

# Between Pleasure and Punishment: The Moral Vocabulary of Drug Use in Nigerian Digital Spaces

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## Abstract

Drug use among Nigerian youth is increasingly treated as both a public health crisis and a moral failing. This study examines how the crisis is narrated in digital spaces through slang, sentiment, and moral language that not only reflect consumption patterns but shape them. We analyzed 5,240 text samples: Twitter posts (n = 3,100), Nairaland threads (n = 920), and lyrics from 45 hip-hop and street-pop tracks (n = 1,220 lines), collected between January 2021 and March 2024. Using targeted keywords including “high”, “loud”, “colorado”, “skushi”, “roachies”, “tramadol”, and “codeine.” Using sentiment analysis (VADER), an adapted moral foundations tagging approach, and close qualitative coding, we traced how different drugs are framed across class, gender, and emotional registers. Stimulants such as “loud” and “tramadol” are often aligned with masculinity, performance, and aspiration, while sedatives like “codeine” and “rohypnol” appear more often in narratives of feminine withdrawal, vulnerability, or social regulation. Imported substances (e.g., “*Canadian Loud*,” “*SK*”) evoke status and trend-savviness; locally mixed drugs (e.g., “*monkey tail*,” “*gutter water*”) mark degradation, addiction, or spiritual decline. First-person disclosures carry tones of defiance or fatalism, while third-party accounts invoke disgust, fear, and betrayal of purity or religious authority. These moral framings do not merely describe behavior; rather, they regulate it. If public health is to be effective, it must move beyond condemnation and engage with the lived vocabularies of those it seeks to reach.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, drug discourse, gender, sentiment analysis, moral language, youth culture, psycholinguistics, slang, digital stigma, harm reduction

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## Introduction

Drug use in Nigeria is not merely a clinical issue. It is a contested terrain of morality, identity, and social order. Across urban street corners, religious pulpits, and digital platforms, narratives of drug consumption oscillate between condemnation and

normalization, with young people cast variously as victims, deviants, or heroes in the making (Adelekan & Lawal, 2006; Cowan et. Al., 2012, Atilola, 2012). Yet these narratives are rarely shaped by medical data alone. They are constructed through language: slang that seduces, slogans that shame, and metaphors that moralize. In a society marked by religious pluralism, economic inequality, and weak public health infrastructure, discourse itself becomes a mechanism of control (Agbibo, 2020; Gwarzo & Omosehin, 2023).

Recent years have witnessed an explosion in the visibility of psychoactive substances among Nigerian youth. “Loud” (a strain of high-grade cannabis), “colorado” (often synthetic cannabinoids), “skushi” (a locally brewed depressant), “tramadol,” “codeine,” and “roachies” (Rohypnol) form a shifting lexicon of pleasure, escape, and peril (Fawole & Adebayo, 2021; Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018). Digital spaces, from Twitter (X) threads to afrobeats lyrics do not merely reflect how these substances are used; they animate how they are culturally situated, morally justified, or socially condemned (Adebanjo et al., 2022; Ogunlesi, 2023). The popular slang “on colos,” used to describe altered mental states, captures this fluidity by simultaneously trivializing and dramatizing breakdown, as both trivialized meme and ominous warning.

The moral tone of such framings is neither static nor universal. Costly, imported stimulants like “Canadian loud” or “Mayan” are often aligned with aspirational masculinity and elite rebellion, while cheaper depressants like “sk,” “gutter water,” “monkey tail” are depicted as evidence of failure, spiritual decay, or feminine weakness (Salawu & Adebayo, 2021; Adebisi et al., 2020). Gendered framings appear especially stark: women are more often associated with impurity, excess, or relational ruin, while male users are alternately framed as misguided or masculine self-presentation as strong or emotionally detached (Oginni et al., 2021).

In this paper, we examine the moral and psycholinguistic architecture of drug-related discourse in Nigerian digital culture. Drawing on over 5,000 data points, from social media posts and online forums to lyrics by Davido, Naira Marley, Portable, and Burna Boy, we analyze how slang, sentiment, and moral language converge to create a social semiotics of drug use. This is not an account of pathology. It is an inquiry into meaning: who gets to define normalcy, whose pain gets dignified, and how digital speech recirculates both stigma and solidarity.

