

Nature-Based Metaphors in Selected Niki's Song Lyrics: A Semantic Study of Emotional Expression

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-05-18 Revised: 2026-05-28 Accepted: 2026-06-01</p> <p>Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; Emotional Expression; Nature-Based Metaphor; NIKI; Semantic Studies.</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10674</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Asna Pratiwi Asnapratiwi25@gmail.com Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Jawa Tengah</p>	<p><i>This study examines the use of nature-based metaphors in the lyrics of five Niki songs - "Anaheim," "Backburner," "Oceans & Engines," "Autumn," and "La La Lost You." Nature metaphors are powerful emotional expressions, articulating abstract inner states with real, universally recognizable phenomena emotional narratives making them a rich focus for semantic analysis. Niki song lyrics utilize connotative language rich in natural imagery, representing a suitable corpus for semantic and metaphorical investigation. This study aims to identify, classify, and interpret the emotional functions of nature-based metaphors, specifically ocean, fire, storms, and seasonal cycles, to articulate various emotional states, including grief, unrequited love, and the search for autonomy. Based on Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this study views metaphors not merely as stylistic ornaments but as cognitive mechanisms that help listeners understand abstract emotional states through concrete natural phenomena. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the analysis revealed a total of 101 nature-based metaphorical expressions across the selected songs. The findings reveal three main types of metaphors: ontological metaphor, structural metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Ontological metaphors are the most common, demonstrating a lyrical strategy for materializing abstract internal pain into tangible substance. Semantically, Niki utilizes the domain of nature. Semantically, Niki uses the natural domain metaphor to enrich emotions. The fire metaphor deepens the nuances of emotional intensity, while the water and sky metaphors communicate longing, sadness, or relief. This study contributes to the fields of music linguistics and metaphor research, offering insight into how a modern Indonesian artist writes popular songs using interconnected conceptual metaphors as aesthetic and cognitive tools but with distinct emotional implications.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Music serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying emotions and meaning. In song lyrics, figurative language is often used to directly express complex emotions. In the perspective of (Putra et al., 2024) demonstrated that the use of figurative language such as metaphors and similes in song lyrics adds depth and emotional resonance, thus communicating nuances of feeling more effectively. Semantically, the meaning of lyrics lies not only in the literal interpretation but also in the implied meaning created through the figurative language. According to (Nugraheny & Yuwita, 2023) state that in song lyrics, metaphors function to convey messages or emotions in unique and imaginative ways. (Fisher, 2021) emphasize that musical meaning arises from internal conceptual patterns, where analogous patterns can trigger metaphorical interpretations and similar emotional responses.

From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, these linguistic symbols are not static, isolated structures; rather, they function as a dynamic communicative act that connects artist, text, and audience (Fuente & Walsh, 2020). In this way, lyrics act as cultural artifacts that reflect broader socio-cultural narratives, shape personal and collective identities, and demonstrate how popular culture influences emotional regulation and everyday meaning-making (Ramadhana & Heriyati, 2025).

The theoretical foundation for understanding metaphor in language, including song lyrics, was fundamentally reframed by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). CMT establishes that metaphor is not merely a literary ornament but a cognitive mechanism that articulates how humans think, reason, and communicate from abstract concepts to concrete, embodied experiences (Green, 2006). Lakoff and Johnson identified three primary types of metaphor: structural, orientational, and ontological, each reflecting a different mode of cognitive mapping. Structural metaphors organize one concept in relation to another; orientational metaphors assign spatial logic to abstract states; and ontological metaphors embody abstract experiences as physical entities or substances. Together, these categories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how lyrical language encodes emotional meaning.

In the context of song lyrics, this means that when an artist describes heartbreak as “drowning” or love as “fire,” the listener cognitively maps the physical properties of water or heat to emotional states, making abstract feelings tangible and comprehensible. To strengthen its theoretical depth, this study also draws insights from cognitive semantics (Kövecses, 2020), which explores how meaning is constructed through conceptual structures, and from emotional linguistics, which examines how language encodes and communicates affective experiences. Furthermore, ecocritical perspectives (Reinikainen, 2025) and symbolic interaction theory are referenced to understand how nature imagery functions as a shared cultural symbol for emotional expression.

According to (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) one form of metaphor that frequently appears in song lyrics is the nature-based metaphor; natural elements such as the sea, sky, rain, and fire are often invoked to represent various emotional states and moods. (Şakalar et al., 2025) found that songs themed around love and grief use abundant natural metaphors; for example, love is depicted as a blazing fire or as endless wine. From an ecocritical perspective, the fusion of nature and emotion in these lyrics is clearly no coincidence.

In human interactions, which are directly tied to emotions and bodily responses, the physical space around us ultimately influences not only how we feel but also the direction of our thinking, according to (Mossner, 2020). Nature-based metaphors, in this sense, serve as universal emotional barometer offering listeners a shared symbolic vocabulary through which diverse, often inexpressible affective experiences become recognizable and meaningful. This universality also explains their particular effectiveness in popular music, where emotional accessibility and broad audience acceptance are key concerns.

Previous research on metaphors in song lyrics has been extensive, but most studies have focused on general metaphor classification rather than specific thematic domains. For example, (Kadek et al., 2025) explored concrete to abstract metaphors in Ariana Grande's album *Eternal Sunshine*, showing that metaphors reveal songwriter characteristics and express profound emotions. Similarly, (Devano & Khairunas, 2025) also examined metaphors and contextual meanings in Charlie Puth's song, *Nine Track Mind*, and found that 28 metaphorical expressions effectively conveyed emotions of love, heartbreak, and personal growth, with their interpretations heavily influenced by the audience's social and emotional context. (Putra et al., 2024) applied CMT to classify metaphors in James Arthur's songs into structural, orientational, and ontological types, but they focused only on general metaphors rather than specific thematic source domains.

