

A Semiotic Analysis of Toxic Relationship as Portrayed in *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love*

Odelia Yulita¹, Marlina², Yuniawati Kencanasari³

^{1,2,3}Institut Komunikasi dan Bisnis LSPR, Indonesia

odeliayulita@gmail.com

Abstract

There are obstacles that originated from the participants involved in the relationship and interfere with everyday life and well-being becoming toxic. Unfortunately, toxic behaviors from lovers are often perceived as a gesture of love due to their romanticization in movies. Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love, nevertheless, depicts toxic relationship as destruction in a relationship. This research aimed at identifying the signs of toxic relationships in the movie and interpreting them with Barthes's semiotic analysis; order of signification. The study used interpretivism paradigm due to researchers' subjectivity with the signs' interpretation and qualitative case study with purposive sampling collected from the movie. Communicating toxic relationships has become essential since most couples are not aware they are in a toxic relationship either as the agent or as the victim. Toxic relationships can get worse during the pandemic for some couples who live together may feel suffocated from being with each other all the time and couples who live apart may develop more trust issues. Most previous research had discovered toxic relationships as a result of the patriarchal system in society. This current research found that toxic relationships can also be rooted in a sense of inferiority.

Keywords

semiotics; toxic relationship; story of kale; when someone's in love



I. Introduction

In the stressful moments filled with uncertainty during COVID-19 pandemic, most people take their negative emotions out on someone close with them, in this case, someone whom they live with, most likely their spouse. World Health Organization reported a 60 percent increase in domestic abuse by April 2020. National Commission on Violence against Women reported 11,105 cases of domestic violence against women throughout 2019 before the pandemic in Indonesia. The outbreak of this virus has an impact of a nation and Globally (Ningrum *et al*, 2020). The presence of Covid-19 as a pandemic certainly has an economic, social and psychological impact on society (Saleh and Mujahiddin, 2020). Covid 19 pandemic caused all efforts not to be as maximal as expected (Sihombing and Nasib, 2020). After lockdown in March 2020 during early and continuously rising cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia, the number of domestic abuse cases has risen ever since. Tuani Sondang Rejeki Marpaung, a member of a defense fund for women (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan), argued that financial stress is one major factor of domestic abuse by men mostly from the lower class since they can no longer work and provide for the family (Putra, 2020).

Aside from domestic abuse cases due to financial stress, a pandemic may also affect romantic relationships even when the financial condition is not the concern or the couples are not married or live together. A relationship before the pandemic and without lockdown itself already has its own struggles and hurdles. However, there are some relationships in

which the problems are within the couples themselves where they hurt their partner or each other. That kind of relationship is toxic because it affects the well-being of people involved in it. A toxic relationship refers to physical and emotional abuse in a relationship, usually the romantic one. A toxic relationship refers to “any relationship between people who don’t support each other, where there’s conflict and one seeks to undermine the other, where there’s competition, where there’s disrespect, and a lack of cohesiveness” (Glass, 1995). The key to cohesiveness between couples is to accept each other, give in, be patient, and be respectful (Suciati, 2013).

A toxic relationship is dangerous for physical and mental health and can be fatal if it happens for a too long time. It is also not as easy as domestic abuse to recognize because it usually does not result from physical abuse (hitting the partner), but may seem like a physical threat (throwing things around the partner but then apologizing to win back the partner). The problem with toxic relationships is the victims become dependent on the abusers and powerless that they do not have the courage and the strength to get out from it. To make matter worse, they start to blame themselves for making the abusers upset, normalize the bad treatment they get as the punishment they think they deserve, and take that as a responsibility to turn their partner into a better person (Graham, 1995).

Toxic relationships might worsen during the quarantine due to financial stress and boredom or suffocation of being with each other all the time. On the other hand, for couples who do not live together and have an anxious attachment style, they become anxious that their partner will cheat with someone else if they do not monitor them directly which may come from low self-esteem that there are better people out there who can make their partner happier (Bowlby, 1973). Being apart from the partner in a toxic relationship during the pandemic restrictions can also give people some time to contemplate upon their relationship.

