

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF NIKI'S SONG LYRICS USING BARTHES' THEORY: LOSS AND LONGING

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Abstract

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi kehilangan dan kerinduan dalam lirik lagu "La La Lost You" dan "On The Drive Home" karya NIKI menggunakan pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan teknik analisis semiotika yang berfokus pada tiga tingkat pemaknaan, yaitu denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Data penelitian berupa lirik lagu "La La Lost You" dan "On The Drive Home" karya NIKI yang dikumpulkan melalui teknik dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan dengan mengidentifikasi tanda-tanda linguistik dalam lirik lagu dan menginterpretasikannya melalui kerangka semiotika Barthes untuk mengungkap makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitologis yang berkaitan dengan kehilangan dan kerinduan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua lagu merepresentasikan kehilangan dan kerinduan melalui konstruksi makna yang berbeda. Lagu "La La Lost You" secara eksplisit menggambarkan kehilangan melalui simbol jarak geografis, nostalgia, dan konflik batin setelah perpisahan, sedangkan "On The Drive Home" merefleksikan kehilangan melalui metafora perjalanan, kesendirian, dan penerimaan emosional. Pada tingkat mitos, kedua lagu membangun pandangan bahwa hubungan interpersonal tidak hanya bergantung pada kehadiran fisik, tetapi juga pada ikatan emosional yang sangat mendalam. Dengan demikian, lirik lagu dapat dipahami sebagai sistem tanda yang kompleks yang tidak hanya menyampaikan makna literal, tetapi juga merepresentasikan pemahaman budaya dan ideologis yang lebih luas mengenai pengalaman manusia.

Kata Kunci: Semiotika, Roland Barthes, Lirik lagu, Kehilangan, Kerinduan

Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of loss and longing in the lyrics of the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" by NIKI using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. This study employed a qualitative method using semiotic analysis focusing on three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The data consisted of the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home," collected through documentation techniques. Data analysis was conducted by identifying linguistic signs within the lyrics and interpreting them through Barthes's semiotic framework to uncover denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings related to loss and longing. The results indicate that both songs represent loss and longing through distinct constructions of meaning. The song "La La Lost You" explicitly conveys loss through symbols of geographic distance, nostalgia, and inner conflict after a breakup, while "On The Drive Home" reflects loss through metaphors of journey, solitude, and emotional acceptance. At the mythical level, both songs construct the view that interpersonal relationships depend not only on physical presence but also on deep emotional bonds. Thus, song lyrics can be understood as a complex system of signs that conveys not only literal meanings but also broader cultural and ideological understandings of human experiences.

Keywords: Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Song Lyrics, Loss, Longing

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of art, a song is a structured sequence of notes combined with text and possessing poetic qualities, thereby forming a unified artistic expression that holds aesthetic value and serves a specific function. A song is an instrument intentionally harmonized with words, combined into a single entity to produce a rhythm that resonates with the listener's heart (Luwiga. & Djohan, 2025).

Songs play a very important role as a medium of communication and emotional expression used by many segments of society. Songs serve as entertainment, a means of

conveying criticism, a vehicle for messages, and a representation of human life experiences. Song lyrics are a sequence of words that are beautifully sung and can be interpreted. This demonstrates that text can be used as a tool for interpersonal communication to convey a message. There are various direct and indirect meanings in song lyrics because the language used is symbolic, allowing for both denotative and connotative interpretations in the process of meaning-making (Sinaga. et al., 2021).

Song lyrics are a cultural text containing numerous symbols and signs that reflect social reality as well as the personal experiences of

their creators (Ariyadi et al., 2024). In popular culture, songs serve as musical complements and expressions rich in meaning. Through various processes of selecting stylistic devices, words, narrative structures, and metaphors, song lyrics can convey messages that transcend their literal meanings. Simply put, songs are understood by the public as vocal musical works with a specific structure: verses, a bridge, and a chorus. These sections are arranged so that the listener can receive the message the songwriter intends to convey through poetic language. Song lyrics also serve as a space for individuals to articulate their inner experiences, such as love, loss, longing, happiness, and many other emotions.

These representations are often conveyed by the songwriter or singer implicitly through various linguistic cues that require a deep interpretive process. As a result, the meaning of song lyrics is not singular; rather, it is open to various interpretations, depending on the listener's culture, experiences, and sociocultural background. Two songs that express emotional depth are "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home," performed by NIKI, an Indonesian singer-songwriter active on the international stage. In academic studies, NIKI whose real name is Niki Zefanya can be positioned as a representative of contemporary Asian musicians who have successfully penetrated the global market through predominantly English-language music productions. NIKI's name gained rapid prominence after she joined 88rising, a label that promotes Asian talent to the international market.

