

New York, New York: The Empire State of Mind

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at reading the two songs entitled *New York, New York* and *The Empire State of Mind* to see how the city of New York is perceived and campaigned by the songs. It is an American popular cultural studies research discussing the two songs which are analysed as popular media works to deliver messages to the audiences. Inge's theory on popular cultural works is employed to examine the form, function, and methods of evaluation in a way that the songs are treated as readable cultural texts. Semiotics is also employed as a relevant approach to interpret the data. In addition, Socio-cultural approach is applied in this study by considering American history that is useful to have a deeper discussion to examine how the city of New York is defined and spread by the media through the songs. The finding shows that the two popular songs see New York as a representation of America to hold the values of finding dreamland, conquering the wilderness, and achieving individual success in a modern materialistic capitalistic America. Released in two different eras, the songs are functioned as media voicing the American thoughts and feeling toward New York City as the today's place of dream and reshaping the society itself as well.

Keywords: *New York, America, popular culture, media works, song.*

INTRODUCTION

Dream is a continuous desire of every American to give a lively energy to move for the development of the nation. Dating back to the history of the nation, the U.S., was built through experiences of leaving the Old World, finding the New World - promising land, moving to the West conquering the wilderness throughout *frontier* experience, and ruling the world to be such a model throughout its empire. These stages are uniquely owned by America which leads to the formation of the nation; Tocqueville (2000) underlines it as the American exceptionalism. The notion of 'dream' is really important for the American as it has been the biggest magnet to trigger waves after waves of immigration to the new land to pursue their dreams. Even after the end of the colonization era marked by the independence to give a birth to a new nation, the United States of America, the notion of dream keeps giving the spirit to the American people to keep moving for the betterment of their future. This paper will read how the concept of New York as a new dream space represent American values through popular media, i.e. two songs about New York City (NYC) entitled *New York New York* popularized by Liza Minnelli in 1977 and then by Frank Sinatra in 1980, that were echoed three decades later by Jay-Z featuring Alicia Keys in 2009 through a song entitled *Empire State of Mind*, under the frame of American popular cultural studies.

New York as known as New York City (NYC) is the biggest city in the U.S., which is characterized by a multicultural society. Founded in 1664 as New York, the city was previously called as New Amsterdam, and it is located at the opening gate to the Europe in the North Atlantic region. The city has been the open door symbol to welcome immigrants from Europe who crossed Atlantic ocean "and through the Statue of Liberty, the most powerful symbol of New York, the newcomers are welcomed to the city's *golden door*"

(Lankevich, 2018). It is related to the building of the Immigration Station at Ellis Island which is located off Manhattan Island in upper New York Bay. This station was the gateway for immigrants who came to the U.S. at the end of the 19th century. The city has been built by people of many different identities. Thus, multicultural background of its social life has been part of the city development “as it has been noted that at the end of the 20th century, there have been 200 national groups were counted among NYC people” (Lankevich, 2018). It is proven by the existence of some corners of the city that are characterized and named by unique identity of their immigrant ancestors which build diaspora communities such as China Town, Little Italy, Little Odissey, Harlem, Bronx, and so on.

The global city is the center of many: history, arts, architecture, fashion, business, etc. If multiculturalism, materialistic world, as well as individual success in becoming a magnet to attract people to come is the way many people view the U.S., then NYC is undoubtedly the little America. NYC is the representation of the U.S. as the city of dream for the American. It symbolizes the American success in term of individual liberty, wealth, and also cultural diversity. For the past two centuries, New York has been the most populous and wealthiest American city (Lankevich, 2018). Its popularity makes the city be performed in many popular culture media products. It is very easy to find the images of the city in postcards, magazines, films and, of course, songs.

