

AN ANALYSIS OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION FOUND IN NIKI'S SELECTED SONG LYRICS

¹Putri Alicya

¹Student of English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Education and
Teacher Training State Islamic University of Mataram. Indonesia

Corresponding Author Email: alicyaputri@gmail.com

ABSTRACTS	ARTICLE INFO
<p>This research aims to identify and analyze the types and meanings of idiomatic found in three selected songs by NIKI from the album Live at The Wiltern, namely Lose, Lowkey, and Backburner. The focus of this research is to investigate how idiomatic expressions contribute to the overall meaning and emotional depth of the lyrics. The researcher uses a qualitative descriptive method and applies the theory proposed by Boatner and Gates to classify the types of idioms. The data were collected by listening to the songs, transcribing the lyrics, identifying idiomatic expressions, and analyzing their meanings based on context. The findings show that a total of 24 idiomatic expressions were identified in the three songs. These idioms consist of various types, including lexemic idiom noun, verb, adjective, adverbial, and phrasal idioms. Each idiom contributes to the thematic richness of the lyrics, expressing feelings of love, heartbreak, self-reflection, and personal growth. The use of idioms in the lyrics adds depth and emotional nuance, making the songs more expressive and relatable for listeners. This research is expected to provide insights for English learners, teachers, and future researchers about the importance of idiomatic expressions in song lyrics as a tool for enhancing language comprehension and cultural understanding.</p>	<p>Article History: <i>Received: October 17th, 2025</i> <i>Revised: October 26th, 2025</i> <i>Published: October 2025</i></p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Idiomatic expression, Song lyrics, Niki, Boatner and Gates, Qualitative analysis</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

In linguistic studies, idiomatic expressions are defined as phrases whose meanings cannot be inferred from the literal interpretation of the words that compose them. These expressions, deeply embedded in cultural contexts, play a significant role in shaping how language conveys meaning beyond its surface level. Idioms are frequently utilized in various forms of communication, including literary works and song lyrics, to express complex emotions, thoughts, and experiences in a more nuanced and culturally resonant manner. In society, we learn language as a skill needed for living. However, if we have a different language than others, we will experience language barriers that limit our communication.

Idiomatic expressions are an essential part of the English language that reflect cultural richness and convey complex meanings that are not always interpret-able literally. Fernando argues that idioms are not merely decorative language elements, but they also express emotional nuances and speakers' attitudes that are often difficult to convey through literal words. In the context of English as a second language learning, idioms present a particular challenge due to their figurative and contextual nature. Therefore, authentic media such as

song lyrics can serve as effective tools for understanding and learning idiomatic expressions in natural contexts.

Songs, as a form of artistic expression, carry authentic cultural and linguistic values. According to Murphey, song lyrics are capable of increasing learners' emotional engagement while offering rich linguistic contexts for exploring idiomatic meaning. In this regard, the use of songs as teaching material or as an object of analysis in applied linguistics becomes increasingly relevant, especially when the lyrics include idiomatic expressions that reflect the social and psychological realities of the writer or performer.

Nicole Zefanya or better known professionally as Niki, an internationally recognized singer-songwriter from Indonesia, is the most popular Indonesian artist on Spotify with more than 2.8 billion plays, surpassing Rich Brian in January 2024. Niki is also the Indonesian artist with the record for the highest number of monthly listeners on the platform to reach 13.2 million listeners in December 2021. Niki is known for her ability to weave trusting emotions into her lyrics. Her songs often feature idiomatic expressions, which add layers of meaning and complexity to the narratives she portrays. By blending Western and Eastern influences in her music, Niki offers a rich linguistic tapestry that reflects not only her personal experiences but also the broader cultural intersections that define her artistry.

In recent years, international Indonesian artist NIKI has attracted growing scholarly attention due to the strong narrative and emotional depth in her lyrics. Pratiwi investigated the representation of Asian diaspora identity in the album *Moonchild*, while Azzahra and Rahmah explored the themes of self-empowerment and love in NIKI's lyrics through thematic analysis. However, to date, there has been no specific research focusing on the use of idiomatic expressions in NIKI's lyrics, particularly in the *Live at The Wiltern* (2023) album. Yet, in songs such as *Backburner*, *Lowkey*, and *Lose*, idioms play a significant role in expressing inner conflict, nostalgia, and the complexities of personal relationships.

Based on this background, the present study aims to fill this research gap in linguistic analysis of NIKI's lyrics by specifically examining idiomatic expressions in three selected songs. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of idiomatic language in song lyrics and its implications for linguistic studies and English language learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which aims to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups assign to a particular social phenomenon or issue. The qualitative approach used in this research is descriptive and analytical, as it collects data in the form of words or texts and examines them in depth to uncover underlying meanings and patterns. The research particularly investigates idiomatic expressions in selected song lyrics by NIKI. It seeks to answer two main research questions: (1) What types of idiomatic expressions appear in NIKI's selected song lyrics? and (2) What are the meanings of these idiomatic expressions within the context of the analyzed lyrics? To answer these questions, the researcher identifies, classifies, and analyzes idiomatic expressions based on their types and contextual meanings, using relevant linguistic theories.

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The idiomatic expressions found throughout the selected song lyrics reveal a strong emphasis on emotional and psychological dimensions. Rather than functioning as mere decorative language, these idioms operate as essential vehicles for expressing the artist's internal states, emotional turmoil, and personal reflections.