Story of Kale: When Someone’s in Love, therefore, comes right in time for those who get stuck in a toxic relationship to acknowledge the fact that they are in a toxic relationship. The movie also gives them empowerment so that they become brave enough to step out from it. Movies are the best media during the quarantine since people can still watch it online easily for entertainment at home, to portray how bad toxic relationships can be through the experience of the characters which may relate to the audience who are still mistaken toxic behavior with love or in denial mode because they cannot imagine themselves as the victim or abuser. Seeing the story of other people can at least make people who are still in denial mode detach from their own fear and make a clear judgment of the characters which may take them to the next step of acceptance especially after seeing how the characters who used to be in a toxic relationship can finally break free. A study conducted on university students found that movies have the power to influence their perspectives on romance and alter their behavior in the relationship (Lippman, 2014).

Story of Kale: When Someone’s in Love, produced and released during this COVID-19 pandemic, is a spin-off movie revolving around Kale, a character depicted as a “fuck boy” who cannot commit to a relationship with Awan, the main character in *One Day We’ll Talk about Today*. Coming from the great success of its preceding movie, *Story of Kale: When Someone’s in Love* uses this opportunity to address a serious relationship issue among youngsters which most of the time is romanticized as a way of showing love rooted in a lot of romance movies selling the story of a bad boy who later surrenders in love once he finds the one, giving the audience an illusion of living romance plotline to turn a bad boy into a good one (Dewi, 2020). *Story of Kale: When Someone’s in Love* undoes the misconception of how love should be and prevents further damage from the toxic relationship by bluntly showing the signs and effects of toxic relationships to the couples.

Delving into toxic relationship topics is important, especially for generation Y who is now in the age range for marriage. Generation Y takes marriage as a sacred vow to spend time together during marriage based on love (Kholisoh and Primayanti, 2016).

Toxic relationships can be examined with relationship abuse warning signs-behavior by Murphy and Smith (2010).

1. The first sign is gender denigration by demeaning a partner’s ability and worth based on her gender.
2. The second sign is personal putdowns which refer to verbal abuse for the partner’s appearance, intelligence, and personality.
3. The third sign is public debasement, similar to personal putdowns, except for it is done in public while personal putdowns are in private.
4. The fourth sign is verbal aggression that is made during heated arguments.

Those four signs can affect the partner’s self-esteem. These next signs are acts of overprotectiveness.

5. The fifth sign is jealousy/possessiveness that is marked with excessive monitoring of the partner’s whereabouts and activities.
6. The sixth sign is social restriction by preventing the partner to go out and have a social life outside the relationship.
7. The seventh sign is exit-control tactics by doing everything to keep the partner in the relationship, including threatening to kill if the partner leaves.

The signs of toxic relationships above can be seen throughout the movie. This current research aims at analyzing the signs’ meaning and discussing how those signs contribute to the relationship fallout between the couple characters, Kale and Dinda. A lot of research has applied semiotics, a study of meaning from signs, to analyze the inferred meaning from literary works. Semiotics helps with the interpretation of both verbal and nonverbal signs. Saussure, a founding father of semiotics, uses the term signifier (sign) and signified (meaning) in encoding (creating a message) and decoding (finding the meaning) the message in the language area (denotative system).

Barthes later develops the sign from the first order to the second order of signifier and signified as a cultural influence (connotative system) that results in myth as shown in the figure below.

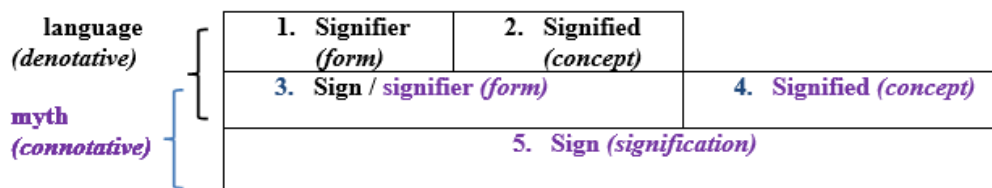


Figure 1. Order of Signification (Barthes, 1972)

This study aims at discovering the signs of toxic relationships portrayed in *Story of Kale: When Someone in Love* using Barthes’ semiotic analysis. The figure above is used for the analysis. Discussing semiotics and toxic relationship during this COVID-19 pandemic offer something fresh to the academic significance as the number of domestic abuses reported during the pandemic has risen. This present research may have similarities with other research since semiotic analysis in the movie is popular in communication as well as in the linguistics field. Toxic relationship discussion is also common in psychology and popular culture.