Song is a popular media of global society today. It is not only a form of entertainment to listen at leisure time for the audience, but also a useful tool to drive people to possibly speak their ideas and express their thoughts. As stated by Spitzer and Walters (2003), popular songs, which have components such as tunes and lyrics, can be an evidence to know people, places, and attitudes of the past. They believe that many songs were created for a specific purpose, including to speak ideas and thoughts as we mentioned, and they give an example of Irving Berlin’s “*God Bless America*” in 1918 as a response to the First World War, the Second World War and the attack of September 11, 2001. In Indonesia, for instance, this nation’s history recorded the importance of “*Halo-halo Bandung*” as a song to drive the fighting against Dutch colonials in the 40s at the time of the revolution. This song is now sung during the celebration of Indonesia’s independence. The ruining Soviet Union in 1990 was also marked by Scorpions’s “*Winds of Change*” campaigning the need of change. This popular song is always connected as a social criticism against the long established governmental system of the Soviet Union in a new direction supporting the more openness. At that time, Communist authorities saw rock ‘n’ roll music as an association with democracy and capitalism for it had no place in Soviet society, but, as Soviet authority and global politics changed (under Gorbachev’s reforms) to a much more open, rock ‘n’ roll reflects the openness of society, from complete isolation to openness and freedom (Verspieren, 2017, p.2). Not to mention that every country in the world today has a national anthem, a song definitely takes a role to unite the country, perform identity, and drive nationalism. In other words, song is a powerful media to deliver messages, and it may also contribute to social change.

Along with the advancement of technology, song as popular products are commonly found in varieties of today’s media: television, radio, CD, iTune, smartphone, internet, etc. In music industries, songs are written to win public attention and to produce money as the way popular culture found its mechanism as part of the industry. Spitzer and Walters (2003, p.4) underline that the purpose of the creation of songs, that is “often having to do with publication and profit”. Fiske argues that popular culture is produced massively by capitalist corporations (in Baker, 2003, p.68). It enables a popular song or singer to be popular

globally mediated by industry and technology. An American song is easily consumed trans-nationally and included in music charts of radio and television in many different countries. It further influences the consumers, so it may motivate social change in addition to gain profit in the industry.

In this paper, the discussion is departed by reading two songs portraying NYC which are viewed as popular cultural texts (Campbell & Kean, 2006). In addition, Lauter (2001) also emphasizes that American Studies may employ non-traditional text to develop the studies. Popular cultural products like popular music hold the aspects of form, function and methods of evaluation, as Inge (2002) underlines that popular cultural product is similar to cultural product in general, not to be dichomized against high culture in a way it holds the three aspects. A song that could be so popular cannot be separated from its wholly formula of the song: the rhythm, stream, lyrics, singer and the package of the song as a popular product. They could be read as signs that hold multiple meanings. Signs found within the songs may signify connotative meanings. For Barthes, the connotative meaning is a second order semiological system which he calls as metalanguage or myth itself (Barthes, 1972, p.115). Thus, “myths are connotations which have become naturalized, that is, as accepted as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, they act as conceptual maps of meaning by which to make sense of the word” (Baker, 2005, p.92).

Here, the article will discuss the uses of popular products as media, in this case the two songs, in delivering messages as it holds values and explains the important NYC for the American specifically and the world in general as represented by the songs. The research seeks to explain the way the two songs interpret New York. The songs are chosen as they represent the development of the understanding of New York and both are popular and well-accepted as a celebration of NYC in two different era and points of view about the city. Minelli and Sinatra made a success with the first song, *New York New York*, by making their own recording, each with slightly different genre; the song was recorded by Minelli in 1977 in a more traditional pop and Sinatra made it in jazzy style in 1980. The newer reinterpretation about the city is represented by the second song, *Empire State of Mind* released in 2009 and popularized by Alicia Keys and Jay-Z in the rap hip hop genre.

METHODOLOGY

It is a descriptive qualitative research aiming at interpreting two popular works as media to deliver certain messages about New York City. Thus, this research examines two songs about NYC entitled (1) *New York New York*, popularized by Liza Minnelli in 1977 and then Frank Sinatra in 1980, written by John Kander and Fred Ebb, and (2) *Empire State of Mind* which is popularized by Jay-Z featuring Alicia Keys in 2009, written by A. Hunte, A. Keys, A. Shuckburgh, B. Keyes, J. Sewell, S. Carter, and S. Robinson.

The two songs are the sources of data from which the data are taken on the forms of music rhythm, genre, lyrics and verse structure. In addition, the identities of the singers are also discussed to understand the changing realities of the white and black success in American music industries through times. The data are reduced purposively by considering the research questions of searching for the NYC representation of American values within the two songs, and to be interpreted semiotically to find the messages of how NYC is defined and voiced up. “Barthes argues that we can talk of two systems of signification: denotation and connotation” (in Baker, 2005, p.92). Barthes’s semiotics are employed to

read the signs delivered by the two songs to be interpreted “in the work of signification, myth and ideology” (Barthes in Baker, 2005, p.92).

