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Discursive Leadership in
the Beatles' Lyrics: Positioning,
Feminism, and the Cultural
Management of Meaning

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Abstract: Previous studies examining feminist elements in Beatles songs primarily focus on critical and qualitative analysis of the narratives within the lyrics, often overlooking the dynamics of power between males and females, as well as their roles in relationships. More importantly, the leadership discursively constructed and performed by the band has been underexplored, despite its impact on the cultural management of the meanings of genders. Drawing upon positioning theory, this study conducts a thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to uncover the predominant themes in the lyrics of Beatles songs released in 1963 and 1964. This study elucidates how the Beatles discursively positioned males in relation to females, especially in romantic relationships, in lyrics that apparently reflect feminism, as well as the cultural management conducted by the band. The thematic analysis reveals that a significant portion of the lyrical content relates to feminist themes, where females are positioned as having a higher interpersonal status alongside male empowerment. Conversely, males are portrayed as sacrificers who offer unconditional love to females, despite the challenges posed by the latter. It is argued that the Beatles are cultural leaders managing social perceptions on gender equality through discursive positioning strategies in the lyrics, and that language plays an important role in (re)shaping gender identities that challenge conventional images of gender in society.

Keywords: cultural management, feminism, lyrics, discursive leadership, positioning theory

Introduction

The Beatles, consisting of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr, were an English rock band active in Liverpool in the 1960s, and are regarded as the most influential band of all time (Hasted, 2017). A significant number of popular and long-lasting songs were created by the band, including *Can't Buy Me Love* (1963), *Love Me Do* (1962), *Yesterday* (1965), *Let It Be* (1969), among others. What set the band apart from, and made them more successful than, other widely acclaimed musicians were their feminine and feminist elements. These included their appearance with mop-top hairdos, collarless onstage outfits, as well as the content of their song lyrics, which helped the band develop a feminist ideology in society, challenging long-standing masculine ideologies and practice (Driver, 2007; Stark, 2005). Beatlemania was a cultural movement characterized by the rise of female status along with female audiences' frenetic state, hysteric craze, and adulation—a melodramatic mode—in the U.K. and the U.S.A. (O'Toole, 2016). Melodrama features include exaggeration, hysterical musical expressions, crying, and conflicts between the good and the evil, or the powerless and the powerful, to display feelings of opposition (Kapurch, 2016). This description does not intend to depict females as negative entities, but rather to highlight what Millard (2012) claims is the first and most dramatic uprising of women's sexual revolution (p. 134). Therefore, this cultural movement had a profound impact on women's roles in self-discovery, politics and society at a time when women were seeking liberation from traditional domestic roles (Stark, 2005).

The Beatles played a key role in the counterculture movements that arrived in the 1960s and significantly influenced the new youth (Driver, 2007). Scholars and experts have detailed the colossal impact of the Beatles' music and their distinct culture, Beatlemania¹, on audiences, especially women (O'Toole, 2016;

¹ *Beatlemania*: The cultural product of the Beatles' uniqueness and proto-typicality shaped by sweeping adulation among fans, mostly females, in the U.K. and the U.S.A. Also, the memories of *Beatlemania* had a far-reaching influence on its heated cultural formation in society (Driver, 2007, p. 74–75).

Schneider, 2016). The band surpassed numerous internationally acclaimed stars, such as Elvis Presley, nearly all of whom many teenage females had shown staunch support to (Deboick, 2017). Kapurch (2016) suggests that the Beatles served as a vehicle for females to rise against social limitations and stereotypes of gender and sexuality. This assertion is also supported by historian Elaine Tyler May, who claims that the Beatles set tone for feminism (Stark, 2005, p. 4). Feminism is the belief in equality among all genders, encompassing a range of socio-political movements that advocate for equal opportunities in all aspects of life, as well as greater intellectual and financial independence for women (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2010). Feminism challenges systemic inequalities and the underlying assumptions of gender ideologies, particularly those that place women in disadvantageous positions (Mohapatra, 2009). Women have begun to find themselves *awake* in a world dominated by stereotypical and socially constructed gender norms. Such ossified norms were to be addressed in the melodramatic feature of their music as “vehicles for girls to negotiate gender and sexuality” and “...that critique social norms related to masculinity and femininity” (Kapurch, 2016, p. 200). The band was the key to women’s liberation of their pent-up emotions and desires for freedom (Frith, 1984). Given this context, it is reasonable to infer that the songs of the Beatles and Beatlemania established a relationship with audiences through music inextricably linked to *feminine* discourse and feminism. Feminism also requires a re-examination of the divided essences of sex and gender (Booth, 2018). Sex is biologically determined, while gender, related to masculinity and femininity, is socially constructed (Butler, 1990). Feminism in the historical context of the 1960s in the United Kingdom marks a significant transition, recognized primarily as the onset of the second wave of feminism, which emerged in the aftermath of World War II, fueled by broader social and political upheavals of the time. This era was characterized by a resurgence of feminist activism, as women began to challenge ingrained social norms and push for a more equitable status in various societal domains, including politics, employment, and education (Scharff, 2011). Specifically, the feminist movement rallied against patriarchal structures embedded within society, advocating for issues such as reproductive rights, workplace equality, and anti-discrimination legislation (Rowbotham, 1977).

The 1960s were marked by a radical rethinking of gender roles, with many women participating in both organized and grassroots movements (Spandler & Carr, 2020). This collective activism challenged the traditional view of women as primarily wives and mothers in society, instead promoting the idea that women should have the same opportunities and choices as men in all spheres of life.