In Indonesian popular music, (Listiwati et al., 2025) studied metaphors as emotional expressions in Nadin Amizah's Indonesian song lyrics, offering valuable insights into self-expression in popular music but focusing on classification rather than domain-specific semantic constructions. Ecolinguistics analysis has also addressed elements of nature in Indonesian pop music; (Jismulatif et al., 2020) evaluated songs by Iwan Fals and Gombloh, although their focus remained on social and environmental critique rather than personal emotional expression. (Quezada, 2024) used an ecolinguistics approach and Critical Metaphor Analysis to examine Studio Ghibli song lyrics, and found that structural and ontological metaphors expressing the relationship between humans and nature generate emotional bonds with the environment and build deeper ecological understanding among young listeners.

The journal did analyze natural metaphors in song lyrics but through an ecolinguistics rather than semantic approach. Although these studies collectively demonstrate metaphors, they share the same limitation: general metaphors without examining specific conceptual domains, particularly nature as a coherent semantic system as a distinct category, functioning specifically to construct emotional narratives or how these metaphors influence listeners' reception and interpretation.

Research Gaps Despite these insights, several significant gaps remain in the literature. First, previous studies often categorize metaphors into general types (ontological, structural, orientational) without exploring how specific thematic source domains—especially natural imagery—construct deeper semantic and psychological meanings. Despite these contributions, a glaring gap remains: the literature specifically exploring nature-based metaphors in NIKI's lyrics is very limited. To date, research has focused on analyzing figurative language in general in NIKI's works (Putra & Cintya, 2024) without highlighting how natural metaphors construct emotional meaning.

However, based on the studies, natural metaphors have been shown to contribute significantly to building the emotional depth of musical works. Therefore, this research is crucial in filling this gap. By identifying and interpreting natural metaphors in Niki's

selected lyrics, we hope to understand how natural imagery conveys emotional expression semantically.

Based on the gap identified in previous studies namely the limited focus on specific metaphor domains and the lack of research examining nature-based metaphors in contemporary popular music, particularly in the works of Niki on this study is guided by two research questions: (1) What types of nature-based metaphors are identified in selected song lyrics by Niki? and (2) What emotional meanings are conveyed through the use of nature-based metaphors in the selected song lyrics? In line with these questions, this study aims to examine the types and patterns of nature-based metaphors used in selected song lyrics by Niki, as well as to interpret how these metaphors semantically represent emotional expressions such as love, loss, longing, and healing.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on nature-based metaphors as a distinct analytical category and its application to multiple songs within a contemporary pop context. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize general metaphor classification, this study offers a more focused semantic analysis by linking natural imagery to emotional meaning, thereby providing a deeper understanding of how figurative language functions in expressing complex human emotions in modern song lyrics.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a semantic approach to analyze the use of nature-based metaphors in selected song lyrics by Niki. A qualitative design is appropriate because this research focuses on interpreting meaning and understanding how figurative language represents emotional expression in texts. Qualitative methods are widely used in linguistic and literary studies to explore subjective meaning and contextual interpretation (Creswell, 2009). In addition, semantic analysis enables the researcher to examine both literal and implied meanings constructed through language use, particularly in metaphorical expressions (Ulfah & Pujiati, 2025).

The subject of this research consists of selected song lyrics performed by Niki, namely Anaheim, Backburner, Oceans & Engines, Autumn, and LaLa Lost You. These songs are selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) the presence of figurative language, especially metaphors; (2) the use of natural imagery such as ocean, seasons, or environmental elements; and (3) thematic relevance to emotional experiences such as love, loss, longing, and healing. Although NIKI's discography is extensive, limiting the focus to these five specific songs ensures representativeness and qualitative depth.

The decision to limit the analysis to five songs was made to allow for an in-depth, line-by-line semantic analysis, rather than a superficial survey of the larger corpus. These five songs were chosen because they are the richest in natural metaphors in Niki's discography and simultaneously represent the emotional peaks and critical transitional phases of this narrative arc (falling in love in "Autumn," unrequited longing in "Backburner," fear of commitment in "Anaheim," a painful breakup in "Oceans & Engines," and detached post-breakup reflection in "La La Lost You").

By selecting these core songs, this study captures the full spectrum of NIKI's emotional trajectory, ensuring that metaphorical expressions are highly representative of her systematic cognitive mapping of nature into emotions. The experiential meaning in song lyrics is multifaceted, encompassing both grammatical and symbolic dimensions, as well as personal and collective experiences (Simbolon et al., 2025).

The data collection technique used in this study is documentation combined with close reading/close depth textual analysis (Phelan, 2021). The researcher collects the official song lyrics from reliable sources from YouTube or Spotify and carefully reads them multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding. This technique is consistent with previous metaphor studies, where documentation and close reading are used to identify figurative expressions in lyrics song (Putra & Cintya, 2024). The researcher integrated auditory analysis, listening to the songs repeatedly via streaming services while studying the written lyrics.