This study is conducted under the frame of American popular culture studies. Thus, the year of the release of the songs is important to consider since it functions to represent the development of the understanding of the city, NYC, through different periods of times. Based on Inge (2002), the research focusses on the interpretation of the form, function, and method of evaluation related to the songs as popular products and employing Barthes’s signification on how they signify and view New York City. For instance, the lyrics are analysed by interpreting their signification within the American context, what myths are being signified by treating the lyrics as signs holding multiple meanings. Therefore, socio-cultural background of the American society as well as American history are employed as they are useful to read and interpret the songs as representations of the American thoughts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To be number one seems to be planted at the bedrock of the American mind to actively move to win any kind of competition. This idea fits into the discussion of the city of dream for major Americans: New York, New York. Examining the two songs about the city, it could be explained how the city that *doesn't sleep* is just a real sample of the diverse multicultural materialist-capitalistic America. The dream city of each American appears to be on the top list not only in America but also in this globe along with the rising American empire within the frame of globalized world facilitated by the media. Today's generation of the world will always see New York rather than the older legendary glorious city of Alexandria. New York City is recognized by major people in the world. Just like America, New York have been the destination to make their dream come true. New York holds all of the symbols of the material world in the capitalistic age to represent American values which are shaped through its history. For that reason, New York is often considered as the new wilderness to conquer and experience.

Reading the songs of *New York New York* and *Empire State of Mind* as popular cultural products, the whole package of the songs themselves shows how New York is a representation of America. It includes the discussion of the music stream, singers, and interpretation of the lyrics. First, the music stream from Swing Jazz into Rap-Hip hop show the marking of each age of the year released. They show that the creativity of a popular product can wrap into a newness, i.e. the early 21st century –the time of the second song, is not original Blues but Hip Hop and Rap, which is on the hit (Larry & Christopher, 2006), while late 70s and early 80s still could be coped by Swing Jazz (Joyner, 1993). Popularity is absolutely determined by the forms of the cultural product itself. Jay-Z and Keys use the ‘black way’ of blues combined with rap hip hop as it is released in 2009, when America is on hip hop syndrome. The music genres used by each song are in line with the age of the music industry when they were produced and released.

Secondly, the songs cannot be separated from the singers when they are consumed by the audiences since singers of a song do represent him or herself, and they encourage people to construct self-images and often become the role models for the people how to behave (Spitzer & Walters, 2003, p.7). Minnelli and Sinatra are two figures from outside NYC who reached the fame in NYC. Both are representation of those white-Americans who were born outside of New York and decided to move to the city and made a success. Sinatra was born and grew up in New Jersey; crossed the Hudson river to NYC, he made his dream come true. As cited by Nocera (2015), James Kaplan, the publisher of the second volume of

Sinatra's biography, said that the song *New York New York* had a significant meaning for Sinatra since it described "his own sense of triumph in what he had become". Minnelli is basically also famous from her blood of being Judy Garland's daughter – famous Hollywood's actress, she was born in Hollywood. She, however, found her life in New York as a cabaret singer and reached her fame. Both Minnelli and Sinatra are the *white success* representation, to be rich and famous in New York. They are actually singing their own biography to legitimize themselves as the sample.

Focusing on the second song, it is interesting to see the criticism of the Black's success: Jay-Z and Alicia Keys, their attitude to mention minority groups to address NYC is functioning their music as an identity that cannot be separated from their blackness identity. It is in line with what Alicia Keys stated that "it (the song) is about the HOPE that New York represents; the possibility of the chance to follow your dreams **no matter who you are or where you come from**" (Lipshutz, 2017). Looking at the issue of race and gender in the U.S., their appearance will be very important to examine how the acceptance of minorities on stage is. Alicia Keys will not have a good place like what she has today in America if she had lived back prior to 1960s. To compare, Josephine Baker is a clear example of Black Woman finding hard times in the struggle of acceptance despite her unquestionable talent (Timothy, 1991). Josephine Baker is a talented black female singer who fought for acceptance. She had experienced many rejections as a singer before finally she could sing at Carnegie Hall in 1973 with a standing ovation. Jay-Z calls himself as the *New Sinatra* to deliver a message of his black identity to redefine the white-success Sinatra.