The Beatles also played the role of cultural leaders, shaping social perspectives towards males and females by positioning the genders in the lyrics of their songs. Specifically, the songs served as vehicles that narrated gendered stories and conveyed feminist ideology advocating gender equality. Their lyrics were discursive performances that contested gender inequality and constructed new understandings of masculinity, femininity and the dynamic interpersonal and power relationships between males and females. Thus, analysing the lyrics of the Beatles' songs can enhance our understanding of how feminist ideology is linguistically constructed and disseminated through the discursive leadership and cultural management of a band that had great influence on their fandom and audience in general. Nevertheless, very little research has systematically examined the lyrics and illustrated how feminism is composed thematically. To address this research gap, this study employs positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) and conducts thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to investigate and elucidate the predominant themes of the Beatles' lyrics (1963–1964) in relation to feminism and Beatlemania, explicating the discursive leadership of the band and the way they managed the cultural meanings of males and females.

Literature review

Discursive leadership

Discursive leadership is grounded in a broadly constructionist ontology (Hacking, 1999) that questions the naturalness and inevitability of leadership as a social phenomenon. Instead of accepting leadership as a self-evident or universally desirable practice, discursive approaches interrogate how

leadership is socially constructed, maintained, and sometimes contested through language and interaction (Shotter, 1993). For example, the concept of “authentic leadership” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) is revealed to be contingent and constructed, as its meanings shift depending on whether authenticity is framed as virtuosity or as the exposure of a leader’s ‘dark side’—demonstrating that the very idea of leadership is subject to competing discourses. Critical theorists further expand the constructionist stance by casting leadership as a mechanism of domination and advocating for more democratic alternatives (Clegg et al., 1996). Discursive leadership, then, is conceived as a practical accomplishment—an outcome of everyday communication and the performative use of language (Sigman, 1992)—rather than as a stable set of traits or functions. Robinson’s (2001) definition encapsulates this processual view: “Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (p. 93). This definition underscores leadership as an emergent process of influence and meaning management, distributed among actors and recognized through discourse, rather than a quality inherent to individual leaders (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The phenomenon of Beatlemania in the 1960s provides a striking example of discursive leadership, as the Beatles became not only musical icons but also influential cultural managers who reshaped societal understandings of masculinity and emotional expression. Through the fervor and collective identification generated by Beatlemania, the band’s lyrics—such as those in *Help!*, *Yesterday*, and *All You Need Is Love*—foregrounded vulnerability, emotional honesty, and affection, challenging traditional stoic models of masculinity. In this way, the Beatles used their cultural platform to enact leadership that constructed new discourses around gender and emotion, illustrating how popular music and its surrounding fandom can collaboratively negotiate and legitimize alternative social identities.

Beatlemania as a case of cultural management

Beatlemania is a cultural movement which highlights the Beatles’ role as cultural leaders managing gender ideologies through positioning males and females

in the lyrics of their songs. Through using lyrics that questioned traditional gender roles with androgynous aesthetics, the band played an important role in reshaping cultural attitudes toward genders. The band blurred the boundary between feminine “pop” (fans) and masculine “rock” (fans) by modelling a less hegemonic masculinity (Warwick, 2007). This was achieved by several mechanisms, including (1) writing inclusive, woman-positive lyrics (Feldman-Barrett, 2021) and (2) being self-aware in how they engaged female listeners (Bradby, 2005). The band's music served as a vehicle for advancing “girl-talk”, which challenged conventional gender roles (Kapurch, 2016). Specifically, the lyrics are composed of themes that deviated from the conventional male-female relationships. The Beatles' music can function to transcend gender norms by allowing women to cultivate and uphold their own values and independence (Feldman-Barrett, 2021, p. 5). For instance, songs like *Please Please Me* and *If I Fell* expressed male vulnerability, contrasting with the stoic masculinity typical for rock and pop music (MacDonald, 2005). These songs offer a new perspective of male image, encouraging audience to rethink gender roles. Moreover, the Beatles' colourful clothing style and long hairstyles with accessories demonstrated a mixture of masculinity and femininity, which was revolutionary for male performers at that time (Womack, 2014). This visual presentation confronted the mainstream notions of masculinity, inspiring young men to explore alternate identities and self-expression (Riley, 2002). Therefore, Beatlemania is often perceived as a form of liberation for women at that time, and can be viewed as a case of cultural management that specifically influenced or challenged the established gender roles in society. The movement is seen as providing a space for young women to express themselves and challenge societal norms (Carr, 2015), and a protest against the sexual repressiveness and rigid double standards of female teen culture (Ehrenreich et al., 2007). The Beatles' music supported advancing women's rights (Rowbotham, 2019). Consequently, females became active participants in rock music, engaging in self-reflection, developing their identities and establishing their communities (Feldman-Barrett, 2021). In other words, Beatlemania is an exemplar that demonstrates the discursive leadership of the Beatles, who played the role of cultural leaders in managing new models of masculinity and femininity

through the lyrics of their songs. The enactment of such discursive leadership is rooted in discourse.

