

From Role Compliance to Interpretative Sovereignty in Gender Identity Maintenance and the Reconfiguration of Power Across Generations

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary shifts in gender roles have made the meaning of behaviour increasingly unstable, challenging traditional assumptions about identity and power within relationships. While existing theories explain how gender roles are formed, they often assume that the meanings attached to behaviour remain fixed. This study addresses this limitation by examining how individuals interpret gendered behaviour in role-reversed situations and how these interpretations shape power and identity. Using qualitative responses from 30 participants across different generational groups, the analysis identifies three interconnected processes: the interpretation of behaviour, the construction of power, and the maintenance of identity. The study employs a purposive sampling strategy to capture diverse perspectives across generations, with recruitment through community organizations and social media platforms. The findings show a clear generational shift from fixed interpretative systems, where behaviour carries stable symbolic meaning, to more flexible systems in which meaning is actively constructed. Based on these findings, the study introduces the concepts of Gender Identity Maintenance and interpretative sovereignty to explain how individuals preserve identity coherence through reinterpretation rather than strict role adherence, drawing on and extending symbolic interactionist traditions which emphasize the ongoing construction of meaning in social interaction. The results further demonstrate that power is increasingly understood as relational and context-dependent rather than tied to gendered positions. A table is developed to illustrate how generational context shapes interpretative systems, which in turn influence power and identity outcomes. The study contributes to gender research by positioning interpretation as the central mechanism linking social change, identity stability, and relational dynamics while acknowledging that generational differences may be moderated by individual, cultural, and contextual factors.

Keywords: Gender identity, interpretation, power, gender roles, generational differences, identity maintenance, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Gender roles have historically been sustained through shared social meanings that guide both behaviour and its interpretation. Actions such as serving, kneeling, or assisting a partner have carried stable symbolic associations with dominance and submission. Within this framework, masculinity is linked to authority, control, and independence, while femininity is associated with care, support, and relational responsibility. This creates a system in which behaviour aligns with widely accepted expectations, and identity remains coherent because meaning is rarely questioned.

However, contemporary social changes are disrupting this stability. Shifts in gender expression, evolving relationship expectations, and an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy allow the same behaviour to be interpreted in multiple ways. Acts once clearly associated with submission or authority may now signify love, obligation, equality, or resistance, depending on interpretation. This indicates that meaning is no longer fixed but

actively constructed, and that identity can no longer rely solely on stable roles but must instead be maintained through ongoing interpretation.

The theoretical foundations of this study lie at the intersection of symbolic interactionism and identity theory. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) has long held that meaning arises through social interaction and interpretive processes, yet gender research has often treated gender meanings as relatively stable once internalized. Identity theory (Stryker, 1980; Burke & Stryker, 2016) further suggests that individuals maintain identity coherence through feedback loops between behaviour and self-perception. However, existing frameworks have not fully explored how individuals reinterpret gender-role behaviour when traditional symbolic associations are disrupted. This study extends these traditions by proposing that Gender Identity Maintenance operates as a distinct interpretive mechanism through which identity coherence is preserved despite behavioural change. Similarly, the concept of interpretative sovereignty contributes to symbolic interactionism by specifying degrees of interpretive freedom from external normative constraints.

Existing theories such as Social Role Theory explain how gender expectations emerge from social structures but tend to assume that meanings remain stable. Similarly, research on gender norms and power accounts for how authority is distributed but often treats these patterns as predictable and fixed. Even foundational work on "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), while emphasizing the performative and emergent nature of gender, focuses primarily on how individuals enact gender in interaction rather than on how they interpret the gendered behaviour of others. This leaves a gap in explaining how individuals interpret behaviour when symbolic meanings are unclear or contested.

To address this, the study shifts focus from behaviour itself to its interpretation. It introduces the concept of Gender Identity Maintenance, defined as the process through which individuals preserve identity coherence by reinterpreting behaviour that challenges traditional expectations. It also develops the idea of interpretative sovereignty, which refers to the extent to which individuals rely on internally constructed meanings rather than externally imposed norms. Together, these concepts provide a framework in which identity, power, and meaning are connected through interpretation.

