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The Portrayal of Contemporary Love in NIKI's *Dancing with the Devil* Song

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research paper looks at how modern love is represented in NIKI's "Dancing with the Devil" song. The perspective of changing ways of expressing love due to digital media is overlooked in the analysis of the song. It signifies that love no longer follows traditional norms, which makes it liberating albeit more intricate when it comes to relating. **method:** this study employs semiotic phenomenology approach by Peirce, the paper interprets this piece to reveal its deeper intentions as well as cultural context, revealing the new understanding of youth on love. **Result and discussion:** the song narrates about an artist who had complicated experiences related to love and were ironic, desperate, thrilled in having a destructive relationship with oneself but addictive too. **Implication:** this article's analysis contextualizes on these themes within a greater society where instant gratification often triumphs over meaningful relationships leading people into endless chasing without any end solution. The dynamic of society consequently creating new norms that is adaptable. However, the gratification of shallow love in dating society needs to be studied even further in the application of real society.

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INTRODUCTION

The fast-paced and evolving range of expression and experiences in today's society, as well as cultural changes brought about by the advancement of digital life, have transformed social conditions and how individuals engage with one another individually. The media culture of today has transformed the notion of love, resulting in a significant shift in what inspires people to pursue love and what they desire from

it. The concept of love itself is multifaceted and ever-changing. However, love has always been an element of humanity's growing up process.

Love has been fostered throughout modern media, including music, where musicians frequently produce songs about modern love. For instance, NIKI. Nicole Zefanya, known professionally as NIKI, born in 1999, is an Indonesian-born singer and composer under *88rising*, the same recording label as Rich Brian, an Indonesian born rapper, and Warren Huang, an Indonesian born singer. NIKI began her career as a cover vocalist, singing other artists' songs and uploading them to platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud. When her *Nicole* album was released in 2022, her popularity in Indonesia increased significantly, particularly among youngsters. One of her highly-listened songs in this album was *High School in Jakarta* with over 130 million listeners on music streaming platform, Spotify. Meanwhile, *Dancing with the Devils* is one of the songs in her debut album, *Zephyr*. The song *Dancing with the Devil* was published a week on YouTube before her debut album, which was out on May 16, 2018. *Dancing with the Devil* is a song about the character "I"'s complex connection with their present partner. The song began with a gloomy R&B instrumental and then followed by nice and catchy beats. Pop/RnB songs are generally popular among youngsters in the 21st century. The rise of RnB popularity among youngsters is generally due to the shift of media preference. Hakim et al., (2023) said in their study that the wide exposure of musical genres including RnB is due to the high digital media and social interaction activities.

Love in the modern age contains several key aspects such as the absence of norms which means the modern love being said is not constrained by traditional love value, this leads to the freedom of expression by people who are involved in the relationship. The desire of being freed from constraints such as commitments drives modern love to exploit the sake of relationship as an escape to cure loneliness whilst not being able to fulfill the expectations of romantic relationships. This constantly leads to a concept against the norms of emotional, psychological and social needs of a relationship. Balcos (2020) in The Science Scholar via Medium stated in their writing that in the modern age, romance has started to become rather complicated and intimate relationships have become rather casual or shallow. This problem caused people to easily break up, and also contributed to the rise of cheating. Adam defined

that flirting and sexual behavior in social media or cyber relationships is also perceived similarly to physical infidelity (Adam, 2019;Rokach & Chan, 2023).

The complicacies in modern relationships have been manifested throughout generations. However, the definition of modern love and relationships are perceived differently in each media. Thus, why this article will discuss the portrayal of modern love and relationship in the song *Dancing with the Devil* by NIKI. The objective of this study is to discuss how modern love and relationships are depicted in the song *Dancing with the Devil* by NIKI. This article is written to understand how youngsters perceive love and relationships in their social circle.