Lyrics, power, inclusion and identity construction

Discourse is an ideal source for the investigation into identity, as it influences and is influenced by socio-cultural contexts (Gee, 2005). Composed of language and language use, discourse is viewed as structured patterns that contribute to transitional and interactional purposes of communication (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). As a result, discourse can reflect socio-cultural values that are embedded by speakers and writers and received and interpreted by readers and listeners. Identity is often represented, negotiated and positioned in discourse. The identity-in-discourse can be explicated by looking into language patterns and elucidated by social structure, practice and politics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Identity in lyrics is represented in two modes. The first is the reflective mode, through which an individual or group is represented through music that is politically communicated (Street, 2012). For example, marginalized women in the 1960s used music and lyrics as a platform to highlight women's needs and issues of inequality. Thus, lyric can play a "truth-bearing" role, reflecting cultural context as cognitive praxis (Eyerman, 1998). The second is the expressive mode. Echoing social movements, music with lyrics can be a channel for expressing resistance to regimes (Cushman, 1995). One example is protest songs that highlight injustice and mobilise public sentiment to challenge political or social authorities (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). The functions of lyrics influence how audiences perceive the legitimacy of institutional power, particularly in cultural or grassroots movements. In other words, music including songs and sounds can be an instrument to challenge the dominant ideological and political system, while people make use of it to construct or transform individual and collective identity (Adorno, 2002). Thus, lyrics are one of the ideal discourses that can contest gender norms and challenge patriarchal structures through discursive leadership of performers, particularly those who are popular and influential in society.

Prior text studies recognize the relationship between the Beatles' lyrics and feminism, as their music conveys perspectives that resonate with feminist themes

(Warwick, 2007). This connection reflects the tension between the entrenched patriarchy of their era and the rising status of women, as the Beatles' works often critique traditional social norms that perpetuated patriarchal values in the 1960s. For instance, Kapurch (2016) analyses the modes of lyrical expression through a comprehensive descriptive approach to several songs, including *Misery* (1963), *Ask Me Why* (1963), and *Boys* (1960 & 1963). Themes such as teenage femininity, androgynous features of romance, and powerlessness are represented in the lyric discourse (Stark, 2005). It is argued that the lyrics of the Beatles' songs reflect a shift from female dependence to male vulnerability (Gould, 2007). For example, the song *She Loves You*, emphasizes the Beatles' leading role in fostering belief in female love and articulating female longings that extend beyond marital expectations to include fun and carefree dating (Warwick, 2007). Love relationships and romance are prevalent themes in their lyrics, with high frequencies of third-person pronouns such as "she" and "her", underscoring the significant role of women in the band's lyrics and capturing the attention of discourse analysts (Petrie et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, these studies have limitations, as they do not effectively reflect the full picture of how the Beatles' music engages with feminist themes due to their focus on specific lyrics and a limited dataset. Consequently, the underlying meanings that explicate the power dynamics and gender roles in the Beatles' music remain underexplored. More importantly, the role of the Beatles in the Beatlemania movement, and how their leadership is discursively constructed and performed through the cultural management in the lyrics have yet been explicated. To address this gap, this study analyses the lyrics of the Beatles songs to elucidate how the cultural management of the band discursively shaped and manifested their leadership in relation to gender ideologies, especially masculinity and feminism in the 1960s. This study addresses the research questions:

- A) How are male and female identities represented, positioned and managed in the lyrics of the Beatles' songs (1963-1964)?
- B) How can the discursive leadership of the Beatles be manifested and construed in their cultural management and positioning of gender?

Theoretical framework: Positioning theory, narrative and lyrics

This study utilizes positioning theory to examine how the Beatles made use of feminism-related lyrics to position males, particularly in romantic relationships. According to positioning theory, an individual's identity emerges through social interaction and is continually (re)constructed through discursive practices and narratives (Davies & Harré, 1999). Instead of adopting the conventional notions of 'identity' or 'role', which are often seen as rigid, formal and ritualistic, positioning theory focuses on the dynamic, fluid, and negotiable aspects of face-to-face interactions by using the concept of 'position'. A position encompasses both how an individual wish to be perceived by others and the perspective from which they view the world (Ceuterick & Vandebroek, 2017). Furthermore, all positions are relational, meaning that while an individual position themselves in a particular way within a social interaction, other participants are simultaneously positioned relative to that individual (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Consequently, positioning can lead to instrumental or task-oriented negotiations. To examine the positioning of individuals or groups, it is crucial to have a grasp of the implicit rules that generate meanings within a situational event, which can be considered as the background, setting, or context (Berger, 1986). Analysing how individuals display their alignment, set, stance, posture, or projected self to themselves and others helps enhance the understanding of the event (Goffman, 1986). An individual's position can be interpreted through their interpretative repertoire, which refers to the patterned and recognizable routine of descriptions, arguments, and evaluations that are distinguished by recurrent themes, metaphors, and characterizations (Wetherell, 1998). Despite its nature as written discourse, lyrics function as an ideological and epistemological carrier, allowing performers to convey meanings that position the participants in lyric narratives. In other words, the positioning that occurs in lyrics can be realized through investigating the predominant themes that reflect the power dynamics between males and females. To reveal how the Beatles position males in relation to females in romantic relationships, this study employs thematic analysis and corpus-assisted discourse analysis, focusing on feminism-related

content and linguistic items signaled by interpersonal relationship, such as the meanings associated with first-person and second-person pronouns, and the lexical items that indicate values, beliefs and relationship status.

