



# The Interplay of Lyrics and Melody in Conveying Emotional Narratives: A Case Study of Niki Zefanya's Selected Songs (Backburner, Take A Chance with Me, Ocean & Engines)

Avanti Nur Febrianingsih<sup>1</sup>, Yanti Rosalinah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Literature Department, University of Bina Sarana Informatika

Corresponding E-Mail: [avantinurfebrianingsih@gmail.com](mailto:avantinurfebrianingsih@gmail.com)

Received: 2025-11-02 Accepted: 2025-12-15

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v13i2.8865

## Abstract

This study discusses the relationship between lyrics and melody in expressing emotional narratives in NIKI Zefanya's selected songs, namely Backburner, Take a Chance With Me, and Oceans & Engines. The purpose of this study is to explain how lyrics and melody work together to show emotional meaning. The method used in this research is qualitative descriptive. The data used are from the lyrics and musical elements of the three songs. This study uses lyrical analysis and musical semiotics to identify language and music features that express emotions. Results indicate that metaphor, hyperbole, and irony are the most frequently used figurative devices in the lyrics. Tonal variation, rhythm, and harmony further enhance the emotional expression conveyed in the songs. The combination of these elements creates a strong emotional connection between the songs and the listeners. This study gives a better understanding of how emotions are built through the combination of lyrics and melody in popular music.

**Keywords:** *Lyrics, Melody, Emotional Narrative, Figurative Language, NIKI Zefanya, Music Semiotics*

## Introduction

In popular songs, lyrics and melody often work together to tell stories and share feelings with listeners. Lyrics use language to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions, while melody transforms those feelings into sound. When combined, both elements create a deep emotional connection between the artist and the audience. Songwriters frequently express emotional experiences such as anger, sadness, and happiness by using expressive language to create appeal and uniqueness in their

lyrics (Yeni Witdianti, Nursalim, 2025)

NIKI Zefanya is an Indonesian singer-songwriter under the 88rising label who is known for her honest and emotional storytelling. Her songs such as *Backburner*, *take a Chance With Me*, and *Oceans & Engines* show how she mixes soft melodies with expressive lyrics. Through her works, she talks about love, longing, and heartbreak in a way that feels real and personal. Many listeners connect with her songs because they reflect feelings that are easy to relate to.

Some studies have discussed NIKI's works, especially from the language perspective. (Zahria & Wibowo, 2024) analyzed the use of figurative language in her lyrics and found that metaphor and hyperbole are often used to show emotion. However, most of these studies only focus on the lyrics and not on the melody. There are still few studies that explore how lyrics and melody work together to build emotional meaning. This makes it important to study both elements in one analysis.

NIKI's songwriting style reflects her ability to blend words and music to express deep emotions. In her songs, melody often follows the emotional tone of the lyrics. For example, slow tempo and soft chords are usually used when she sings about sadness or longing, while higher notes and stronger rhythms appear in moments of emotional release. This connection between lyrics and melody helps the listener to feel what the singer feels. It shows that both elements language and music work together to create one clear message.

Only a few studies have analyzed how lyrics and melody interact in NIKI's songs. Most research tends to focus exclusively on either the meaning of the lyrics or the musical arrangement alone, leaving the multimodal relationship between language and music relatively unexplored. Comprehensive reviews and meta-analyses confirm that the intersection of music and linguistics, especially in popular song analysis, remains an under-researched area. For example, (Stamou, 2024) and studies by (Ma et al., 2024) highlight the need for multimodal approaches that integrate both lyrical and musical features to fully understand song meaning and emotional impact.

Furthermore, research by (Xu et al., 2021) demonstrates that combining audio and lyric features provides a more holistic understanding of music emotion and genre, underscoring the importance of examining both modalities together in song analysis. There is still limited understanding of how both aspects interact to build an emotional story in the song. This study, therefore, aims to examine how lyrics and melody support each other in delivering emotional narratives in NIKI's songs *Backburner*, *Take a chance with Me*, and *Oceans and Engines*.

