

Positive and Negative Language in Queen's Lyrics: A Sentiment and Thematic Analysis of Personal Struggle and Self-Identity

¹Nur Annisa Shamsul Anwar, ^{*2}Muhammad Haziq Abd Rashid, ³Hairul Azhar Mohamad, ⁴Nur Balqis Binti Khairul Effendy, ⁵Amir Lukman Abd Rahman, ⁶Muhammad Luthfi Mohaini, ⁷Pavithran Ravinthra Nath, ⁸Venny Karolina

¹Faculty of Education and Humanities UNITAR College Penang

^{2,3,5,6,7}Akademi Pengajian Bahasa Universiti Teknologi MARA

⁴INFINITY8 Reserve Sunway Square

⁸Universitas Tanjungpura Kalimantan

^{*}Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Music is a powerful medium for emotional expression, yet the lyrics of classic rock bands have received far less systematic linguistic attention than contemporary pop. This study examines how the British rock band Queen conveys personal struggle and self-identity through positive and negative language across twenty selected songs. Using a qualitative thematic and sentiment analysis guided by Aristotle's concept of pathos, 463 significant phrases were coded in NVivo, quantified in Excel, and cross-checked for ambiguous tone under full researcher control. The songs showed a balanced emotional profile: 45% leaned positive, 45% negative, and 10% were evenly split. Personal struggle dominated 50% of the songs and self-identity 30%, with the remainder blending both themes. Struggle was expressed largely through negative language, whereas identity was expressed through positive language, revealing a deliberate pairing of vulnerability and resilience. The findings position popular music as a valuable site for studying language, emotion, and identity formation.

Keywords: sentiment analysis, song lyrics, Queen, pathos, self-identity

INTRODUCTION

Language binds people together by allowing them to share needs, feelings, and ideas, and music extends that capacity by pairing words with melody to carry emotion (Long & Barber, 2015). Song lyrics, in particular, give listeners a linguistic surface on which private experience becomes public and shareable. The British rock band Queen, formed in London in 1970 around Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor, and John Deacon, built much of its lasting appeal on this quality. Songs such as 'Bohemian Rhapsody' and 'Somebody to Love' address personal struggle, resilience, and the search for identity in language that remains emotionally legible decades later.

Research on music and emotion has shown that listeners respond reliably to musical features such as tempo and tonality (Juslin, 2013; Mercado, 2020), and that sad or conflicted music can move audiences precisely because it invites empathy (Eerola et al., 2016; Hunter et al., 2008). Much of this work, however, concentrates on non-verbal elements, treating melody, harmony, and performance as the primary carriers of feeling while leaving the lyric itself comparatively unexamined. Yet lyrics are themselves a structured emotional language, and Queen's catalogue offers an unusually rich case for reading that language closely.

Interest in the linguistic analysis of lyrics has grown, but it has clustered around contemporary pop. Recent studies have examined Taylor Swift's figurative storytelling (Deviani & Hendar, 2024; Sofian, 2022; Nafisa et

al., 2024), NIKI's thematic songwriting (Iqlimaa & Panggabean, 2025), and the semantic density of BTS (Yuliana et al., 2024; Lestari, 2020). Classic rock has attracted far less of this attention. Where Queen has been studied, the focus has tended to be biographical, stylistic, or figurative (Braae, 2015; Putra et al., 2020; Nugraha & Adika, 2024) rather than sentiment-based, and broader sentiment research has likewise favoured recent chart music over older repertoire (Habibi, 2023; Rosebaugh & Shamir, 2022). Medina and Noorman (2019) examined interpersonal meaning in Queen's lyrics but did not map emotional polarity systematically. A gap therefore remains: the emotional and thematic structure of Queen's language has not been analysed through a combined sentiment and thematic lens.

