

'TOO MUCH' OR 'JUST ENOUGH' A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EMOTIONAL EXCESS IN BERNADYA'S KATA MEREKA INI BERLEBIHAN AND TAYLOR SWIFT'S AUGUST

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Abstract

This article presents a cross-cultural examination of how emotional excess is constructed, mediated, and valued in contemporary popular music through a comparative analysis of Bernadya's *Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan* ("They Say This Is Too Much," 2024) and Taylor Swift's *august* (2020). While both songs center on themes of unrequited love and emotional intensity, they manifest strikingly different cultural attitudes toward vulnerability. Bernadya's lyrics directly challenge Indonesian societal norms that police women's emotions as "berlebihan" (excessive), framing her defiance through collective pronouns ("mereka"/"they") that highlight the tension between personal authenticity and social expectations. In contrast, Swift's *august* aestheticizes heartbreak through nostalgic individualism, where melancholy becomes a private, poetic experience rather than a social transgression. Employing methodologies from Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, alongside Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as "palimpsestic" rewriting, this study reveals how both songs engage in transnational dialogue about gendered emotional expression while being reinterpreted through local cultural codes. The analysis demonstrates how Bernadya's work adapts Swift's themes of longing to an Indonesian context, transforming the "sad girl" trope into a collective critique of emotional censorship. The study contributes to three key scholarly conversations: 1) the globalization of emotional aesthetics in pop music, 2) the gendered double standards of artistic vulnerability across cultures, and 3) adaptation theory's utility in analyzing transnational musical dialogues. Ultimately, it argues that judgments of "too much" or "just enough" emotion are never neutral—they reflect entrenched power structures governing gender, culture, and artistic legitimacy.

Keywords: *emotional excess, comparative literature, adaptation theory, Indonesian pop music, Taylor Swift*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Music has become a part of everyone's life, accompanying people in their daily activities. A song can sound overly emotional when someone has just had a tough day or is heartbroken. For those who have never experienced that phase of life, some people who listen to emotionally charged songs often interpret them as "too sensitive" or even "cringe", but singers like Bernadya and Taylor Swift successfully break the stigma with their songs, which their songs are wrapped in beautiful melodies and the chosen lyrics. Bernadya just released her debut song in 2024 and has already made local people fall in love with

her. Taylor Swift is a successful Western singer, and so many people know her songs, which mostly talk about love problems. Both singers have their own uniqueness when delivering their heartfelt songs, but recently, Indonesian netizens have noticed that Bernadya and Taylor have a similar meaning in one of their songs. In Bernadya's *Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan*, the lyrics tell about challenging social rejection, meanwhile Taylor's *August* tells about unrequited love, but of course, they explore these excessive emotions from different cultural perspectives and narrative styles. This article presents a comparative literary and cultural analysis of these two songs, explaining how they portray love, longing, and the societal gaze that deems certain feelings "too much." Using frameworks from Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, and Translation/Adaptation Theory, this study asks:

1. How do cultural norms shape expressions of emotional excess in Indonesian versus Western pop music?
2. How do Bernadya and Swift adapt similar themes of unrequited love to their respective cultural contexts?
3. What do these differences reveal about gendered perceptions of vulnerability?

By presenting their songs in the context of conversation, we question the meaning of "*Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan*" and what it reveals about broader issues of love, vulnerability, and artistic emotional expression in global pop culture. Both singers transform emotion into art, but their cultural context determines how the messages in their songs are received and where the line between "too much" and "enough" is drawn.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

1. Close reading of lyrics to identify the thematic patterns
2. Cultural contextualization of Indonesian collectivism versus Western individualism.
3. Adaptation theory (Hutcheon 2006) to examine how Bernadya's song reworks Swift's motifs with Indonesian socio-gendered codes.

Primary sources include the original songs and their official translations; secondary sources span scholarly work on Indonesian gender norms (Brenner 1999), Western pop culture (Frith 1989), and adaptation studies

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Emotional Excess in Two Cultural Contexts

A comparative analysis of these two songs examines the excessive emotional expression embedded in Bernadya's *Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan* and Taylor's *August*. Both songs tell how social norms with different cultures can shape perceptions and expressions of vulnerability in popular music. Through textual and cultural context analysis, this study highlights how the lyrics in Bernadya's song "*Kata mereka ini berlebihan/Tapi mereka tak pernah tahu rasa ini*" directly challenge Indonesia's collective values that prioritize emotional control as a social currency, especially criticizing gendered judgements of women's emotions as "dramatic" or "too much." This song reflects a strong affirmation among Indonesia's younger generation of emotional authenticity against traditional expectations to suppress emotions. This reflects broader societal pressures for women to conform to *perempuan ideal* (ideal femininity), where emotional control is a social currency (Suryakusuma 1996). On the other hand, Taylor's song *August* represents Western pop culture's aestheticization of sadness through nostalgic imagery ("salty air," "August slipped away") where emotional intensity becomes a commodity to be sold as introspective art rather than a social norm. This difference highlights cultural variations in emotional expression, where the phrase "too much" is seen as a disruption to social harmony, yet some celebrate it as authentic self-expression. The translation challenges between these works further emphasize these cultural differences, as the socio-cultural weight of

“excessive” resists a direct equivalent in English, just as the seasonal metaphor *August* loses its resonance in a tropical context.

