



Masculinity in the Song Lyrics of *Imagine Dragons*: How it is represented

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of masculinity in the song lyrics of Imagine Dragons through a semantic analysis approach. Using Lyons' (1981) theory of contextual meaning and Chafetz's (1978) theory of masculinity, the research identifies how the contextual meaning representing masculinity is conveyed in three selected songs: Demons (2012), Thunder (2017), and Eyes Closed (2024). The findings based on contextual analysis reveal five categories of masculinity: other personality traits, interpersonal thinking, intelligence thinking, emotional control, and sexual aggression. The study highlights that Imagine Dragons' lyrics often reflect traditional masculinity values such as ambition, independence, resilience, and emotional restraint, with an emphasis on personal struggles and self-discovery. The results contribute to the understanding of masculinity in contemporary Western popular music and its impact on gender representation.

Keywords: contextual meaning, Imagine Dragons, masculinity, semantics, song lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Semantics is the study of meaning in language, focusing on how words, phrases, and sentences relate to each other to convey meaning. It is vital for understanding communication and language processing systems (Siregar, 1992; Munthe et al., 2022). Semantics, as a discipline of linguistics, encompasses various topics, including contextual meaning. According to Lyon (1977), contextual meaning refers to a word's meaning within a particular situation. He states that a sentence's meaning can vary depending on the context in which it is employed.

Contextual Meaning is central to semantics, as it considers the surrounding context (e.g., speaker intent, topic, and relationships) to understand meaning beyond the literal interpretation (Wardani, 2019). Understanding contextual meaning is essential for efficient communication and interpretation because it enables people to learn the intended meaning of words and phrases in various settings. It also emphasizes the dynamic and adaptable character of language, in which word meanings change depending on the context in which they are employed. In studying contextual meaning, representation is another thing studied, in addition to words and sentences.

Representation refers to how actors, opinions, and events are portrayed in a discourse, which can influence community identity, challenge stereotypes, and reflect societal values (Putri et al., 2017). It can show that everyone is part of the community, and what is said or shown can represent other groups which can certainly build a sense of community. In this case, representation can also illustrate the masculinity value.

Masculinity is discussed as a social construct with varying definitions across time and cultures. Traditional masculinity emphasizes traits such as strength, dominance, and independence (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Mosse, 1996). Media and popular culture, including song, play a significant role in shaping and challenging perceptions of masculinity (Malm, 2016). Songs, as a form of cultural expression, convey emotions and ideas, and can reflect societal norms and values (Anindya, 2018; Medina, 2002). Several researchers on masculinity are expressed in song lyrics (Muchenje et al., 2018, Ristola 2008, Boman 2012).

For example, study conducted by Ulya, et al. (2021), entitled *Representation of Javanese Masculinity in The Dangdut Songs Lyric*. They used Chafezt's theory of masculinity (1978) and discovered Javanese masculinity in the lyrics of dangdut songs. After analyzing the data, they find three dimensions of masculinity, namely functional, emotional, and intellectual.

Contrary to this current study, the research above only identified the representation of masculinity using Chafezt's (1978) theory in the Javanese song, while the current study focused on the contextual meaning based on Lyon's (1981) theory in a different subject, which is Imagine Dragons' songs. Considering the research that examined Javanese song lyrics, the researcher expects the findings be different because Javanese and American are culturally different. The depiction of masculinity in Javanese society and Western society represented by these two languages will definitely be different.

This study focuses on the representation of masculinity in the lyrics of Imagine Dragons, a popular American band. The analysis will examine three specific songs: *Thunder*, *Demons*, and *Eyes Closed*. The research question is: "*How is contextual meaning representing masculinity found in the song lyrics by Imagine Dragons?*" The purpose of this research is to find out the contextual meaning representing masculinity that are found in the song lyrics by Imagine Dragons.

The scope of the study includes semantic analysis of the contextual meaning using Lyon's theory (1981), masculinity values based on Chafetz's theory (1978), and song lyrics from *Demons* (2012), *Thunder* (2017), and *Eyes Closed* (2024). The data will be gathered from lyrics in phrases, clauses, and sentences, focusing on contextual meaning, particularly those that represent masculinity.

This research is expected to have both theoretical and benefits. Theoretically, this research contributes to understanding how contextual meaning in song lyrics can express masculinity. Practically, it serves as a reference for those interested in analyzing how contextual meaning in song lyrics represents masculinity.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive linguistic approach to analyze the representation of masculinity in the song lyrics of *Imagine Dragons*. how masculinity is represented in Imagine Dragons' song lyrics. This approach aims to empirically describe language patterns based on the theory of contextual meaning by Lyons (1981) and the theory of masculinity by Chafetz (1978). By using descriptive method, this research aims to provide more in-depth, systematic, and valid findings in understanding the representation of masculinity in song lyrics.

