

***Modern Japanese Youth's Ideologies As Seen in Vocaloid Music
– Focusing on the Period From 2007 to 2011***

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Abstract

VOCALOID is a voice synthesizer developed by Yamaha Corp. Following the development of VOCALOID, a new genre of music called Vocaloid music was born, and has gained significant popularity among young Japanese audiences. Given the dominance of young listeners and creators within this genre, Vocaloid music is said to greatly influence young Japanese people. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the analysis of thematic contents within Vocaloid songs can provide valuable insights into the ideologies and values of contemporary Japanese youth. In this article, the author examines the dominant themes of Vocaloid music from 2007 to 2011 through contextual analysis of popular song lyrics. The results show that the two most dominant themes are love and “Ikidurasa” (the pain of living). After going deeper into the contents of these songs, this article comes to three conclusions. Firstly, character songs were popular for a short period, however, songs written to express the ideology of the producers became more popular in the later stages of Vocaloid music. Secondly, the themes of Vocaloid music in 2007 – 2011 were quite abundant and contained some topics that are hardly found in other Japanese popular music. Lastly, the majority of popular Vocaloid songs in this period have negative lyrics. It reflects the picture of a society where the youth are feeling disconnected and anxious in human relationship.

Keywords: Vocaloid Music, Japanese Youth, Song Lyrics Analysis

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Introduction

According to a recent report by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2023, the suicide rate of children and young people in Japan has risen quickly for the past few years. The high pressure level in Japanese society is said to put a tremendous amount of stress on the youth. On the other hand, it is alarming how more and more youth feel that there is no other way out of their problems other than ending their lives. In Japanese, there is a specific term to call the situation that these youths with suicidal tendencies are facing, that is "Ikidurasa.". "Ikidurasa" is a Japanese term that can be translated as "the pain of living" and is used frequently in newspapers and research to describe the hardship and burden of the Japanese in modern society. Along with the rising suicide rate, the frequency of this word appearing in Japanese media is also rising (Fujikawa, 2021, p. 361).

In my opinion, to find a solution for suicidal issues among Japanese youth, it is necessary to look into the youth's view of society and their own feelings about "Ikidurasa".

In this article, the author's approach is cultural research. In other words, the author tries to find out about Japanese youth's ideologies, especially about "Ikidurasa", by analyzing a cultural phenomenon, Vocaloid music.

VOCALOID is the name for a series of voice synthesizer software launched by Yamaha Corp., made to provide artificial singing voices for digital music. They were also generally regarded as virtual singers by fans and music producers.

Along with the release of VOCALOID, especially Hatsune Miku, a new genre of music created using these voice synthesizers, Vocaloid music, was also born in Japan. In Japan, Vocaloid music is a youth culture that is very popular among the youth. Not only does Vocaloid music attract a lot of young audiences, but the majority of Vocaloid producers also started making Vocaloid music from a young age. On the other hand, Vocaloid music is famous for having quite a number of popular songs with negative, "dark" lyrics that talk about death, suicide, and mental health problems.

The author believes the messages of Vocaloid songs reflect and resonate with the thoughts and feelings of the Japanese youth, and that is why they become popular. For that reason, in this research, the author aims to analyze the ideologies expressed in Vocaloid music, and through that, examine this hypothesis.

The Scope of Study and Research Method

To research about Japanese youth ideologies expressed in Vocaloid music, the author chooses the Vocaloid songs that were released from 2007 to 2022 as the target for analysis. The year 2007 is considered the beginning of Vocaloid music, marked by the release of Hatsune Miku, while the year 2022 is when the author started this research. In previous research, the author has based on the changes in the dominant themes used in Vocaloid songs each year from its founding year to divide the history of Vocaloid music into three periods: from 2007 to 2011, from 2012 to 2015, and from 2016 to 2022 (Pham, 2024). In this article, the author only focuses on the period of 2007–2011.

The period from 2007 to 2011 is said to be the golden era of Vocaloid music, and also when Hachi and wowaka, two famous Vocaloid producers who are said to define the style of

Vocaloid music, were most active in. That is why, it is also considered the period for Vocaloid to form its base and find its unique style, and has significant influence on later periods.