Many creative works of movies and songs have already displayed the damaging effects of toxic relationships instead of glorifying it as a sign of love. Before *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love*, *Posesif* already showed dark perspectives of the abusive relationship between teen couples. The movie has been the subject of many semiotic studies as the representation of abusive relationships. For instance, Prasetya and Rahman (2020) studied abusive signs in *Posesif* with Pierce's semiotic analysis of signs, objects, and interpretant meanwhile Damaryani and Rinawati (2019), as well as Andini and Putri (2019), analyzed the movie with Fiske's reality, representation, and ideology. Those three pieces of research discovered that the movie represents abusive relationships due to male power and dominance. The toxic relationship in *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love*, nonetheless, is not merely rooted in male superiority. It has more something to do with attachment style as proposed by Bowlby as "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (1969).

Tedjo, Luik, and Aritonang (2021), who studied toxic relationships in *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love* with Fiske's semiotics, found that the movie represents the toxic relationship with Argo as a bad temper toxic partner and abusive partner, Kale as a possessive (paranoid) toxic partner, Dinda as a liar toxic partner. Their toxic relationship can last due to a fantasy bond that mistaken their toxic behavior as love. It also comes from a patriarchal society where men are more superior than women which normalizes Argo's abuse towards Dinda. Unlike Tedjo, Luik, and Aritonang's research, this present research only focuses on the toxic relationship portrayed in Kale's behaviors and does not interpret his toxic behaviors as a result of superiority as a man, but as a result of his experience.

Aside from movies like *Posesif* and *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love*, some songs also bring the topic of toxic relationships to their lyrics and music video. One of them is an Indonesian song entitled "Lathi" by Weird Genius. Persada (2020) analyzed the toxic relationship in the "Lathi" video clip with Saussure's semiotics of signifier and sign to discover that a chained woman turning into a monster and killing a man signifies a hurt woman in a toxic relationship has the power to break free and takes revenge on his partner. Sadewo and Kusuma (2020) also analyzed some Korean songs depicting abused women retaliating against their abusive partners to show that women are not as weak as portrayed in society and women can also take control of their own life. The research of Persada (2020), as well as Sadewo and Kusuma (2020) of women's courage and power to end the toxic relationship, relate to Dinda leaving Kale in *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love*. That means not only are women can stand up for themselves, they can also be toxic partners to men as in Kard- "You in Me" music video. Putri and Putri (2020) discovered that women in the music video become possessive by clinging to their partner even when their partner is already dead.

Most of the reviewed works of literature above highlight that the major cause of toxic relationships is a patriarchal society where men use their power to abuse inferior women. This current research expects to delve into another perspective of toxic relationships rooted not only in power but also in insecurity of rejection and fear of abandonment.

II. Research Methods

This research focused on signs of toxic relationship portrayed in the movie *Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love* by identifying the signs and interpreting their meaning with interpretivism paradigm. This research is a part of a qualitative case study for its in-depth analysis of a specific topic of toxic relationships and the subject of the movie for semiotic analysis.

The researcher collected audiovisual data on Netflix streaming of the movie and took some purposive samples of utterances, gestures, symbols, and dialogues from the scenes when the main characters, Kale and Dinda, started their relationship until they ended their relationship. Dinda's signs of a toxic relationship with her former partner were not taken as data because this study aimed at discovering how Kale, who at first had been portrayed as Dinda's savior from her former partner, turned out to be toxic as well. The samples were taken as qualitative data based on the researchers' perception of how toxic the relationship appears to be.