Narratives can be “temporal (reflecting on the past and looking to the future), emotive (positive and negative experiences and surprises), reflective (beliefs, expectations, and practices), and instructive (advice)” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 38), involving a wide-range content about subject positions, lives, cultures and feelings (Yip, 2020). Positioning theory can be one of the conceptual and analytical tools for the investigation of narratives, as it “foregrounds the ways narrators carry out various actions by attributing certain positions to characters in their stories, to the audience of their storytelling, to themselves, and in respect to the cultural world at large” (Brockmeier, 2012, p. 10). Harré et al. (2009) contend that “if we take the view that life unfolds as a narrative, with multiple, contemporaneous interlinking storylines, the significance of the actions that people carry out, including speech acts, is partly determined by the then-and-there positions of the actors” (p. 8). The authors agree with Harré et al. (2009) as they further explain that “what the dominant story line of a narrative is can be determined by the local assignments of rights and duties. As positioned, the act-forces of a person’s speaking and acting are given this or that meaning and consequently play this or that role in a story” (p. 12).

Lyrics are often viewed as narratives, given their narrative structures and storytelling elements embedded within lyrical expressions. Research indicates that song lyrics function not merely as vehicles for personal emotion, but also as narratives that share experiences, illustrating the broad spectrum of emotions through structured storytelling techniques. For instance, Alberhasky and Durkee (2024) emphasize that the “Arc of Narrative” in songs varies considerably by genre, suggesting a distinct narrative presence that resonates with listeners across different musical styles. This genre-dependent narrative quality highlights the significance of context in interpreting lyrical content. Another example is Blessing (2024) who analysed Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song* and demonstrated how lyrical narratives embed personal experiences, effectively weaving together themes and emotions that resonate with narrative depth. Thus, it is evident that lyricism frequently operates within a narrative

framework, enriching artistic expression by marrying personal emotions with storytelling. In this study, the lyrics of the Beatles' songs are perceived as narratives that allow the exploration of discursive positioning of males and females in romantic relationships. Although analysing lyrics in isolation can be incomplete or misleading if broader contexts—such as literary and poetic traditions, the development of popular music, and prevailing gender norms—are not taken into account, it is notable that the Beatles frequently drew upon familiar tropes and conventions. However, as cultural leaders, they addressed these elements in ways that strategically appealed to female fans and acknowledged male vulnerability. Rather than claiming that the Beatles were revolutionary in their portrayal of gender roles through lyrics, this study examines how their lyrics operate as narratives and discursive practices that both reflect and subtly shape the discursive positioning of men and women within romantic relationships. This perspective enriches our understanding of lyrics of popular music as sites where perceptions on gender are negotiated through discursive leadership.

Methodology

The collected lyrics were from the Beatles albums released in the U.K. and the U.S.A. Table 1 shows the albums included in the analysis.

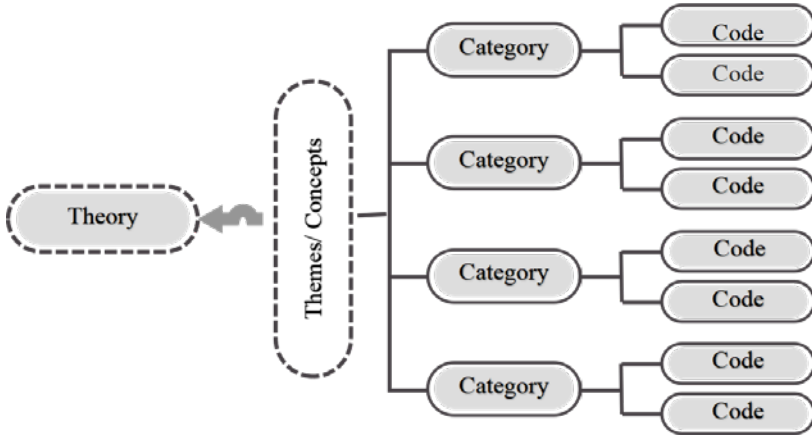
Table 1. Albums of the Beatles Released in the U.K. & U.S.A. from 1963 to 1964

Albums released in the U.K. (4)		Albums released in the U.S. (4)	
Please Please Me	1963	Meet the Beatles	1964
With the Beatles	1963	The Beatles' Second album	1964
A Hard Day's Night	1964	A Hard Day's Night	1964
Beatles for Sale	1964	Beatles' 65 #	1964

The lyrics were collected mainly from the internet, and manual transcriptions of the songs were conducted to compile a specialized corpus of the Beatles' lyrics. The corpus contains 68 songs, comprising 8532 words. The corpus compiled for this study is modest in size; however, this smaller size allowed us to conduct both quantitative and in-depth qualitative analyses, as smaller corpora are better suited for genre-specific investigations (Handford, 2010).

Both thematic analysis and corpus linguistic analysis were conducted to reveal the predominant themes of the lyrics and examine the relationship of the classified themes with feminism by considering patterns and semantic meanings of the most frequently occurring lexical items. Thematic analysis involves the analytical examination of texts by breaking them into relatively small units for subsequent descriptive treatment (Sparker, 2005) and involve systematic coding which creates categories and code-groups leading to higher orders to generate a theme (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Thematic analysis goes beyond to explore explicit and implicit meanings within data sets (Guest et al., 2012), allowing us to holistically accommodate parties' lived experiences, perspectives, practices, social norms, and processes that contextually shape particular phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the data set was examined from social, historical and cultural aspects in relation to the emergence of Beatlemania and feminism. The coding method of thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to investigate the phenomena of texts in various forms, such as words (lyrics), photographs, audio, video, and so on (Saldana, 2009). This method can reveal the underlying replicable and systemic patterns (Bryman, 2011). The analysing process involves circular and systematic reading and observation by assigning labels (codes) to the content of texts, which are then divided into several parts systemically and categorized into themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The underlying phenomena related to these themes can be identified and explained. The code-to-theme processing involves conceptual, contextual and relational reflections on the reality of the world's happenings, such as feminism in women's movements (Berg & Latin, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Saldana's (2009) coding instructions were employed. The specific process of coding is as follows:

