

A corpus-based analysis of emotional insecurity and modern masculinity in Anson Seabra's album lyrics

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Abstract

Traditional norms of masculinity often prevent emotional openness, causing men to internalize vulnerability and suppress emotional expression. This study aims to examine how emotional adjectives in Anson Seabra's *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break* album reflect emotional insecurity and representations of modern masculinity through language. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach supported by corpus-based analysis, this study identifies the most frequently used adjectives, which are broken, hurt, wrong, and good. Following this, the adjectives are analyzed for their use through semantic and sociolinguistic perspectives based on the context in the lyrics. The findings reveal that these adjectives frequently appear in lyrical contexts that portray self-doubt, emotional fragility, and fear of relationship failure. The results provide insight into the internal conflicts faced by male characters in articulating vulnerability. This research enhances both the fields of linguistics and gender studies by revealing how artistic language in music could challenge traditional concepts of manhood and function as a medium for emotional expression.

Keywords

corpus linguistics, semantics, adjective, masculinity, emotional insecurity

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Introduction

Contemporary societal views on masculinity remain troubling, particularly in relation to emotional expression. Men are perpetually expected to display their strength while concealing any signs of weakness in front of the people around them. This conventional benchmark of masculinity is a primary contributor to a societal issue referred to as toxic masculinity. The presence of toxic masculinity promotes emotional suppression, hindering men's ability to cope with vulnerable situations (Connell, 2005). In addition, recent research shows that traditional masculinity norms are consistently linked to a wide range of negative mental health outcomes. Societal expectations for men to be emotionally stoic and self-reliant often result in emotional suppression, which contributes to issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression. Men who strongly conform to these norms tend to experience higher levels of psychological distress due to the internalized pressure to appear strong, even when facing emotional challenges (Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025)

In this context, music has a significant role as a platform or a way of expressing emotions, both for the creators and for the listeners as well. As noted by DeNora (2000), the use of music is not only as entertainment for the creator and the listener, but more importantly as a media to process, express, and understand certain emotions. As a result, lyrics have a strong potential to reflect the deep inner struggles, which makes it valuable to have a deeper look into the emotional narratives.

One artist whose music embodies this emotional vulnerability is Anson Seabra. Anson Long-Seabra is an American singer-songwriter known for his introspective and emotionally driven music. Since his debut in 2018, he has been recognized for addressing themes such as heartbreak, self-worth, and emotional vulnerability, especially through soft piano melodies and minimalist production. His 2023 album, *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break*, presents a collection of songs that portray a male figure experiencing emotional turmoil, self-doubt, and relational insecurity. These recurring themes make the album a relevant subject for examining how language is used to convey emotional fragility and the broader societal expectations placed on men to suppress such emotions.

This study intends to examine the linguistic construction of emotional insecurity and modern masculinity as expressed in the lyrics of Anson Seabra's album. Using a corpus-based methodology, this study analyzes the most frequently used adjectives in the lyrics to observe the emotional traits. These adjectives undergo further examination through semantic and sociolinguistic perspectives to reveal how language portrays emotional fragility.

This approach enables a deeper understanding of how words carry implicit emotional meanings, especially when used repeatedly in personal narratives. As language does not exist in a blank space, the interpretation of these adjectives is shaped by the speaker's cultural and social environment, including societal expectations around masculinity. The lyrics therefore become a meaningful space to uncover how emotional vulnerability is communicated and negotiated through language. As a result, this study aims to identify the most prevalent adjectives found in the lyrics of Anson Seabra's album and to analyze how these adjectives portray the emotional insecurities and challenges associated with modern masculinity.

Literature Review

According to the Cambridge dictionary, Adjective is described as a word that defines nouns and pronouns. In English, there are 11 types of adjectives which are descriptive adjective, proper adjective, quantitative adjective, numeral adjective, demonstrative adjective, interrogative adjective, possessive adjective, distributive adjective, emphasizing adjective, exclamatory

adjective, and relative adjective (Khamying, 2007). The type of adjective found in this research is the descriptive adjective. The existence of descriptive adjectives in song lyrics indicates the function of the adjective. The use of descriptive adjectives in song lyrics aims to explain what happens in the context of the song. In addition, descriptive adjectives also have a role to describe the state of the characters in the song.

Semantic also has an important role in identifying adjectives based on the meaning of their respective usage. Alwasilah & Mahdi (2020) in Downing (2015) categorize adjectives into two types, namely adjectives that act as descriptors and adjectives that act as classifiers. In the semantic category, descriptors are characterized by adjectives in the form of color, size, quality, time, emotive, and Miscellaneous (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002).