This process ensured that the prosodic and emotional phrasing of the text guided semantic interpretation. The process involves identifying and marking expressions that indicate the presence of nature-based metaphors. To support systematic data collection, the researcher develops an analytical instrument in the form of a coding framework that categorizes types of metaphors and links them to their potential emotional meanings. This framework is based on semantic analysis and supported by conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The coding process followed an explicit step-by-step procedure to ensure transparency and replicability. First, Contextual Reading: All song lyrics were carefully read to build a general understanding of the overall theme and narrative. Second, identified metaphorical expressions were classified according to their type, specifically focusing on nature-based metaphors such as marine, seasonal, fire, or environmental metaphors. Third, each song was semantically analyzed in terms of three metaphor types (ontological, structural, or orientational metaphors) by examining the relationship between the source domain (natural elements) and the target domain (emotional concepts), as proposed in cognitive semantic studies (Zoltán Kövecses, 2022). Fourth, researchers interpreted how these metaphors represent the emotional meaning of each metaphor by analyzing how the nature of the source domain (e.g., the coldness of winter, the weight of water) mapped to the target emotional concept (e.g., separation, sadness) within the context of the song lyrics.

Metaphors are used to convey emotional experiences and abstract meanings, allowing listeners to interpret messages beyond literal language. Furthermore, metaphors create broader and deeper interpretations, enriching listeners' understanding of the lyrics (Putra et al., 2024). Finally, the findings are explained and interpreted to reveal patterns of metaphor use and their contribution to emotional meaning. Through this process, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how nature-based metaphors function as linguistic and emotional devices in contemporary song lyrics. To validate the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, several steps were taken. Credibility was strengthened through analyst triangulation: the coding and classification of metaphors were reviewed iteratively across multiple readings, and the findings were cross-checked against theoretical definitions established by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and (Kövecses, 2020).

3. Result

Distribution of Metaphor Types

The study of Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly transitivity analysis, emerged as the most widely used analytical framework, underscoring the importance of grammatical choices in shaping how listeners perceive and relate to the lived experiences encoded in lyrics (Simbolon et al., 2025). In the discography of Nicole Zefanya,

professionally known as Niki, the natural world serves as a recurring source domain for the articulation of complex affective states such as heartbreak, longing, and identity conflict (Andra et al., 2026). This research report presents the findings of a semantic analysis conducted on five selected tracks *Ocean & Engines*, *Backburner*, *Autumn*, *Anaheim*, and *La La Lost You* to identify the types of nature-based metaphors employed and the emotional meanings they convey. By applying the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) established by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), this analysis demonstrates how Niki utilizes ontological, structural, and orientational metaphors to transform the physical environment into a mirror for internal psychological landscapes.

The results of this study are grounded in the systematic mapping between a concrete source domain (nature) and an abstract target domain (emotion). Metaphors in song lyrics are not merely stylistic devices but cognitive tools that reflect human conceptualization of emotional life (Fauzi et al., 2025). Based on the data analysis, the metaphors identified are classified into three primary types: ontological metaphors, which treat abstract ideas as discrete entities or substances; structural metaphors, which organize one concept in terms of another; and orientational metaphors, which map emotional states onto spatial directions (Lingga et al., 2025).

Table 1. Distribution of Metaphor Types Across Selected Lyrics

Song Title	Ontological Metaphor	Structural Metaphor	Orientalional Metaphor	Total
<i>Ocean & Engines</i>	12 (50.0%)	8 (33.3%)	4 (16.7%)	24 (100.0%)
<i>Backburner</i>	7 (50.0%)	5 (35.7%)	2 (14.3%)	14 (100.0%)
<i>Autumn</i>	9 (40.9%)	10 (45.5%)	3 (13.6%)	22 (100.0%)
<i>Anaheim</i>	11 (44.0%)	10 (40.0%)	4 (16.0%)	25 (100.0%)
<i>La La lost you</i>	8 (50.0%)	6 (37.5%)	2 (12.5%)	16 (100.0%)
<i>Total</i>	47 (46.5%)	39 (38.6%)	15 (14.9%)	101 (100.0%)

As shown in the table, ontological metaphors dominate the cognitive strategies in all five songs. This is not an aesthetic choice, but rather, ontological metaphors play a distinct functional role in emotional communication by allowing concrete, non-physical, and physical abstract emotional states to be conceptualized as sadness, longing, confusion, or existential trauma of the human mind. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), ontological metaphors allow the speaker to give structure to amorphous inner experiences by treating them as physical entities that can be contained, measured, or manipulated. In Niki's lyrics, this manifests as the need to "pour" questions into the ocean, "breathe" heartache, or "dig" into the soul all of which serve the cognitive function of making the unbearable more emotionally manageable.

This cognitive process of "materialization" stabilizes the emotion, making it something that can be referred to, quantified, and acted upon by the singer and listener. Treating emotional pain as a physical substance is an important cognitive coping mechanism; This provides a sense of boundaries to the extraordinary and limitless internal state, and encourages immediate emotional acceptance and empathy in the listener.

Quantitatively, ontological metaphors comprise approximately 46.5% of all identified metaphors (47 out of 101), with the highest concentration in *Ocean & Engines* (50%) and *Anaheim* (44%) both songs addressing themes of acute emotional intensity further supporting the direct correlation between high-impact themes and ontological concretization. Structural metaphors represent 38.6% (39 out of 101), while orientational metaphors make up the smallest portion at 14.9% (15 out of 101), suggesting that spatial mapping of emotions is used as a secondary, reinforcing device, rather than as a primary expressive tool.

Emotional Meaning Categories

Depth semantic analysis of 101 nature-based metaphorical expressions expressed in these five selected songs. These domains serve as a cohesive "universal emotional barometer," mapping physical and natural transformations directly onto internal affective journeys.