Figure 1. Codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (Saldana, 2009: 11–13)



As shown in Figure 1, coding begins with scatters of codes, which are often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a salient, summative and related attribute to a portion of text (Saldana, 2009). These codes are then categorized and grouped into categories with specific properties which the coder judges to be distinct from the properties of other classes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This process aims to “represent both the interrelations among words and their classification into meaning categories” (Roberts, 1989). In other words, it refers to grouping the codes into categories that share similar topics or salient features. The lyrics of a song in the data set were separated into three verses. The question of whether each verse can have more than one code is controversial. However, given that the same verse can sometimes contain more than one meaningful content, the analysts were allowed to label a verse with more than one code. Indeed, splitting the textual data into smaller codable units can enhance the scrutiny of data analysis (Saldana, 2009).

In addition to thematic analysis, this study also employed corpus linguistics as a supplementary analysis to uncover predominant semantic meanings of the lyrics of the Beatles’ songs. Corpus linguistics encompasses various methods for analysing linguistic patterns in collections of digitized, naturally occurring language (Cheng, 2012), utilizing specialized corpus analysis tools. This approach complements qualitative thematic analysis by providing both qualitative and

quantitative insights, enhancing the reliability of theme identification. Two corpus linguistics techniques were employed: keyword analysis and concordance analysis, each yielding quantitative results supported by examples. A keyword is defined as a word that occurs significantly more frequently in one corpus than in another (Hunston, 2002). Keywords serve as 'signposts' to discourses (Baker, 2006), reflecting the most distinctive language forms in the corpus. Generating a keyword list for a specialized corpus requires a large general reference corpus for comparison (Cheng, 2012), and the British National Corpus was used as the reference for the Beatles' lyrics corpus. Keywords were identified using log-likelihood calculations (Dunning, 1993), a confidence measure that assesses the likelihood that a keyword is genuinely significant rather than a result of sampling error (Brookes & Baker, 2021, p. 366). Table 2 shows the generated top-ten keywords of the corpus.

Table 2. Keywords of the Beatles' lyrics (1963–1964)

Rank	Keyword	Keyness (Likelihood)
1	I	1933.396
2	you	1627.948
3	me	857.848
4	't (not)	550.977
5	love	541.641
6	my	375.2
7	'll (will)	334.783
8	don't	279.119
9	she	274.325
10	baby	261.756

The present study focuses on the positioning of males and females and the power dynamics between the genders. Adopting corpus linguistics as a complement to thematic analysis, the study examines the keywords which are pronouns signalling interpersonal meanings, including 'I', 'you', 'me',

'my' and 'she'. Subsequently, concordance analysis of the pronouns was conducted. The researchers iteratively reviewed the concordance lines to critically analyse and interpret recurring semantic patterns, generalising the predominant meanings in the lyrics. Finally, the results of the thematic analysis and corpus linguistic analysis will be compared and contrasted. Logically speaking, the two sets of results should be thematically consistent and complementary to one another, as both of the analyses focus on the thematic aspects of the data. Combining these analytical methods allows researchers to identify the predominant themes in discourse with high accuracy and reliability through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. With the identified themes and their specific meanings, this study employs positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) to discuss the power dynamics between males and females and elucidate how the Beatles, representing males, locate themselves in relation to females through the lyrics.

Findings

A total of 409 codes were generated from the analysis of 68 songs. The categorization process yielded results indicating that 81% (331) of the categorized codes fall under the overarching theme of power dynamics between males and females in romantic relationships. Specifically, three predominant themes of positioning were identified, including positioning as a struggling man, positioning as a scarifier, and positioning as an equal person. The following sections offer details about the themes with support from excerpts and concordance examples.

Positioning as a struggling man

This theme of positioning illustrates the negative states and emotions of males, portraying them as struggling men. Specifically, the content relates to their inferiority and vulnerability in relationships with females and the emotions they experience in these relationships. The males' sentimental suffering is attributed to the overwhelming pressures exerted by women, placing them in dilemmas.

However, the males are aware of their suffering yet choose to endure it. Excerpts 1 to 3 exemplify the meanings associated with this category:

⋮ Excerpt 1

⋮ *I've lost her now for sure*
⋮ *I won't see her no more*
⋮ *It's gonna be a drag ... **Misery***
⋮ (Song: *Misery*)

⋮ Excerpt 2

⋮ ***I do all the pleasing with you**, it's so*
⋮ *hard to reason*
⋮ *With you, whoah yeah, why do you*
⋮ ***make me blue***
⋮ (Song: *Please Please Me*)

⋮ Excerpt 3

⋮ *I know **I'll never be the same***
⋮ *If I don't get her back again*
⋮ *Because I know she'll always be*
⋮ *The only girl for me*
⋮ (Song: *Don't Bother Me*)

These excerpts illustrate how males are positioned as inferior in their romantic relationships. For instance, males refer to females as *misery* after discontending them (see Excerpt 1); and though males *do all the pleasing with* females, females still *make* them *blue* (see Excerpt 2). A dynamic where men feel subjugated is highlighted. This portrayal not only reflects their emotional struggles but also underscores the shifting power dynamics in relationships, aligning with feminist themes that challenge traditional notions of male dominance and explore the emotional complexities faced by men in a changing social landscape. In these lyrics, men are not depicted as strong providers in a relationship or family as expected; instead, they are positioned as struggling

men with emotions. Perceptions on gender roles can be constructed and reinforced through media portrayal, including popular music (Jerome, 2013). In this way, the Beatles were cultural icons who served as leaders for their audience, if not followers, in constructing new understandings of masculinity that contributed to the feminist discourse. Such management of meaning was important in the construction of new ideas of gender roles, as it could challenge stereotypes of male superiority and the association between emotional restraint and masculinity. The band implicitly suggested that both men and women could equally experience and express their struggles in relationships. Moreover, the corpus analysis of the keyword 'I' also indicates this positioning and identity of males in the lyrics. The following concordances of the keyword "I" provide more details.