Through the analysis of quantitative data with the help of KH Coder¹, the author speculated that the popular songs in this period were mostly heart-break love songs and character songs² (Pham, 2024). And though there are songs about suicide and death, it still has not become a dominant theme in Vocaloid music as compared to later periods (Pham, 2024). In this article, based on Nico Nico Douga³'s ranking, 100 top-ranked Vocaloid songs from this period are chosen to be the target of analysis. Then, the author conducts a deeper contextual analysis of the lyrics of these songs to find out whether this speculation is true and to survey the ideology hidden behind the lyrics of these popular songs.

The songs used as target for analysis in this article are shown as below.

Table 1: Top 100 Vocaloid Songs From 2007 to 2011 Ranked by My List Number
(According to Nico Nico Douga)⁴

No.	Title	Vocaloid Producer	Released year
1	Senbonzakura	KuroUsaP	2011
2	Melt	ryo	2007
3	Matryoshka	Hachi	2010
4	Miku miki ni shite ageru	ika	2007
5	Mosaik Role	DECO*27	2014
6	World is mine	ryo	2008
7	World End's Dancehall	wowaka	2010
8	The disappearance of Hatsune Miku	cosMo	2008
9	A born coward	164	2011
10	Two-faced Lovers	wowaka	2009
11	Rolling girl	wowaka	2010
12	Nuclear Meltdown	iroha(sasaki)	2009
13	Romeo and Cinderella	doriko	2009
14	Double Lariat	AgoAniki	2009
15	FREELY TOMORROW	Mitchie M	2011
16	Black Rock Shooter	ryo	2008
17	Kagerou Daze	Jin	2011
18	Happy Synthesizer	EasyPop	2010
19	Panda Hero	Hachi	2011
20	Hold, Release; Rakshasa and Carcasses	Hachi	2009
21	Coward Montblanc	DECO*27	2010

¹ A computer software for quantitative content analysis and text mining.

² Song where Vocaloid characters sing about themselves and their identity as virtual singers.

³ A Japanese video sharing website, considered the founding place of Vocaloid music.

⁴ The English names of the songs in the ranking was cited exactly as in the English version of Nico Nico Douga.

22	Melancholic	Junky	2010
23	Just Be Friends	Dixie Flatline	2009
24	Karakuri Pierrot	40mP	2011
25	*Hello、Planet.	sasakure.UK	2009
26	Paradichlorobenzene	OwataP	2009
27	Deep Sea Girl	Yuuyu	2010
28	Once Upon A Me	DECO*27	2010
29	Invisible	kemu	2011
30	Unhappy Refrain	wowaka	2011
31	Tokyo Teddy Bear	Neru	2011
32	Though My Song Has No Shape	doriko	2008
33	Luka Luka ★ Night Fever	samfree	2009
34	1925	T-POCKET	2009
35	Alice in Musicland	Fuwacina	2011
36	Servant of Evil	mothy	2008
37	First Sound (Full version)	malo	2007
38	Calc.	JimmythumbP	2010
39	Love is War	ryo	2008
40	Life Reset Button	kemu	2011
41	When the First Love Ends	ryo	2008
42	Rain of Cherry Blossom Petals	halyosy	2008
43	magnet	minato	2009
44	Eye Examination	40mP	2011
45	Kagamine Len Original Song 「Butterfly on your Right Shoulder」	NoriP	2009
46	RIP=RELEASE	minato	2009
47	from Y to Y	JimmythumbP	2009
48	Ten-faced	YM	2011
49	clock lock works	Hachi	2009
50	Eh? Ah, Sou.	ChouchouP	2010
51	Torinoko City	40mP	2010
52	Iroha Song	Ginsaku	2009
53	Saihate	Kobayashi Onyx	2008
54	Time-Warped After Chopping My Stag Beetle	UraManboP	2011
55	Heart	Travolta	2008
56	Fire◎Flower	halyosy	2008
57	Antichlorobenzene	OwataP	2010