METHODS

This analysis will use qualitative descriptive methods to understand the meaning used in the word choice in the lyrics of the lyrics of *Dancing with the Devil*. This analysis will use two kinds of data, which are primary and secondary. The primary data is the song lyrics *Dancing with the Devil* by Nikki, and the secondary data is literature writings such as academic and non-academic articles to support the interpretation. This analysis will use a semiotic phenomenology approach based on Peirce semiotic theory to analyze the sign of the object through the interpretant, which will be processed individually, culturally, and contextually. This method aims to analyze how modern love and relationships are depicted in the song based on the perceptions of youngsters in their social interactions. The semiotic analysis is used to analyze the intrinsic elements of the lyrics to examine the complexities of modern love in the lyrics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

General Theme

This section is aimed at explaining the general information of the song *Dancing with the Devil* by NIKI and does not mean to analyze it deeper. The song *Dancing with the Devil* was released on May 16, 2018 on YouTube, a week before the release of NIKI's debut album, *Zephyr*. NIKI described this song as the moment when she fell into someone's charm voluntarily, despite it being the wrong thing to do, and she is willingly committing to it (Edwinortiz, 2018). *Dancing with the Devil* was the sixth track on the album *Zephyr*. The album itself contains eight tracks in total. This song speaks about the complicated romantic experience of the singer, and the narrative tells how the

experience is affecting the singer from her point of view. With the genre of pop/R&B, this song is popular among young listeners.

General Analysis

This section aims to generally analyse the lyrics and how NIKI sang the lyrics. The analysis is mainly focused on the word choices and language usage in the lyrics. This section does not intend to analyse the song in a social context.

The song started with melancholy beats with the lyrics,

“Wide awake at 2 A.M”

“Think I’m losin’ who I am”

Interprets that the singer attempted to say that this relationship constantly lingers around her mind that she barely had a rest– this proves that the word “Think I’m losing who I am” refers to the crisis that the singer dealt while being in the relationship.

“Why you keep on choosing them”

This implied how her current partner keeps on choosing someone or something else and constantly ruining their priorities thus making the singer feel like they are not enough. This later supported with the next line of the lyrics,

“When all I’m trying to do is make sure you got a nice bed and welcoming arms to come home to”

This line interprets how the singer tried all her best to make her significant other feel loved, the phrase “*nice bed*” refers to a good place to rest and followed by “*welcoming arms to come home to*” refers to how the singer compares her affection with a safe place or a sanctuary for her partner to “come home” *which metaphorically means comfort zone*.

Then the singer continues to recite “*But time and time and time again, you’re only here every now and then*” to “*When’s it gonna end*” means that the singer’s partner simultaneously being absent in the relationship, referring to the phrase “...you’re only here every now and then” and the singer’s hopeful demeanor represented in the phrase “*When’s it gonna end?*” which the singer re-claimed she has a thought on how her partner will be better one day.

The other line of the first verse also said,

“People say I’m all the kinds of crazy ‘cause I’m crazy for you” and then continued with *“They say, “How you love a ghost you can’t touch?”*

This means that everyone including the singer’s closest friends even say that her behavior doesn’t make any sense because she loved a “ghost”, ghost metaphorically refers to a person that has gone away, either it is unavailable for the other parties or died.

The song continues with lyrics,

“They ain’t wrong but I just love you too much”

This refers to the singer’s self-awareness of her position, thus still unable to get out from the situation, hence why the singer continues the line with *“So go and call a GP”* GP or General Practitioner refers to the term for doctor of general medicine that works in a local community but not a hospital. The tone for the latter was rather challenging, telling people that they can call a GP to treat her if she is so crazy and this proven by the next line *“Baby say I’m too freaky”* means that she is well aware that everyone including her current partner acknowledged her for her persistence and ‘dedication’.

The chorus of the song goes along with the phrase,

“Oh my God I’m so gone”

“I’m dancing with the devils with my high heels on”

The term “I’m so gone” refers to the state of the singer’s wellbeing, where she felt out of her mind thus why she is “Dancing with the devils” which refers to enthusiastically engaging in a risky action or situation knowing the output won’t be good for her. In this phrase, it is portraying the ironic condition of the singer. The singer speaks about the irony of despite the awful relationship she is currently in, she is still enthusiastically involved in it because of the thrill, this also emphasized with the next line *“Unapologetic ‘bout it”* which refers that the singer has no regrets in being involved in this relationship. The “high heels” terms refer to the femininity and submissiveness of the singer, where she admitted she has fallen too deep on the relationship to take control of it. Burcar (2018) in their study mentioned that high heels function as one of feminine contemporary devices which portray the fragility, instability, and the helplessness of a

woman. The tone as the singer sings this phrase is rather desperate, almost in the complaining tone. This especially portrayed in the elongated notes in the word “God” and “Gone”, the word “God” was being sung in a rather high-pitched tone, meanwhile the word “Gone” was rather sung in a low pitch, indicating shame, irony, and hopelessness.