The emotional arc of *"Oceans & Engines"* traces a journey from quiet awe to utter resignation. This dynamic is not articulated through explicit narrative, but rather through the gradual deconstruction of the protagonist's inner world. At the beginning of the song, we are presented with a palpable sense of awe and a vulnerable openness: the speaker is drawn to someone with an almost gravitational pull, captivated by a presence that feels greater than ordinary human connection a presence capable of reviving him even in his most fragile moments. But this is precisely where the song's emotional complexity lies, for that same openness then becomes the source of his deepest wound the intimacy that initially felt like a restoration is revealed, in retrospect, to have been built on unstable foundations, and when the relationship ends, the speaker experiences not just sadness but the complete collapse of the inner structure on which he had relied for his sense of security and belonging.

This then leads to the most psychologically acute emotional state in the song: a profound helplessness in the face of unanswered questions, where inner conflict has reached a point beyond the capacity of language itself. What remains is a suspended state of grief not the calm born of acceptance, but the stillness of someone who has stopped fighting for a relationship and stopped searching for answers that will never come.

What makes *"Backburner"* so emotionally wrenching isn't the pain itself, but the speaker's calm acceptance of it as something she was always meant to endure a resignation so profound that it no longer feels like defeat but like an inherited identity. The song doesn't explode in anger or sadness; instead, it dwells in a far more gripping emotional space: a slow but agonizing recognition that the patterns of emotional neglect and abandonment she experienced in childhood have followed her into her adult relationships not as a fluke, but as something that feels alarming because it's so natural.

There's a distinct loneliness embedded in this realization the loneliness of someone who has internalized her own second nature, who has learned to find comfort in being needed, while simultaneously feeling that the comfort she offers will never be fully

returned. The song's emotional weight deepens in its depiction of the anticipation of investing fully in someone whose presence is never guaranteed, whose tendency to disappear feels inevitable yet still manages to hurt every time it happens. Rather than triggering confrontation, this emotional state produces something closer to paralysis: a dependency that the speaker is aware of as painful on the one hand, but which he is unable to abandon, because leaving would mean breaking down the only relational role he has ever known how to play.

What "*Autumn*" manages to capture with rare emotional precision is the experience of loving someone with the full knowledge that it is leaving not in a sudden rupture, but in a slow, irreversible way, like the warmth that slowly drains from the air as the seasons change. The song's emotional core isn't heartbreak in its acute form, but something quieter and more suffocating: the state of someone who has given themselves so completely, carving their presence into another person's body, offering unconditional adoration only to find that sacrifice alone cannot sustain a relationship once the season has passed.

There's a distinct poignancy in this realization, for the speaker's devotion is genuine and total, yet it pales in comparison to the natural momentum of things crumbling. What makes this emotional landscape so poignant is the lingering nature of the longing which doesn't wait politely for nightfall or quiet moments to arrive, but cuts into the ordinary hours of the day, disrupting the rhythms of everyday life with a grief that refuses to be scheduled or contained. At the song's final emotional point, the speaker is no longer fighting to win back the relationship, but simply struggling to function under its weight exhausted, disillusioned, and suspended in the question of whether survival itself is still possible when everything that once kept him afloat has now sunk.

In "*Anaheim*," with rare emotional honesty, is the paralysis of someone who desperately desires connection but can't trust themselves to maintain it not because love isn't there, but because the accumulated weight of past pain has made vulnerability feel more like a threat than a gift. The song's emotional center isn't a fear of the other person, but rather a fear of what others might discover once they look closely enough: that beneath the surface of someone who wants to be loved lies a landscape of buried shame, unresolved wounds, and emotional debris that even the speaker herself has spent years trying not to confront.

This creates a deeply uncomfortable emotional tension the simultaneous longing to be fully known and the terror of being fully seen and it's this tension, not any external conflict, that makes the relationship feel fragile. Further deepening this emotional misery is the speaker's realization that his inability to be fully present is causing the very destruction he fears: the happiness he desperately tries to maintain is being eroded not by the actions of his lover, but by his own emotional unavailability, by his own inability to find his way back to a self-stable enough to love without conditions or concealment. The song's final emotional register, therefore, is a self-awareness tinged with the pained clarity of someone who can see exactly what is happening and what will be sacrificed, yet feels powerless to change the inner terrain that keeps pulling him off course.

In the lyrics of "*La La Lost You*" with its quiet devastation is the very typical grief of someone who has accepted that a relationship is over, but whose emotional body has not yet accepted the news a condition in which love stubbornly persists long after the conditions that sustained it have disappeared. The emotional texture of the song is not the sharp pain of a fresh wound, but the persistent dull ache of someone navigating the daily

life after loss, who discovers in small, unexpected moments how thoroughly the other person has been woven into the warmth, security, and sense of home she has always had. What makes this emotional experience so isolating is its geographical dimension: the lover is not simply leaving, but going to a place that feels both climatically and emotionally opposite a cold, unfamiliar city, far from the warm intimacy they once shared in the sun and this physical distance is a constant and inescapable reminder that the life they once built together is now entirely in the past.

The most emotionally complex moment in the song comes when the speaker realizes that even her fondest memories have turned against her: the things that were bringing happiness a smile, a warmth once shared now returning as a source of pain, haunting rather than comforting her. But the song does not end in bitterness; instead, it concludes with something softer and more heartbreaking a love so sincere that the speaker is still able to pray for warmth and protection for his former lover, even knowing that he himself can no longer be the one to give it.

Song-Specific type Metaphor Analysis

Ocean & Engines

The song "Ocean & Engines" beautifully illustrates how water and geological metaphors convey the vastness of grief and personal instability after a traumatic breakup. The metaphor "ocean" serves as an ontological space for all the unanswered questions at once and a structural representation of the vast physical and emotional distance that stretches between them.

