



Freedom of Expression in Music: Controversial Song Lyrics that Challenge Social Norms

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Abstract

Freedom of expression is one of the human rights. There are many ways to convey self-expression, one of which is through music. Song lyrics in music can be a means for musicians to convey what they feel. Since music is universal, the listeners, who may have the same thoughts and feelings as the musician, can understand the meaning of the song. Musicians can use their skills in writing song lyrics, expressing themselves with stanzas that can move the heart and make them relevant to their listeners. But not only music with "touching", "motivational" or other positive lyrics are found in the world of music, there is also a lot of music with lyrics containing controversial things that are against the norm, such as swearing, violence, free sex, drugs, and so on. This article, using the literature study method, analyzes the complexity of song lyrics containing explicit content that is not under the norms and freedom of expression as a human right. Music with controversial content can provoke and influence someone who hears the music continuously. There is a need for wisdom in airing, broadcasting, or listening to these songs since music with controversial content can still be played in certain countries.

Keywords: *Freedom of Expression; Song Lyrics; Controversial; Social Norms*

Introduction

Humans have a wide range of complexities that distinguish them from other living things, like animals and plants. Humans have complex feelings or emotions, not just black and white or just happy and sad. While there is no rule that says an emotion should be expressed or kept, it must be adapted to the conditions around us. Maybe in a social condition, for example in a work environment, a person must hold back his emotions to show his professionalism at work. Someone who has a tendency to often hold back his own emotions can cause them to become an angry or offended person. Therefore, it is necessary to manage emotions well so that a person avoids mental problems. If at any time a person needs to express their feelings, they will not express these feelings explosively or impulsively.

Humans are able to create various means of life and then control them for their survival, such as language which was created as a means of self-disclosure. Humans also have the creative ability to express their emotional life in various forms such as art, whether in the form of dance, painting, or music.

Music has become a part of people's lives. Music not only presents sounds with certain pitches and rhythms but also as a means of communication in pouring out the hearts and minds of its creators. (Prasetya & Sunarto, 2019). Music, in the ethnomusicological view, interacts with culture concerning religion, language, and nationality. Music expresses beliefs, social customs, psychology, technology, and certain cultures (Shaleha, 2019). Research shows that the recognition of emotional cues for music listeners is increased if the musician and the listener are from the same culture, or in other words, listeners who have the same background as the musician will feel relevant to the music they hear (Argstatter, 2016).

Music not only contains elements such as melody or rhythm, but music also has lyrics. Lyrics are useful as a medium of expression used by musicians in channeling their creativity to convey what they feel through wordplay (Cahya & Sukendro, 2022). The lyrics contained in a song can also affect a person with a certain emotional condition, providing a suggestion for the listener either positive or negative suggestions (Amelia & Aryaneta, 2022). Because music is a product of a person's efforts to express themselves, music can be a means of validation for listeners who may have the same feelings or thoughts as the composer of the music, so that listeners can think that "they are not alone" and make listeners feel understood. This shows that music is universal because people other than the composer can also feel the meaning behind the music.

The complexity of emotions and feelings possessed by humans causes a variety of *output* from an art that aims to express feelings and thoughts, including in song lyrics contained in music. Various twists and turns of life problems can be found as themes in writing song lyrics. However, in addition to music with song lyrics that contain positive elements or in this case song lyrics with negative emotions and feelings but still packaged with good language, many songs contain controversial content; for example, the use of swear words, descriptions of violence, crime, drugs, sex, or song lyrics that contain language that refers to explicit things, both in the form of euphemisms and dysphemisms.

Songs with explicit lyrics often spark controversy. This is because these songs are considered to be against social norms. Song lyrics that contain explicit content can also influence the listener, depending on how someone is listening to the song. Adolescents who often listen to music with explicit themes can influence their thoughts and actions so that they become maladaptive individuals and ultimately contradict existing social norms.

Based on this background, several problems can be formulated as follows: (1) How is freedom of expression in music? (2) How is the existence of music with controversial content? (3) How do these songs affect the listeners? (4) How are actions taken regarding these songs?