In relation to emotional meaning in language, it is also important to consider how social norms influence the way individuals, especially men, express their emotions. Traditional views of masculinity often emphasize strength, independence, and the rejection of vulnerability. Connell (2005) explains that masculinity should not be seen as a fixed character type or natural behavior, but rather as something that is shaped through social processes and relationships. It refers to a position within gender relations and includes the practices that people do in order to express or respond to that position. These practices can influence a person's body, personality, and culture.

Research by McKenzie et al. (2018) also highlights that men who deviate from dominant masculine norms by expressing emotional distress often experience feelings of shame or discomfort. Emotional openness is frequently associated with femininity, which causes many men to avoid emotional expression in order to maintain an image of self-sufficiency. This suppression of emotion not only affects psychological well-being but may also influence the way emotional experiences are conveyed through language, such as in song lyrics.

Music has always been recognized as a powerful medium for expressing emotions. More than just entertainment, music allows individuals to process, organize and make sense of their emotional experiences. DeNora (2000) emphasizes that music plays an important role in shaping emotional life and identity, acting as a means of emotional regulation and reflection. Similarly, Baker (2012) highlights that music is not only used to express emotions, but also to manage emotions that are considered socially undesirable. Emotional engagement with music can change throughout one's life, often following socially patterned expectations, including those related to gender norms. Within the context of masculinity, where emotional vulnerability is often discouraged, music provides a space where such feelings can be explored more openly. Analyzing song lyrics is therefore a meaningful way to examine how emotional states, especially those related to insecurity and male identity, are communicated through language.

Several previous studies have examined the use of adjectives and linguistic patterns in song lyrics using a corpus-based approach. For instance, Goyak et al. (2021) conducted a study on conversational mental verbs in English song lyrics, while Mukminin et al. (2024) used corpus analysis to investigate the use of first-person pronouns in NIKI's songs. Another study by Zulaikah et al. (2024) applied a semantic approach to analyze the meaning of adjectives in Taylor Swift's album *Lover*. While these studies provide valuable insights into linguistic elements in song lyrics, few have combined corpus tools with a semantic and sociolinguistic perspective to explore how language reflects emotional states in relation to gender norms. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the use of adjectives in Anson Seabra's album *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break*, with a specific focus on emotional insecurity and masculinity.

Method

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a corpus-based perspective to analyze the use of adjectives in Anson Seabra's album titled *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break*. The study focuses on how adjectives are used to represent emotional insecurity and the construction of modern masculinity in song lyrics. A corpus tool was used to help identify frequently occurring adjectives, which were then interpreted from a semantic and sociolinguistic perspective to understand their emotional and social meanings in the context of the lyrics.

Data Source and Corpus Description

The data for this study was taken from Anson Seabra's album *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break*, which consists of 13 songs: "Loving Means Leaving," "Ojai," "Past Tense," "What About the One Who Leaves," "Broken Boy," "Heartbreak Souvenirs," "Supposed To Be a Love Song," "If We Started Talking Again," "Hard Way," "Collide," "Used to Be Yours," "Next Life," and "A Heart Is a Terrible Thing To Break." The lyrics of these songs were collected from the Genius website (<https://genius.com/albums/Anson-seabra/A-heart-is-a-terrible-thing-to-break>).

The lyrics from the album were collected and compiled into a single text file titled *lyrics*. The data collection and corpus uploading process was carried out on December 16, 2024. After preprocessing, the corpus had a total of 3,483 words. The prepared corpus was then uploaded to Voyant Tools, a web-based corpus analysis platform, for further analysis.

Data Cleaning and Adjective Identification

Before being analyzed, the collected lyrics were cut to remove elements that could interfere with corpus processing, such as section labels (e.g., verse and refrain markers). All words were converted to lowercase to ensure consistency in frequency counting. Punctuation and abbreviations were retained, as they were found to have no significant effect on the analysis results in Voyant Tools.

In this study, adjectives are defined simply and functionally as words that describe the quality, state, or characteristics of nouns, especially those related to emotional states and personal identity. The identification of adjectives was conducted manually. First, the researcher examined the list of most frequent words generated by Voyant Tools. From this list, words functioning as adjectives were selected and then further categorized based on the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review. All stages of data preparation, adjective identification, and categorization were conducted systematically as part of the research process.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted using Voyant Tools, a web-based text analysis tool that provides various features for corpus exploration. In this study, the word frequency feature was used to identify frequently occurring words, especially adjectives, while the concordance feature was used to analyze the contextual use of these adjectives in the lyrics.