Table 2. Nature-Based Metaphor Analysis: Ocean & Engines

Metaphorical Expression	Type	Source Domain	Target Domain	Emotional Meaning
"Seas of beguiling sepia"	Ontological	Ocean / Ink	Eyes / Attraction	Deep, nostalgic fascination
"Dreams and demons drowned"	Ontological	Water / Drowning	Hopes and Fears	Emotional finality and death
"Lost all solid ground"	Structural & orientational	Earth / Geology	Stability	Disorientation and loss of safety
"Pouring them into the ocean"	Ontological	Liquid / Container	Confusion / Questions	Overwhelming release of grief
Total	4			

Through the lyrics "stared into two seas of beguiling sepia," Niki creates an ontological metaphor in which her lover's eyes are not just body parts but vast "oceans." The choice of "sepia," a natural pigment historically derived from cuttlefish ink, is a metaphor. Niki describes "pouring" her questions "into the ocean." This ontological framework uses confusion as a fluid and the ocean as a vast container. Niki's song also incorporates the metaphors of structural collapse and geological disorientation.

The song uses structural and orientational metaphors to describe the emotional devastation caused by abandonment. The lyrics, "what do you do when your pillar crumbled down," suggest that a relationship is the foundation of life, and when it fails, the physical structure collapses. This is combined with the orientational metaphor: "you've

lost all solid ground." In this context, "solid ground" represents a sense of stability and security. The sadness of separation is further enhanced by the metaphor of "dreams and demons drowned," where hope is depicted as ontologically surrendered and drowned in the "ocean."

Backburner

While Backburner is synonymous with its central culinary metaphor as its main theme, the song contains significant nature- and biology-based metaphors that address themes ranging from haunting past trauma, excessive submissiveness, and the emotional existence of someone who is "broken" or lost in a relationship.

Table 3. Nature-Based Metaphor Analysis: Backburner

Metaphorical Expression	Type	Source Domain	Target Domain	Emotional Meaning
"Sounding like a hurt puppy"	Ontological	Animal	Partner's Sadness	Manipulation and helplessness
"Mother bleeding into my stride"	Structural	Biological / Fluid	Inherited Trauma	Inevitability of family patterns
"You'll fade away again"	Structural	Atmosphere / Light	Presence	Inconstancy and neglect
"Father... wandering eyes"	Structural	Biological / Vision	Infidelity	Genetic instability in love
Total	4			

The song explores the origins of Niki's emotional patterns through profound, nature-based metaphors. The lyric, "maybe I blame my mother bleeding into my stride," serves as a structural metaphor for inherited trauma. This is further reinforced by the allusion to her father's "wandering eyes." This is a clever use of biological structural metaphor by Niki to describe betrayal and how the emotional uncertainty she experienced as a child ultimately shaped her current relationship standards. "Hurt puppy," This ontological metaphor suggests a fragile and protective figure, providing a zero-sum for the abused protection in a toxic relationship. Furthermore, the lover is described as someone who will "fade away again," a structural metaphor like fading light or dissipating fog.

Autumn

"Autumn" is a beautiful work of structural metaphor, utilizing the changing seasons to reflect feelings. The song uses the natural transition from life to the fall of leaves to describe the "bittersweet feeling" and the "fleeting nature of love," which only lasts a moment before everything fades away.

Table 4. Nature-Based Metaphor Analysis: Autumn.

Metaphorical Expression	Type	Source Domain	Target Domain	Emotional Meaning
"Heartache I breathe"	Ontological	Atmosphere / Air	Persistent Grief	Toxicity and essential pain
"Stars... left me in dust"	Ontological	Celestial / Debris	Faded Hope	Disillusionment and ruin
"Night cuts into the day"	Structural	Diurnal Cycle	Painful Longing	Intrusive emotional transition
"Stay afloat"	Orientalational	Buoyancy / Water	Relationship Stability	Struggle for survival
Total	4			

The song's title serves as a conceptual (ontological) metaphor, comparing a love relationship to a season. It uses both the conceptual metaphor (Relationship = Season) and the ontological metaphor " (Heartbreak = Air/Gas). Changes in temperature (cold) and physical elements (falling leaves) are used to materialize feelings. Furthermore, there is the use of the diurnal cycle metaphor in the line "when the night cuts into the day." The speaker notes that he "must have been too grateful for her lucky stars," but now feels "left in too much dust."

This ontological transformation from "stars" (symbols of hope and destiny) to "dust" is symbolic of decay and abandonment. His sacrifice is also depicted through the ontological biological metaphor, "I carved my name into your ribs." Through the orientational metaphor, he can only wonder "how do we stay afloat," the relationship conceptualized as a ship in the gravitational force field of the ocean.

Anaheim

In Anaheim, Niki utilizes various nature-based metaphors, ranging from temperature changes, earth elements, and geographical distance, to illustrate the complexities of fear of commitment and showcases the inner struggle of someone who hesitates to show their true side, especially because their "soul" has been wounded by bitter past experiences.

