

The True Intentions of “*Paint the Town Red*”

Introduction

Music is filled with symbolism and often sends a specific message intended for an audience, making it crucial to analyze its impacts and understand how it connects and influences audiences. Traditionally, a song has both lyrics and a music video, which is important since seeing and hearing are culturally constructed and influence how humans interpret and understand messages. One song I was interested in evaluating is “Paint the Town Red” by Doja Cat. It was released in 2023 and received nationwide media attention as fans were concerned with the demonic references and satanic praise in both the song lyrics and music video. This catchy song became extremely popular with young listeners and quickly reached a top-ranking spot in a short period of time. This led me to the question, does this song make demonic worship more acceptable and popular in society?

Context

In this paper, I will argue that Doja Cat's song “Paint the Town Red” influences society to make demonic worship more popular and acceptable in culture. Using visual criticism, I show that familiar and influential color schemes, costumes and scenes, and the expression of individuality through demonic worship all create an illusion of demonic acceptance and embracement rather than fear. Initially, it is crucial to understand the background of the rhetor, Doja Cat. Doja Cat, whose full name is Amala Ratna Zandile Dlamini, was born in California and began releasing music as a teenager on SoundCloud. In 2013, she released a song that soon took off, leading her to change her name to “Doja Cat.” Doja grew up practicing Hinduism for over four years in her childhood and then became a well-known influencer on social media as an

artist and performer. As her fame and fortune continued to rise, many of her fans addressed concerns regarding her satanic rituals and imagery, leaving Doja to call out her fans for their obsessiveness. Many “religious conservatives have accused her of Satanism for her playful use of Illuminati imagery at her 27th birthday bash,” leading her to face criticism because of her public praise of demonic worship (Harding, Charlie). In Hinduism religion, it is common to worship demons and the concept of evil because it is in human nature and based on human actions. Demons oppose gods, and it is a cultural belief “that evil is a natural part of life that is caused by the law of karma, which is the law of cause and effect,” making it acceptable to worship evil (BBC). Having a background in accepting and worshipping evil allows Doja Cat not to understand the significant influence and impact her messages have on audiences.

To better understand the impacts and intention of “Paint the Town Red,” it is necessary to review the contextual analysis of the historical time period in which the song was released. This song was released post covid in August 2023. During this time period, many people were struggling with depression and identity issues after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and the rise in social media platforms such as TikTok. Doja used this time to promote individuality, empowerment, and confidence to her audiences. With the targeted audience already in a vulnerable state of mind, it is easy to work certain ideologies, beliefs, and values into the audience's subconscious to feel connected and empowered by working with evil and death through praise and offerings rather than fearing it.

Literature Review

The only visible colors mainly shown throughout this music video are red and black. All colors have certain influences on humans, and red especially “is known to influence psychological functioning, having both negative (e.g., blood, fire, danger), and positive (e.g.,

sex, food) connotations” (Foxe and Einstein). The sole use of red is highly influential to humans no matter the message; the color red inflicts neurological networks to find familiar patterns connected to hatred, death, anger, hunger, and so many other low-vibrational emotions. The color red has the lowest vibrational frequency with the longest wavelengths, and black has no frequency, which symbolizes “the relationship between coexistence and confrontation” and “represents the difficulty and contradiction of human spirit”(Academy Publication). “Paint the Town Red” portrays empowerment through embracing the demonic spirit in human nature, otherwise known as the bad or evil. The colors alone play a significant role in shaping audiences' interpretations and emotions, but when compared to the actions and imagery throughout the entire music video, it allows one to question the true intentions of “Paint the Town Red.”