The analysis process consisted of several steps. First, the frequency list generated by Voyant Tools was analyzed to identify adjectives relevant to the research focus. Second, the selected adjectives were analyzed using concordance lines to understand their contextual meaning. The

adjectives are then interpreted and categorized into themes related to emotional insecurity and modern masculinity based on their semantic and contextual usage in the lyrics.

Ethical Consideration

This study uses publicly available song lyrics obtained from the Genius website for academic analysis purposes. The data is used solely for research and educational purposes, and no commercial use is involved. To respect copyright considerations, the analysis focuses on linguistic patterns rather than reproducing the lyrics in their entirety. This study also acknowledges the limitations of using online lyric databases, including the possibility of inaccuracies in transcription.

Results

Adjective Frequency and Distribution in the Lyrics

The corpus uploaded to Voyant Tools consists of song lyrics from 13 tracks in Anson Seabra's album *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break*, comprising a total of 3,483 words in a single document. The corpus shows a vocabulary density of 0.180 and a readability index of 5.749, indicating a relatively repetitive and accessible lexical pattern typical of song lyrics. These corpus statistics provide an initial overview of the linguistic structure of the data and serve as a basis for identifying frequently occurring words, particularly adjectives, which are central to the focus of this study, as summarized in Picture 1 below.

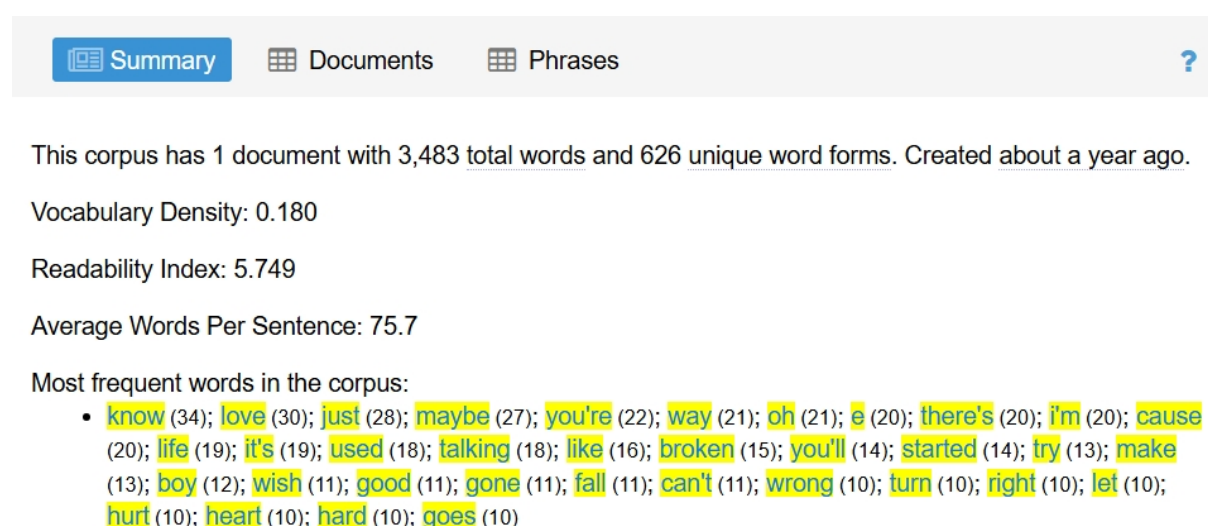


Figure 1. Summary of corpus statistics in Voyant Tools

As illustrated in Figure 1, the summary output from Voyant Tools presents the distribution of lexical items within the corpus, including the number of unique word forms and their frequency of occurrence. The presence of a relatively limited set of recurring word forms indicates that lexical repetition appears across multiple songs rather than being confined to a single track. This pattern supports the use of frequency-based analysis to identify words that consistently recur throughout the album and therefore warrant closer linguistic examination.

Following the corpus summary, the analysis proceeds to examine the distribution of frequently occurring words in the album lyrics. Identifying high-frequency lexical items is important

because it reveals which words are repeatedly used across songs and therefore play a central role in shaping the overall lyrical meaning. This step provides a clearer picture of dominant linguistic patterns before narrowing the focus to specific grammatical categories, particularly adjectives.

