigeria.

The study finds that Onyeka Onwenu's public identity strengthens the song's influence. As a respected musician, journalist, and advocate, her voice carries moral authority. Her long-standing commitment to national unity and social justice gives *One Love* additional weight, allowing audiences to connect the song's message with her wider contributions to public life. This connection between artistic expression and personal credibility enhances the song's role as a form of political advocacy.

These findings show that *One Love* operates as a powerful cultural text that blends musical simplicity, lyrical clarity, and moral purpose. Through its accessible style and inclusive message, the song encourages reflection, fosters emotional connection, and promotes a vision of unity that remains relevant in Nigeria's ongoing search for social cohesion and justice.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that *One Love* functions as more than a popular song; it operates as a subtle but intentional form of social revolution. Its message of unity is not presented as a vague emotional appeal but as a response to the deep social and political fractures that continue to shape Nigerian life. In this sense, the song acts as a cultural critique of inequality, mistrust, and weak national cohesion, reflecting Hall's (1996) argument that cultural texts often challenge dominant ideologies and expose the tensions within society. By drawing attention to the conditions that make unity necessary, the song encourages listeners to reflect on the structural issues that undermine collective wellbeing.

A key aspect of the song's transformative power lies in its reframing of unity as an active political choice rather than a passive ideal. The lyrics call for empathy, patience, and shared responsibility, subtly resisting the normalisation of ethnic division, political apathy, and social fragmentation. This aligns with Eyerman and Jamison's (1998) view that music can articulate alternative social visions capable of unsettling the status quo and inspiring new forms of collective identity. The song's warm tone, steady rhythm, and symbolic musical gestures mobilise emotional energy that encourages listeners to imagine a more humane and inclusive society. This reflects Tarasti's (2002) argument that music carries semiotic power, enabling it to shape consciousness and inspire reflection through its expressive codes.

The song's impact is further strengthened by Onyeka Onwenu's public identity. As a respected female artist, journalist, and advocate, her voice carries moral authority and challenges gendered expectations about who may speak on national issues. Her presence in the public sphere reinforces observations that African women in popular culture often challenge patriarchal boundaries through their creative work (Dosekun, 2015; Nkealah, 2016). By using



her platform to promote unity and social responsibility, Onwenu contributes to a broader tradition of African women whose artistic expressions serve as tools for political engagement and cultural transformation.

The song's quiet revolutionary character also reflects wider scholarship on cultural resistance. Duncombe (2017) argues that cultural expressions often serve as subtle forms of dissent that question dominant power structures without relying on direct confrontation. Similarly, Stokes (2014) notes that music can create emotional connections that strengthen solidarity and support social change. *One Love* fits within this tradition by offering a gentle but persistent call for unity that resonates across generations and social groups. Its message is accessible, non-aggressive, and inclusive, allowing it to circulate widely and remain relevant in moments of national reflection.

Furthermore, the song's emphasis on shared humanity aligns with decolonial perspectives that highlight the importance of reclaiming indigenous values and communal ethics in the face of social fragmentation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mignolo, 2011). By drawing on familiar musical idioms and culturally grounded themes, *One Love* affirms local knowledge systems and challenges the dominance of divisive political narratives. This reinforces Agawu's (2003) argument that African musical expressions often serve as epistemic tools through which communities interpret their realities and imagine new possibilities.

Taken together, the discussion shows that *One Love* contributes to social revolution not through confrontation or protest but through a reorientation of values, identities, and civic consciousness. Its musical simplicity, lyrical clarity, and moral tone work together to promote unity as a shared responsibility. In doing so, the song demonstrates the enduring power of music to shape public awareness, challenge harmful social norms, and inspire collective action in contemporary Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *One Love* stands as one of Onyeka Onwenu's most enduring contributions to social consciousness and political advocacy in Nigeria. The analysis shows that her lyrical and musical choices create a thoughtful blend of African and Western popular styles, resulting in a sound that is both culturally grounded and widely accessible. Through its lyrical clarity, stylistic restraint, and moral tone, the song presents unity not as a sentimental slogan but as an ethical commitment rooted in shared responsibility. Rather than provoking confrontation, *One Love* encourages listeners to see themselves as active participants in shaping the nation's moral and social future.

By placing the song within wider debates on cultural resistance, political communication, and postcolonial identity, this study highlights the important role that popular music plays in shaping civic imagination. The findings suggest that advocacy grounded in empathy,



persuasion, and inclusive narratives can be just as politically influential as overt protest, especially in societies marked by deep divisions. In this way, *One Love* demonstrates how music can quietly challenge harmful norms, inspire reflection, and promote a vision of collective belonging.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry several implications for scholarship, cultural practice, and national discourse. First, they show that popular music remains a powerful medium for shaping public consciousness in Nigeria. Songs like *One Love* can influence how people understand unity, justice, and civic responsibility, offering alternative narratives to those produced by political elites.

Second, the study highlights the importance of female agency in Nigerian popular culture. Onyeka Onwenu's work demonstrates that women artists are not only cultural contributors but also influential voices in national conversations about identity and social change. Her example challenges gendered assumptions about authority and public engagement, suggesting that female musicians continue to play a vital role in Nigeria's cultural and political landscape.

Third, the study underscores the value of moral persuasion in political communication. In contexts where direct confrontation may deepen existing tensions, music that appeals to shared values and emotional connection can foster dialogue and encourage collective reflection. This insight is particularly relevant for peacebuilding, civic education, and cultural policy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and implications, several recommendations emerge:

- **For scholars:** Future research should explore unity-oriented songs across different African countries to identify common themes and cultural variations. Comparative studies would deepen understanding of how music contributes to nation-building across diverse contexts. Empirical studies on audience reception would also provide insight into how listeners interpret and internalise musical messages of unity and social responsibility.
- **For musicians and cultural practitioners:** Artists should recognise the potential of music as a tool for social transformation. By crafting messages that promote empathy, justice, and collective responsibility, musicians can contribute meaningfully to national conversations and civic development.



- **For policymakers and educators:** Cultural and educational institutions should integrate socially conscious music into programmes that promote national cohesion, peace education, and civic engagement. Supporting female artists and expanding platforms for their voices would further strengthen inclusive cultural participation.
- **For the Nigerian public:** Citizens can draw on songs like *One Love* as resources for reflection, dialogue, and community building. Music that promotes unity can serve as a reminder of shared values in times of political or social strain.

In the end, *One Love* reminds us that nation-building does not begin in government offices or political rallies, it begins in the quiet spaces where people choose compassion over division, and where a simple song becomes a blueprint for the society we hope to create.

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