The data in this study are phrases, clauses, and sentences taken from three Imagine Dragons songs: *Demons* (2012) - 54 lines of lyrics, *Thunder* (2017) - 57 lines of lyrics, *Eyes Closed* (2024) - 62 lines of lyrics. From a total of 173 lines of lyrics, the research found 32 relevant lyrics and summarized 20 data consisting of one or two lines of lyrics. These songs were chosen due to their explicit themes of personal struggles and self-discovery. In addition, this research focuses on how masculinity in American culture (specifically through the work of Imagine Dragons) is represented in their song lyrics.

The documentation method was used to collect data, which was done through several steps. First, listening while reading. The researcher listened and read the song lyrics repeatedly. Second, selecting songs. The researcher selected three songs that were considered to contain elements of masculinity. Third, recording the data. The data was recorded and analyzed based on Lyons' (1981) theory of contextual meaning.

Data analysis was conducted through a descriptive linguistic approach with the following steps:

1. Data reduction - selecting lyrics that contain contextual meaning and discussing them based on Chafetz's (1978) theory of masculinity.
2. Data Presentation - The data was arranged in a table that categorized the types of masculinity and their frequency.
3. Data Analysis - The data is analyzed based on the theory of contextual meaning and masculinity to interpret the representation of masculinity in song lyrics.
4. Conclusion - The researcher verifies the data that has been analyzed to ensure that the conclusions drawn remain relevant to the research results.

This research aims to contribute to the study of semantics and representations of masculinity in song lyrics, especially in the context of American culture represented by Imagine Dragons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research explores the representation of masculinity in the lyrics of *Imagine Dragons*, focusing on the songs *Demons* (2012), *Thunder* (2017), and *Eyes Closed* (2024). By employing Janet Saltzman Chafetz's (1978) theory of masculinity and Lyon's (1981) contextual analysis, the study aims to identify and interpret the various expressions of masculinity conveyed in the song lyrics. The analysis reveals five key categories of masculinity: other personality traits, interpersonal thinking, emotional, intelligence thinking, and sexually aggressive. The data were collected by examining phrases, clauses, and sentences from the lyrics that reflect different aspects of masculine identity and cultural expectations. The total data and its masculinity categories will be displayed in the table as follows:

Table 1. The amount of data found in categories that contain masculinity theory by Chafetz (1978)

No.	Types of Masculinity	Data Number	Frequency
1.	Other Personality Traits	Data 1,2,3,4,5,6,7	7
2.	Interpersonal Thinking	8,9,10,11,12	5
3.	Emotional	13,14,15,16	4
4.	Intelligence Thinking	17,18,19	3
5.	Sexually Aggressive	20	1
The Total Amount			20

Based on the table above, the data is presented from the most used to the least frequents. First in the list is the type of *other personality traits* which found that Imagine Dragons' song lyrics depict traditional masculinity values that include being selfish, competitive, self-centered, a competitive. Second is the *interpersonal thinking* which express traditional masculine values such as dominance, leadership, and represent how these traits shape interpersonal dynamics and personal growth. Third is *emotional control* which reflects traditional masculinity values that focus on strength, emotional self-control, and resilience in the face of various challenges, both internal and external. Next is the *intelligence thinking* that depicts masculinity as a combination of vulnerability, self-reflection, courage, and determination which shows a logical and reasoned way of thinking in every action. Last is *sexually aggressive* that reflects a caring and motivational masculinity. The masculinity displayed is explained the natural trait of men who care about the thoughts and things that concern to the people they love.

The most prominent category identified was **other personality traits**, appearing in seven instances across the songs. This category encompasses ambition, self-centeredness, competitiveness, and emotional restraint—traits often culturally linked to traditional masculinity. Lyrics from *Demons* and *Thunder* reflect this through themes of internal struggles and the drive to achieve personal goals. For example, the lyric "*But with the beast inside, there's nowhere we can hide*" from *Demons* portrays a conflict between vulnerability and the need to suppress negative emotions, emphasizing the struggle for personal control and dominance often linked with masculine identity.