Results and Discussion

1. Freedom of Expression in Music

Every individual has freedom of expression, which is one of the basic human rights. Freedom of expression includes not only the freedom to speak, but also the freedom to convey thoughts or ideas, both in writing and orally (Ansar, 2021). John Locke argued that freedom of expression is one way to seek truth, receive and disseminate information. The information is then discussed—whether to be supported or criticized—as a process of removing misunderstandings of values and facts (Rahmanto, 2016). Individual freedom of expression can be expressed in the form of books, writings, or even art such as painting, dance, or music.

Music is often thought of as something universal. Music is not only a means of comfort, but it can be said to be an expression and hope for many people around the world. A person's musical preferences

can be linked to their identity. A study showed that a measure of a person's self-esteem can significantly predict their music preferences, taking into consideration age, gender, and personality variables (Clark & Lonsdale, 2023). Music can reconcile, unite, and heal individuals or groups of people in need (Dave, 2015). In addition to encompassing human emotions, music also encompasses the objective outer reality of nature and human activity as well as "the inner, subjective, and psychological world of thought" (Munkittrick, 2010).

Music can affect the listener. Soft music can make the listener's feelings soften, or music with a fast rhythm pattern can excite the listener. The lyrics of a song also play a role in adding to the listener's thoughts, or even reinforcing the listener's pre-existing perceptions.

For example, many musicians contribute to the music industry by contributing their perspectives on various national injustices through the music they create (Moore, 2013). In Indonesia, many musicians use music as a medium of social criticism or resistance. Many of Iwan Fals' works are about social criticism of the Indonesian government and the suffering experienced by the community due to the injustices committed by the army in the New Order era (Susanti & Nurmayani, 2020). Music can unite people who have the same feelings, making them feel that their voices are represented by the music.

Social criticism-themed songs, although often considered controversial and opposed by the government, are actually constructive because they convey the shortcomings of the government so that if the government cares about the progress of the nation and its country, the song can be used as a reference in fixing domestic polemics. However, "controversial" theme songs do not only focus on improvement, but there are also many controversial theme songs that are destructive. Many song lyrics contain elements that are contrary to social norms, such as American rock music which over the past decade has sung about violence, deviant behavior, and sociopaths (Martin, 1993). In Indonesia, there are many dangdut songs with sexual themes that are not in line with Indonesian values and norms.

As Nomi Dave writes, while music has a role to play in freedom of expression, the scope should be based on music's capacity to shape progressive change, not as something that brings evil (Dave, 2015). Therefore, freedom of expression in music must still pay attention to the content of the music it creates, because freedom of expression is still bound by restrictions that uphold recognition and respect for human rights (Gettari et al., 2023).

2. Music Existence with Controversial Content

The use of explicit content in music varies from song to song. Some songs do not depict violence but use swearing, whether the language is used as an affirmation or meant literally. An example is the song "Seven" popularized by Jeon Jungkook. The song has two versions, the clean version and the explicit version. There is not much difference in the two versions, but there is a one-word change in one verse in the chorus from "loving" to "f***ing". In the clean version, the verse written is "you know night after night I'll be loving you right", then in the explicit version the lyrics change to "you know night after night I'll be f***ing you right". Although only one word has changed, it can change the overall meaning of the song from initially telling a story about loving someone every day, then changing the context to a more sexual direction.

Swear words are generally used to express emotions, especially anger and frustration. Swear words are often used to express an emotion because their primary meaning is connotative. The emotional impact of swear words and expletives depends on one's cultural experience and language conventions (Timothy & Janschewitz, 2008).

There is research conducted by Stephens and the team to test how swearing affects a person. The initial hypothesis in the study was that swearing is a maladaptive pain response, swearing will decrease a

person's pain tolerance and thus increase pain perception compared to someone who does not swear. However, the results of the study showed that people who swore were more tolerant of pain than those who did not swear. Swearing decreases pain perception which is accompanied by an increase in heart rate resulting in a hypoalgesic effect (pain reduction) (Stephens et al., 2009). This could be the reason why some musicians often include swear words in their song lyrics, that is to express strong emotions and reduce pain perception thus providing a "relieving" effect.