“Paint the Town Red” uses influential imagery tactics that encourage demonic worship to be more acceptable within society and culture. The song uses specific symbolism to communicate that demonic worship should be more acceptable for individuals to get what they want rather than be fearful of it. Demonic thoughts and worship impact the human body psychologically through stress and fear, physically through increased anxiety, and even emotionally through mental health impacts. These direct impacts on individuals within society make the influential imagery used in “Paint the Town Red” crucial to criticize and understand how it impacts society and culture. The red star symbol drawn on her arm sleeve is a pentagram that is “a symbol of evil and attracts sinister forces because it overturns the proper order of things and demonstrates the triumph of matter over spirit” and is a commonly used symbol in Satanism (Garmer, Lance). This symbol is important to understand as it represents the worship of evil spirits, which impact the human body negatively, leading audiences to question why Doja Cat

would use symbols such as the red pentagram, knowing its influence on the human body and spirit.

The target audience of Doja Cats' song "Paint the Town Red" is young adults who listen to hip-hop and pop genres and are the main users of TikTok and other social media platforms. Social media creates cultural trends that are significant to society because they reshape societal norms and culture. According to the National Library of Medicine, a study proved "young adults were more influenced by the opinion of adults than teenagers"(NCBI, 2017). Doja Cat is a famous and successful authority figure who dramatically increases the influence and acceptability of her messages on young adults and teenagers. Information such as visual imagery used by someone with high influence or popularity is often equated with knowing and truth, which can be powerful in shaping culture within societies.

With young adults being so susceptible to influence, we must question why society is drawn to demonic symbolism and praise. Culture is always changing, and it is now at an increased rate due to technology, more specifically, apps such as music or social media. Since 2014, there has been a 58% rise in adults who believe in hell, and it continues to rise as demonic symbolism becomes more apparent in culture. Hollywood puts a spotlight on this symbolism as "the Devil is front and center in movies, TV shows, podcasts, and even children's books," which not only encourages acceptance and normalization but also gains popularity and then becomes a trend (Bond et al.). Trends happen when something gains popularity or high media attention and encourages society to partake in the popular message. As more people become encouraged to participate it leads culture to create new societal expectations or norms to follow. Assessing the song "Paint the Town Red" and Doja Cats' influence allows audiences to understand this song's messages to make demonic worship more acceptable and popular in society.

Analysis

Looking at the color and imagery used in this music video, audiences can see a clear, dark aesthetic that is shown. The color scheme of black, white, and red, as well as both bright and dark, exposes the scenes that portray the line between good and evil and bright and dark. “Paint the Town Red” gives audiences an ominous perspective by using these figures, which influence an individual's physical, mental, and emotional self. Doja Cat's appearances in a long red dress, red paint (blood), and black paint next to the devil are highly influential to humans no matter the message.

In the music video, Doja Cat is seen wearing black and red riding a horned mystical green giant similar to a troll, often associated with demons in certain mythologies. Throughout the music video, Doja is seen with only three other characters, all being demonic entities such as a troll, death skeleton, and a demon. Doja is displayed riding, hugging, and sitting naked, painted in all black with these demonic representations. Countless times throughout this song, Doja Cat references the devil, but the music video shows the praise of demonic energy through worship and connectedness. The stages of “Paint the Town Red” are significant as they show a deeper ritual process. Doja is portrayed next to a death skeleton in a long red dress with red eyes and then cuts the cord of a womb to signal the idea of birth or rebirth. Through this rebirth, it symbolizes the death of one's old self, beliefs, and values. The ritual then shows she must surrender to the apex predator by offering raw red meat and ringing a bell for feeding time. This stage symbolizes an offering or feeding to the negative entities of power, in this case, the devil, in order to be accepted and powerful enough to work with death rather than fear it.