58	Two Breaths Walking	DECO*27	2009
59	ONLINE GAME ADDICTS SPRECHCHOR	Satsuki ga Tenkomori	2010
60	Cendrillon	SignalP, orange	2008
61	Hello/How are you	Nanou	2010
62	Cut-off Line	40mP	2011
63	Remote Control	JesusP	2011
64	Chain Girl	Noboru↑	2009
65	Cyber Thunder Cider	EZFG	2011
66	Headphone Actor	Jin	2011
67	A Single Red Leaf	KuroUsaP	2008
68	Ah, It's a Wonderful Cat Life	Nem	2011
69	Rotten Heresy and Chocolayte	PinocchioP	2011
70	Heaven's Song	Yuuyu	2009
71	Rin-chan now!	OwataP	2011
72	Poker Face	Yucha	2010
73	White Snow Princess	Noboru↑	2010
74	Our 16bit Wars	sasakure.UK	2009
75	glow	keeno	2010
76	Daughter of Evil	mothy	2008
77	Monochrome ∞ Blue Sky	Noboru↑	2010
78	LOL - lots of laugh	KeN	2009
79	Miracle Paint	Fuwacina	2007
80	Heart Rate#0822	ChouchouP	2010
81	Time Machine	40mP	2010
82	Stardust Utopia	otetsu	2009
83	Last Night, Good Night	kz	2008
84	Electric • Angel	Yasuo	2007
85	Wanderlast	sasakure.UK	2009
86	Thousand-Year Solo	yanagiP	2008
87	Packaged (Full Ver.)	kz	2007
88	Humorous Dream of Mrs. Pumpkin	Hachi	2009
89	SPiCa	TokuP, kentax	2009
90	Dear	19 iku	2008
91	The Lunacy of Duke Venomania	mothy	2010
92	Aitai	SignalP, Deadman	2010
93	Sweet Float Apartment	UraManboP	2011
94	Love Words	DECO*27	2009
95	No Logic	JimmythumbP	2009

96	Envy Catwalk	Tohma	2011
97	IMITATION BLACK	natsuP	2009
98	Cantarella	KuroUsaP	2008
99	Alluring Secret ~Black Vow~	HitoshizukuP	2010
100	My Time	Kuchibashi	2007

Result of Analysis

After looking into the lyrics and assessing the possible themes and messages expressed in the songs, the results are as below. Firstly, the most dominant theme of this period was romantic love, with 41 songs talking about romantic love as the main theme. Secondly, 29 out of 100 songs were songs about suicide, mental health problems, and death, or in this research, it was regarded generally as songs about “Ikidurasa”. Lastly, aside from these two themes, there are also character songs, funny nonsense songs, etc., which occupy only a small proportion. In this research, to go into the details of how these themes are handled in each song and how they are used to express the ideology behind the songs, based on the above results, the author divides the analysis result of song lyrics into three types: (a) songs about romantic love; (b) songs about “Ikidurasa”; and (c) other songs.

Songs About Romantic Love

First of all, the author is going to talk about songs about romantic love, or love songs.

After reading into the meaning of each song, the author has found out that the love songs in this period mostly have a negative nuance to them, with only 10 songs with positive messages, which mention love as something to encourage and lift up the human spirit. The others consist of songs about heart-break, songs that doubt the existence of love, or songs about forbidden, toxic love.

Among the negative love songs, the most dominant theme is sad love, with 16 songs talking about break-up, heart-break, and the longing for another that one feels are out of one's league. This result is the same as the author's previous speculation based on the analyzed result from KH Coder.

Aside from the emotional side of love, Vocaloid love songs also mention the physical side of it, which is sexual attraction. Similar to songs about the emotional side of love, most of these songs talk about the negative side of sexual attraction, like toxic, possessive love, or superficial love that is only based on physical attraction, or even minor sexual abuse. For example, “Mosaik Role” (DECO*27, 2010) doubts the existence of love and wonders if the desire to possess somebody physically is love or just lust. On the other hand, some of these songs regard love as not just the story between two people but a mental phenomenon with its own causes and consequences, such as “White Snow Princess” (Noboru↑, 2010), a song that talks about the unwanted jealousy that came from unwanted affection from others. Another example is “Two-Faced Lovers” (wowaka, 2009). It is a song that mentions love as something foreign to the human mind and body that they cannot control, and doubts if love is just an emotion that exists only to aid the reproduction process of humanity.

