



Reading between *Blurred Lines*: The complexity of interpretation



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ABSTRACT

This article uses thematic qualitative analysis and techniques from corpus linguistics to interrogate the way that listeners interpret and make sense of *Blurred Lines*. The song was controversial upon its release as many listeners felt that it implied that even if women said they did not want sex, in fact, they did. Such issues of sexual consent are a key issue for feminist analysis, particularly within current debates about 'rape culture'. We investigated listeners' interpretations of the song, distributing an online questionnaire to over 1000 respondents. We found that most listeners either interpreted the song as relating to sexual consent and took offence, or felt that it was simply representative of the genre, and found the song unproblematic. However, a number of listeners expressed conflict in relation to the song, enjoying it musically but finding the lyrics particularly problematic. Our analysis investigates the language that respondents used to negotiate their relationships with the different elements of the song.

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1. Introduction

Blurred Lines (written by Robin Thicke, T.I. and Pharrell Williams) reached number one in fourteen countries and was the biggest-selling single in the world in 2013 (IFPI, 2014). At the time of writing, the official version of the song has been viewed 500, 913, 572 times on YouTube. It now has a content warning stating that 'this video may be inappropriate for some users', but this is a recent addition. This warning reflects the controversy that the song provoked, with critics associating it with issues of sexual consent (henceforth referred to as a consent-based reading), suggesting it indexed discourses of sexual violence; the lyrics 'I hate these Blurred Lines' and 'I know you want it' were particular targets for reproach.

The consent-based reading of *Blurred Lines*, debated widely in the press, suggests that the song is promoting or supporting a view that women want to have sex despite stating otherwise; hence the 'blurred lines' between consent and resistance. Lai (2013) notes that the song was labelled 'rapey' and Romano (2013) comments that 'the song is about how a girl really wants crazy wild sex but doesn't say it – positing that age-old problem where men think no means yes into a catchy, hummable song'. Claims that the song expressed 'rape culture' – defined by Bushwald, Fletcher and Roth

(2005:xi) as 'a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women' and where 'the clear line between rape and consensual sex can no longer be drawn with confidence' (Kelley, 2008:129) – were vehemently denied by the song's writers. Alternative readings of the song are possible. Those opposing consent-based readings argued that the song was more complex and playful than critics assumed, and claimed it was prudish to take offence.

To investigate how the song was received by the (UK) general public, we administered an online questionnaire to 1024 respondents who read the song's lyrics and watched the music video. Our analysis utilises corpus linguistics methods and close reading to interrogate different possible readings of the song, and examines the wider discourses that respondents drew upon. We show that respondents largely viewed the song/video as consent-related, but also that for many, their perceptions was that (partially due to its form as a pop song with a danceable tune) the song was playful, and did not endorse (implicitly or otherwise) sexual violence. Thus, listeners found the process of understanding the song more complicated than merely accepting or rejecting the consent-based reading.

The following section summarises relevant research on lyric analysis, section 3 discusses work on gender representation in music videos, the methodology is provided in Sections 4 and 5 includes our analysis, which focuses on representations of gender in the video, interpretations of lyrics, and discussions of sexual consent. We consider the wider ramifications of our findings in Section 6.

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2. Negotiating meaning in song lyrics

Existing research on the interpretation of lyrics (c.f. [Dibben 1999:331](#)) has focused on considering the extent to which listeners' understandings of a song are constrained by properties of the song itself and explores how songs make 'ideology material'. [Dibben \(1999:331\)](#) argues that 'meanings are the result of convergence between material properties of a text, and the particular social allegiances of the reader'. This means that despite each listener hearing the same music and lyrics, their particular beliefs and social experiences shape their conceptualisation of a song's meaning; thus interpretations of linguistic meaning are variable, socially constructed and liable to change.

[Dibben \(1999:332\)](#) suggests that each song has a 'subject position', defined as 'the ethical position which the material encourages the listener to adopt towards the social content'. In *Blurred Lines*, this position would be one where the listener accepts and empathises with [Thicke's](#) perception (as primary vocalist) that there are 'blurred lines' in the initiation of heterosexual relationships. The genre of the song (funk, with its prominent bass line) encourages this heteronormative sexual interpretation of the subject position, as funk is traditionally associated with 'the expression of male sexuality' ([Dibben, 1999:345](#)). *Blurred Lines* also includes a rap by T.I. which sets it within a masculinist discourse; rap, particularly gangster rap, is frequently associated with an overtly misogynistic and violent masculinity, with women being viewed solely as objects of male desire ([Dibben 1999:345](#); [Kubrin, 2005:306](#); [Skeggs, 1994:110](#)). [Durham \(2012\)](#) argues that popular music is permeated with this hip-hop vision of hypermasculinity, wealth display, and sexually available women. This combination of the genre, and the dominance of the two male voices suggests that *Blurred Lines* is encouraging listeners to view the pursuit of sexual gratification from the subject position of a heterosexual male, whose masculinity can be considered at times overtly misogynistic (but, according to the writers, not criminal or violent). Those rejecting a consent-based reading of the song tend to accept this subject position and feel that an awareness of 'blurred lines' does not equate with sexual violence; the song's subject is not a rapist.