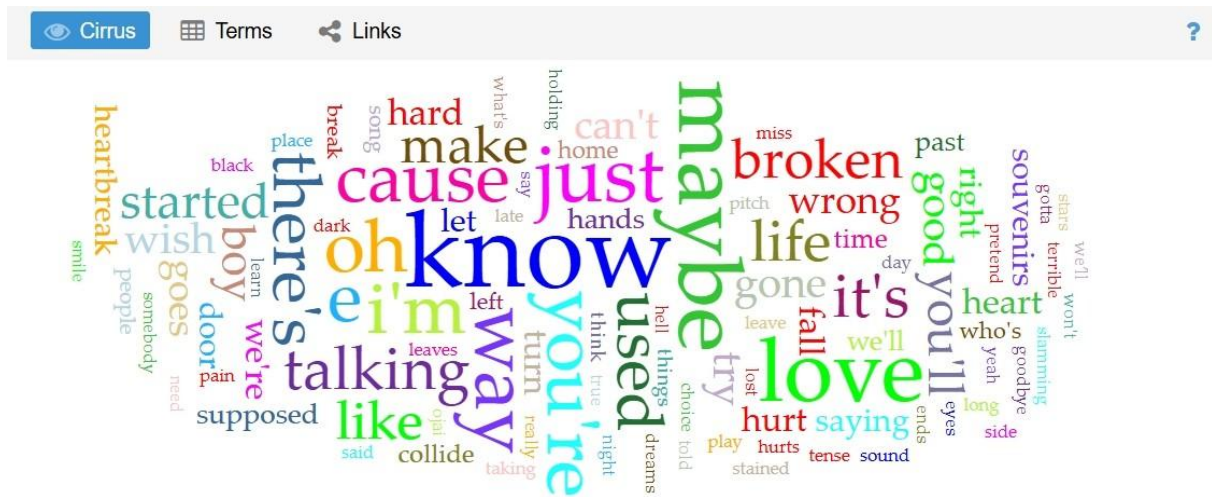


Figure 2. Cirrus visualization of frequent words in Voyant Tools

As shown in Figure 2, the Cirrus visualization highlights several words that appear prominently throughout the corpus. Words such as *know*, *love*, *just*, *maybe*, and *you're* dominate the visualization, indicating the prevalence of emotional expression, uncertainty, and interpersonal reflection in the lyrics. The prominence of these words suggests that the album frequently explores inner feelings, relational dynamics, and self-questioning experiences.

Although the Cirrus visualization includes words from various grammatical categories, it functions as an effective visual tool for identifying lexical items that recur across the album. From this set of frequent words, those functioning as adjectives were manually identified for further analysis. These adjectives were selected because of their role in describing emotional states, personal conditions, and evaluative meanings, which are central to the investigation of emotional insecurity and representations of modern masculinity. The identified adjectives and their frequencies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Findings of adjectives in the *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break* album

List of The Most Frequent Adjectives	Frequency	List of The Most Frequent Adjectives	Frequency
just	28	hurt	10
broken	15	hard	10
good	11	supposed	8
wrong	10	past	8
right	10	left	8

Table 1 presents the adjectives identified in the corpus along with their frequency of occurrence. A total of ten adjectives were found across the 13 songs in the album. The adjective *just* appears most frequently with 28 occurrences, while *past* and *left* show the lowest frequency, each

occurring eight times. These findings indicate that adjective usage in the album is limited in variety but recurrent across different songs.

To further understand the functional role of these adjectives, they were subsequently classified based on their semantic characteristics. This classification aims to clarify how different types of adjectives contribute to meaning construction in the lyrics, particularly in relation to emotional expression and identity representation.

Table 2. Classify adjectives based on their category

Semantic category	Type	Example	Amount
Descriptors	Quality	Just	28
		hard	10
		Right	10
		Supposed	8
	Time	Past	8
		Left	8
	Emotive	Broken	15
		Good	11
		Wrong	10
		Hurt	10

Table 2 shows the classification of the identified adjectives into three semantic categories following Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2002). Four adjectives are categorized as qualitative adjectives, two as time-indicating adjectives, and four as emotion-related adjectives. This classification provides a descriptive overview of the types of adjectives used in the album and serves as the basis for the subsequent analysis of emotional insecurity and modern masculinity.