Thirdly, it is analyzing the lyrics of the songs. The analysis is conducted by employing Barthes's semiotic approach. The lyrics is functioned as the signifier. The signified meaning is dug up by considering the socio cultural condition and the history of the American society.

These songs are validating –confirming– the American feeling toward NYC, the city that is dreamed by most American. How Minelli or Sinatra starts the song by singing:

Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today,
I want to be the part of it --New York, New York.

This shows how coming to NYC is full of excitement and anxiety about how future life will be, i.e. to be a dreamy New Yorker. This can be connected to how Americans feel about New York. As stated by Lankevich (2018) in his article entitled *New York City* published by Encyclopedia Britannica, inc., "New York always meant possibility, for it was an urban center on its way to something better". Validating can also be meant to connect to the massive audiences that in fact NYC is the city where major American symbols could be found: Liberty Statue, Brooklyn Bridge, Harlem, Empire State Building, Time Square, Broadway, Twin Tower –already ruined, Wall Street, Fifth Avenue, SoHo, etc. Living in NYC is like living in an imagined place. The city is, in fact, a common setting, theme, and dream of major popular works such as movies, songs, novels, literature, criticism, photography, paintings, and many more. In line with the first song, Jay-Z and Keys praises NYC through the final lines to conclude:

One hand in the air for the big city
Street lights, big dreams, all lookin' pretty
No place in the world that could compare

It shows that the idea of NYC as a dreamy city is still alive despite the decades passed by. Using more informal and straightforward language of expressions, the second song is celebrating NYC. It illustrates that living in the city is as if it is in a big stage show. NYC is described as being showered by lights and beautiful. These signify glamorous NYC to attract those having big dreams. The city is unique as it cannot be compared to any other city, most importantly the idea of dreams is preserved.

Working on the *Myth and Symbols* to borrow Smith's methods in *Virgin Land* (2008), NYC has the above major American icons that hold symbol to represent the American dream of betterment, fulfillment and success. It is the myth of materialistic success. The icons do have significant meaning for American since they create a lovely strong feeling towards being a part of NYC. So, the people will not let anyone destroy them because NYC is a place where they can live in hope and where they can hang their dreams on. Once something endangers NYC, of course, they will see their future and success not as clear as those they have in mind. For instance, the ruining down the World Trade Center (WTC) that was landmark of New York and a symbol of American capitalism (Salmela in D'haen, Giles, Kadir, & Zamora, 2005, p.611) hurts the American in general that later triggered the *war on terror* led by George W. Bush. The incident proves how New York is very important for the American as it holds American symbol and Americans are living on the symbol. It was not the expectation of the American to have the twin tower ruined down. The impact of the 9/11, therefore, reveals on how both the American side and its foe – the terrorist -- realized how significant New York is to be the American business center and how strong WTC holds major symbol on American economy – standing in the center of the NYC business busiest area of Wall Street and distributed the world's capital flows.

Jay Z and Keys state: *Statue of liberty, long life the World Trade*. These clauses suggest two points, i.e. the iconic liberty statue and the hope of long life World Trade. The expression is useful to show the liberty statue as an icon of the city and America. Not only is Statue Liberty owned by NYC, it also symbolizes the U.S. The image of Statue Liberty is very powerful to represent America. Many Hollywood movies, for example, use the image of the statue to describe the U.S. Produced in 2009, the song was released eight years after the 9/11; it means that only Ground Zero found to replace the WTC. Jay-Z and Keys, however keep mentioning World Trade to suggest that the absence of the WTC does not stop NYC to be the center of world trade. The notion of New York as the city of dream to reach fame is represented by the following lines:

I want to wake up in that city that doesn't sleep to find I'm king of the hill top
of the heap.