Table 5. Nature-Based Metaphor Analysis: Anaheim

Metaphorical Expression	Type	Source Domain	Target Domain	Emotional Meaning
"Freeze this moment"	Ontological	Temperature / Ice	Preservation	Desire for eternal happiness
"This city will surely burn"	Structural	Fire / Urban Decay	Relationship Path	Destructive passion and ruin
"Unearth this soul"	Ontological	Geology / Mining	Vulnerability	Fear of revealing hidden flaws
"I am lost"	structural	Navigation	Self-Identity	Alienation and lack of direction

Total 4

The song uses the ontological metaphor of heat to depict the inner conflict between the desire to maintain happiness and the harsh reality of inevitable destruction. The lyrics, "I'd freeze this moment," symbolize the attempt to stop time (stasis). However, this desire conflicts with the stark warning that "this city will surely burn if we keep this as it is". Here, "city" is a structural metaphor for the feelings growing between them. Niki uses the ontological geological metaphor of "unearth this soul" to describe the fear of being honest and open with someone. This internal excavation is combined with the structural metaphors of "road" and "routes." This feeling of alienation is further reinforced by the imagery of "recognize these roads" or "memorize this route" to her lover's "home," which depicts a profound emotional disorientation.

La La Lost You

The song "La La Lost You" uses metaphors of climate and the wild nature of nature to describe the loneliness and "cooling" of a once-warm relationship. The contrast in nature between Los Angeles and New York serves as a geographical metaphor, demonstrating the emotional distance that stretched between them, leading to the end of the relationship.

Table 6. Nature-Based Metaphor Analysis: La La Lost You

Metaphorical Expression	Type	Source Domain	Target Domain	Emotional Meaning
"Summer's endin'... nights coolin'"	Structural	Climate / Season	Detachment	Loss of intimacy and warmth
"Demons run wild"	Ontological	Animal / Wilderness	Intrusive Thoughts	Uncontrollable grief and memory
"Toes turn blue in winter"	Ontological	Temperature	Vulnerability	Suffering caused by separation
"Hope New York holds you"	Structural	Environment / Human	Support / Embrace	Displacement of affection
Total	4			

Niki uses the structural metaphor "Summer's endin' now and the nights are coolin' down." This symbolizes the fading warmth in relationships and the rise of loneliness. Temperature is a standard cognitive metaphor symbolized as an emotion. The physical image of your toes turn blue in winter" is an ontological metaphor, giving concrete form to an abstract condition. The author seeks a substitute for warmth through "red rum" (a color metaphor for warmth/fire). Through the recurring phrase "all my demons run wild," Niki uses an ontological metaphor to describe the wild and uncontrollable figure that haunts her memories and thoughts. This sentiment concludes with the hope that "hope New York holds you... like I do," using the environment as a structural metaphorical substitute for herself.

Comparative emotional patterns

The results of this analysis demonstrate how adeptly Niki uses natural elements as a tool to convey complex human emotions. By borrowing real-life imagery such as the

vastness of the ocean, the changing seasons, and even animal behavior, her lyrics successfully bridge abstract personal feelings into something that can be directly felt by the listener. The use of strong metaphors throughout the song proves that Niki deliberately transforms pain, vulnerability, and trauma into something "tangible." Ultimately, this personal story evolves into a universal reflection on loss and the struggle to find identity in the world of modern pop music. Comparatively, the emotional trajectories of the five songs reveal a structured development. Ocean & Engines and Autumn convey a profound sadness evident in the intense use of ontological metaphors.

On the other hand, Backburner and La La Lost You instead take us to a phase of resignation and stasis, where structural metaphors such as biological elements and weather dominate. Uniquely, Anaheim has a world of its own, this song articulates being trapped in an inner conflict between stubbornness in wanting to hold on and the realization that the relationship will still be doomed. This comparison between the songs reveals that NIKI's metaphorical choices are not random, but rather carefully calibrated according to the emotional phase of each song. Of course, this research is not free from interpretive debate: certain metaphorical expressions such as "heartache that I breathe" or "demon roaming" are very likely to be interpreted differently by others depending on the perspective of the cultural context, individual experience, or performative delivery, and the boundaries between types of metaphor are not always linguistically clear.

However, this flexibility of meaning is not a weakness. This is actually an interesting point that opens the way for further research—whether it is examining how listeners react directly, comparing its meaning across different cultures, or dissecting the multimodal aspects involving NIKI's vocal character and musical arrangements, not just the lyrics on paper.

4. Discussion

The results of this analysis demonstrate how adeptly Niki uses natural elements as a tool to convey complex human emotions. Consistent with (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) theory, these metaphors allow the songwriter by borrowing real-life imagery such as the vastness of the ocean, the changing seasons, and even animal behavior, her lyrics successfully bridge abstract personal feelings into something that can be directly felt by the listener. The use of strong metaphors throughout the song proves that Niki deliberately transforms pain, vulnerability, and trauma into something "tangible." Ultimately, this personal story evolves into a universal reflection on loss and the struggle to find identity in the world of modern pop music.

By identifying 101 distinct metaphorical expressions across five core tracks, this study successfully maps out the structural hierarchy of NIKI's figurative language. The empirical data reveals a striking contrast in usage: ontological metaphors overwhelmingly dominate the landscape at 46.5%, followed by structural metaphors at 38.6%, and orientational metaphors at 14.8%.

The dominance of ontological metaphors suggests that NIKI's primary cognitive strategy is to manifest abstract emotions into something tangible or concrete. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the song "Autumn," when she sings the lyrics "*it's heartache I breathe*." Here, the intangible sadness is ontologically transformed into air - a toxic atmosphere that ironically must still be inhaled in order to survive. This writing pattern seems to be in line with the findings (Simanjuntak & Dewi, 2026), who noted that ontological metaphors often play a role in melancholic song lyrics because they are able

to transform abstract pain into something concrete and fragile. As a result, the empathetic bond with the listener feels much deeper.