- 1) I'm a loser I'm a loser / And I'm not what I appear to be.
- 2) I'm so happy when you dance with me
- 3) Baby's in black and I'm feeling blue / Tell me, oh what can I do?
- 4) I'm sure of I will love her forever
- 5) You know if you break my heart I'll go / But I'll be back again.

The concordances seem to represent "I" as the male who is insistent about his love for the females. This is evident in concordances 2) and 4). This steadfast love compels the male to return, even after experiencing heart-breaking events in the relationship, as shown in concordance 5). The "I" portrayed in the lyrics tends to be negative, sometimes depicted as a loser, and as a sad and lost person. Thus, the first-person male, represented by the Beatles, is positioned as a man struggling to handle their relationship with women confidently. Through these lyrics, the Beatles were engaged with changing public attitudes about gender roles and norms that were in line with feminist ideas. Their widespread popularity enabled them to perform the discursive practices, through lyrics, of demonstrating vulnerability in relationships and redefining the meaning of masculinity, which in turned contributed to not only their success and popularity especially among female audiences, but also the development of the second wave of feminism starting in the early 1960s (Gould, 2007).

Positioning as a sacrificer

Related to the previously illustrated theme of positioning, males are meanwhile positioned as sacrificers in the lyrics. This positioning indicates a rising status of women from the male perspective, highlighting the importance of females from the male perspective. In the positioning, the contents are associated with male actions, beliefs, needs, and appreciation for females. Excerpts 6 and 7 illustrate the superiority of females in these dynamics:

⋮ Excerpt 6
⋮ *You, if you break my heart I'll go*
⋮ ***But I'll be back again***
⋮ (Song: *I'll Be Back*)

⋮ Excerpt 7
⋮ *Anna*
⋮ *You come and ask me, girl*
⋮ ***To set you free, girl***
⋮ ***You say he loves you more than me***
⋮ *So, I'll set you free*
⋮ *Go with him (Anna)*
⋮ *Go with him (Anna)*
⋮ (Song: *Anna*)

These excerpts demonstrate how the superior position of females is constructed in romantic relationships. For example, in Excerpt 7, the male willingly lets the female go when she falls in love with someone else, highlighting his emphasis on her happiness and his readiness to sacrifice for her sake. This dynamic illustrates the recognition of women's agency and autonomy, which aligns closely with feminist ideals that advocate for women's empowerment and challenge traditional power hierarchies. It is essential to recognize that feminism is discursively constructed through the interplay of the positionings between males and females, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of power dynamics

among the genders. In addition to the thematic analysis, this positioning can also be realised in the concordances of the keyword “me”.

- 6) You really got a hold on **me**.
- 7) Since you left **me**, I'm so alone.
- 8) Won't you dance with **me**? I am so sad and lonely.
- 9) Tell **me** that you love **me** baby.
- 10) You know you made **me** cry.

The concordances of the object pronoun “me” illustrate the male’s suffering in the relationship, such as being left alone, refused, and hurt. Despite these hurtful experiences, the male still deeply desires the love of the female and remains eager to give love to the female. The concordances containing the keyword “my” also indicate a similar spirit of the male in a relationship.

- 11) I give her all **my** love.
- 12) If I give **my** heart to you, I must be sure.
- 13) Well, I beg you on **my** bended knees.
- 14) You could find better things to do than to break **my** heart again.

As shown above, the possessive pronoun “my” is often used to describe the male’s love and heart for the female. However, this keyword seems to convey a negative meaning, suggesting that “my love” is not cherished and “my heart” is broken by the female. Moreover, the second-person pronoun “you”, which often refers to the female in a relationship, tends to be used to express the male’s love. Similar to the previous keywords, this one also indicates the male’s struggles, such as the desire to be loved, the sadness of being lied to, and the anxiety of being left.

- 15) Now I know that **you** won't leave me no more.
- 16) I'll send all my love to **you**.
- 17) Tell me that **you** love me baby.
- 18) Why **you** lie to me.

The keyword that directly portrays the image of the female appears to be “she”. Concordances of this keyword are as follows:

- 19) **She's** got the devil in her heart.
- 20) Though tonight **she's** made me sad I still love her.
- 21) I'm happy just to know that **she** loves me.
- 22) I think of her but **she** thinks of him.

As shown in concordances 19) to 22), the female seems to be portrayed negatively, depicted as having a devilish mind, potentially thinking of another male and causing the male sadness. Despite these hurtful behaviours, the male still loves her and yearns for her affection, sacrificing himself and his love. While such portrayals might contribute to the stigmatization of females being the ‘bad’ party in a relationship, the male is positioned as a scarificer in the relationship. In this way, traditional power dynamics are challenged: males are positioned as voluntary sacrificers for females, which contracts with conventional expectations that females should sacrifice for males by taking on the familial responsibilities such as child-rearing, maintaining the household and providing emotional support to the male partner (Bruley, 2016). These lyrics by the Beatles, who actively shaped the narrative around and managing the cultural meaning of men’s love for women, demonstrated the band’s role in (re)defining the gender identities of both men and women.