This perspective suggests that behaviour does not directly determine identity but is mediated through meaning-making processes. It also has important implications for power: when meanings are fixed, power is tied to gender roles, whereas when meanings are flexible, power becomes relational and emerges through interaction. Building on this perspective, the study examines three interconnected processes across generational groups and addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do different generations interpret gendered behaviour in role-reversed situations?
- RQ2: How do these interpretations shape the construction of power within relationships?
- RQ3: How do individuals maintain identity stability when behaviour challenges traditional gender norms?

By addressing these questions, the study develops a process-based explanation of how interpretation links generational change, power relations, and identity maintenance, contributing to gender research by shifting the analytical focus from behaviour to interpretation, introducing Gender Identity Maintenance and interpretative sovereignty as key mechanisms, and reconceptualising power as an interpretative outcome rather than a fixed structural position.

METHODS

Study Design and Sampling

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how individuals interpret social situations. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity across generational groups and to capture a range of perspectives on gender roles. Participants were recruited through community organizations (e.g., religious institutions, neighborhood associations) and social media platforms (Facebook and LinkedIn), using targeted posts seeking volunteers for a study on "how people understand relationships and everyday interactions." No financial incentives were offered; participation was voluntary.

Participants

Thirty participants were selected from three generational groups, with ten participants per group: Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Millennials (born 1981–1996), and Generation Z (born 1997–2012). The sample included 16 females and 14 males, distributed approximately evenly across generations (Baby Boomers: 5 females, 5 males; Millennials: 5 females, 5 males; Generation Z: 6 females, 4 males). All participants resided in urban and semi-urban areas of Sri Lanka, representing a range of educational backgrounds (secondary education to postgraduate degrees) and occupational statuses (employed, self-employed, retired, and students). No participants identified as non-binary or gender-diverse, reflecting both the sampling frame and the cultural context. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Data Collection

Participants were shown a set of four images depicting interactions between men and women, including both traditional (e.g., man standing, woman kneeling to assist) and role-reversed situations (e.g., woman standing, man kneeling to assist; man wearing traditionally feminine clothing). Images were pre-tested with a small pilot group (n=5) to ensure clarity and interpretability. Participants were asked to describe what they believed was happening in each image. This method allowed them to express their interpretations freely, revealing underlying assumptions about gender and power.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on patterns in how participants constructed meaning rather than counting responses. Analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the report. Coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by existing theory.

Rigour and Reflexivity

The study ensured credibility through repeated analysis and careful interpretation of responses, including member checking with three participants who reviewed preliminary findings for resonance with their experiences. Reflexivity was maintained by recognising the researcher's influence on the analysis through a reflexive journal documenting analytical decisions and assumptions, including the researcher's position as a male millennial academic from Sri Lanka, which may have shaped interpretations of gendered interactions. All analytical steps were documented to ensure transparency. While the findings are not statistically generalisable, they provide valuable theoretical insights.

RESULTS

The analysis identified three interconnected themes, interpretative systems, power construction, and identity maintenance, which together explain how participants interpret gendered behaviour in both traditional and role-reversed situations as a linked process of meaning production rather than separate categories, with clear generational differences in how behaviour is understood, evaluated, and integrated into broader assumptions about relationships and identity.

The first theme highlights variation in interpretative systems, showing a shift from fixed to flexible meaning-making across generations: older and some Millennial participants relied on stable gender norms in which behaviour carried predetermined meanings, so actions such as kneeling or assisting a partner were read as submission when performed by men and as appropriate support when performed by women; for example, one participant described the man in Image A as having “totally lost his two...balls” and criticised him for not “standing up like a real husband,” while the woman was labelled “worthless” and blamed for “chaos and shame,” demonstrating that behaviour was judged against fixed symbolic standards rather than contextual factors. In contrast, younger participants, particularly Generation Z females, showed greater interpretative flexibility, constructing meaning in relation to emotional context, intention, and relational dynamics; one participant stated that “true masculinity is never defined by physical dominance,” reframing apparent submission as emotional

maturity, while another described marriage as “a partnership built on mutual understanding,” shifting interpretation toward equality rather than hierarchy, indicating that behaviour can hold multiple meanings depending on interpretation.