From a cognitive poetics perspective, this represents the literary exploitation of conceptual integration the capacity of figurative language to blend two distinct cognitive domains into a single, emotionally resonant structure (Fauzi et al., 2025). The recurring source domains (ocean, season, temperature) form a consistent conceptual landscape. When "night cuts through day," the harsh verb "cut" alienates the cycles of nature, forcing the listener to experience longing as a disruptive wound rather than a smooth transition.

Nature as an Emotional Mirror An Ecocritical Reading, Beyond cognitive mechanisms, the systematic use of natural imagery in NIKI's lyrics invites an ecocritical reading that examines how the natural world functions not simply as metaphorical raw material but as a culturally and emotionally charged symbolic system. (Reinikainen, 2025) hypothesis, "Nature as a Mirror," posits that natural imagery serves as a cognitive bridge between an artist's inner experience and the listener's emotional understanding.

Nature based of semantic and emotional meaning

In answering the second research question, the results of the analysis revealed that the emotional meaning in the Niki song conveyed through these metaphors is deeply rooted in certain natural domains: including: (1) water/sea, (2) fire, and (3) seasons/weather.

In the work "Ocean & Engines," for example, the ocean waves, sinking, distant shores are conceptualized as a means to conceptualize feelings of loneliness, loss, and deep longing. The use of this metaphor visually depicts the feeling of someone who is "adrift" or even "drowning" in a vortex of sadness. One interesting metaphor, namely "pouring questions into the ocean," represents a total surrender to grief, where the vast ocean is positioned as an endless container for grief that is no longer contained. Conversely, in the songs "Backburner" and "Autumn," the imagery of fire (such as the process of burning or flames) is used to dramatize how burning and intense the passion of love.

The romantic relationship here is depicted as very passionate, but on the other hand feels painful because it slowly burns the lover. In "Backburner," the structural metaphor of "mother bleeding into my steps" maps generational trauma or inherited past wounds onto the body's biological processes. This suggests that these emotional patterns are perceived as a "natural" destiny.

Meanwhile, "Autumn" cleverly applies the "Relationship = Season" concept mapping through natural changes such as the falling leaves and the descent of cold air, to signify emotional transitions and the phase of letting go. Heartbreak here is not seen as the end of everything, but rather is framed as a natural cycle that occurs naturally. Even when not explicitly mentioned, imagery of storms or turmoil (e.g., chaos, hurricanes) appears implicitly, reinforcing the feeling of conflict. Finally, the songs "Anaheim" and "La La Lost You" use metaphors of climate change to express acceptance, reflection, and even self-renewal after heartbreak.

The desire to "freeze this moment" in "Anaheim" represents a cognitive attempt to halt the natural progression of time in order to preserve a shred of remaining happiness. Conversely, "La La Lost You" equates the "the nights are coolin' down" with the process of emotional letting go and the contrast presented between warm summer and cold

winter. finally managed to evoke a sense of nostalgia and an increasingly distant interpersonal distance.

This domain-specificity suggests that NIKI's use of nature is governed by a coherent ecocritical logic, in which the emotional properties attributed to natural phenomena reflect culturally shared human experiences of the physical world (Mossner, 2020). This is also connected to emotional semantics, which examines how affective meaning is encoded in language at the level of conceptual structure rather than simply lexical choice. This approach frames human relationships as embedded in, and constrained by, the Earth's broader physical and ecological parameters.

Critical Reflection: Subjectivity, Audience Diversity, and Cultural Limitations

Subjectivity

The discussion must acknowledge that metaphor interpretation is inherently subjective. Three critical limitations are worth noting. Subjectivity of interpretation: Classifying "losing all solid ground" as structural and orientational illustrates this problem. Other analysts might categorize it solely as orientational (spatial instability) or purely structural (crumbling foundations). Without inter-rater reliability metrics, these categories remain interpretive claims, not objective measurements.

Audience Diversity

According to Reader Response Theory and cognitive stylistics (Green, 2006), the meaning of metaphorical texts is dynamically constructed in the interaction between linguistic symbols and the listener's unique socio-cultural background. A listener in a landlocked desert might not immediately understand "pouring questions into the sea." A listener from a tropical climate without autumn might interpret the metaphor of seasonal decay differently.

This analysis assumes a universal audience, but emotional semantics are co-constructed between text and receiver. Cultural Differences: NIKI is an Indonesian-born, English-speaking artist who writes for a global audience. As recognized by emotional linguistics, affective responses to figurative language are shaped by individual experiences, cultural background, and psychological context factors that vary significantly across NIKI's global and multicultural audience (Kövecses, 2020).

Comparison with Contemporary Pop Artists

Contextualizing NIKI's metaphorical style within the broader landscape of contemporary popular music reveals both similarities and distinct characteristics. NIKI Nature (ocean, seasons, geology, biology) Toxic attachment, inherited trauma Very high (101 metaphors / 5 songs).

Table 7. Comparative Matrix of Lyrical Metaphor Styles in Pop Music

<i>Artist</i>	<i>Primary Metaphor Style</i>	<i>Typical Source Domains</i>	<i>Cognitive Function</i>	<i>Cultural Context</i>
<i>NIKI</i>	Environmental & Atmospheric	Oceans, climate transitions, domestic heat, cities.	Atmospheric saturation; reifying emotion as an inescapable environment.	Southeast Asian diasporic; highly introspective; urban-natural

<i>Taylor Swift</i>	Mythological & Rural	Wild forests, rivers, willow trees, historical battlefields.	Narrative distancing; structuring relationships as timeless, epic journeys.	hybridity. Western Anglo-American; traditional folk-country narrative; pastoral focus.
<i>Billie Eilish</i>	Visceral & Somatic	Decay, physical damage, blindness, body fluids.	Somatic reification; converting psychological trauma into bodily containment.	Contemporary global youth; dark pop; focus on physical vulnerability.
<i>SZA</i>	Conversational & Body-Centric	Urban spaces, direct physical friction, domestic items.	Interpersonal friction; mapping power dynamics directly onto modern social spaces.	African American urban; R&B/Pop; focus on immediate social conflict.