The chorus continued with *“Cause the lovin’ so good, though I know baby’s no good”* the singer is well aware of her partner’s wellbeing, however she is admitting that the singer liked the affection her partner gave. The line continued with *“Yeah the lovin’ so good, if I could stop it, I would”* it refers to how the singer describe that the affection is addictive that she cannot control it, this also justify the line *“They ain’t wrong but I just love you too much”* and *“I’m dancing with the devil with my high heels on”* that interprets how the singer feels under control over her current relationship with her partner, then the lyrics continues to *“Yeah the lovin’ so good ‘cause we up to no good”* this again reclaims how the singer said that the affection that her partner gave her feels addictive, the phrase *“Cause we up to no good”* refers to how they are not doing anything that’s “good” enough or “normal” enough for a relationship. This also refers to the line *“Dancing with the devils”* and emphasizes the risky action that the singer is willing to do, then the chorus ends with *“But the lovin’ so good”* she once again puts a stress on how good the affection her partner gave made her feel. The singer continuously mention “The love feels so good” and underscore how it is actually nice to be so in love, and yet the singer simultaneously follows the phrase “Love so good” with phrases that has negative connotation such as, *“If I could stop it I would”* the word “Stop” refers to the antonym of “start”, then the line *“Cause we up to no good”* once again the phrase “So good” contradicts with the phrase “No good” then this continues with the word *“But”* before the phrase *“The lovin’ so good”* which means the singer is trying to justify her behavior towards this relationship.

The second verse of the song goes along by

“The other day your mama called”

“She told me all in all”

“I was the best you’ll ever have”

“You won’t commit a crime bigger than givin’ me up”

The singer mentioned that her partner's "Mama" called her and told her how the singer is the best that her kid ever dated. "Mama" here refers to the closest person that the singer's partner ever has, the one that bears the singer's partner, knows how good the singer loves her partner. The underlying meaning could refer to the word "Mama" with the feminine aspects of Mom. The singer is comparing her love to the purity of "Mother's love" that is ever changing. In the study conducted by Permatasari & Mochtar (2022) though the mother's love is gentle and nurturing traditionally, however the mother's love could be any other emotion.

According to the study by Deevi (2022) mother's love in literature is often portrayed as selfless, pure, and unrivaled. The mother fulfills their role with complete devotion. This is how the singer view her affection to her current partner as it is continued with *"I was the best you'll ever have"* and *"You won't commit a crime bigger than givin' me up"* the "Mama" referred in the song lyrics believed that her kid won't do any kind of mischiefs, however the fact that the singer said *"..crime bigger than giving me up"* interprets to how the partner will miss out on so much things because they let go of the singer. This is supported by the previous line *"I was the best you'll ever have"* that refers to how she loves her partner so much, she became selfless and did not care whether her partner will reciprocate her feelings or not and she compared her love to a mother's love. However, the half of the second verse could indicate how the singer viewed herself, that she actually has a pride and great self-love, this is justified by *"And I know that she ain't wrong"* which means she agreed to what her partner's "Mama" said. Her love is the best, her love is selfless, she loves her partner so much, and that her partner won't find another as good at loving them as the singer did. Another justification also stressed on the line *"...I know someday a better man will come along"* refers that the singer is well aware there are better people than her current partner and she deserves better than to cling on her current partner.

However, the next half of the second verse contradicts how she viewed herself,

"But your lips got me saying"

"Let bygones be bygones"

"I don't wanna fucking move on"

Once again, despite the fact that she is well aware of her worth, the singer is continuously interested in the smallest part of her current partner. The phrase *"Your lips got me saying"* means that once she is with her current partner, she has forgotten everything including how she deserves better, hence *"Let bygones be bygones."* This is then emphasized with the line *"I don't wanna fucking move on"* in this line she especially used maledictive language, in which usually used to express strong emotions such as anger or frustration (Hughes, 1991 in Osborne 2021). Maledictive language used here is to emphasize the feelings of the singer. The frustration could be felt by the tone in how the singer sung this particular line, which is later supported by the next line *"Boy why am I so crazy for you"* she was questioning her behavior, this again re-stating that the singer has a self-awareness how she deserves something more, but despite, she chose to stay with her current partner until the state of "crazy".