There is optimism in viewing New York as a city that provides a space for fame for those deciding to live the city. The song is not only describing the sleepless city that runs its activities twenty-four hours a day but also telling that the city has open opportunities to make oneself *to be king of the hill* and the *top of the heap*. Nocera (2015) in one of his columns of *The New York Times* wrote that the song told people about New York as the greatest city in the world, becoming the place where the most ambitious people wanted to be. He added that although this city might be the toughest place in America to achieve success, it was also the most satisfying one to reach success, just like Sinatra's achievement – becoming *the king of the hill top of the heap*. Dating back to the beginning America in the history of colonial periods and waves of immigration, America has been viewed as a dream

land that is promising a betterment of life. New York is then a new dream space for Americans as they want to always wake up there for real and be a part of the city to experience success. Along with the popularity of the city as it is mediated, New York can be shining more and dreamt by not only Americans. Achieving a fame that NYC can provide is the idea of the song to add the notion of reaching a dream.

Further, the city is described by the lines: *If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere*. That's the way Minnelli or Sinatra underlines New York. It is then re-emphasized by Jay-Z and Keys. This estafet can be connected in a way Jay-Z says in his rap lyrics by calling himself as *the new Sinatra*:

I'm the new Sinatra, and, since I made it here
I can make it anywhere

Again, it reminds the audiences to the above tag line telling how conquering New York is just the way how to conquer the world or elsewhere. The opportunity is then opened to more identities. *New Sinatra* is a very effective term to show that reaching fame in NYC is no longer a white privilege only as represented by Sinatra but also for people in color represented by Jay Z. As stated by Sisario (2009), with "Empire State of Mind" in 2009, Jay Z got great popularity and "a symbolic crown" of the king of New York music since then he was bigger than ever, signing a 10-year deal with Live Nation, the largest live entertainment company that operates concert promotion, worth an estimated \$150 million.

"*Make it in New York*" suggests that New York provides new challenges to conquer to be able to gain more successes anywhere else. It is a signification of today's wilderness characterized by the capitalistic way of materialistic success, i.e. to be popular, rich, having life style a la New Yorker. The phrases reflect two things, i.e. New York as a promising city and New York is the new model of jungle to conquer. Promising city is in line with concept of promising land which has been attached to America to call waves of immigrants in the past. While conquering jungle and the wilderness is a very significant American experience in the frontier era that has shaped the American national character. Turner (1935) underlines that frontier - journey to the West - has made American more American. New York appears at once as the representative idea of promising land and the wilderness that represents the values of America. The latter might be clearer explained by Lankevich (2018) that New York gets a reputation as foreign and fearsome city, a place where uncertainty, arrogance, and cruelty tested the energy of everyone who enters it.

New York is becoming the destination as an urban city, where many youngsters want to experience living in NYC and to be *number one, on top of the heap, head of the list, and the king of the hill*. Career, life style, blinding glamorous life, better facilities as well as being a successful person -- rich and popular -- are the magnet of modern life in America. The American are continuously on the move, the tradition of immigration to the New World of their forbears in the old days is continued by the urban movement, NYC appears to be the replacement of the New World as the dreamed city. Alicia Keys in the featured chorus of *Empire State of Mind* describes NYC as:

Concrete jungle where dreams are made of, There's nothing you can't do,
Now you're in New York, these streets will make you feel brand new, Big lights
will inspire you, let's hear it for New York, New York, New York

The city of dream is a new jungle, living there is a brand new start. It holds the meaning of having hope and facing new life in the positive way by choosing to have a life in New York. Connotatively, the second meaning is the new form of jungle. The wilderness of the today's culture is no longer the real wood of harsh nature in the West, but the materialistic of the capitalistic world. New York City is absolutely a good representation of it; it provides a new adventure and challenge for every American to conquer the concrete jungle to be able to conquer the world – make it there and make it anywhere. New York, therefore, is a city with power, hegemonizing people to come and to feel it. It represents the dreamland inviting immigrants. Even though Sinatra says *it's up to you*, however the invitation to feel NYC is stronger as the city keeps offering new challenges, the ladders to the fame.

The terms “*brand new*” is important to underline as it appears in both songs. This term represents the uniqueness of New York to explain that starting a life in New York means restarting life in a positive way. The first song states it as: *I'll make a brand new start of it, in old New York* while the second mentions:

Now you're in New York
These streets will make you feel brand new
Big lights will inspire you

There is a strong connection of the feeling of brand new, it means that they will forget their origins and old identity as NYC promises newness to find. The second song even provides stronger notion that NYC will bring inspiration to set the newness by being part by New York.