This study addresses that gap. Framed by Aristotle's concept of pathos, the appeal to an audience's emotions (Braet, 1992; Nichols, 1987), it examines how positive and negative language in twenty Queen songs conveys the themes of personal struggle and self-identity. Three research questions guide the analysis:

1. What are the frequencies of positive and negative phrases in the selected Queen lyrics?
2. How many of the songs are dominated by themes of personal struggle?
3. How many of the songs are dominated by themes of self-identity?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to linguistics, musicology, and the psychology of music, and argues for popular music, and classic rock in particular, as a serious site for the study of language, emotion, and identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emotional Function of Song Lyrics

Music is widely understood as a technology of emotion. Listeners use it to regulate mood, mark identity, and connect with others (Schäfer, 2016; Slater & Henry, 2013), and emotionally rich music can evoke empathy even when its content is sombre (Eerola et al., 2016). Within this field, lyrics occupy a distinctive position because they carry propositional meaning as well as affect. Batcho et al. (2008) showed that lyrics serve as vehicles for nostalgia and identity, while Markowitz and Hancock (2017), analysing the words of artists who died young, found that lyrics can register genuine psychological distress. Long and Barber (2015) describe songwriting as an emotional economy in which private feeling is converted into shared cultural currency. Together these studies establish the lyric as a legitimate object for emotional and linguistic analysis, and not merely a supplement to melody.

Sentiment and Semantic Analysis of Popular Music

Sentiment analysis, the systematic classification of text by emotional polarity (Liu, 2012), has increasingly been applied to song lyrics. Napier and Shamir (2018) and Malheiro et al. (2018) demonstrated that quantitative content analysis can surface emotional and social patterns across large lyric corpora, while Du (2024) and Rosebaugh and Shamir (2022) used natural language processing to compare emotional trends across artists. Semantic analysis, which interprets meaning through context (Goddard, 1998; Manning & Schütze, 1999), complements this by clarifying how particular words function within a lyric. Applied studies of contemporary pop, including analyses of Taylor Swift (Marwah & Suswanto, 2023; Nopas, 2025), Olivia Rodrigo (Luthfiani & Heriyati, 2023), Maroon 5 (Pasingi et al., 2022), and BTS (Yuliana et al., 2024), show the value of the approach. Yet as Habibi (2023) notes, this literature leans heavily towards recent chart music. Classic rock, despite its lyrical complexity, is rarely subjected to the same structured sentiment reading, and studies of Queen specifically have concentrated on figurative language and interpersonal meaning (Putra et al., 2020; Medina & Noorman, 2019; Nugraha & Adika, 2024) rather than emotional polarity.

Aristotle's Pathos as an Analytical Lens

Aristotle identified pathos, the appeal to an audience's emotions, as one of the three modes of rhetorical persuasion alongside ethos and logos (Braet, 1992; Nichols, 1987). Although classical in origin, pathos

remains a productive framework for analysing how texts move audiences (Corbett, 1963; Dillard & Peck, 2000), and it has been applied to music, as in Wilkowski's (2015) study of rhetorical appeal in protest song. Pathos is well suited to Queen, whose lyrics repeatedly stage vulnerability and defiance in ways that invite empathy and identification. Reading positive and negative language as instruments of pathos allows this study to connect a descriptive account of emotional polarity to a rhetorical account of why that polarity matters.

Research Gap

Three strands emerge from this review. First, lyrics are an established site of emotional meaning. Second, sentiment and semantic methods are well developed but have been applied disproportionately to contemporary pop. Third, pathos offers a durable lens for interpreting lyrical emotion. What remains missing is a study that brings these strands together for classic rock, and for Queen in particular, by mapping the frequency of positive and negative language and relating it to the recurring themes of personal struggle and self-identity. This study occupies that gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that combines thematic analysis and sentiment analysis, supported by descriptive quantification. The analytical work is interpretive: the researcher classified the emotional tone and thematic content of each lyric, guided by Aristotle's concept of pathos and by prior lyric research (Medina & Noorman, 2019; Putra et al., 2020). Frequency counts and percentages then summarise those classifications so that patterns across the corpus can be compared (Napier & Shamir, 2018; Malheiro et al., 2018). Triangulation across three tools was used to strengthen consistency and credibility (Morgan, 2024).

Corpus and Sampling

Twenty Queen songs, released between 1973 and 1992, were selected through purposive criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Songs were included if they engaged the themes of personal struggle, resilience, or self-identity; contained both positive and negative emotional language; employed rhetorical or figurative devices such as metaphor, repetition, and imagery; and, collectively, represented the span of the band's career. Table 1 lists the corpus.