Later this irony is portrayed in the sarcasm of the next line *"You're so talented in not coming home"* in the first verse, she is referring to herself as a "home" which her partner should reside in, however, her partner has other priorities that they did not take the singer seriously. The sarcasm was also a portrayal of the singer's self-pity, how she still sees the good in her current partner despite their behavior. This is supported by the next line saying, *"But if it ain't you I'd rather be alone"* which refers to whatever happened in the relationship, and whatever her partner did with her, she would rather stay by their side. The singer's self-awareness continues in the line *"SOS situation"* which refers to how this relationship did not run how it is supposed to, this is an "SOS" situation, or a dangerous situation which she should be "saved" from. The singer's resistance then portrayed in the next line *"Can't say no to temptation"* which she agreed that this relationship is so tempting and addictive, she cannot "get out" from it.

This analysis is dependent on how the lyrics are interpreted generally. The interpretation of the lyrics is linked to how the singer sang the song and it is influenced by the resonance of the song's themes and messages. The song's theme primarily revolves around the complicated and unstable love story of the singer, delving deep into the complexities of human feelings and relationships. This is obvious in the carefully chosen words and wording, which help clearly express the singer's current

experiences within a relationship. Each line contains a variety of meanings, presenting the singer's journey from the peaks of desire to the depths of grief.

Discussion

This section is aimed to discuss the social context of the song, and connect it to the romantic experiences of the youngsters. The word choices in the song portray certain conditions that are experienced by the singer. NIKI on this song admitted that this song talks about her certain experience about having challenges in a relationship with her partner, the 'devil' metaphor is symboling how her partner is able to tempt her to stay despite how hurt she is by her partner. The idiom "dancing with the devil" represents that with her partner, she is willing to take risky action and put aside the consequences. The phrase "with high heels on" in the line "I'm dancing with the devil with my high heels on" represents how she is under control of the risky action she took, thus why she is "dancing with the devil" with her "...high heels on." NIKI as reported in Complex by Edwinortiz (2018) stated that this song is about when she fell into someone's charm willingly despite knowing it is wrong– but they (the person) had her keep on pursuing them that she doesn't want to be right. According to the study conducted by Burunat (2019), love for humans is a physiological motivation such as hunger, sleep or sex, which makes it a motivation for human beings to survive. Thus, why NIKI is staying in the relationship and define it to be a reason for her to keep on going, because she is heavily motivated by the 'love' she felt.

The complexities of love portrayed in the song related to the reality of modern dating. Raimy (2023) argued that modern dating is influenced by the social applications, gender pressure, and the shift of perspective in connection. Raimy also argued that modern dating turns people to pursue quantity over quality. The fast-paced dating app also drives individuals to engage in a continuous swiping cycle which rarely allows individuals to have enough time to actually get to know someone. Raimy argued that authenticity and real interactions are frequently overlooked in favor of instant pleasure. The overlooked gratification of instant pleasure turns youngsters to take quality connection for granted. The lack of understanding their partner often drives the relationship into a shallow connection instead of fulfilling. This often leaves both parties

confused and lost, whilst turning one of the parties as a chaser and the other one as a prey.

Study conducted by Bonilla-Zorita et al., (2021) argued that problematic usage of dating applications is often motivated by the sex-search and self-esteem enhancement. The usage of dating applications also influences the objectification tendencies and the fear of deception. The fear of deception often motivates youngsters to stay in unidentified connections. Thus, why in the song “*Dancing with the Devils*” NIKI is telling a narrative about how big is her sacrifice in order for the connection to be stable, whilst continuing to wait on the uncertainty that her partner is constantly showing. The song also portrays the concern of NIKI’s close acquaintances and calls her accountable over her decision, but yet again since she felt the feeling she wanted to feel in the connection, she refused to leave it. Even though everyone is already warning her over the output of the connection, she is rather be with her partner than not at all.

CONCLUSION

The song “Dancing with the Devil” by NIKI encapsulates the complexities of modern love and relationships as experienced by today’s youth. Through its poignant lyrics, the song reflects the inner turmoil and the paradoxical nature of pursuing a connection that is both intoxicating and damaging. It underscores the tendency among young people to cling to relationships that may not fulfill their deeper emotional needs, highlighting a preference for the familiarity of unfulfilling bonds over the uncertainty of solitude. This study suggests a need for further research into the behavioral patterns of young individuals in love and the factors influencing their relational choices. By delving into the symbolism within NIKI’s music, we gain insight into the evolving narrative of love in contemporary culture—a narrative that continues to be shaped by the media, societal expectations, and personal experiences.

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