Positioning an equal person

Despite the struggle and sacrifice of the males, the lyrics also signal the male’s desire for equal status in the relationship. This theme, which is the least frequent compared with the other two predominant themes, emphasizes equality in romantic relationships. Sample lyrics include:

- ⋮ Excerpt 4
- ⋮ *Whenever I want you around, yeah*
- ⋮ *All I gotta do is call you on the*
- ⋮ *phone*

.....
And the same goes for me, whenever
you want me at all

 (Song: *All I've Got to Do*)

Excerpt 5
You know it's up to you
I think it's only fair
Pride can hurt you too
Apologize to her
 (Song: *She Loves You*)

The words such as *same* and *fair* that are revealed in the thematic analysis underscore the desire for equitable relationships between males and females. This category connects to the theme of feminism as it reflects a growing awareness of the need for balance and mutual respect in romantic partnerships. More specifically, feminism in the 1960s indicates females' resistance to conservative social norms and desire for having the same rights, opportunities and choices as males have in society (Spandler & Carr, 2020). The keywords *same* and *fair* literally manifest the feminists' emphasis in the era. By advocating for fairness and reciprocity in romantic relationships, these lyrics align with feminist ideals that seek to dismantle traditional gender roles and promote equality, highlighting the importance of both partners' contributions to a healthy relationship. In other words, the Beatles made use of love stories and intimate relationships as tropes to strategically present a social fair status between males and females, advocating gender equality in love relationship between men and women, as well as the broader society (Eagly et al., 2009). This theme of positioning is not evidenced in the corpus analysis, apparently due to its statistical infrequency in the corpus.

Discussion

Drawing upon positioning theory (Harré et al., 2009), this study conducts thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to reveal the predominant themes of positioning between males and females in the lyrics of Beatles songs released between 1963 and 1964. The mixed-methods analysis shows that 81% of the identified themes are related to three main positionings: a struggling man, a sacrificer, and an equal person in the relationship. Among these, the positioning of sacrificer is the most prevalent. In the positioning of a struggling man, the lyrics reveal men grappling with their negative states, influenced by societal expectations and pressures within their relationships. These men are portrayed as enduring various forms of emotional distress, reflecting a broader critique of the association between masculinity and the suppression of vulnerability. This positioning does not simply depict men as inferior; rather, it highlights the complexities of their emotional experiences in a changing cultural landscape. By acknowledging male struggles, the Beatles challenged the stereotype of the stoic male and open a dialogue about the emotional toll of romantic relationships. Through their lyrics, the Beatles used language to resist existing gender hierarchies and to question conventional ideals of masculinity. By shaping lyric narratives in their songs, they set an example for a different model of masculinity and for men's emotional expression in relationships with their female partners.

The positioning of sacrificer emerges as the most prominent theme. The lyrics appear to celebrate women's agency, emphasizing their importance and the respect they command from men. This recognition of female empowerment and male sacrifice not only challenges traditional power hierarchies but also aligns with feminist advocacy for women's rights and autonomy. The willingness of males—represented by the popular band and cultural leaders, the Beatles—to make sacrifices and prioritize the happiness of women, as demonstrated in the excerpts, reflects an acknowledgment of female agency. This further reinforced the discursive leadership potential of these narratives to shape cultural conversations in the context of the 1960s, a period when feminism was gaining momentum in advocating for equality between men and women. This positioning is supported by the findings of the corpus linguistic analysis,

which reveals that the keywords in the lyrics mostly pertain to the male's expression of determined love, belief and loyalty to the females, as well as the desire for the female's love. On the other hand, the female is portrayed as the person who often disappoints the male. The representation of males and females in the lyrics displays categorical opposites, including faith versus hope and harsh social criticism versus morose personal confession (Schneider, 2016). Lastly, despite being the least prevalent among the identified themes of positioning, the positioning of an equal person underscores the male's desire for balance and mutual respect in romantic partnerships. The emphasis on fairness and reciprocity in these lyrics aligns with feminist ideals that advocate for dismantling traditional gender roles. By promoting equitable dynamics, the Beatles contributed to a discourse that recognized the importance of both partners in fostering healthy relationships, suggesting a progressive view of gender interactions. The way the Beatles positioned gender in the lyrics of their songs from 1963 to 1964 analysed in this study demonstrates the band's discursive leadership during the early 1960s, a period that marked the emergence of the second wave of feminism.

Language matters in symbolic management. Drawing upon discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003), this study highlights the crucial role of lyric language in negotiating and constructing gender perceptions. Language users adopt distinct language and speech patterns to (re)construct identities to achieve transitional and interactional purposes (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 2003) because certain linguistic characteristics may be associated with different identities (Yip & Kong, 2025). Discourse is an important form of social practice that reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations (Fairclough, 1992). According to the results of corpus linguistic analyses, this study illuminates the use of first-person and second-person pronouns in the lyrics to represent the unequal relationship between males and females through narratives. For instance, in positioning as a struggling man, the lyrics contain a profound number of first-person pronouns 'I' along content words that signal emotions and roles of males in the narrative, such as 'blue', 'loser' and 'happy'. The positioning as sacrificer shows the frequent use of both first- and second-person pronouns to depict what and how the males sacrifice

to love the females. These language patterns contribute to the composition of the identified feminist themes and the construction of gender identity.