Musically, NIKI's work often explores themes of love, the loss of interpersonal relationships, the dynamics of young people's evolving love, and personal growth. Two of NIKI's standout works in this context are the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home." These two songs have captured the attention of a wide audience because they explore themes of loss, longing, emotional distance, and reflection on relationships that have changed. Both songs offer an emotional experience that resonates deeply with the reality of today's young listeners.

The song "La La Lost You," released in 2019, portrays the experience of losing

someone and deep longing, yet it also conveys geographical distance and life changes. This song tells the story of the feeling of losing someone with whom one once shared a very close emotional bond (Dian, 2024). In line with this, the song "On The Drive Home," released in 2024 on the album "Buzz", explores themes of longing and the process of reflecting on a changed relationship transforming into a personal journey toward a safe space, memories of the past, or the process of rediscovering oneself after experiencing changes in interpersonal relationships (Narasi TV, 2025). Both songs share the common themes of loss and longing, yet through different perspectives: personal reflection in "On The Drive Home" and separation in "La La Lost You."

To analyze the meanings in the lyrics of "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" semiotics is a relevant approach. Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is produced and communicated within cultural life. Roland Barthes is a thinker in the field of semiotics who developed the concept of the sign system through two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation, which later evolved into the concept of myth as a form of ideology operating within culture (Griffin, 2019). Connotation derives from the Latin word "connotare," meaning "to imply," and refers to cultural signs arising from emotions, personal experiences, and other social contexts. Denotation refers to the literal meaning that is immediately apparent. Myth is understood as a natural and normal cultural value formed through social construction (Ramadaiya et al., 2024).

In the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" the lyrics words, and metaphors used function as signs that convey specific messages. Therefore, Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics is relevant for revealing the meanings of loss, longing, and nostalgia, as well as the dynamics of relationships, as represented in the lyrics of the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home."

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing relevance of themes such as loss, longing, emotional distance, and relationship transitions in contemporary society, particularly among young people. In the digital

era, interpersonal relationships are increasingly shaped by geographical mobility, long-distance communication, and changing social circumstances, which often influence emotional attachment and experiences of separation. As a form of popular culture, song lyrics serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium through which emotional experiences and social realities are represented and communicated. Therefore, examining the representation of loss and longing in song lyrics is important for understanding how emotional meanings are constructed, interpreted, and normalized within contemporary cultural contexts.

Several previous studies have examined song lyrics as cultural texts through Roland Barthes's semiotic framework. The research analyzed denotative and connotative meanings in Indonesian popular song lyrics from the 1990s and 2000s and found that song lyrics contain layered meanings reflecting social values, emotional experiences, and cultural contexts beyond their literal interpretations (Ariyadi et al., 2024). However, the study primarily focused on denotative and connotative meanings and did not further explore the mythological dimension proposed by Barthes. The research examined the meaning of solitude in Tulus's song "Ruang Sendiri" and revealed that solitude is represented not merely as physical isolation but also as a process of self-reflection and emotional maturity. Nevertheless, the study focused on a single emotional theme and a single song, limiting broader comparisons regarding emotional loss and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, other research analyzed Nadin Amizah's song lyrics using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory and found that emotional experiences are constructed through denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in symbolic language (Wulandari et al., 2025). While the study successfully demonstrated the role of song lyrics as cultural texts, it did not specifically examine the themes of loss and longing within the context of changing interpersonal relationships. Despite these contributions, studies specifically examining the representation of loss and longing in NIKI's

song lyrics remain limited. Existing research has generally focused on symbolic meanings, emotional representations, or cultural values in song lyrics, yet little attention has been paid to how loss and longing are constructed across different emotional stages within an artist's work. In particular, no study has comparatively analyzed NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" using Roland Barthes's concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. Although both songs address themes of separation and emotional attachment, they portray different responses to loss, ranging from longing and nostalgia to reflection and acceptance. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how meanings of loss and longing are represented and culturally constructed through semiotic signs in both songs. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis of two songs from different periods of NIKI's musical career, revealing the transformation of emotional representations of loss and longing through denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings.

Given this background, the researcher formulates the following research question:

1. What is the denotative meaning in the lyrics of the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" by NIKI ?
2. What are the connotative meanings of loss and longing in the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home"?
3. How are the myths or ideologies regarding loss and longing represented in the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home"?

In line with this research, the objective of this study is to describe the denotative meanings in the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" analyze the connotative meanings of loss and longing constructed through the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" and explain the myths or cultural constructions regarding loss and longing represented in the lyrics of NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home".