The overall purpose of the text in “Paint the Town Red” is to explore the idea of individuality and self-expression. Doja Cat presents a dark and rebellious form of expression

with an argument to break social expectations and frames demonic symbolism as a form of empowerment rather than fear. The beginning lyrics show an unapologetic rebellious mindset as she continuously uses the expression “I said what I said” and “I don’t care, I paint the town red”. Doja Cat argues she is unapologetic over what she has said and encourages individuality rather than conforming to traditional thinking or actions. In the second verse, Doja references herself as being the devil and a rebel that will take a lot for her to settle. A clear expression of empowerment is being shown with acknowledgment and acceptance to her dark devil side. Doja’s portrayal of confidence can clearly be seen by her argument that her happiness is because of everyone else’s misery while explaining there is no remedy to her illness or way of thinking. The message Doja is clearly sending is the empowerment one gets from breaking traditional expectations and allowing the dark and rebellious side to be seen.

Audiences interpret different messages depending on the position of the camera. For instance, closer shots provide a focal point on key information, as wide shots help audiences understand the extent or scale of something. The point of view in “Paint the Town Red” includes both close-up and wide shots to highlight different messages within a scene. In the beginning, the focal point of the video shows little to no touching between the death skeleton and Doja, whereas, after the worship and offering, the skeleton is seen touching, hugging, protecting, and praising Doja Cat. This symbolizes the strength and connection an individual can receive once selling or giving themselves to demonic worship. The skeleton is a symbol of cultural imagery; many interpret it as a symbol of death within society, whether you’re spiritual, religious, or neither. Close-up shots in cinematography could be an indication of possession as they consume a viewer’s focus and attention, making them most memorable to the human consciousness. The

focal points throughout the music video show the progression of Doja Cats' relationship with the death skeleton prior to, during, and after ritual behavior.

The different scenes alone show a bigger picture of the spiritual realm. The scenes add up to be a ritual process between the ground and sky to represent a spiritual world of heaven and hell. Doja's lyrics predict her future as certain scenes within the music video show a process of making a deal with a death skeleton/devil by cutting the womb signifies a rebirth of herself and offering raw red meat during dusk hours. Through this rebirth, it symbolizes the death of one's old self, spirit, beliefs, and values. The ritual then shows Doja must surrender to the apex predator in the music video, as her lyrics explain, "I rather be famous instead, I let all that get to my head, I don't care I paint the town red". This provides significance as it shows Doja Cat cutting a womb, offering raw red meat at dusk, and working with the devil to get what she wants without a second thought to how or who it impacts. The lyrics explain that Doja would rather "be famous" and portrays her manifestation over her own fortune, fame, and reality at the cost of giving herself to the demonic spiritual realm. This influences audiences to interpret her message as explaining that worshipping and giving yourself to the devil or demonic worship allows you to achieve what you want, such as fame or fortune.

Aside from the style of this song, we must also acknowledge the form of delivery within the music video. Using a music video with a song adds context to the message and lyrics through imagery, patterns, symbolism, and interpretations. The music video has an opportunity for visual storytelling, as audiences can use the music video for guided interpretation. The music video starts off with Doja Cat wearing only black and red with a shirt that states "feral." The expression of Doja's rebellious and feral side through the outfits, characters, and behaviors all argue empowerment, individuality, and self-expression. The demonic symbolism challenges

traditional norms or beliefs, which can be a representation to encourage individuals to embrace their darkest and rebellious selves with no regard for others. Being released after the COVID-19 pandemic was done to connect to listeners who seek confidence, empowerment, and connection. This song resonates with younger audiences, primarily social media users, and encourages the embracement of the devil as power to oneself rather than fear. Since Doja Cat is a highly influential star, the implications of her messages must be criticized.

Another interesting descriptive aspect of this song is the style and what it makes the song feel like. A catchy, upbeat tone masks the darker themes that are explored throughout this song. Without attention to the lyrics, it is impossible not to find yourself moving to the beat with a sense of self-empowerment. When listening to the song, audiences can feel the fast tempo and the humming in the background, making it easily enjoyable and catchy and creating audience resonance with the music. Using electronic piano and drums creates a celebratory style, making listeners pumped up or excited when listening to it. The style evokes a feeling of power and confidence with little to no question or thought about the consequences to others. My interpretation of the style within this song is a mysterious and rebellious power used to build up one's confidence by breaking down others.