Representations of Emotional Insecurity in the Lyrics

Following the identification of the most frequently used adjectives in the previous section, this section explores how they are embedded in the context of lyrics that explicitly express emotional insecurity. For further understanding, the concordance of each adjective is reviewed with the aim of examining the representation of emotional insecurity in song lyrics.

1. Broken

“Don't fall for a broken boy, you'll never fill that void.”

In this line, the speaker refers to himself as a broken boy, which indicates an internalized sense of damage or emotional deficiency. The use of the word broken serves as a self-label that keeps the speaker away from romantic relationships, implying that he considers himself incapable of giving or receiving love. This portrayal depicts a deep sense of emotional insecurity, where the speaker warns others against getting too close, believing that his emotional emptiness is incurable. The adjective broken here is not only descriptive, but functions as a marker of emotional unworthiness and relational self-sabotage. Its use reflects the speaker's fear of vulnerability, a recurring theme in lyrics written by men. As Rosenberg (2022) notes, the repeated use of “broken boy” in song lyrics often symbolizes emotional fragility and insecurity, revealing a young man's struggle with self-esteem and the pain hidden beneath the surface of masculinity.

2. Good

"Yeah, sometimes what's good is goodbye"

In this line, the speaker implies that letting go is the most appropriate decision, even though it is emotionally difficult. The adjective good, which generally has a positive meaning, is used here as opposed to the act of saying goodbye. This use of the word good indicates an internal acceptance that ending the relationship is ultimately the right choice, even if it feels painful at the time. The contrast between goodbye and goodbye highlights the speaker's emotional growth and willingness to prioritize self-care over attachment. This moment of detachment can be seen as an attempt to regain control in the face of emotional turmoil. As Neff (2011) notes, letting go of relationships, even when painful, is an important part of emotional maturity, allowing individuals to move beyond insecurity and embrace resilience and self-care.

3. Wrong

"Sometimes there's no good way to make a wrong thing right"

In this line, the speaker expresses an emotional acceptance that not all mistakes can be fixed, even with the best intentions. The adjective wrong refers to a situation or decision that has caused pain or damage, possibly within a relationship. Rather than attempting to force resolution, the speaker acknowledges the emotional weight of leaving certain wrongs unresolved. This expression reflects a form of vulnerability, where the speaker admits the limitations of his own actions or circumstances. Such openness challenges traditional masculine ideals that discourage showing regret or emotional weakness. As Staiger et al. (2020) argue, Strong adherence to traditional masculine norms often hinders men from expressing emotional vulnerability and seeking help, which can contribute to extended emotional suffering. Acknowledging emotional limitations and accepting that some situations cannot be easily resolved can be an essential step toward greater emotional resilience and self-acceptance.

4. Hurt

"You'll just get hurt with a broken boy"

In this line, the speaker offers a cautionary statement, suggesting that any emotional involvement with him is bound to result in pain. The adjective hurt is used here to convey an inevitable outcome, reflecting the speaker's anticipation of emotional failure in relationships. Rather than portraying vulnerability directly, the speaker externalizes it through a warning to others, which subtly reveals his own deep emotional fragility. This expression indicates a form of self-protection rooted in fear of closeness and rejection. The speaker's acknowledgment of emotional damage implies a sense of psychological vulnerability. According to Nogueira & Teixeira (2025), psychological vulnerability which includes feelings of fragility and susceptibility to emotional hurt is associated with reduced hope and mental well-being, as well as increased stigma, particularly among adolescents. In this context, hurt serves as a linguistic signal of the speaker's internal struggle with fear, insecurity, and emotional isolation.

Overall, the analysis shows that emotional insecurity is consistently represented through adjectives that describe vulnerability, emotional uncertainty, and inner conflict in the lyrics. The recurring use of these adjectives highlights how emotional states are foregrounded as a central pattern across the album. At the same time, the linguistic portrayal of vulnerability and self-doubt also reflects broader identity meanings, suggesting a shift in how masculinity is expressed. Rather than emphasizing emotional restraint, the adjectives used in the lyrics indicate a form of masculine expression that allows emotional openness and introspection. This connection

between emotional insecurity and identity construction provides a basis for examining representations of modern masculinity in the following section.