The second theme, power construction, reveals contrasting understandings of authority within relationships: among those using fixed interpretative systems, power was positional and tied to gender roles, with masculinity associated with authority and femininity with submission, as reflected in statements such as “a man should never have to bow down” and “a good wife always knows when to be humble,” reinforcing hierarchy even in positive descriptions of women. In contrast, participants with flexible interpretative systems constructed power as relational and context-dependent, where authority emerged through interaction, intention, and mutual recognition; for instance, one participant argued that “financial contribution alone should never determine the level of authority,” while another stated that acts of service “should come from a place of genuine willingness,” reframing them as voluntary expressions rather than obligations, showing that power is shaped through interpretation rather than fixed roles.

The third theme, identity maintenance, examines how individuals preserve identity when behaviour challenges traditional norms: participants relying on fixed meanings maintained identity through boundary enforcement, rejecting deviations such as cross-dressing, as seen in a response questioning “why the heck he has dressed in a frock” and linking it to loss of respect, indicating that stability depends on clear behavioural boundaries. Millennial participants showed a transitional pattern, combining critique with partial acceptance and reflecting tension between competing frameworks, whereas younger participants maintained identity through reinterpretation, redefining behaviour to preserve coherence; for example, cross-dressing was interpreted as acceptance within a relationship, and “clothing choices should never be used to judge character,” while a woman assisting her partner in masculine attire was described as showing that “love and devotion transcend all traditional gender boundaries.”

These findings demonstrate that identity can remain stable even as behaviour changes, provided its meaning is reinterpreted, and as summarised in Table 1, the three themes form an integrated framework linking interpretation, power construction, and identity maintenance as the analytical foundation of the study.

Table 1 Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes

Main Theme	Subtheme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Interpretative Systems	Fixed Meaning (Symbolic Determinacy)	Behaviour interpreted through rigid gender norms	“He has totally lost his two...balls... why can’t he stand up like a real husband?”
	Flexible Meaning (Interpretative Sovereignty)	Behaviour interpreted based on context and intention	“True masculinity is never defined by physical dominance.”
Power Construction	Positional Power	Authority tied to gender roles (male dominance)	“A man should never have to bow down... a good wife knows her role.”
	Relational Power	Power emerges through interaction and mutual respect	“Financial contribution alone should never determine authority.”
Identity Maintenance	Boundary Enforcement	Identity preserved by rejecting norm violations	“Why the heck has he dressed like that... people lose respect.”
	Reinterpretation	Identity maintained by reframing behaviour	“Clothing should never be used to judge character.”

These themes demonstrate a systematic shift in how gendered behaviour is interpreted, how power is constructed, and how identity is maintained.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that shifts in gender, power, and identity are driven not by behaviour alone but by changes in interpretation, a process captured in Table 1, where generational context shapes interpretative systems

that in turn influence how behaviour is understood, how power is constructed, and how identity is maintained. The results align with and extend symbolic interactionist accounts (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980) by specifying how interpretive frameworks vary systematically across generations and how this variation produces different identity maintenance strategies. Participant responses reveal not just differences in opinion but fundamentally different ways of producing meaning, clustering around three interconnected processes, interpretation, power construction, and identity maintenance, which operate sequentially and relationally as the basis through which social reality is organised.