Table 1. The corpus of twenty selected Queen songs.

No.	Title	Album	Year
1	Keep Yourself Alive	Queen	1973
2	Now I'm Here	Sheer Heart Attack	1974
3	Bohemian Rhapsody	A Night at the Opera	1975
4	You're My Best Friend	A Night at the Opera	1975
5	Somebody to Love	A Day at the Races	1976
6	We Are the Champions	News of the World	1977
7	We Will Rock You	News of the World	1977
8	Don't Stop Me Now	Jazz	1978
9	Save Me	The Game	1980

10	Play the Game	The Game	1980
11	Under Pressure	Hot Space	1981
12	I Want to Break Free	The Works	1984
13	It's a Hard Life	The Works	1984
14	Radio Ga Ga	The Works	1984
15	Who Wants to Live Forever	A Kind of Magic	1986
16	I Want It All	The Miracle	1989
17	The Miracle	The Miracle	1989
18	The Show Must Go On	Innuendo	1991
19	Innuendo	Innuendo	1991
20	In My Defence	The Freddie Mercury Album	1992

Instruments and Coding

Three tools supported the analysis. NVivo was the primary platform for manual segmentation and coding. Each song was divided into phrases, defined as self-contained expressions of thought or emotion, and repeated lines, interjections, and vocalisations were excluded to preserve semantic clarity. Each phrase was then coded twice, once for sentiment (positive or negative) and once for theme (personal struggle or self-identity). Personal struggle covered hardship, emotional conflict, and existential doubt, while self-identity covered individuality, self-expression, and the search for personal meaning, following identity theory (Erikson, 1968; Berzonsky, 2005). Positive language expressed hope, love, joy, or empowerment, and negative language expressed sorrow, despair, or anxiety (Fredrickson, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Microsoft Excel was used to tally the coded categories and to generate the charts reported below. A large language model (ChatGPT) was used only in a limited, supporting role, to cross-check ambiguous or metaphorical cases after the researcher's own coding. It did not perform the analysis or assign final classifications, and all interpretive decisions rested with the researcher, consistent with guidance on the cautious and transparent use of such tools under human supervision (Wang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Validation

Coding proceeded through five stages: song selection, lyric preparation, sentiment categorisation, thematic categorisation, and validation. Lyrics were drawn from verified sources and standardised before segmentation. A sample of the coded data was reviewed by a subject-matter expert, the research supervisor, who assessed the sentiment and thematic labels for accuracy and coherence, and the feedback was used to finalise the coding. This human-in-the-loop procedure, with NVivo as the coding platform and the language model confined to a scaffolding role, was designed to keep interpretation consistent and auditable (Morgan, 2024; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2020).

Data Analysis

Coded data were exported to Excel, where the frequency of positive and negative phrases was calculated for each song, addressing the first research question. The proportion of phrases coded as personal struggle and as self-identity was then calculated to establish each song's dominant theme, addressing the second and third research questions. Songs were classified as personal-struggle-dominant, self-identity-dominant, or an equal mix, according to whether personal struggle or self-identity accounted for the larger share of their coded

phrases, with exact ties treated as an equal mix. Finally, sentiment and theme were cross-tabulated to examine how emotional tone aligned with each theme, interpreted through the lens of pathos.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency of Positive and Negative Language

The twenty songs yielded 463 significant phrases, an average of 23.15 per song. Across the corpus, sentiment was closely balanced: nine songs (45%) contained more positive than negative phrases, nine (45%) contained more negative than positive, and two (10%), ‘We Will Rock You’ and ‘Who Wants to Live Forever’, were evenly split (Figure 1). Table 2 reports the per-song distribution.

Table 2. Frequency and proportion of positive and negative phrases by song.