In addition to the use of swearing, there are also many song lyrics with a higher level of explicitness, such as song lyrics that describe violence, alcohol use, and sexuality. Dukes' research examined the 100 most popular songs from 1958 to 1998. The study revealed that from 1976 to 1984, songs that used sexual references were mostly performed by women compared to men. Then from 1991 to 1998, men composed more songs with sexual themes than women. The top 100 words in folk and country music are about travel and nature. In reggae music, most of them use the Jamaican language. On the other hand, the top 100 words in blues and R&B music are about love and sex, while the top 100 words in rap music contain vulgar words. In metal music, the top 100 words are death and violence. Changes in song themes affect the perspective and culture of the listener (Urbano et al., 2021). Another study showed that of all the most popular songs in the United States, a third contained content about alcohol and marijuana or cannabis. Music that shows explicit drug use appears most often in rap music (48 out of 62 songs) and least often in pop music (3 out of 35 songs) (Primack et al., 2008).

When compared to other music genres, rap and heavy metal are music genres that often come under scrutiny for the language used in writing their lyrics. Some authors argue that the lyrics in rap music are often violent and misogynistic. This provokes listeners to commit violence or crimes that endanger society. Meanwhile, heavy metal music whose lyrics contain violent elements is feared to encourage listeners to use drugs or attempt suicide (Fried, 1999).

In 1992, Los Angeles-based heavy metal band Body Count released an album that included a song called Cop Killer. The song tells the story of a young man who plans to kill a police officer. The release of the song caused a variety of responses, including US politicians Dan Quayle to Jesse Jackson explicitly condemning the song. Police departments across the country threatened to sell all shares invested in Time Warner as the record label of the band Body Count and threatened to sue them. Bomb and death threats were also made to record executives. As a result of these pressures, a few weeks later Body Count withdrew the album from the market and removed the song Cop Killer from the album (Fried, 1999).

Leaving aside foreign songs, there are also songs in Indonesia that contain explicit content. Like the song "Cinta Satu Malam" (One Night Love) performed by Melinda in 2009, this dangdut-flavored song explicitly and implicitly represents *free sex* activities that are carried out only overnight on a consensual basis (Winduwati, 2018). Apart from the aforementioned song title, there are still many dangdut songs in Indonesia whose lyrics contain elements of erotica. This is why music that is loved by the middle to lower class is often considered a music genre with negative connotations, even though many dangdut songs have positive meanings, such as songs performed by Rhoma Irama, who bears the nickname "King of Dangdut" (Vera, 2017). This has become a common phenomenon, as many songs in Indonesia use vulgar and inappropriate lyrics. No longer pursuing aesthetic elements but using indecent messages or glorifying immorality (Kusumaningsih et al., 2018).

Songs that contain controversial elements in their lyrics are often criticized by the public. Even so, sometimes these songs still circulate because it is seen as a common thing to do. For example, songs that contain content about extramarital sex may be restricted or even banned in countries that uphold religion or norms such as countries in the East but can still be listened to freely in countries that adhere to a liberal system. This shows that the existence of such music is influenced by the culture in a particular environment.

3. The Effects of Music with Explicit Content on Listeners

Music is in high demand among teenage listeners. Teenagers, especially those who are in puberty, are very easily influenced by the music they listen to. This is because puberty is a time when a teenager is looking for their identity (Najla, 2020). Teenagers are often curious about the world around them, so they look for answers to their questions through various ways either by asking adults, reading books, or through other media such as movies or music.

Music has a wide range of themes that are in line with the identity that teenagers are searching for, such as romance, friendship, independence, or self-confidence. Music plays a role in helping children or adolescents understand their feelings and facilitating their social interactions (Roberts et al., 2003). If children or adolescents are reluctant to discuss their concerns with adults, then they will escape from parental supervision, and it is feared that adolescents will find it difficult to distinguish what is good or needs to be avoided and swallow the information they get from outside. Popular culture, which tends to be associated with fun things, also contains many themes related to crime. This allows for a link between the culture and crime, and social control (Deflem, 2010).