The meaning of utterances, gestures, and symbols was later analyzed with Barthes' order of signification's model consisting of the denotative meaning (real meaning) and connotative meaning (the cultural meaning) between signifiers of what happens and signified as the interpretation of the signifier. The movie scenes with toxic relationship signs (Murphy and Smith, 2010) were screen-captured and presented as a signifier in the denotative area and the description of the scenes as signified in the denotative area. The second-order, connotative (purple font color), would be the next interpretation from the signs in the first order. The analysis would be a step-by-step process of the scene's interpretation.

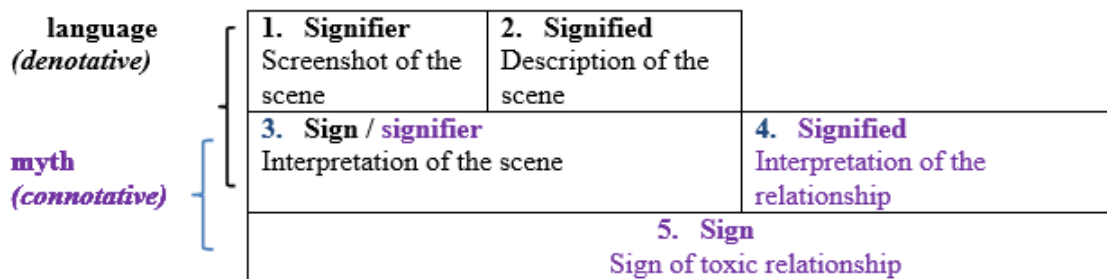


Figure 2. Data Analysis

III. Results and Discussion

The movie begins with a scene where Dinda is abused by his boyfriend, Argo. Kale comes as a knight in shining armor for defying Argo's violent behavior and telling Dinda that love should not hurt, referring to Argo's abuse, that she deserves someone better, implying himself. Kale is presented as a sweet and sensitive man who is willing to love Dinda to the fullest and make her the happiest woman. The next scene where Dinda wants a breakup is straightforward which makes the audience wonder what has gone wrong. At the first glance, the movie tends to lead the audience into thinking that Dinda wants a breakup because Kale is too good for Dinda who has been familiar with an abusive relationship with Argo. The following scenes after Dinda's "I want us to break up" are flashbacks of Kale and Dinda's relationship from their romantic relationship with some signs of the toxic relationship as follows.

3.1 Jealousy/Possessiveness


<p>1. Signifier</p>  <p>Time: 41:24</p>	<p>2. Signified</p> <p>Dinda is conversing and laughing with another man; Kale was staring at them.</p>
<p>3. Sign / signifier</p> <p>Kale is interested in Dinda and the other man's conversation though he can barely hear it.</p>	<p>4. Signified</p> <p>Kale likes Dinda and feels threatened by another man.</p>
<p>5. Sign</p> <p>Kale wants to have Dinda all by himself.</p>	

Figure 3. Sign of Jealousy/Possessiveness

That scene marks the early professional relationship between Kale, a band member, and Dinda, the band's manager. On the bus, Dinda is conversing and laughing with another male band member and Kale is staring at them as if he wants to watch their every move. That scene indicates Kale's romantic interest in Dinda and a hint of jealousy even before he gets into a romantic relationship with her.

Later, the sign's interpretation of jealousy is confirmed when Kale proposes to have a romantic relationship with Dinda because he wants to be the only one Dinda cares for. However, at that time Dinda has not realized his reason as a sign of toxic behavior and still thinks that it is just Kale being a naive man who has never been in a romantic relationship before.

Kale feeling threatened to see Dinda with someone else and wants to be in a relationship with her so that she only cares for him is listed by Murphy and Smith (2010) in the signs of the toxic relationship as jealousy and possessiveness. People may feel jealous to some extent when seeing their crush seems to have a great time with someone else. Their responses, however, make the difference. They can either feel small and bury their hope or tag along with the conversation to have a great time together. Kale does nothing when seeing Dinda conversing and laughing with another man. He stays in his seat and distracts himself with his phone until he falls asleep. When he gets the chance to speak alone with Dinda, he voices his loud and clear jealousy. Even before being romantically involved with Dinda, he already holds Dinda accountable for his happiness and sees the relationship proposed as his way to get control over Dinda to not care for other men other than him even though it is Dinda's role as the band's manager to care for the band members.