Addressing RQ1, the findings show that generational context shapes meaning-making, with a distinction between fixed meaning, or symbolic determinacy, and flexible meaning, or interpretative sovereignty. Older participants, including many Millennials, relied on fixed frameworks where behaviour is tightly linked to identity, as seen in responses describing a man as having "totally lost his two...balls" for not acting like a "real husband," and a woman as "worthless" and responsible for "chaos and shame," reflecting rigid expectations of masculinity and femininity. In contrast, younger participants, particularly Generation Z females, demonstrated interpretative sovereignty by constructing meaning in relation to context and intention, with statements such as "true masculinity is never defined by physical dominance" and "marriage is a partnership built on mutual understanding," reframing behaviours like kneeling or assisting as care or relational balance rather than submission. However, this shift is uneven and incomplete, as some younger participants still expressed discomfort with role-reversed scenarios, causality remains uncertain, and gender moderates the pattern, with females showing greater interpretative flexibility than males. Moreover, alternative explanations should be considered: generational differences may reflect life-stage effects (younger individuals tend to hold more progressive views regardless of cohort) rather than genuine generational change, or may be specific to the Sri Lankan cultural context where traditional gender norms remain comparatively strong. The findings may also overstate generational differences by minimizing within-generation variation, as some Baby Boomers expressed flexible views and some Generation Z participants expressed fixed views.

Addressing RQ2, these interpretative differences shape power construction, with fixed systems producing positional power tied to gender roles, where male authority is naturalised and supported by statements such as "a man should never have to bow down" and "a good wife always knows when to be humble," making power appear self-evident. In contrast, flexible systems produce relational power, where authority emerges through interaction, as reflected in views that "financial contribution alone should never determine the level of authority" and that service should come from "genuine willingness," indicating that power is no longer automatically tied to gender but constructed through meaning-making. Yet, relational power introduces uncertainty and potential inequity, as it requires constant negotiation and may advantage those with greater social or interpretative resources, while not eliminating hierarchy but relocating it within interpretative capacity; participants also shifted between frameworks depending on context, showing that this transition is complex rather than linear. From a critical perspective, relational power may obscure ongoing structural inequalities by making power appear voluntary and negotiated when it remains shaped by material and institutional constraints (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Addressing RQ3, identity maintenance varies across interpretative systems, with fixed systems relying on boundary enforcement, where deviations are rejected through moral reactions such as describing non-conforming men as "ashamed," thereby preserving identity through clear symbolic boundaries. Millennials displayed a transitional pattern marked by tension between traditional and emerging interpretations, while Generation Z participants maintained identity through reinterpretation, reframing behaviours such as cross-dressing as acceptance or asserting that "clothing choices should never be used to judge character," and describing non-traditional roles as expressions of love and devotion. This supports the concept of Gender Identity Maintenance, showing that identity can remain stable through flexible meaning-making, although this raises concerns about whether reinterpretation is sustainable, whether individuals shift strategies depending on context, and whether excessive flexibility risks undermining identity coherence altogether. Identity theory (Burke & Stryker, 2016) would predict that identity maintenance requires some stability in meaning over time; if all meanings become infinitely flexible, the identity itself may lose distinctiveness. This suggests a potential boundary condition for interpretative sovereignty.

Beyond the research questions, the findings position interpretation as the central mechanism linking meaning, power, and identity, shifting analysis from behaviour to meaning-making processes while revealing a structural tension between stability and adaptability, as flexible systems promote inclusion but reduce predictability,

whereas fixed systems ensure clarity but restrict variation. This leads to a broader paradox in which interpretative sovereignty increases individual freedom yet may fragment shared social reality, making understanding more difficult and potentially intensifying conflict, with generational differences reflecting not just disagreement over norms but over how meaning itself is produced.

The table is also context-dependent, applying most strongly in settings where individuals can negotiate meaning, while in rigid or unequal contexts interpretative flexibility may be limited and boundary enforcement may remain dominant.

Alternative interpretations warrant consideration. First, the observed generational patterns may reflect differences in social desirability bias, with younger participants more aware of progressive norms and therefore more likely to express flexible views regardless of genuine belief. Second, the findings may capture not a linear shift toward interpretative sovereignty but a cyclical pattern in which periods of fixed meaning alternate with periods of flexibility. Third, the emphasis on generational difference may obscure the role of institutional context: individuals may hold flexible views in principle but enforce fixed meanings in specific settings (e.g., family, workplace) where traditional norms are actively sanctioned. Future research should examine these possibilities directly.