However, it is possible to reject this subject position, viewing *Blurred Lines* as contributing to rape culture. One justification for the consent-based reading of *Blurred Lines* is that its lyrics index discourses of sexual violence. Critics drew direct comparisons between the lyrics and the words used by rapists during and/or after attacks. For example, [Project Unbreakable \(2014\)](#) collected photographs of rape and sexual assault survivors pictured alongside the words spoken by their attackers. These quotes include 'I know you want this... so open up and don't tell anyone' and 'Stop lying, I know this is what you want'. These words are mirrored in the key refrain of *Blurred Lines* – 'I know you want it' – independent of the songwriters' intent.

In a similar vein, [Horvarth, Hegarty, Tyler and Mansfield \(2012\)](#) demonstrated that young men and women struggled to tell the difference between quotes from media texts (specifically UK lads' mags) and quotes from convicted rapists. Their results showed that respondents correctly attributed only quotes 56.1% and 55.4% of the time, respectively, suggesting that respondents perceived some linguistic similarities between the two sets of quotations. Respondents also noted that the idea of miscommunication influenced their decisions: 'I've always thought as rapists as men that don't understand signals from women [...] saying no but really they mean yes' ([Horvarth et al., 2012:465](#)). Such sentiments are embedded within the subject position of *Blurred Lines*, where the singer apparently cannot interpret the signals being given by the object of his affections. [Horvarth et al. \(2012:467\)](#) note that 'the

'mainstream' status' of lads' magazines allows them to 'legitimise views about women that young men [and women] might otherwise consider unacceptable'. If such print media can be seen to influence views of male and female (hetero)sexuality, then arguably the same weight can be given to the lyrics (and videos) of popular music such as *Blurred Lines*.

3. Gender performativity and representation in popular music

As the visual representations of songs, music videos situate lyrics within a particular narrative, and therefore perform a powerful semiotic role in the interpretation of songs. Despite the potential for music videos to represent women as 'independent, strong, and self-reliant agents of their own desire' ([Emerson, 2002:116](#)), [Ward et al. \(2005:144\)](#) suggest that the world of music videos is an 'arena where images of powerful and dominant men and of sexually objectified women are especially prevalent'. [Seidman \(1992\)](#) shows that in music videos women are the recipients/initiators of sexual advances more than men, and are often depicted in 'revealing clothing'. In the *Blurred Lines* video, men wear suits and trousers, whilst women wear underwear, nude-coloured clothing and transparent plastic dresses. The video begins with singer Robin [Thicke](#) in bed wearing a white collared shirt beside a woman who is partially naked.

Feminist research ([Bates, 2014](#); [Baxter and Coslett, 2014](#); [Gill, 2006](#); [Walter, 2010](#)) has focused on the way that women are represented across a range of different media as sexualised and as complicit in their own sexual exploitation. [Hansen and Hansen \(1990\)](#), have expressed concern about the effects of this on younger audiences, whilst [Johnson et al. \(1995\)](#) and [Kalof \(1999\)](#) identified alterations in attitudes towards violence among respondents exposed to music videos that included implicit sexual violence. The sexualisation of women in music videos is also achieved through more implicit means. In their study of early-nineties' music videos, [Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan and Davis \(1993\)](#) observed that 'implicit sexuality', expressed through actions such as 'long lip licking', is a prominent feature. Semiotic resources such as lip licking and finger sucking appear in both the pre-watershed and unrated versions of the *Blurred Lines* video.

This study takes a feminist discourse analytical approach to audience responses to *Blurred Lines* and is underpinned by performative understandings of gender identity ([Butler, 1990, 1993](#)). In this model of gender, repeated linguistic (and non-linguistic) practices are viewed as constitutive; thus gender is something you *do* rather than something you *have*. However, most relevant to this study is the *performative* nature of gender: 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being' ([Butler, 1990: 33](#)). What we understand as normative gender performances are instantiated through repeated reference to particular discourses, or 'ways of seeing the world' ([Fairclough, 1992](#)). Thus, as with any kind of linguistic meaning, conceptualisations of gender identity are dependent on consensus. As [Goffman \(1976\)](#) argues, 'our gendered behaviour, as well as our concepts of masculinity and femininity are scripts that are dictated by our environment that we consciously and unconsciously learn and perform, in order to play our appropriate roles in society' (cited in [Wallis, 2011:161](#)).

Drawing on [Butler's \(1990, 1993\)](#) work, we argue that we are interpellated by representations of masculinity and femininity according to how they are constructed in our immediate environment. [Gauntlett \(2008:27\)](#) describes how 'interpellation occurs when a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a

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