In Dinda's former relationship, Argo yells at Dinda who does not visit his grandma because she needs to take care of her band, saying he never likes Dinda's job and the band. It is easy to tell Argo is an abusive boyfriend with all his fury and violence. Kale, nevertheless, talks in a calm tone when he says he wants to be the only one whom Dinda cares for. He even states his acknowledgment that such a wish sounds selfish. His passive-aggressive behavior disguises his toxic behavior.

3.2 Social Restriction


<p>1. Signifier</p>  <p>Time: 20:02</p>	<p>2. Signified</p> <p>In the music studio, Kale is playing the piano; Dinda is using her gadget.</p>
<p>3. Sign / signifier</p> <p>Kale is keen on making the project; Dinda is not.</p>	<p>4. Signified</p> <p>Dinda is not emotionally present with Kale in the music studio.</p>
<p>5. Sign</p> <p>Dinda stays because Kale forces Dinda to make the project with him.</p>	

Figure 4. Sign of Social Restriction

The movie seems to put Argo and Kale in binary opposition. Argo calls Dinda a moron for her useless work that hinders her from going to visit his grandma. Kale, on the other hand, praises Dinda's singing skill and has faith that Dinda can succeed as a singer in a music project that he creates with, or more likely for her. While doing the music project, Dinda seems to have her mind wandering someplace else. She keeps checking her gadget and laughing. When Kale asks who she is chatting with, she just brushes it off. She even says she wants to go to Argo's sister's birthday party as if telling Kale that she is stuck with him doing this music project and still wants to connect with Argo.

Kale reminds Dinda that she has promised to make the music project together and it will cause more problems if Dinda shows up at the party since Argo will be there. Kale seems to force Dinda into staying with him and doing the music project with his reasoning even though Dinda states her wish to go to the party. He, nonetheless, does not use dominance like Argo to control Dinda. Instead, he seems to lead Dinda to reach her full potential as a singer and protect her from her abusive former boyfriend.

Kale forcing Dinda to make the project with him and not go to Argo's sister's birthday party for her own sake is a sign of a toxic relationship with social restriction (Murphy and Smith, 2010). Kale uses the passive-aggressive tactic to get Dinda to do what the music project he wants without appearing as controlling. He uses his arguments about why Dinda should stay and continue doing the project with him and says that in the end, it is Dinda's decision knowing that Dinda is not capable of standing up for herself.

3.3 Personal Putdown and Verbal Aggression




<p>1. Signifier</p>  <p>Time: 1:03:13</p>  <p>Time: 1:03:20</p>  <p>Time: 1:03:44</p>	<p>2. Signified</p> <p>In the hotel lift, as Kale reaches Dinda's room, Argo goes inside the lift. Kale repeatedly knocks on Dinda's door.</p>
<p>3. Sign / signifier</p> <p>Kale gets furious because he thinks Argo has just met Dinda in her room.</p>	<p>4. Signified</p> <p>Kale believes Dinda has a sexual intercourse with Argo in the hotel room and confronts her instead of Argo when they meet in the lift.</p>
<p>5. Sign</p> <p>Kale judges and punishes Dinda for his assumption out of insecurity.</p>	

Figure 5. Sign of Personal Putdown and Verbal Aggression

When seeing Argo on the same floor as Dinda's room, he says nothing to Argo, but he repeatedly knocks on Dinda's door with force as if he is about to hunt her down. Despite his aggressive behavior of continuous knocks, he still uses his passive-aggressive tactic by looking at the disorganized bed sheets and asking cynically what has Dinda done. Dinda explains that Argo previously delivered his wedding invitation and feels disgusted by Kale's accusation to think so little of her. Kale calls Dinda a liar and lashes out in fury. He throws the lamp and suddenly crawls to Dinda's knees crying and apologizing for letting his emotion get the best of him. This behavior is categorized as a personal putdown and verbal aggression (Murphy and Smith, 2010).