Teens aged 15 to 18 are exposed to popular music for an average of 2.4 hours per day. With so many controversial-themed songs, it was found that on average, teens are exposed to about 84 songs with explicit drug references per day, 591 references per week, or 30,732 references per year. On the other hand, the level of exposure varies by genre, where the average teenager listening to pop music gets 5 drug-referenced songs per day, while the average teenager listening to rap music will get 251 references per day (Primack et al., 2008).

Several studies have shown that music with violent lyrics or aggressive words can trigger a person to have aggressive thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors, especially if the music is played repeatedly, such as on the radio, on social media, or by the listener himself. Listening to music allows the listener to imagine the details contained in the lyrics of the song they hear, for example, music with a violent context can make the listener imagine himself to be an antagonist (Andersen et al., 2003). Research conducted by Ballard and his team showed that music that contains antisocial elements in its lyrics tends to make listeners have the same thought patterns, namely becoming a maladaptive and antisocial person (Ballard et al., 1999). In general, adolescents who are exposed to music with these contents do not worry too much about legal and physical consequences, because their egos often feel that they are "invincible" (Primack et al., 2008).

In addition to music with themes of violence or sexuality, there are also suicides associated with songs that contain suicidal content in their lyrics. *Gloomy Sunday* is one of the songs dubbed as "*The Hungarian Suicide Song*" because it is believed to have created a kind of suicide epidemic. The lyrics in this song describe the feeling of hopelessness that drives the desire to commit suicide. "*My heart and I have decided to end it all...*" is a stanza in the song *Gloomy Sunday* that is thought to trigger people with suicidal potential to make up their minds to end their lives (Stack et al., 2007).

Music with provocative lyrics also usually influences the content of the music video. For example, if a music song contains sexual content, the music video will contain visuals that can be said to be attractive, such as a well-built woman wearing sexy or provocative clothes. Women who continuously hear such songs and watch such videos will feel that they must have an attractive appearance—in this case, look sexy and provocative—to feel accepted by a social structure (Pervez et al., 2022). As for men, the more they are exposed to sexually explicit content, the more likely they are to see women as sex objects. This depends on the type of material viewed, the level of explicitness, and gender (Brandt, 2013). Although complaints about sexual content vary, it often contributes to deviant sexual behavior and is one of the causes of societal degradation (Dixon & Linz, 1997).

Psychologists have also begun to explore the negative impact of rap music with violent lyrics on listeners. Violent lyrics can lead to violent video clips. Exposure to violent rap videos causes African-American youth to condone violence and lower academic aspirations. Research has also shown that there is a link between rap music and teenage chaos, which has an impact on participants' violence and mood. In addition to rap music, heavy metal or rock music also affects the increasing acceptance of violence and antisocial behavior. Usually, adolescents who like this type of music are associated with rebellious personalities (Fried, 1999).

In Indonesia, in line with the existence of dangdut music with indecent lyrics and the development of technology, many children and teenagers are exposed to these songs. Research also revealed that because dangdut songs are often heard and have a pleasant rhythm, it becomes easier for children to memorize the lyrics of dangdut songs, which unfortunately contain indecent content. Because of this, children's language development is affected, and they use more vocabulary with negative connotations that should not be spoken by children (Surari & Hartini, 2017).

Music with explicit content does not only give suggestions to someone to perform certain actions. As it has been mentioned music interacts with culture, one of which is with a nation, so someone of a certain ethnicity performing an explicit song can make that ethnicity viewed negatively by listeners. An example is rap songs, which are identified as music for black people. Hardcore rap is one of the most dominant musical genres to develop in the United States over the last quarter century. It developed in Southern California, moved to the east coast of America, and eventually spread to several countries around the world. The culture that surrounds hardcore rap music influences perceptions of race, class, and gender, especially among young black males in the United States (White, 2009). Because hardcore rap music is popularized by black men, with many explicit lyrics, it has led to a generalized perception that all black men have bad tempers and are dangerous.