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on a deep interpretation of the meanings in the lyrics of "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" particularly regarding loss and longing. This study employs a qualitative approach based on Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis.

The units of analysis in this study are the lyrics of the songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" by NIKI. These two songs were selected because they contain deeply emotional narratives about loss and longing, distance, and changes in interpersonal relationships, all of which are relevant to this study. The data sources for this study were primary and secondary. Primary data consist of the lyrics of "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" while secondary data include books, journals, scientific articles, and other reference sources related to this study.

Data analysis identified signs in the lyrics of "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" which were then interpreted at three levels of meaning: connotation, denotation, and myth. In this study, Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics is used not only to identify denotative and connotative meanings but also to understand how signs in song lyrics form a broader system of meaning (Kutanto, 2024). Barthes views a sign as a relationship between the signifier and the signified, which then develops into a second-order system of signs. At the first level, a sign is understood as a denotative meaning that is literal and direct. However, at the second level, the sign undergoes a process of reinterpretation that produces a connotative meaning that is, a meaning influenced by cultural context, experience, and individual emotions. In this case, the sign no longer stands alone but becomes part of a more complex system of meaning. Furthermore, Barthes explains that connotation can evolve into a myth a system of signs that functions to represent ideological values within society. Myths operate by normalizing certain meanings so that they appear as something natural and unquestioned. In the context of song lyrics, myths can emerge through the representation of relationships, emotions, and life experiences considered universal by society (Wulandari et al., 2025). Additionally, Barthes's semiotic analysis in

this study also considers the concept of the two orders of signification, in which meaning does not stop at the denotative level but continues to develop to form a construction of meaning that to ensure the validity of the data in this study, the researcher employed both theoretical and source triangulation (Hanif & Jupriani, 2025). Theoretical triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis with other relevant concepts in communication studies and semiotics, thereby ensuring that the resulting interpretation was not singular. Additionally, source triangulation was conducted by reviewing various references such as books, scientific journals, and previous studies related to song lyric analysis and the meaning of loss.

Validity was further strengthened through a process of repeated interpretation of the same data, allowing the researcher to ensure consistency in the interpretation of meaning. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument; thus, a deep understanding of the context and the theories employed is a critical factor in maintaining the accuracy of the analysis (Creswell. & Poth., 2018). Additionally, to enhance data validity, the researcher employs systematic analytical techniques, including identifying signs, classifying meanings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, and linking them to social and cultural contexts. Consequently, the research findings are expected to possess a high level of credibility and be academically accountable.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

La La Lost You

Lyrics	Denotative	Connotative	Myth
While I'm on Sunset, are you on the subway?	The speaker is on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, while the other person is on the New York subway.	These lyrics depict two individuals separated by distance who have been living their own lives. This creates an emotional distance within a relationship	In modern relationships, differences in place and time can lead to rifts and alter an individual's perspective.
You would	The lyrics	These lyrics	In a

Lyrics	Denotative	Connotative	Myth
know if you stayed	say that the person would learn a lot if they chose to stay with her.	represent the character's disappointment in someone. They believe their relationship would last a long time if they stayed together.	relationship, love must be fought for together.
Missing our drunken 2 A.M. strolls in K-Town	The speaker is longing for the moments when they were drunk at 2 a.m., wandering around K-Town.	These lyrics represent shared memories that have since faded.	A breakup makes someone remember the small, precious things in a relationship they once had.
All my demons have your smile	The lyrics describe demons or wounds that resemble someone's smile	These lyrics depict a character haunted by beautiful memories of the person they love. This causes emotional pain for the character in the lyrics.	After a breakup, sweet memories are hard to erase because of a deep emotional bond.
Remember last winter when we used to drive around	The character in the lyrics recalls last winter when they often drove together.	These lyrics represent the character's nostalgia for the warmth of a relationship they once shared with someone.	Seasons often serve as markers of the phases of a person's life.
If I'm honest, I'd call, but I'm trying to let go	The speaker's desire to call someone, yet they are trying to let go.	These lyrics may represent an internal conflict within the speaker between wanting to contact someone and wanting to forget them.	In a relationship, individuals often feel torn between maintaining it and letting it go.