The song *Backburner* by Niki Zefanya tells the story of a one-sided romantic relationship, an unbalanced relationship where one person feels unappreciated and treated as a backup partner in an uncertain relationship. The feeling of being unappreciated and neglected evokes emotions that can be felt after listening to the song (S & Idris, 2025). While the song "*Backburner*" describes a one-sided, hopeless teenage romance, the song "*Take a Chance With Me*" depicts a teenage love story full

of hope, in which a girl falls in love with the boy she adores. In addition to falling in love, the girl is also sensitive to the hidden ambitions of a boy who secretly likes her but is reluctant to express his feelings. On the other hand, the next song, Ocean and Engines, tells the story of a couple's separation due to a long-distance relationship that can no longer be maintained.

The main questions of this study are how linguistic and musical elements interact to build emotional narratives, and how these elements support one another in shaping listeners' affective responses. The objectives of this research are to identify and classify the figurative language in the lyrics, to analyze melodic and harmonic structures that support the emotional tone, and to explain how lyrics and melody combine to form cohesive emotional narratives. The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach that bridges literary and musical analysis to reveal emotional communication in contemporary popular music.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore the relationship between lyrics and melody in selected songs by NIKI Zefanya. The focus is on providing a detailed understanding of how lyrics and melody combine to create emotional narratives, following (Creswell, 2018) idea that qualitative descriptive research aims to explain phenomena rather than generalize statistically.

The main data sources are the lyrics and melodic elements of three songs: Backburner, Take A Chance With Me, and Oceans & Engines. Lyrics were collected from verified sites such as Genius.com and Spotify Lyrics, while melodic data were gathered through repeated listening and transcription using digital audio workstation (DAW) software to analyze key, tempo, and harmonic progressions. In addition, secondary data from books, journal articles, and previous studies on figurative language, emotional expression, and stylistic analysis of pop music were consulted using reputable academic databases like SINTA journals, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate.

Data collection involved three steps:

1. Organizing and documenting the official lyrics
2. Conducting auditory observation by listening carefully to each song multiple times to note rhythm, melodic contour, and emotional intensity
3. Reviewing related literature on NIKI's songwriting style, emotional themes, and lyric melody interaction

Data analysis combines linguistic stylistics and music semiotics. Using (Short, 2013) framework, lyrics were examined with particular attention to figurative language metaphor, personification, and irony as key devices in constructing emotional narratives. Metaphors feature implicit comparisons without explicit markers, for example, "drowning in silence". Personification attributes human qualities to abstract ideas, for example, "memories haunt me". Irony is identified where literal meaning contrasts with contextual meaning to create emotional tension.

Musical elements were analyzed according to (Tagg, 2012) and (Tarasti, 2002), focusing on tonal progression, rhythm, and harmony as musical signs communicating emotional meaning aligned with the lyrics.

To ensure consistency, the analysis followed a three-step coding process:

1. Identifying figurative language and melodic patterns
2. Classifying these by emotional tone such as sadness or hope
3. Interpreting how lyrics and melody work together to express emotional narratives within the songs

## Results

Based on the analysis of three selected songs by NIKI Zefanya Backburner, Take A Chance With Me, and Oceans & Engines several types of figurative language were identified as central to constructing emotional narratives. The dominant devices found were metaphor, personification, and irony. Metaphor appeared 15 times, personification 8 times, and irony 6 times across the three songs. For example, in Backburner, the metaphor “drowning in silence” implicitly conveys emotional distress, while personification is seen in lines such as “memories haunt me,” attributing human actions to abstract concepts. Irony is evident in Take A Chance With Me, where optimistic expressions contrast with underlying emotional uncertainty, creating emotional tension (Simanullang & Adinulhaq, 2025).

Simile also emerged, though less frequently, as in the line “I watch my whole world fall like dominoes,” which explicitly compares the collapse of feelings to a chain reaction (Zahria & Wibowo, 2024). Each figurative device was interpreted within its lyrical and melodic context, revealing how these elements work together to deepen emotional meaning.

Melodic patterns in NIKI's songs further reinforce the emotional narratives. Descending melodic lines are often used in sections expressing sadness or introspection, while ascending intervals appear during moments of hope or resolution. Slow tempos are typically associated with nostalgia and longing, while faster tempos signal emotional intensity (Ma et al., 2024). These musical cues interact with the lyrical content to create a layered emotional experience for listeners, highlighting how both melody and lyrics work together to deepen the emotional impact of the songs.