No.	Song	Total	Pos.	Neg.	Pos. (%)	Neg. (%)
1	Keep Yourself Alive	15	5	9	33.33	60.00
2	Now I’m Here	35	15	5	42.86	14.29
3	Bohemian Rhapsody	44	7	26	15.91	59.09
4	You’re My Best Friend	18	16	1	88.89	5.56
5	Somebody to Love	23	6	15	26.09	65.22
6	We Are the Champions	21	14	6	66.67	28.57
7	We Will Rock You	12	6	6	50.00	50.00
8	Don’t Stop Me Now	29	29	0	100.00	0.00
9	Save Me	20	6	14	30.00	70.00
10	Play the Game	14	9	4	64.29	28.57
11	Under Pressure	19	5	10	26.32	52.63
12	I Want to Break Free	15	7	8	46.67	53.33
13	It’s a Hard Life	27	16	11	59.26	40.74
14	Radio Ga Ga	22	14	6	63.64	27.27
15	Who Wants to Live Forever	14	7	7	50.00	50.00
16	I Want It All	19	13	3	68.42	15.79
17	The Miracle	22	17	3	77.27	13.64
18	The Show Must Go On	34	15	19	44.12	55.88
19	Innuendo	23	8	9	34.78	39.13
20	In My Defence	14	4	10	28.57	71.43

Percentage of Positive vs. Negative Phrases Across All 20 Songs

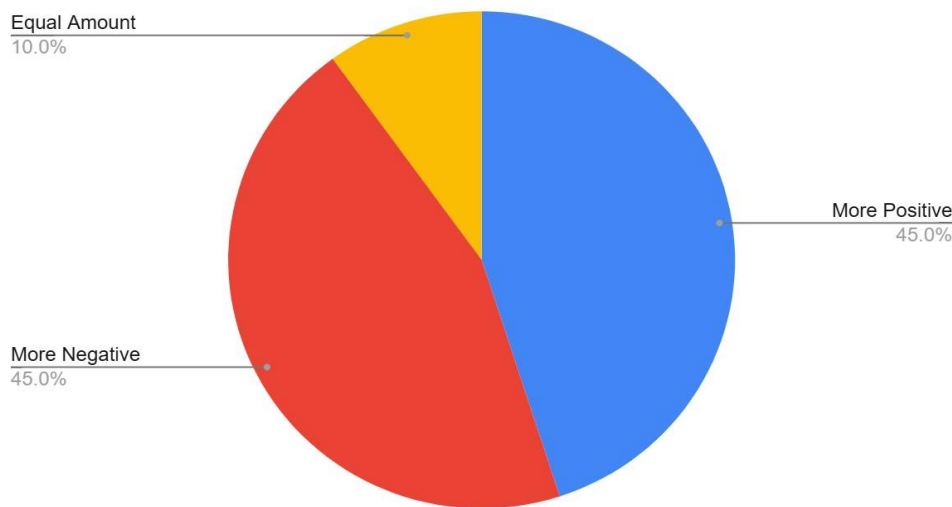


Figure 1. Percentage of songs leaning positive, negative, or balanced across the twenty songs.

The extremes illustrate Queen's tonal range. 'Don't Stop Me Now' is wholly positive, with all twenty-nine of its non-neutral phrases expressing joy or freedom, whereas 'In My Defence' is the most negative (71.43%), and 'Bohemian Rhapsody' carries the largest absolute count of negative phrases (26, or 59.09%). Read through pathos, this balance is itself a rhetorical resource. Queen persuades neither through relentless optimism nor through unbroken despair, but by moving between the two, so that moments of hope acquire weight from the hardship around them. In answer to the first research question, positive and negative language occur in near-equal measure across the corpus, and emotional contrast, rather than a single dominant tone, characterises the band's writing.

Songs Dominated by Personal Struggle

Personal struggle was the more prevalent of the two themes, dominating ten of the twenty songs (50%). It was most concentrated in 'Save Me' (75.00% of coded phrases), 'In My Defence' (71.43%), 'The Show Must Go On' (64.71%), and 'Who Wants to Live Forever' (64.29%), all of which dwell on pain, loss, and existential uncertainty. These high-struggle songs were also the most negative in tone. 'In My Defence', for example, pairs 71.43% struggle content with 71.43% negative sentiment, and 'Save Me' and 'Who Wants to Live Forever' each reach 50% negative-struggle language. Struggle in Queen's writing is therefore voiced predominantly in negative language, which gives these songs their characteristic weight of despair. The theme is not monolithic, however. Mid-range songs such as 'It's a Hard Life' (55.56% struggle) and 'We Are the Champions' (52.38%) combine adversity with resilience, mixing negative and positive language to frame hardship as something endured or overcome. In answer to the second research question, ten songs are personal-struggle-dominant, and their emotional signature is predominantly, though not exclusively, negative.