Romantic love has always been a topic used largely in music. In Japan, most of the songs ranked on Oricon Chart are songs about love. Nabae even stated in his book that the percentage of love songs in popular music in Japan has risen from 7% in the Meiji era⁵ to 97% in the 1990s, meaning that modern Japanese popular music, namely J-Pop, mostly consists of songs about commercialized romance (Nabae, 2004). Therefore, it can be said that love songs occupying the largest proportion of Vocaloid music ranking is a phenomenon that follows the normal pattern in the modern Japanese music world. However, according to Ayukawa, in Vocaloid music, there's a genre called "anti-love song" or "anti-sexual song"⁶ that talks about love differently from other types of popular music. Ayukawa claimed that anti-love songs "include not only songs that are clearly against love, but also songs that treat love as something different from its pre-existent definition⁷ or something that is not clearly defined" (Ayukawa, 2022, p.58). All of these "anti-love songs" in this period belong to the above-mentioned sub-theme, love songs that mention love in relation to sexual attraction, like "Mosaik Role" and "Two-faced Lovers", which doubt the existence of true love in the traditional sense and compare it to sexual attraction.

Additionally, there are also a number of songs in this period that talk about LGBT love, like "magnet" (minato, 2009) or "Alluring Secret ~Black Vow~" (HitoshizukuP, 2010). In this period, LGBT love was quite a rare theme in the Japanese music world, especially in mainstream popular music like J-Pop; however, as we can see from the result, there are still songs about LGBT relationships that could make it into high-ranking Vocaloid music. This is probably because the Vocaloid music world is closely associated with the manga-anime otaku world, which has always been open to this genre of story. But from this, it can be said that the theme of Vocaloid music is more broad and inclusive compared to other popular Japanese music.

Songs About Ikidurasa (The Pain of Living)

Moving onto the next section, we have songs about Ikidurasa (or the pain of living). From the author's previous analysis, it is speculated that the topic of Ikidurasa was not as popular a theme in this period as it would become in later periods of Vocaloid music. However, in my opinion, Ikidurasa being the second most popular theme in this period means that it has always been a big theme in the Vocaloid music world ever since the beginning.

There are a variety of sub-themes in Ikidurasa, from self-hate, depression, loneliness; to addiction; bullying; or grief and mourning.

The reason that leads to Ikidurasa can vary, but mostly it is because of the feeling of loneliness coming from being disconnected from other people or being unable to fit in with normal social standards. Even songs about things like game addiction also hint about the reason that led to the addiction as being unable to connect with the real world. Among these songs, "Invisible" (kemu, 2011) depicts a story that can summarize the ideology about human relationships in many songs of the same theme. It is a song about a girl who was happy finding herself turning invisible one day, but then slowly realized that not being able to

⁵ From October 23, 1868, to July 30, 1912.

⁶ Although Ayukawa stated in his book that anti-love songs cannot be counted as love songs, since their main theme are still about love, in this research, the author has sorted these songs in the category song about love.

⁷ When Ayukawa Pate mentions pre-existent love, it is most likely that he talks about the emotional side of heterosexual love, the desire that drive a person to want to connect emotionally with a person of the opposite sex in a romantic relationship – a theme that has been dominant in Japanese love songs.

connect with others was scarier than being hated. In other words, it can be seen that human relationships are something that Japanese youth are scared of but yearn for at the same time. On the other hand, there are also some songs that criticize the cold, rotten society that drives people into madness, like “Rotten Heresy and Chocoyte” (PinocchioP, 2011), which talks about the bad consequences coming from gossiping, or “Hold, Release; Rakshasa and Carcasses” (Hachi, 2009), which condemn the cold-heartedness of humans and the cruelty of children hidden behind the mask of innocence and ignorance.