Throughout this music video, audiences can see many different influences, including rebelliousness against societal norms, color scheme manipulation, and surreal imagery, including cultural imagery. Each tactic adds to the ritual process of this music video, which provides a deeper understanding to audiences of how to achieve what they want. Doja influences viewers to see that giving yourself to the devil or practicing demonic worship influences how you achieve what you want in society. This portrayal and behavior makes demonic worship not only more normalized in society but also embraced.

Overall, “Paint the Town Red” influences society to praise and accept the demonic presence in order to receive what they want. This impacts an individual's body mentally, psychologically, and physically, causing viewers to be more receptive to the rhetor's message. Visual criticism allows audiences to understand the impacts of cultural imagery, demonic symbolism, and camera positioning to understand the impacts of visual rhetoric. This song illustrates complex and influential imagery through color, surreal imagery, and symbolism in order to make demonic worship more acceptable and normalized in society.

Conclusion

Understanding “Paint the Town Red” 's true intent creates questions about its popularity and its impact on each individual. The use of demonic imagery and lyrics, this song challenges societal norms and acceptance of certain themes, making demonic worship more acceptable within society. I realize that it is an effective artifact to analyze for rhetorical criticism purposes between the popularity of the artist and the influence on society and culture. Doja Cat is a popular artist, which means that not only is her music listened to by large masses, but it also means that she has a significant influence on society. The messages in her song have the ability to become more acceptable within a culture, making this artifact crucial to analyze. A “sinful” culture prioritizes greed, power, and disregards others. In 2020, for the first time in over 80 years, “worship has tumbled over the past several decades, dropping below 50 percent” (Malone) which results in a less faithful society and culture. We must begin to ask ourselves, what kind of culture do we want to live in, one filled with humility, happiness, and hope, or one filled with resentment, selfishness, and immorality.

Works Cited

Grammarly: Free AI Writing Assistance, <https://app.grammarly.com/>. Accessed 28 September 2024.

Academy Publication. "'The Influence of Color on Human Emotions.'" *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. 2015, www.academypublication.com/issues2/tpls/vol05/06/27.pdf. Accessed 28 9 24.

"Age-related differences in social influence on risk perception depend on the direction of influence." *NCBI*, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5614112/>. Accessed 28 September 2024.

"Doja Cat - Paint The Town Red (Official Video)." *YouTube*, 4 August 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4_9TFeMfJE. Accessed 28 September 2024.

Foxe, John J., and Albert Einstein. "The color red attracts attention in an emotional context. An ERP study." *NCBI*, 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4413730/>. Accessed 28 September 2024.

Harding, Charlie. "Doja Cat's Satanic Suite — Switched On Pop." *Switched On Pop*, 19 September 2024, <https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/doja-cat-satanic-suite-paint-the-town-red-demon-attention>. Accessed 28 September 2024.

"What does Hinduism say about the origin of evil? - The problem of evil and suffering - CCEA - GCSE Religious Studies Revision - CCEA." *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zhsjscw/revision/5>. Accessed 28 September 2024.

Katelyn Macomber

Bond, Paul, et al. "Satan is Getting Hot as Hell in American Pop Culture." *Newsweek*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/satan-getting-hot-hell-american-pop-culture-1790669>. Accessed 2 December 2024.

Malone, Michael R. "Where have all the faithful gone?" *News@TheU logo*, 20 09 2020, [https://news.miami.edu/stories/2023/09/where-have-all-the-faithful-gone.html#:~:text=N
ewell%20and%20Robyn%20Faith%20Walsh,part%20of%20broader%20societal%20
moves](https://news.miami.edu/stories/2023/09/where-have-all-the-faithful-gone.html#:~:text=N%20and%20Robyn%20Faith%20Walsh,part%20of%20broader%20societal%20moves). Accessed 02 10 2024.