2. Comparative Literature: When Heartbreak Speaks the Same Language

While one uses the metaphor of a fading summer and the other of long-distance relationship fatigue, both sing about the same thing: a love that was beautiful but never really belonged to them. There is something familiar about how Taylor Swift and Bernadya describe the heartbreaking feeling of love. Taylor portrays her nostalgia with lines like “*August slipped away into a moment in time / 'Cause it was never mine,*” while Bernadya’s “*Sebelas ribu kilometer kutempuh sendirian*” (“I traveled 11,000 km alone”, “carrying the weight of a hug that was not even missed.”)

Even more striking is how both singers describe how they change themselves to gain the affection of someone else. Taylor’s narrator waits by the phone, canceling plans in case he calls, while Bernadya goes to the extent of changing her hairstyle “*Ku tak pernah ikat rambutku lagi semenjak kau bilang rambutku indah bila terurai panjang*” (“I never tied my hair again after you said it looked beautiful loose”) and forcing herself to read books she thinks will impress him. It’s a common, almost embarrassing truth that we all know too well: the things we do to make ourselves “perfect” for someone who only loves us on condition.

3. Gendered Regret: Indonesia and the U.S.

Taylor Swift’s *August* captures the narrator’s regret from the perspective of a summer romance in lines like, “*meet me behind the mall.*” The sadness of deep waiting, a personal lament for a relationship that “*was never mine,*” reflects a Western individualism where emotional pain is rarely in the spotlight from the outside. In comparison, Bernadya’s *Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan* centers on society’s judgment, as seen in the lyrics “*Tak kuhiraukan kata mereka ini berlebihan*” (“I ignored their words saying this was excessive.”) This reflects how social life in Indonesia makes private things about feelings and emotions often still become public consumption, and still think about other people’s judgment of oneself.

Here, the sadness of Bernadya’s lyrical narrator is reinforced by other people’s opinions that perceive her feelings as “*berlebihan*” (excessive), a critique of how Indonesian society often limits the intensity of women’s romanticism. The line “*Ingin sempurna di matamu*” (“I wanted to be perfect in your eyes”) further underscores the patriarchal pressure to present perfection as a woman for man. While Taylor’s narrator laments a love that was never truly hers, Bernadya’s narrator laments a love that was deemed “too much” by others, and not even given a chance to exist.

4. Adaptation Theory: The Palimpsest of Heartbreak

Bernadya’s song can unconsciously be interpreted as an adaptation of Taylor’s lyrics, polished with Indonesian culture. For example, through the lyrics, “*Kubatalkan setiap janji/ Hanya karna takut kau butuh aku*” (“I canceled every promise/ Just in case you needed me”) resembles Taylor’s lyrics, “*Cancel plans just in case you’d call,*” both of which depict self-abandonment, which is identical to unrequited love. Whereas Bernadya’s lyrics add a slight layer of social embarrassment. Since in lyric “*Setiap janji*” (“Every promise with other people,”) the lyrics mean sacrificing self-esteem with other people, compared to Taylor’s lyrics, only “*Plans*” may only sacrifice self-esteem without having to accept social shame. It reflects how cultural context can reshape similar emotional experiences by adapting Indonesian cultural codes inherent to social life. This intertextual dialogue exemplifies Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation as palimpsest, where Bernadya’s lyrics overwrite Taylor’s framework with the typical romantic insecurities of Indonesian youth, creating a new yet familiar narrative of heartbreak.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though both songs articulate unrequited love, their treatment of emotional excess reveals different cultural backgrounds. By comparing Bernadya's song *Kata Mereka Ini Berlebihan* and Taylor's *August*. Even though these two songs explore unrequited love, Bernadya's lyrics reject challenging Indonesian societal norms, framing the intense emotion for something that is "too much," especially for women, meanwhile Taylor's nostalgic individualism treats heartbreak as a poetic introspection. Even though these songs have a different cultural perspective, both songs catch the same universal pain, which is longing and sacrifice. With the use of theory adaptation by Hutcheon, Bernadya's song can be seen as an Indonesian reinterpretation of Taylor's themes of romance, adding a social layer. In the end, these differences show how culture decides whether emotions are deemed "too much" or artistically profound, proving that heartbreak transcends boundaries despite its cultural differences in expression.

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