In reality, songs about Ikidurasa, about sadness that is not related to love, are not entirely non-existent in other Japanese popular music like J-Pop; for example, Mika Nakashima’s “Boku ga Shinou to Omotta no wa” (2014) or Hirai Ken’s “Hitomi o Tojite” (2004). Nevertheless, the majority of the time, they are made to encourage and often end with a hopeful ending, where the protagonist at least tries to reach out for help or has somebody else reach out to help them. In contrast, a noticeable feature of Vocaloid songs about Ikidurasa is that the majority of songs belonging to this genre do not have a happy ending. Among them, there are songs like “Tokyo Teddy Bear” (Neru, 2011) or “Life Reset Button” (kemu, 2011), etc., where the protagonist feels absolute isolation and ends with a possible act of suicide. Others, such as “ONLINE GAME ADDICTS SPRECHCHOR” (Satsuki ga Tenkomori, 2010) or “LOL—lots of laugh” (Ken, Endcape, 2009), end with the protagonist just waiting to rot away in the real world or forever drown in their own fantasy world. This can be related to the tendency of trying to bottle up every negative emotion inside, trying to solve the pain by themselves without bothering others of the modern Japanese youth. Moreover, the negative endings to these songs paint a picture of a Japanese society where young people are stuck in a vicious circle of sadness without the means to get free.

From the above, it can be speculated that these Vocaloid songs do not seem to seek to encourage people to live positively, but rather try to expose the pain of living in the truest way possible. Nonetheless, in my opinion, being able to describe the pain without feeling the need to make it positive is also the reason why Vocaloid music is so popular among the youth, especially in the modern world, where people can easily become the victims of “toxic positivity”. Goodman (2022) mentioned that toxic positivity forces people into a shame spiral of feeling ashamed of their negative emotions, trying to shut it down forcefully so as to not bother other people, and that is why being genuine and authentic in moments of crisis or pain is important. And Vocaloid songs about Ikidurasa give the audience exactly that kind of genuine and authentic depiction of emotion. In this way, Vocaloid music provides the youth who have not found a way to get out of their negative emotion, who are struggling to find their connection with positivity, a place where they can find sympathy and understanding.

Others

Aside from the two dominant themes of this period, there are also songs of other themes such as character songs, funny nonsense songs, happy and encouraging songs, etc. that make up the smaller proportion of the ranking.

The first thing the author wants to focus on in this section is character song. When it comes to Vocaloid music, many people have the impression that they are all about the characters, like Hatsune Miku. 2007 – 2011 is said to be the period of booming for Vocaloid music, started by Miku’s release. Therefore, it is often associated with character songs that are written about Miku and other Vocaloid characters. The result of the author’s previous analysis also pointed out that there are more character songs in the first period of Vocaloid music than in the two

later periods (Pham, 2024). However, as seen in this analysis, the number of character songs in this period, though higher than in later periods, was still lower than songs of other themes with only nine songs, and most of them were made in 2007 – 2008, when Miku was first released, which means that even though character songs were popular in the earlier stage of Vocaloid music, this trend quickly died down and gave way to other songs that focus more on the ideology of the producers rather than the characters.

On the other hand, happy and encouraging songs were also seen in Vocaloid music ranking, but only with 11 out of 100 songs, making up just about 10% of the ranking.

Conclusions

After the above analysis, the author has come to three conclusions.

Firstly, the themes of Vocaloid music in 2007 – 2011 were quite abundant and contained some topics that were hardly found anywhere else such as LGBT love, anti-love, suicide, etc. Regarding love, it seems that rather than the fixed image of heterosexual love often seen in other Japanese popular music, Vocaloid music talks about love in various manners: love between the same sex, lust without love, or even doubting the very existence of love, etc.

Secondly, whether it is songs about heart-break, toxic love, or songs about death and suicide, the majority of popular Vocaloid songs in this period have negative lyrics. It reflects the picture of a society where the youth was feeling disconnected and anxious in human relationships. Furthermore, it seems that they had the tendency to bottle their pain inside rather than express it outside, or in Japanese, this tendency was called “uchimuki”, and sometimes can lead to the suicidal tendency seen in Japanese youth nowadays.

Lastly, though Vocaloid music is often associated with characters like Hatsune Miku, rather than character songs written for the characters themselves, songs written to express the ideology of the producers were more popular in later stages.

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