New York includes the paradox of new but old. The rhythm of the life in the city itself shows the very basic idea of being an energetic and hardworking American dating back to the early American puritan ethics—the *city that doesn't sleep*. In addition, New York is a multicultural city; what are considered as minorities can exercise their lives better in the city. Jay-Z emphasizes some neighborhoods like *Brooklyn, Tribeca, Harlem*, etc. as places where the diaspora of non-White could be found in New York, creolized themselves as a New Yorker in their own way. It shows how New York is owned by not only White but also non-white New Yorker – African-American – to emphasize their identity Just like addressing who is an American is as complicated as addressing who is a New Yorker – a diverse multicultural society, Rydell and Kroes underline the American identity and culture as a creolization or hybrids (Rydell & Kroes, 2005, p. 1-13), again, New York is the representation of America. Making a balance of the celebration, the second song provides a warning as Jay-Z raps the following lyrics:

City of sin, it's a pity on the whim
Good girls gone bad, the city's filled with them
Mommy took a bus trip, now she got her bust out
Everybody ride her, just like a bus route
Hail Mary to the city, you're a virgin
And Jesus can't save you, life starts when the church end

Came here for school, graduated to the high life
Ball players, rap stars, addicted to the limelight
MDMA got you feelin' like a champion
The city never sleeps, better slip you an Ambien

The above verses clearly connote the negative aspects of NYC. The description of NYC as the city of sin to reject the religious faith is used to show that somebody may fail to conquer the jungle by committing sin. Jay-Z uses paradox of religion and facts of negativity found in NYC. He contrasts *virgin Mary* and *good girls gone bad*. It criticizes the attitude of the women living in NYC who disrespect themselves. Furthermore, the song claims how the life in NYC starts as the church ends. It means that life in New York is far away from religious values. It also warns that NYC may bend somebody's goal to come to the city. They might come for studying and end up to do something else as what the city offers. The worst case is that the city offers drug abuse that may trap innocent newcomers to be drug addicts. The song further criticizes the term of *The city never sleeps* to be understood negatively not as a representation of working ethics but a night life colored by drug users. It is interesting to see that the second song speaks beyond the positive label of the city by revealing the negative aspects as a warning.

Furthermore, the two popular products are not only recording and validating the have-already-exist idea in the American mind. It is also *spreading the news* that in turn shaping the American and world's mind throughout the vehicle of mass cultural products – the songs are spread throughout the media: cassettes, CD, television and internet as well. They are delivered to every corner of America and the world. Consumed by wider publics, the idea of New York is not only preserved but also penetrated stronger as more people are on the same page of understanding New York. This mechanism is also found in the very basic idea of American exceptionalism on how it can reach the cultural power by creating hegemony like in the U.S. foreign policy in the use of soft power as a weapon (Nye, 2004). America can be narrowed down as represented by New York. New York plays the role as John Winthrop's city upon a hill, the role model of the world, controlling the direction of the world; *I love New York* tends to be the world's maxim not only for the New Yorkers. New York lifestyle, architecture, icon, and culture in general tends to be used as reference for major people in the world as what fits for New York is seeming to be fitted anywhere else. In terms of testing cultural product, New York can be the best city, supported by most international diverse citizens today that have been the victims of the magnetic city, New York is workable for testing a product whether it will be popular or not. In fact, the US has the whole advantages to exercise its power within the popularity of New York, economically and politically.

CONCLUSION

To elicit this discussion, reading the city of New York departed from the two songs as a form of popular works, it can be brought forth that New York is the representation of America in general. The city holds the American values: finding the dream land, conquering the wilderness, reaching individual success and being a hard worker in the capitalistic world. Both cultural texts, the two songs, are readable to suggest how American values are continuously preserved and exercised by Americans in the newer different ways. They further show how this popular cultural works are able to represent the function of revealing

the American massive thoughts and feeling toward New York as the today's place of dream and reshaping the society itself as well; just combining the two titles of the songs: New York, New York, the empire state of mind.

This research provides a lense on how to read *New York, New York* and *The Empire State of Mind*. Further, it views songs as not merely popular products which are commercially distributed and massively consumed by audiences but also hold values and myths. Similar researches can be further conducted to investigate popular cultural products such as songs or other cultural texts to see values and myth campaigned. Focusing on the two songs, further research can also be done to see how the myths found may influence the audiences.

BIODATA

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