The second most frequent category, **interpersonal thinking**, emerged five times. This category emphasizes leadership, dominance, independence, and self-reliance. Lyrics such as "*This is my kingdom come*" from *Demons* demonstrate a male figure asserting authority and personal power, consistent with the cultural portrayal of men as figures of strength and control. Similarly, *Thunder* reflects themes of resilience and ambition despite societal criticism, showcasing a man's determination to overcome external challenges and assert dominance.

The **emotional** category appeared in four instances and reveals how men often suppress or manage their emotions in line with traditional masculinity norms. Lyrics like "*It's where my demons hide*" from *Demons* illustrate internal emotional turmoil masked by emotional control. Similarly, the phrase "*Been gone and facing horrors that should never be said*" from *Eyes Closed* underscores the tendency to endure pain silently, reflecting emotional toughness and restraint often associated with masculine ideals.

Intelligence thinking, identified in three instances, highlights the use of rationality, logical thinking, and decision-making in the context of relationships and personal struggles. For example, the lyric "*I need to let you go*" from *Demons* reflects a decision made from a place of rational thought rather than emotional impulse, prioritizing the well-being of a partner. This category portrays men as intellectual problem-solvers who rely on reason to handle complex emotional situations, emphasizing control and logic over vulnerability.

Lastly, **sexually aggressive** masculinity was found only once in the dataset, but the representation deviates from the typical portrayal of physical dominance. The lyric "*Your eyes they shine so bright, I wanna save that light*" from *Demons* conveys emotional sensitivity and care for a romantic partner rather than physical aggression. It reflects the nurturing and protective aspect of masculinity where the male figure is motivated by a partner's positive influence to improve himself emotionally.

From the discussion, it can find similarities between this research and other studies. This research focuses on contextual meaning to understand the representation of masculinity in Imagine Dragons' song lyrics same as the song analysis by Sri (2023) and Mamun et al. (2022), who also used the contextual meaning approach to analyze the relationship between

meaning and context. In addition, this study uses Chafetz's (1978) theory of masculinity to analyze masculinity categories such as personal traits, interpersonal thinking, intellectual thinking, emotional, and sexually aggressive which is the same as the study by Ulya et al. (2023) also used this theory to analyze masculinity in dangdut songs.

In addition to similarities, there are also differences between this study and other studies. In Anindya's (2018) research, more emphasis is placed on idiomatic or denotative meaning in the analysis of song lyrics while this research relies on Lyon's (1981) theory of contextual meaning to explain the relationship between lyrics and context. There are also differences in the analysis of masculinity caused by differences in background and culture.

The discussion further contextualizes these findings within broader cultural frameworks. The study finds that *Imagine Dragons'* portrayal of masculinity aligns with traditional Western masculine norms, emphasizing dominance, self-reliance, ambition, and emotional control. However, the lyrics also reveal moments of vulnerability and emotional complexity, challenging rigid stereotypes of masculinity. Comparisons with Javanese and Japanese cultural representations highlight significant differences. While Western masculinity often emphasizes personal struggle and individual achievement, Javanese masculinity focuses more on social roles and family responsibilities. Meanwhile, Japanese masculinity, particularly in visual key culture, demonstrates more fluid gender expressions while still valuing emotional strength.

In conclusion, the research provides a nuanced analysis of how masculinity is represented in *Imagine Dragons'* lyrics. The findings suggest that while traditional masculine ideals of dominance, ambition, and emotional control remain central, the band's lyrics also explore personal struggles and emotional depth, challenging one-dimensional portrayals of masculinity. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how popular music reflects and shapes cultural narratives about gender identity across different contexts.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the contextual analysis of *Imagine Dragons'* song lyrics clarifies the expression of masculinity through identifiable markers in phrases, clauses, and sentences. The lyrics generally reflect traditional masculine traits such as leadership, dominance, independence, and rational thinking, particularly in personal relationships and self-expression. However, some songs also highlight feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability, adding complexity to the portrayal of masculinity. The study also emphasizes that while traditional masculinity values remain present in popular music, cultural and social contexts influence variations in how masculinity is portrayed. Although dominant and assertive qualities are often emphasized, modern perspectives have begun to embrace emotional vulnerability, cooperation, and diverse expressions of masculinity. These evolving representations suggest a shift towards a more balanced and inclusive understanding of masculine identity. For future research, the study recommends expanding the analysis to include sociolinguistic perspectives on masculinity, especially exploring how American cultural shifts impact modern interpretations of male identity. Additionally, it suggests using this paper as a reference for further studies on contextual meaning in song lyrics, emphasizing how cultural narratives continue to shape gender representation in music.

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