While Taylor Swift also uses nature (seasons, storms), her metaphors often serve as narrative plot points. NIKI's nature metaphors function ontologically they not only describe emotions but also shape them as entities. Billie Eilish shares NIKI's embodied darkness but prefers decay (spiders, teeth, bruises) to ecological cycles. NIKI's defining characteristic is her transformation of sadness into a breathable atmosphere a type of metaphor largely absent from Swift and Eilish. While other artists use nature metaphors episodically, NIKI uses them architecturally, making the natural world an organizing framework through which her entire emotional landscape is constructed and communicated. This distinctiveness is what distinguishes NIKI's lyrics.

This practice differs from that of her contemporaries and supports the argument that nature-based metaphors in her work function as what this study calls a "universal emotional barometer" a shared natural vocabulary that allows diverse listeners, regardless of their personal experiences, to access and emotionally register the affective content of her songs (Intan et al., 2025).

Ultimately, NIKI's lyrical choices emphasize that metaphor is not merely a verbal decoration, but rather a fundamental cognitive mechanism, as Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argued. By objectifying vulnerability as "blue toes in winter" or "a crumbling pillar," NIKI allows her audience to process their own emotional struggles through the same natural vocabulary.

Pedagogical Implications

In *semantics and linguistics education*, popular song lyrics are a highly effective pedagogical tool in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and cognitive linguistics classes (Kumar et al., 2022). NIKI's lyrics provide a pedagogically accessible example of how Conceptual Metaphor Theory operates in authentic, contemporary language, making the abstract theoretical distinctions between ontological, structural, and orientational metaphors concrete and culturally relevant for students. Because lyrics are culturally relevant and emotionally engaging, using them to teach Conceptual Metaphor Theory helps students grasp abstract concepts such as "source-target mapping" and "ontological reification" much more easily than traditional, contrived examples.

In *literary and discourse studies*, this study provides a rigorous methodological model for integrating stylistic analysis, cognitive semantics, and ecocriticism. It demonstrates that popular cultural artifacts can be subjected to the same level of close reading and qualitative rigor as recognized classical poetry, bridging the gap between formal linguistics and cultural studies.

In *music interpretation and cultural studies*, findings suggest that systematic attention to the source domain of metaphors can reveal the cognitive and emotional architecture underlying an artist's work information that deepens critical and appreciative engagement with popular music. Understanding how songwriters "objectify vulnerability" as "blue toes in winter" or "heartache I breathe" provides a blueprint for clinical expression. Patients who struggle to articulate abstract emotional trauma (such as unrequited longing or grief) can use this natural, physically based vocabulary as a cognitive "framework" to safely externalize, process, and understand their inner pain.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, this study concludes that NIKI successfully uses nature-based metaphors as a powerful cognitive mechanism to externalize complex and abstract emotional states. This semantic analysis also identified 101 metaphorical expressions from five selected songs: "Ocean & Engines," "Backburner," "Autumn," "Anaheim," and "La La Lost You." In these five selected songs, three main types of metaphors are present: ontological (46.5%), structural (38.6%), and orientational (14.8%). Technically, ontological metaphors emerged as the most significant dominant strategy for transforming abstract emotional states into concrete and tangible imagery.

This finding confirms the hypothesis that ontological metaphorization transforms psychological pain from an intangible inner state into something tangible, shareable, and emotionally communicable. This finding aligns with the theory of embodied cognition and confirms the cognitive, rather than merely ornamental, function of metaphors in contemporary popular music lyrics. "Nature as a Mirror," demonstrates that natural imagery provides a shared vocabulary for artists and listeners to process the complexities of the human condition. Several elements, embodied in this article sea/water metaphors, fire metaphors, seasonal metaphors, and storm metaphors—serve as powerful source domains for articulating complex emotions including grief, longing, toxic attachment, disappointment, and the struggle for self-identity after heartbreak.

The emotional meanings conveyed through these metaphors are grouped thematically into three natural domains: (1) water/sea imagery, which conceptualizes loneliness, surrender to grief, and emotional drowning, as seen in *Oceans & Engines*; (2) fire imagery, which dramatizes intense passion that simultaneously burns and destroys,

as seen in Backburner and Autumn; and (3) seasonal and climatic metaphors, which frame heartbreak and emotional distance as a natural cycle of cooling, fading, and letting go, as demonstrated in Anaheim and La La Lost You. These findings are consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which posits that humans conceptualize abstract experiences through more familiar and physical domains.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis only covers five selected songs from NIKI's discography, which may not represent the full range of nature-based metaphors in her work. Second, the study focused solely on semantic analysis and did not examine listeners' interpretations or psychological responses to the metaphors used in the songs.

Recommendations

Based on these findings and limitations, several recommendations are proposed for further research. Future research should expand the corpus to include NIKI's complete discography. Researchers could also explore more contemporary Indonesian songs, artists, or music genres to obtain more comprehensive findings regarding nature-based metaphors in popular music over time. Future studies could also combine semantic analysis with audience reception or psycholinguistic approaches to investigate how listeners emotionally interpret metaphorical expressions in song lyrics.

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