Lyrics	Denotative	Connotative	Myth
Hope New York holds you as I do	The speaker in the lyrics hopes that New York will embrace that person just as he does.	New York is represented as a new place where the character in the lyrics hopes to protect and provide security for someone.	Many people believe that a new city or place of residence can heal old wounds

On The Drive Home

Lyrics	Denotative	Connotative	Myth
Is two foggy windows to a lost soul	The speaker is looking at two foggy windows and has lost their way.	The two windows symbolize two individuals who were together at that time. The foggy windows symbolize a person's confusion, and the phrase "Lost Soul" represents an individual who is losing their sense of self.	Loss is a condition that makes it difficult for someone to see reality and the future clearly.
That it's so quiet on the drive home	The speaker is traveling home in silence, without any conversation.	The absence of conversation between two people together indicates a fractured relationship. Silence is a sign of emotional distance.	In interpersonal relationships, silence is often seen as a sign of strained communication.
Babe, can I build my home in your mind ?	The speaker is asking if they can build a home inside someone's mind.	The word "home" represents a place to return to a place of peace, safety, happiness,	A person feels loved not only through physical presence, but also through their presence in someone's thoughts. Being

Lyrics	Denotative	Connotative	Myth
		and the feeling of being loved by someone.	a figure who is loved and cherished is a deeply romantic form of connection.
Two pieces of driftwood	The current carries two pieces of driftwood.	Representing two individuals whose perspectives have diverged due to their differing life experiences.	In social life, human relationships are often understood as not always maintainable because they are influenced by time, distance, and changing circumstances.
Instead of four limbs and lips to kiss	The four limbs two hands and two feet and the presence of lips to be kissed depict a complete human figure	It can be interpreted as the presence of a partner providing a source of strength, warmth, intimacy, affection, and so on.	"Someone" is often mythologized by the public as an emotional home because of a deep emotional connection.
Darling, let's take the long way home	The speaker invites someone to take a longer route home.	This invitation symbolizes a desire or effort to prolong the time spent together at that moment.	When faced with loss, people tend to try to delay the end of the meeting and make the most of the meaningful moments

Discussion

Based on the findings above, which have been analyzed using Roland Barthes's semiotics, the lyrics of the songs titled "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" performed by Niki Zefanya, both represent experiences of loss and longing for someone, packaged in different forms. The song "La La Lost You" depicts a type of loss explicitly conveyed through symbols, such as nostalgia, inner conflict following a separation, and the presence of geographical distance between the two characters. Meanwhile, the song "On The Drive Home" represents the meaning of loss

framed through acceptance. This is conveyed through the metaphor of a journey home, marked by solitude and emotions accepted.

In the song "La La Lost You" loss is explicitly and tangibly represented through lyrics that feature symbols of nostalgia, inner conflict following a breakup, geographical distance, and starkly contrasting lifestyles. The lyric "While I'm on Sunset, are you on the subway?" illustrates the separation between two individuals who now occupy different spaces and live in their respective homes. Connotatively, these lyrics indicate a difference in location, as well as physical and emotional distance that arises alongside changes in each individual's life.

The use of settings such as "Sunset" and "subway" can be interpreted as representations of different lifestyles, in which each individual experiences a reality that is no longer interconnected. This reinforces the connotative meaning that loss does not always occur suddenly, but rather through a gradual process of change. These lyrics can also be interpreted as a representation of the disparity in life experiences between two individuals who once shared an emotional bond. The difference in location not only signifies physical distance but also reflects changes in each individual's identity and life priorities. In this context, distance serves as a symbol of a shifting relationship that no longer exists on the same plane. This finding aligns with Roland Barthes's view that a sign does not merely stop at a literal meaning but also evolves into a cultural meaning understood through an individual's personal experience (Simanjourang & Aulia, 2025).

The lyrics "Missin' our drunken 2 AM stroll in K-Town" and "Remember last winter when we would drive around" represent a nostalgic memory of a past relationship. Small memories from when they were together, such as driving around the city at night, become a symbol of emotional closeness that is typically recalled by someone who has experienced a breakup. This indicates an experience of loss felt by the individual, consistent with findings that, after rejection or a breakup, individuals tend to reprocess experiences from past relationships in detail including small details as part of emotional regulation (Fitriani & Hasanati,

2026). Thus, this song reinforces the notion that past love always leaves an emotional imprint that is difficult to erase.

In the context of modern society, the portrayal of interpersonal relationships in these two songs also reflects the reality of long distance relationships (LDR), which are becoming increasingly common. High mobility and career demands often force individuals to maintain relationships separated by distance (Janarsyah. & Suranto, 2023). This situation not only affects the intensity of communication but also the quality of the relationship itself. Therefore, "loss" in this context does not always mean the formal end of the relationship but can also refer to a gradual diminishment of emotional closeness.