A significant portion of the idioms conveys intense psychological experiences. For example, expressions such as “lose your mind” and “hate myself” in *Lose* highlight moments of emotional disarray and self-directed frustration, portraying internal chaos and vulnerability. These expressions often appear at lyrical peaks, where the persona's emotional equilibrium is disrupted by overwhelming feelings.

Several idioms further portray the complexities of attachment and relational dynamics. In *Backburner*, idioms like “in your corner,” “burning on your backburner,” and “settled for the backburner” vividly illustrate the pain of being emotionally deprioritized, yet choosing to remain. These expressions blend emotional dependence with resignation, capturing a nuanced form of romantic suffering. Similarly, “stalling” and “think to call love” reveal subtle emotional manipulation and the tension of lingering emotional ties.

In *Lowkey*, idioms such as “lowkey,” “catch a vibe,” “liquid courage,” and “pick your poison” reflect the emotional risks, secrecy, and impulsive intimacy that characterize modern romantic encounters. The idiom “hurt puppy” from *Backburner* is particularly notable for illustrating a person who adopts a victim persona to gain sympathy, indicating complex emotional power dynamics.

Furthermore, NIKI's use of casual idioms such as “bullshit,” “blow shit up,” and “he said, she said” reinforces the raw and conversational tone of her lyrics. These expressions not only communicate emotional tension but also help construct a confessional and relatable lyrical voice.

The use of idioms throughout these songs aligns with the broader thematic concerns in NIKI's work, especially within the R&B/Pop genre. Themes of heartbreak, identity, emotional instability, and introspection are encapsulated in compact, idiomatic forms that resonate with listeners — particularly young audiences experiencing similar emotional journeys.

In conclusion, the idioms found in NIKI's selected songs are not merely stylistic flourishes, but integral to the emotional narrative of her songwriting. They deepen emotional engagement, heighten the intimacy of her lyrical persona, and make her storytelling powerfully relatable and human.

The strategic use of idiomatic expressions in NIKI's selected songs underscores the multifunctional role of idioms in lyrical composition—not merely as stylistic devices, but as powerful tools for emotional expression and narrative cohesion. Idioms do not just enhance stylistic fluency; they encapsulate affective meaning in condensed, metaphorical language, a function increasingly emphasized in recent linguistic and musicological studies. According to Xiao and Li, idioms are processed both holistically and compositionally, depending on their familiarity and semantic transparency, which makes them cognitively efficient in contexts demanding emotional compression such as song lyrics.

In the songs “Lose,” “Lowkey,” and “Backburner,” idioms are employed to express emotional states such as abandonment, longing, regret, and inner conflict. This aligns with the findings of Eissler et al., who discovered that metaphorical language—including idioms—activates stronger emotional and neural responses than literal equivalents, particularly in artistic discourse. Idioms, in this sense, function as emotional amplifiers that help listeners access complex affective experiences through familiar and culturally coded expressions.

For instance, the idiom “*burning on your backburner*” expresses emotional neglect and the pain of being deprioritized in a relationship. This figurative phrase conveys a sense of lingering attachment and self-sacrifice, evoking a vivid image of someone who remains emotionally available despite being placed in a passive, secondary role. This finding is supported by recent corpus-based studies which confirm that high-frequency idiomatic expressions in popular music are often linked with themes of vulnerability and interpersonal conflict—emotions that are easily relatable and emotionally impactful.

Similarly, “backburner”—used as a song title—serves as a spatial metaphor for emotional neglect. It metaphorically positions the speaker as someone relegated to the background of another’s priorities. According to recent developments in cognitive metaphor theory, such spatial metaphors are effective because they translate abstract emotional experiences into concrete spatial schemas, which enhances understanding and memorability. In this case, the metaphor not only encodes emotional marginalization but also aligns with the auditory structure of the song, enhancing its narrative arc.

These idioms thus act as emotional shorthand—a point emphasized by Yuan & Liao, who argue that idiomatic language enables the expression of layered, even contradictory emotional states in a compact and culturally resonant form. This may explain why idioms are so prevalent in emotionally driven genres like R&B and Pop, where authenticity and immediacy are essential to audience engagement.

Moreover, the resonance of idiomatic expressions with younger audiences should not be underestimated. Recent music psychology research indicates that younger listeners prefer lyrics that are emotionally expressive, semantically rich, and metaphorically vivid. Idioms fulfill these criteria by combining narrative density with emotional accessibility, establishing a sense of intimacy and shared affective space between artist and listener.

Ultimately, NIKI’s use of idioms reflects a conscious lyrical strategy. Rather than articulating emotions in literal terms, she employs idioms as figurative filters—inviting interpretation, reflection, and emotional identification. This aligns with current discourse in lyrical stylistics, which views idioms not just as ornamental devices but as semiotic bridges between private feeling and collective understanding. In doing so, NIKI elevates idiomatic language from a rhetorical flourish to a core mechanism of musical storytelling—encoding emotion, narrative, and identity into culturally familiar and poetically potent expressions.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions are: 1). Using Boatner and Gates’ theory, various types of idiomatic expressions were identified in the song lyrics. These idiomatic expressions consist of lexemic idioms in the form of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbials, and phrasal idioms. 2) The idiomatic expressions found in the songs are used to convey complex emotions,

personal experiences, and cultural nuances that resonate with the listeners. 3) The study reveals that idiomatic expressions in song lyrics can provide listeners with a unique linguistic experience, combining poetic artistry with everyday language.

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