Songs Dominated by Self-Identity

Self-identity dominated six songs (30%). It was most pronounced in 'Don't Stop Me Now', where 86.21% of phrases express identity, followed by 'I Want to Break Free' (60.00%), 'You're My Best Friend' (55.56%), and 'Under Pressure' (52.63%). In sharp contrast to the struggle-dominant songs, identity was expressed overwhelmingly in positive language. Eleven of the twenty songs contained no negative self-identity phrases at all, and the strongest identity songs, 'Don't Stop Me Now' (86.21% positive identity), 'You're My Best Friend' (55.56%), and 'I Want It All' (42.11%), affirm freedom, confidence, and self-worth. Where negative identity did appear, it clustered in a small number of emotionally conflicted tracks such as 'Under Pressure' (36.84% negative identity) and 'Somebody to Love' (26.09%), which stage the self under external or emotional pressure. In answer to the third research question, six songs are self-identity-dominant, and their emotional signature is strongly positive.

Emotional Duality: Sentiment Across Themes

Taken together, these results reveal a consistent and, this study argues, deliberate pattern: Queen tends to write struggle in negative language and identity in positive language. The two themes are not merely present in the catalogue but are emotionally coded in opposite directions, so that vulnerability and self-affirmation become distinguishable not only by subject but by tone. Table 3 summarises the resulting categorisation of the twenty songs, and Figures 2 and 3 display the thematic distribution and its intensity across the corpus.

Table 3. Categorisation of the twenty songs by dominant theme and sentiment profile.

Category	Description	Songs
Personal-struggle-dominant (10; 50%)	Struggle accounts for the larger share of phrases; predominantly negative sentiment	Bohemian Rhapsody; Somebody to Love; We Are the Champions; Save Me; Play the Game; It's a Hard Life; Who Wants to Live Forever; The Miracle; The Show Must Go On; In My Defence
Self-identity-dominant (6; 30%)	Identity accounts for the larger share of phrases; predominantly positive sentiment	You're My Best Friend; Don't Stop Me Now; Under Pressure; I Want to Break Free; I Want It All; Innuendo
Equal mix (4; 20%)	Struggle and identity present in roughly equal measure	Keep Yourself Alive; Now I'm Here; We Will Rock You; Radio Ga Ga

Percentage of Songs by Dominant Theme (PS, SI, or Both)

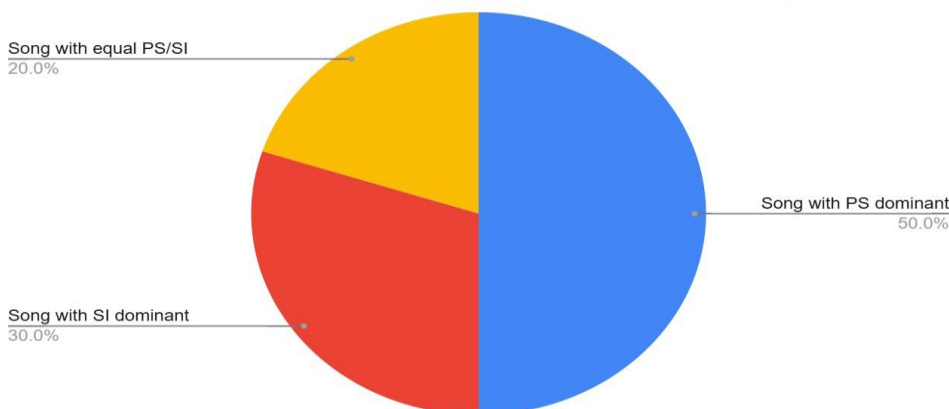


Figure 2. Percentage of songs by dominant theme (personal struggle, self-identity, or both).