Having a former boyfriend coming to one's current girlfriend's room may spark negative wonders, especially in Indonesian culture where it is taboo to have unmarried men and women in one room. That culture comes from the tendency for the pleasure of human nature with sexual activity. Therefore, when seeing a man and a woman in a room together especially when they have a relationship, it is easy to assume that sexual activity is conducted. Kale's distrust and fury, nonetheless, are more likely from his insecurity that Dinda still has feelings with Argo and will choose her former boyfriend rather than Kale.

Here Kale shows Dinda that he feels the need to control Dinda’s personal life and interfere with her private matter.

In the early scene, Argo makes a scene by shouting and breaking a mirror which makes the band members come for Dinda to check up on her. Kale even defies Argo for abusing Dinda. Kale later tells Dinda that love should not hurt. Meeting with Argo in the lift somehow takes Kale to Argo’s role in the early scene. He shouts and throws things in his anger knowing that love should not hurt and right away begging for Dinda’s forgiveness. He makes Dinda realize that Kale is just a fragile version of a dominant Argo.

3.4 Exit-Control Tactic


<p>1. Signifier</p>  <p>Time: 31:05</p>	<p>2. Signified</p> <p>Dinda walks to the door with her luggage; Kale locks the door.</p>
<p>3. Sign / signifier</p> <p>Kale does not let Dinda leave.</p>	<p>4. Signified</p> <p>Kale does not care if Dinda does not love him anymore as long as she stays in the relationship with him.</p>
<p>5. Sign</p> <p>Kale is obsessed with his relationship with Dinda and fears abandonment.</p>	

Figure 6. Sign of Exit-Control Tactic

Dinda, after asking for a breakup, walks her way downstairs to leave the house they live in together with Kale running for her asking for an explanation about the sudden breakup and telling her that if she has some issues, she could tell him instead of just leaving abruptly. Being ignored, Kale locks the door and throws the key far away. Dinda, who is previously portrayed as a weak woman, now dares to stand up for herself and walks away from the toxic relationship in which Kale obsesses with his own relationship fantasy and forces her to fit in the picture. Kale keeps insisting that Dinda should talk to him about the reason she wants to leave, not just leave and expect Kale to read her mind. There Kale blames Dinda for not being as committed as him in their relationship.

Dinda finally reveals to Kale that she has been seeing someone else and from that person, she gets what she wants in a relationship. Feeling frustrated, Kale cusses and after some time he says that he can deal with the fact that Dinda has cheated on him, but he cannot bear the scenario where Dinda leaves him. He then shares his past traumatic experience where his mother leaves him and his father. Kale uses exit-control tactics (Murphy and Smith, 2010) to keep Dinda in the relationship by locking the door and telling his story without caring that Dinda no longer wants to stay with him.

Kale, who previously have saved Dinda from Argo because he seems to care for Dinda and wants to make her happy, offers Dinda another perspective in a relationship. Argo makes Dinda feel so powerless with his power and abuse whereas Kale gives Dinda a role as a mother who has left him in his childhood. With this new role, Dinda finally gets the courage to leave Kale and pursue the relationship she wants.

IV. Conclusion

Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love which first presents Kale as Dinda's savior from her abusive boyfriend turns out to show some signs of toxic relationship such as jealousy/possessiveness, social restriction, personal putdowns, verbal aggression, and exit-control tactics (Murphy and Smith, 2010). Unlike Argo who uses his superiority to abuse Dinda, Kale with his sense of inferiority keeps clinging to Dinda, always fearing abandonment. Argo is easily spotted as a bad guy for his aggression towards Dinda which makes her cry. Kale, however, uses passive-aggressive tactics when showing his jealousy by acknowledging his selfishness. He restricts Dinda to going out by giving out his reasoning but at the same time saying it is all Dinda's choice after all. When he shows his aggression, he immediately begs for mercy. At the end, when Dinda wants to leave, he runs after her to discuss things and locks the door.

Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love portrays signs of toxic relationship which lead to characters' distress to educate toxic couples who are still in denial mode to reflect on their relationship. This research hopefully can make the signs of toxic relationships in the movie clearer with the descriptive analysis of Barthes' semiotics. It is time for movies to not romanticize toxic relationships as a sign of love and for the audience to take every movie with a grain of salt.

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