Representations of Modern Masculinity in the Lyrics

The representation of modern masculinity in the lyrics is constructed through the use of adjectives that emphasize emotional vulnerability, self-awareness, and moral reflection. Adjectives such as *broken* and *hurt*, as reflected in concordance lines like *"Don't fall for a broken boy, you'll never fill that void"* and *"You'll just get hurt with a broken boy,"* portray a masculine identity that openly acknowledges emotional damage and psychological fragility. This portrayal aligns with perspectives on modern masculinity that view emotional vulnerability as an integral part of male identity rather than a weakness (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

In addition, adjectives such as *good* and *wrong* contribute to the construction of masculinity through reflective and ethical self-positioning. Expressions like *"sometimes what's good is goodbye"* and *"there's no good way to make a wrong thing right"* suggest a form of masculinity that prioritizes emotional responsibility and self-awareness over control or problem-solving. This reflective stance resonates with contemporary views of masculinity as fluid and self-critical, moving away from rigid ideals of dominance and emotional restraint (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Collectively, these adjective patterns indicate a representation of modern masculinity characterized by vulnerability, introspection, and emotional accountability, which have been associated with healthier emotional expression among men (Wong et al., 2011).

Discussion

This study discovered that the most frequently occurring adjectives are emotional adjectives which consist of *broken*, *hurt*, *wrong*, and *good*. These emotional adjectives in context often indicate self-doubt and emotional vulnerability. The frequent use across different songs suggests a consistent self-representation of a male speaker internalizing emotional pain and anticipating failure in emotional relationships. Together, these linguistic patterns offer insights into how emotional fragility is expressed through language, especially in ways that challenge conventional expectations of masculinity in contemporary culture.

The results of this study are in line with Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes strength, independence and emotional control in men. The portrayal of emotional fragility in song lyrics by using adjectives such as *broken* and *hurt*, illustrates how men's emotional vulnerability is often suppressed and directed towards self-isolation. This is aligned with Mokhelepa and Sumbane's (2025) findings that traditional masculine norms are strongly associated with emotional suppression and psychological distress.

Additionally, DeNora (2000) draws attention to the role of music as a device for emotional regulation and self-reflection. In this context, the lyrics in Anson Seabra's album serve as a space to express emotions that may be hidden. In comparison to previous corpus-based studies such as the studies conducted by Mukminin et al. (2024) and Zulaikah et al. (2024), which focused on linguistic patterns in lyrics, this study includes a new dimension by linking emotional language to issues of masculinity and mental health.

The findings in this study offer several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study supports the idea that language, in particular the use of adjectives, can reveal deeply embedded emotional states, especially when examined through a corpus-based and semantic perspective. The presence of emotive adjectives in lyrics written by men highlights how artistic

expression can serve as a subtle form of emotional expression, challenging traditional perceptions of masculinity.

Practically, the results of this study show that song lyrics can be a valuable medium for understanding emotional experiences among young men, especially among cultures that stereotype emotional expression. For educators, counselors, or mental health advocates who support them, linguistic patterns in music can provide insight into unspoken emotional struggles. On a broader level, this highlights the importance of supporting creative platforms as safe emotional channels for individuals making sense of social expectations of gender and vulnerability.

One of the main strengths of this study is rooted in the methodological combination of corpus-based tools and semantic-sociolinguistic analysis, which enables both quantitative insight and qualitative depth. The use of original song lyrics as data adds credibility and emotional relevance, making the analysis more grounded in real-world artistic expression. However, this study still has limitations as it only focuses on one album from one artist, which may limit the scope of application of the findings. Furthermore, this study only focuses on adjectives, excluding other linguistic features such as verbs or metaphors that may also have emotional resonance.

Future research may enlarge its scope by examining different linguistic categories or comparing male and female artists to explore how emotional language is influenced by gender. Analyzing other parts of the language, such as verbs or metaphors, can reveal different layers of emotional expression that cannot be expressed by adjectives alone. In addition, combining a larger and more diverse corpus across different genres or cultural backgrounds could provide a broader understanding of how masculinity and vulnerability are communicated through language.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine how emotional adjectives in Anson Seabra's *A Heart Is a Terrible Thing to Break* album reflect themes of emotional insecurity and modern masculinity. By analyzing the most frequently used adjectives namely broken, hurt, wrong, and good through corpus-based tools and semantic interpretation, this study reveals a coherent portrayal of a male voice defined by vulnerability, self-doubt, and emotional detachment.

The findings highlight how language can serve as a powerful medium to express complex emotional states, especially in artistic works. As such, this study supports the idea that music offers a space to challenge traditional masculine norms that suppress emotional openness. This research contributes to linguistic analysis and gender discourse by showing how emotional fragility is represented and repeated through everyday lexical choices in song lyrics.

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