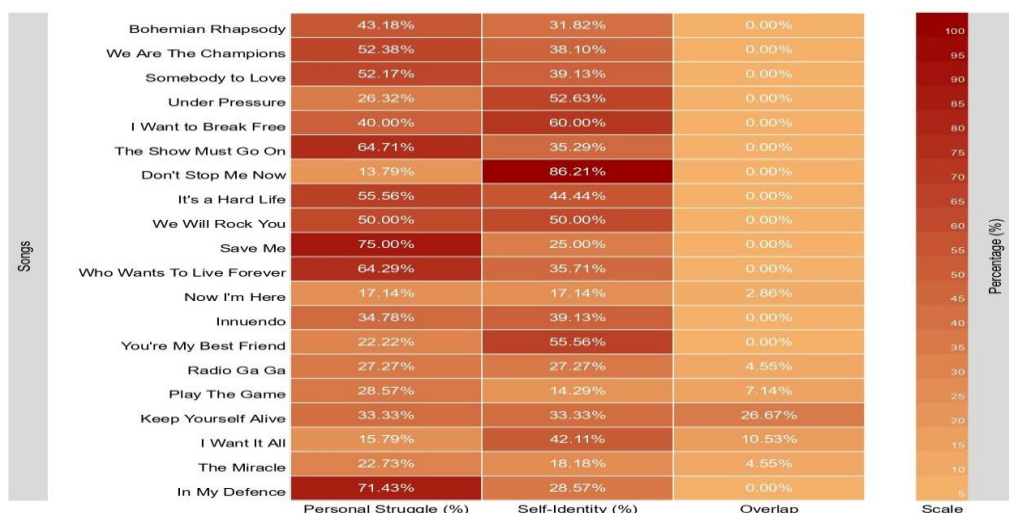


Figure 3. Intensity of the personal struggle and self-identity themes across the twenty songs.

The four songs in the equal-mix category (20%), ‘Keep Yourself Alive’, ‘Now I’m Here’, ‘We Will Rock You’, and ‘Radio Ga Ga’, hold personal struggle and self-identity in roughly equal measure, and it is here that Queen’s emotional complexity is clearest. In these songs, pride and alienation, or ambition and doubt, are voiced together and refuse a single resolution. This duality is the study’s central finding. Interpreted through pathos, it suggests that Queen’s persuasive power lies in emotional honesty: by pairing despair with defiance, the band offers listeners both recognition of hardship and a model for enduring it. The pattern also situates Queen within a longer lineage of emotionally expressive songwriting that reaches contemporary artists such as Taylor Swift, NIKI, and BTS (Deviani & Hendar, 2024; Iqlimaa & Panggabean, 2025; Yuliana et al., 2024), and it lends empirical support to the reading of classic rock as a serious site for the study of emotional language. Beyond musicology, lyrics that articulate struggle and self-affirmation in this way may hold value for emotional literacy in education and for the therapeutic use of music, where naming difficult feelings is often a first step towards managing them.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations qualify these findings. The corpus of twenty songs, though chosen for diversity, cannot represent the full range of Queen’s catalogue, and the selection introduces a degree of subjectivity. Sentiment and thematic coding, even when validated, involves interpretive judgement, and reducing figurative language to positive or negative categories inevitably simplifies emotionally layered lines. The analysis also considers lyrics alone, setting aside melody, tempo, and vocal delivery, which contribute to emotional meaning, and it does not address how audiences actually receive these songs. Future work could extend the corpus across the band’s career to trace emotional change over time, incorporate audio features for a multimodal account, apply the same framework to other rock artists to test its generality, or examine the cross-cultural reception of English-language lyrics.

In sum, this study has shown that Queen’s lyrics are emotionally balanced at the level of the catalogue yet sharply patterned at the level of theme, expressing personal struggle largely through negative language and self-identity largely through positive language, and holding the two in deliberate tension in a significant minority of songs. This emotional duality, read through Aristotle’s pathos, helps to explain the enduring resonance of Queen’s music and demonstrates the value of combining sentiment and thematic analysis for the study of popular song.

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