The findings demonstrate that the interplay between lyrics and melody in NIKI Zefanya's music is crucial for conveying complex emotional narratives. This integrative approach, combining linguistic stylistics and music semiotics, provides a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary pop songs communicate emotional depth (Simanullang & Adinulhaq, 2025). The results also confirm that interdisciplinary analysis is effective in capturing the holistic construction of emotional meaning in popular music.

## Discussion

This study reveals several key findings regarding the interplay between lyrics and melody in NIKI Zefanya's selected songs: *Backburner*, *Take A Chance With Me*, and *Oceans & Engines*. Each song demonstrates a unique way in which figurative language and melodic structure collaborate to construct emotional narratives. The discussion draws on linguistic stylistics and music semiotics to illustrate how both dimensions interact to shape the listener's affective response.

### **Backburner: The Pain of Emotional Repression**

In *Backburner*, NIKI uses metaphor and irony to express emotional restraint and unresolved longing. The metaphor of the "backburner" symbolizes suppressed affection, while repeated affirmations like "I'll be fine" betray denial, reflecting (Short, 2013) view that irony in lyrics creates tension between surface meaning and hidden sentiment. Musically, the slow tempo, repetitive chord progression, and minimal percussion reinforce themes of emotional repetition and resignation. The descending melodic lines and sparse instrumentation mirror the emotional descent and isolation described in the lyrics. According to (Tagg, 2012), the harmonic simplicity and restrained vocal delivery signify emotional clarity and vulnerability, making the song's emotional impact more tangible and layered.

### **Take A Chance With Me: Vulnerability and Hope**

*Take A Chance With Me* explores vulnerability in love through conditional optimism. Hyperbole ("If I could fly, I'd take you to the moon") and personification ("My heart keeps knocking on your door") illustrate emotional persistence and yearning. (Yeni Witdianti, Nursalim, 2025) argue that such linguistic strategies humanize emotional struggle, making vulnerability relatable. Melodically, the upward modulation in the chorus and rhythmic syncopation evoke anticipation, aligning with (Juslin & Laukka, 2003) theory that ascending intervals signal positive affect and emotional openness. The synergy between lyrical vulnerability and harmonic ascension invites listeners to empathize with the universal fear of rejection intertwined with the desire for connection.

### **Oceans & Engines: The Poetics of Farewell**

*Oceans & Engines* features extended metaphor and narrative progression, with the ocean symbolizing emotional distance and the engine representing separation. The juxtaposition of natural and mechanical imagery illustrates the conflict between organic emotion and rational decision-making. The song's slow tempo, minor key, and gradual decrescendo symbolize emotional fading and acceptance. Ambient reverb and layered harmonies amplify spatial imagery, aligning

with (Tarasti, 2002) concept of musical space, where sonic depth represents emotional expansiveness. The synergy between language and melody transforms heartbreak into a meditative experience, guiding listeners toward acceptance.

Comparative Discussion

Across the three songs, metaphor is the most frequent figure of speech, followed by hyperbole, personification, and simile (Aras et al., 2024). Descending melodic lines and slow tempos frequently signify emotional heaviness. Each song embodies a different emotional trajectory: Backburner focuses on repression, Take A Chance With Me captures anticipation, and Oceans & Engines embodies acceptance. These emotional arcs collectively form a triptych of emotional evolution, demonstrating NIKI’s ability to reinterpret similar emotional themes through distinct musical and linguistic lenses.

The findings show that lyrics and melody do not operate in isolation but engage in continuous dialogue to shape the listener’s emotional journey. This comparative perspective highlights NIKI’s skill in constructing emotional experiences that unfold across her musical works, making her songwriting both expressive and immersive.