Overall, the findings provide integrated answers to the research questions while highlighting their limitations, showing that generational shifts toward flexible meaning-making, relational power, and reinterpretative identity maintenance are real but uneven, contextually constrained, and accompanied by new forms of tension, demonstrating that gender, power, and identity are increasingly organised through interpretative processes even as this transformation introduces new contradictions and challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how individuals interpret gendered behaviour when traditional roles are disrupted and how these interpretations shape power and identity within relationships. It shows that the central transformation lies not in behaviour itself but in how it is understood. Across generational groups, there is a clear shift from fixed systems of meaning—where actions carry stable symbolic interpretations—to more flexible systems in which meaning is actively constructed, with important consequences for identity and relational dynamics.

By focusing on interpretation, the study demonstrates that gendered behaviour does not possess a single inherent meaning but instead takes on significance through the interpretative frameworks individuals bring to social situations. This explains why the same behaviour may be understood as submission, care, equality, or resistance depending on the observer. It also shows that identity is not simply a product of behaviour but is maintained through ongoing processes of meaning-making, captured in the concept of Gender Identity Maintenance, where individuals preserve coherence by adjusting interpretation rather than strictly adhering to predefined roles.

The findings further indicate that shifts in interpretation reshape power within relationships. When meanings are fixed, power is tied to gender roles and appears as a stable attribute. In contrast, increased interpretative flexibility transforms power into a relational and context-dependent process that emerges through interaction rather than automatic assignment. This suggests that contemporary relationships are less governed by rigid hierarchies and more by negotiated meanings.

At a broader level, the study contributes to understanding how individuals navigate social change. As traditional norms become less stable, the capacity to reinterpret behaviour becomes crucial for maintaining identity coherence. At the same time, this introduces challenges related to shared understanding, since interpretative sovereignty enhances inclusivity and adaptability but may weaken the common meanings that support social coordination. This creates a tension that points to future research, particularly in examining how cohesion is sustained when interpretative frameworks become more fluid.

The transformation is not without contradiction. Interpretative sovereignty, although expanding individual freedom, is unevenly distributed across generations and genders and may fragment shared meaning as much as it enables personal identity. Similarly, relational power can obscure new forms of inequality based on interpretative capacity rather than visible roles. Therefore, the shift from role compliance to interpretative sovereignty is better understood as a structural reconfiguration involving both gains and costs rather than linear progress.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, cross-cultural research is needed to examine whether the shift toward interpretative sovereignty observed here is specific to the Sri Lankan context or reflects broader global patterns. Comparative studies across societies with varying degrees of gender traditionalism would help establish the generalizability of the framework. Second, longitudinal research tracking the same individuals across time could distinguish generational change from life-stage effects, clarifying whether interpretative flexibility increases with age or remains stable within cohorts. Third, mixed-methods studies incorporating quantitative measures of interpretative sovereignty could examine its distribution across populations and its association with outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, mental health, and political attitudes. Fourth, future research should include diverse gender identities beyond the male-female binary to examine how non-binary and transgender individuals experience interpretative sovereignty in contexts where traditional gender meanings are already contested. Fifth, experimental studies could test the causal direction suggested here, examining whether priming flexible interpretative frameworks increases relational power and identity stability, or whether fixed frameworks are more adaptive in certain contexts. Finally, research examining institutional and structural constraints on interpretative sovereignty would help specify the conditions under which individuals can exercise interpretive freedom versus those in which fixed meanings are enforced through material or social sanctions.

Overall, the study positions interpretation as the central mechanism linking generational change, identity stability, and power relations. It shows that contemporary gender dynamics cannot be fully understood through behaviour or roles alone but must be analysed through the processes by which meaning is constructed and negotiated, thereby offering a more flexible and process-oriented framework for understanding gender in a rapidly changing social context.

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