Overall, the findings suggest that loss in "La La Lost You" is represented as an unresolved emotional experience characterized by geographical separation, nostalgia, and persistent emotional attachment. The repeated references to places, memories, and past shared experiences indicate that loss is not portrayed as a singular event but as a continuing emotional process. Through Barthes's concept of connotation, these signs function as cultural representations of modern relationships in which physical mobility and changing life circumstances often reshape emotional connections. At the mythological level, the song reinforces the belief that meaningful relationships continue to influence individuals even after physical separation has occurred.

Meanwhile, in the song "On The Drive Home" loss is represented reflectively, with a contemplative, implicit tone not explicitly stated but inferred from the context through the lyrics. The metaphor of the drive home symbolizes one's inner journey of accepting a breakup. The lyric "That it's quiet on the drive home" conveys silence as a sign of a rift in the relationship, strained communication, and an emotional distance between two people who were once together. Roland Barthes states that silence is a sign of a rupture in interpersonal relationships (Rahastine., 2023). This is also often analyzed as a connotative sign representing a psychological and emotional rupture. Silence is a practice adopted by individuals in interpersonal relationships that can worsen the relationship. The act of

remaining silent serves to shut down communication and is also interpreted as a sign of the breakdown of honesty within a relationship.

The lyric "Can I build my home in your mind?" represents the concept of "home" no longer defined by a physical structure but as a psychological space where one feels loved, accepted, cared for, and safe. This can be interpreted to mean that romantic relationships in modern culture are often mythologized as a person's emotional refuge. In the concept of myth, this implies that a person can be considered a "home" when they can provide both physical and emotional peace to their partner.

Furthermore, the lyrics "Two pieces of driftwood" represent two individuals who the currents of their own lives have carried away. The drifting wood symbolizes humanity's inability to control a relationship, shaped by time, distance, change, social circumstances, and other factors beyond our control.

In contrast, the findings reveal that "On The Drive Home" represents loss through reflection, silence, and emotional acceptance. Unlike "La La Lost You," which emphasizes longing and nostalgia, this song portrays loss as a process of understanding, adaptation, and emotional growth. The recurring symbols of silence, home, and journey suggest that separation can encourage self-reflection and the reconstruction of personal meaning. From Barthes's perspective, these signs create a cultural narrative in which emotional maturity emerges through the acceptance of relational change rather than through attempts to restore the past.

This distinction sets the lyrics of "La La Lost You" apart, as they depict a loss still shrouded in longing and regret. This song demonstrates a more mature perspective: not all relationships can be sustained under certain circumstances. The findings demonstrate that representations of loss and longing in song lyrics are constructed through a variety of semiotic signs, including places, memories, silence, journeys, and emotional attachment. Through denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings, these signs reveal that loss is not merely represented as physical separation but also as a complex emotional experience shaped

by personal memories, interpersonal relationships, and cultural understandings of intimacy. The analysis further shows that song lyrics function as cultural texts capable of communicating emotional experiences and reflecting broader social perspectives on relationships and separation.

When compared, both songs represent loss and longing through different emotional trajectories. "La La Lost You" constructs loss as an unresolved emotional condition marked by nostalgia, regret, and the desire to reconnect with the past, whereas "On The Drive Home" frames loss as a reflective process that leads to acceptance and emotional maturity. At the level of myth, both songs reinforce the contemporary cultural belief that interpersonal relationships are sustained not only through physical presence but also through emotional attachment. These findings demonstrate that song lyrics function as cultural texts capable of communicating complex emotional experiences while reflecting broader understandings of relationships in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the representation of loss and longing in NIKI's songs "La La Lost You" and "On The Drive Home" using Roland Barthes's semiotic framework. The findings reveal that both songs construct loss and longing through different emotional trajectories. "La La Lost You" represents loss through geographical distance, nostalgia, and unresolved emotional attachment, while "On The Drive Home" portrays loss through reflection, acceptance, and emotional maturity. At the mythological level, both songs reinforce the idea that meaningful relationships are sustained not only through physical presence but also through deep emotional bonds. These findings demonstrate that song lyrics function as cultural texts capable of communicating complex emotional experiences and social meanings. Through denotative, connotative, and mythical levels of signification, the songs illustrate how loss and longing are culturally constructed and understood within contemporary interpersonal relationships. This study contributes to communication and

cultural studies by highlighting the role of popular music as a medium for expressing and negotiating emotional experiences. Future research may expand the scope of analysis by examining other songs by NIKI or comparing her works with those of other musicians who explore similar themes. In addition, future studies may employ audience reception approaches to investigate how listeners interpret and respond to representations of loss and longing in song lyrics.

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