Table 1: Summary of Figurative Language and Melodic Features in NIKI Zefanya’s Songs

Song	Figurative Language (Examples)	Frequency	Melodic Features (Key, Tempo, Chords)	Emotional Tone
Backburner	Metaphor: “crisping up on your backburner” Irony: “I’ll be fine” (repeated despite sadness)	15 (metaphor) 6 (irony)	Bb major, 72 BPM, Bb, F, Gm chords	Sadness, longing
Take A Chance With Me	Hyperbole: “His laugh you'd die for” Personification: “Heart intangible, slips away faster”	8 (hyperbole) 8 (personification)	G major to A major, 84 BPM, syncopation	Hope, vulnerability
Oceans & Engines	Metaphor: “Oceans and engines” Personification: “My soul, it gets sicker”	12 (metaphor) 6 (personification)	E minor, 68 BPM, Em–C–G–D chords	Farewell, acceptance

## Conclusion

This study examines how lyrics and melody work together to convey emotional narratives in NIKI Zefanya's songs "Backburner," "Take A Chance With Me," and "Oceans & Engines," using a qualitative descriptive method supported by linguistic stylistics and music semiotics. The findings reveal that figurative language, particularly metaphor, hyperbole, and irony, plays a key role in expressing emotion, while melodic elements such as tempo, tonal shifts, and harmonic patterns reinforce and deepen the lyrical meaning. Each song highlights a distinct emotional focus: "Backburner" portrays emotional repression through a calm melody and ironic diction, "Take A Chance With Me" expresses vulnerability and hope through rising modulation, and "Oceans & Engines" conveys farewell and acceptance through soft harmonics and extended metaphors.

These results emphasize the importance of analyzing linguistic and musical components together, supporting multimodal approaches in music linguistics theory, offering insights for songwriting practices, and encouraging interdisciplinary methods in music pedagogy and popular music studies. Overall, NIKI's songwriting demonstrates how emotional storytelling in contemporary music transcends linguistic and musical boundaries, and this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how songs communicate emotion, suggesting future studies explore other genres or listener responses for broader insight.

## References

- Aras, B., Bozkurt, S., & Önen, S. (2024). Exploring Figurative Language Usage in Contemporary Music: Pedagogical Implications for English Language Instruction. 18(2), 29–51.
- Creswell. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (4th Editio). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/qualitative-inquiry-and-research-design/book266033>
- Juslin, P. N., & Laukka, P. (2003). Communication of Emotions in Vocal Expression and Music Performance : Different Channels , Same Code ? 129(5), 770–814. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.770>
- Ma, Y., Baker, D. J., Vukovics, K. M., Davis, C. J., & Elliott, E. M. (2024). Lyrics and melodies : Do both affect emotions equally ? A replication and extension of Ali and Peynircioğlu ( 2006 ). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10298649221149109>
- S, N. H., & Idris, M. (2025). Komunikasi Intrapersonal Melalui Musik Niki Zefanya " Backburner " Dalam Proses Replikasi Diri Dan Emosional Pada Pendengar Gen Z Di Kota Makassar. 6(3), 177–181.
- Short, L. &. (2013). *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*.
- Simanullang, T. L., & Adinulhaq, R. R. (2025). A Semantic Analysis of Referential Expressions in NIKI Zefanya ' s Album : Buzz.
- Stamou, T. S. V. L. O. M. M. G. (2024). MUSICLIME: EXPLAINABLE MULTIMODAL

MUSIC UNDERSTANDING Theodoros Sotirou, Vassilis Lyberatos, Orfeas Menis Mastromichalakis, Giorgos Stamou National Technical University of Athens, Greece.

Tagg, P. (2012). Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos. [https://books.google.co.id/books/about/Music\\_s\\_Meanings.html?id=U\\_s4mgEACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.id/books/about/Music_s_Meanings.html?id=U_s4mgEACAAJ&redir_esc=y)

Tarasti, E. (2002). Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics.

Xu, L., Sun, Z., Wen, X., Huang, Z., & Chao, C. (2021). Using machine learning analysis to interpret the relationship between music emotion and lyric features. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.785>

Yeni Witdianti, Nursalim, R. (2025). EKSPLORASI STILISTIKA DALAM LIRIK LAGU BAND SUKATANI : 6.

Zahria, S. T., & Wibowo, H. (2024). An Analysis of Figurative Languages in the Niki Zefanya ' s Song Lyrics. 5, 98–105.