The findings in this study indicate a relational complexity in the portrayal of gender dynamics, aligning with positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999). As cultural leaders, the Beatles demonstrated discursive leadership through lyrics that set examples for a previously unacknowledged spectrum of male experiences, including struggles and vulnerabilities, which serve to illuminate the emotional landscapes of men in romantic contexts. According to positioning theory, all positions are relational, meaning that while individuals position themselves in a particular way within a social interaction, other participants are simultaneously positioned relative to that individual (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). The portrayal of feminism within these songs is discursively constructed through male expressions of tolerance, sacrifice, and suffering in their romantic relationships with women. The Beatles articulated male feelings and desires towards females through their lyrics, revealing the power dynamics at play between genders. Within this lyrical framework, males are depicted as individuals willing to endure suffering, anxiety, depression, frustration, insecurity, and even grief as a result of female actions and words. Despite their emotional turmoil, these males often accept their roles as being manipulated by females, leading to feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and a sense of loss within the relationship. In contrast, females are positioned in a dominant role, receiving love, trust, appreciation, and a sense of necessity from males. Males tend to cherish females and frequently overlook or tolerate their misbehaviours.

While the findings do not explicitly advocate for core feminist values such as gender equality or women's rights, the Beatles' lyrics implicitly challenged the power dynamics between males and females by constructing a more nuanced and progressive image of females. This positioning may have contributed to raising awareness of female self-actualization and the critique of gender norms, aligning with Millard's (2012) assertion that the Beatles made the changing status of women felt worldwide. The positioning between males and females in the Beatles' lyrics, through which discursive practices construct perceptions of gender, not only reflects the complexities of gender dynamics, but also contributes to a broader cultural dialogue about masculinity, femininity,

and the evolving roles of males and females in society. In this case, the Beatles were cultural leaders in the management of meaning (Fairhurst, 2011). This study does not only offer insights into how popular music can both reflect and influence societal attitudes toward gender and gender positioning, it also argues that the leadership of the Beatles in feminist discourse potentially contributed to the emergence of Beatlemania, in which the Beatles negotiated and managed the meanings of males and females. The male-female positioning in the lyrics conveys a sense of the rising status of women in Britain and the US (O'Toole, 2016). One of the salient characteristics of Beatlemania is the conflict between good and evil or the powerless and the powerful (Kapurch, 2016). The findings reveal that the female is portrayed as someone who makes the male feel down and relatively powerful with the empowerment of the male in the relationship. The male, on the other hand, is depicted as good and powerless. Through discursive positioning of males and females in intimate relationships, the Beatles were cultural leaders using lyrics in their songs to forge evolving understandings of masculinity and feminism.

The identified themes of the lyrics—the three main positionings of a struggling man, a sacrificer, and an equal person in the relationship—are in line with the feminist advocate of gender equality. Weaving these themes into their songs, the Beatles not only resonated with the changing social perceptions on gender, especially the growing demand for equality between men and women by feminists, but also helped cultivate their devoted female fanbase, leading to Beatlemania. Through expressions vulnerability, struggles, and a willingness to sacrifice for love in their lyrics, the Beatles crafted male personas that contrasted sharply with the traditional, stoic ideals of masculinity. This recasting of male vulnerability made their songs more relatable and emotionally accessible to female listeners, who could identify with the complexities of romantic relationships depicted in the lyrics, rather than with the traditional authoritative male figure. The band's empathetic portrayal of male emotionality fostered a sense of intimacy and connection with their audience, particularly young women navigating their own changing roles and aspirations during the early 1960s. In doing so, the Beatles not only broadened the scope of acceptable male expression, but also created a cultural platform where female fans' enthusiastic

responses reinforced and encouraged further explorations of gender and emotion in their music. Further studies on the Beatles' songs in later years and their fandom will be beneficial to the understanding of such "charismatic leadership" of the Beatles, which "must be viewed as an attribution made by followers" (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 48). Nevertheless, this study shows that the interplay between lyrical content and audience reception, exemplified by the cultural phenomenon Beatlemania, underscores the Beatles' unique role in discursive leadership and their ability to both reflect and shape contemporary understandings of gender, solidifying their impact as cultural leaders during a pivotal era of social transformation.

Conclusion

Employing positioning theory, this study combines thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to examine lyrics of 68 songs by the Beatles released between 1963 and 1964, discussing power dynamics and interpersonal discrepancies between males and females. Illuminating the emergence of Beatlemania as a case of cultural management, this study reveals how the Beatles played the leading role to discursively shape and change the conventional perceptions of women in the 1960s through utilizing the lyric with feminist's contents in their performance. This is one of the few studies that sheds light on the thematic aspects of the Beatles' music and its association with feminism. It is argued that the identified predominant themes of positioning highlight the unequal relationship between males and females in romantic contexts. The positioning of females challenges conventional views of gender and sexuality by contradicting the traditional statuses of males and females. The Beatles' songs might have played a key role in raising awareness among females regarding self-actualization, a sense of female superiority, and female liberation, due to the feminist content of the lyrics and the band's popularization in the 1960s. In other words, the band displayed the role of cultural leaders who managed former cultural ideology of genders through locating males and females at unequal positions in romantic relationships. This study also highlights

the relationship between language and cultural management. Language can be an instrument that enables cultural actors to negotiate and manage cultural perceptions through the use of linguistic patterns and discursive discourse strategies.

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