4. Action on Songs with Controversial Lyrics

It is known that freedom of expression is one of the human rights. Every individual has the right to express themselves freely, conveying their aspirations, thoughts, and feelings through various media, one of which is through song lyrics. However, if the language used in writing the song lyrics invites controversy—containing violence, drugs, and other things that are not under the values and norms of society, then the right to freedom of expression contradicts the individual's right to feel safe and comfortable. Every individual has different interests and needs so it may cause conflict. Every individual wants their rights to be fulfilled, therefore social norms act as guidelines for behavior in society (Muhammad et al., 2018).

According to Sandrayati Moniaga as Commissioner for Research and Studies of Komnas HAM (National Commission of Human Rights), restrictions on freedom of expression must go through a legal process based on regulations, so that restrictions cannot be arbitrary (Ansar, 2021). Therefore, regulation is applied so that the right to freedom of expression and the right to security and comfort can run evenly. In the conception of the rule of law related to the regulation of human rights, the government still has the authority to limit basic rights adjusted to the control function (*sturing*) (Selian & Melina, 2018). Restrictions on freedom of expression must be established on the grounds of respecting the good name or rights of others and protecting public order, national security, morals, or public health (Rahmanto, 2016).

The government's authority to limit the output of freedom of expression that is deemed not in line with values and norms can be seen in its implementation in 2016 where *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia Daerah Jawa Barat* (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission on West Java Regional) issued a ban on 13 dangdut songs and restrictions on 11 dangdut songs. Not only in West Java, but *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia Daerah Jawa Tengah* (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission on Central Java Regional) also warned 43 songs and restricted 6 songs. For the restricted songs, they were only allowed to be played

after 10 pm. The reason for the ban and restriction is because the songs are considered to have no benefits and when viewed from the titles of songs that are banned from airing in West Java, the songs have indecent meanings (Vera, 2017). Although these songs are still easily accessible through the internet or social media, the government's efforts in providing restrictions and bans are actions to maintain the values and norms of Indonesian society so they should be appreciated.

Restrictions or bans on the broadcast of certain music are not practiced all over the world, as certain countries still tolerate music with explicit language and content as long as the song is played wisely. In 1990, recording studios in the United States applied *parental advisory* labels to albums with lyrics containing explicit content, such as profanity, drugs, sex, or violence. This was done to guide parents in choosing albums that were appropriate for their children (Chin et al., 2018). So, although music with such content is allowed to be played, people who are not pleased with the song can pay attention to the *parental advisory* label or *explicit* label to avoid songs with unwanted content.

However, there is also research that suggests that rap artists may be an appropriate "spokesperson" for adolescents to deliver health messages related to drug use, narcotics, or illicit drugs. Rap music often uses references to drug use, and the large number of adolescents exposed to this music may require education about the dangers of using such substances. With many adolescents more interested in rap music, it can be utilized by rap artists to convey the dangers of drug use through their music (Primack et al., 2008).

Writing song lyrics that contain misogynistic content also encourages feminists to rise and open their voices. Rosemary & Heather do not suggest that musicians who write misogynistic content should be blamed for their "artistic freedom". They argue that if musicians can make misogynistic music depicting sexual violence perpetrated by men against women, then feminists should also be allowed to question their *gender* politics (Hill & Savigny, 2019).

Conclusion

Music is one of the means for individuals to fulfill their right, which is freedom of expression. Musicians describe what they think or feel through the lyrics they write. However, sometimes the individual's right to freedom of expression conflicts with the individual's right to security, with many song lyrics using abusive language or more extreme content with controversial elements, such as violence, drug use, and so on. Although these songs are one of the results of "freedom of expression", but in channeling expression must still be adjusted to the values and norms that apply to society. Music with controversial and provocative content can influence the mindset and actions of someone who hears the music continuously, especially for teenagers who are in a period of self-discovery.

With so much music with controversial lyrics, there is a need for wisdom in airing, broadcasting, or listening to these songs. In certain countries, music with controversial content can still be played because it does not intersect with their culture. Even so, people can still sort out which songs they want to avoid. The *explicit* or *parental advisory* labels found on music platforms can be used as a reference to pay attention and sort out the content of the music they want to listen to. In addition, paying attention to the mental state before listening to certain music can also be one of the precautions to avoid being affected by the negative impact of the music.

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