## **Epidemiology of Drug Use in Nigeria**

Drug use in Nigeria represents a growing public health emergency. According to the 2018 National Drug Use Survey (published by UNODC in 2019), 14.4% of Nigerians aged 15–64 had used psychoactive substances outside medical supervision, more than double the global average (UNODC, 2019). Cannabis (*weed*, *loud*, *skunk*), tramadol, and codeine-based syrups are widely used, often in combination. In recent years, synthetic

drugs like *Molly* and *Colorado (Colos)* have gained popularity among youth in urban slums and peri-urban communities. Gender disparities persist.

Men are more likely to use cannabis and prescription opioids openly, while women often use sedatives or codeine-based products covertly, frequently linked to trauma or intimate partner coercion (Afolabi et al., 2022). Northern Nigeria, especially the North-West and North-East, exhibits disproportionately high rates of use, with socioeconomic precarity, conflict exposure, and low access to mental health care acting as compounding factors.

### **Psycholinguistics of Stigma and Identity Performance**

In digital spaces, language becomes more than a tool; it acts as armor, mask, and megaphone. Nigerian youth often use coded slang to veil drug references while asserting group identity. Terms like *refnol* (Rohypnol), “*sk*” or “*skushies*” (a designer cocktail of narcotics), on *colos* (Colorado, a synthetic strain of marijuana), and *trabaye* (a Yoruba-English blend implying transcendence or being “on a trip”) are not only euphemisms but expressions of shared subcultural knowledge.

Drawing on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), these lexical choices enable users to frame drug use as an act of resistance, coping, or status. Meanwhile, institutional discourse, often from religious, political, and public health actors, casts drug use in narratives of moral failure, impurity, and community decay. The friction between self-narration and external condemnation fuels stigma and narrows spaces for help-seeking, especially for marginalized groups navigating peer expectations and social surveillance.

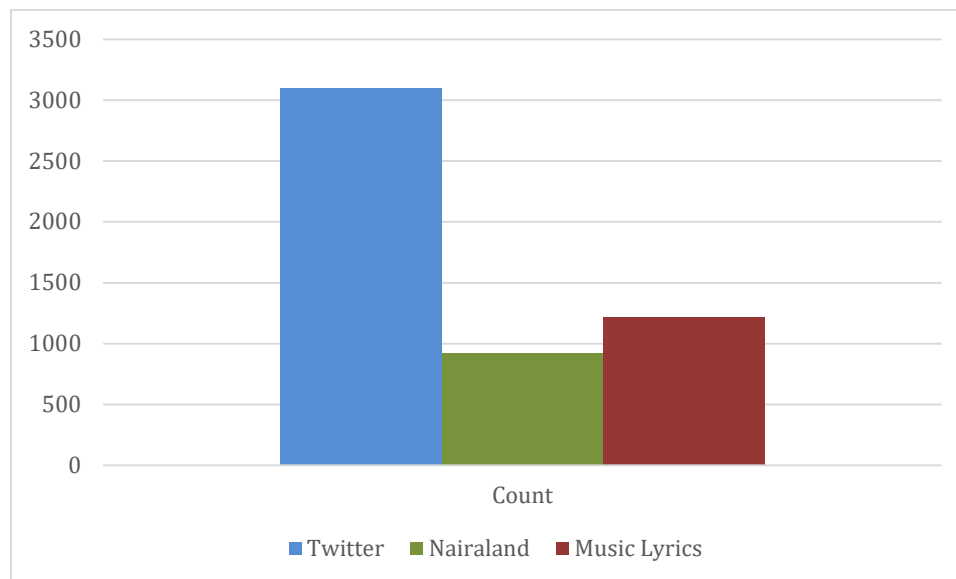
### **Moral Foundations and Affective Language in Online Drug Talk**

Online discourse around drugs in Nigeria is steeped in moral language. Using a modified Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2013, Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009), we observed a predominance of language linked to *purity*, *harm*, and *authority*. Users condemning drug use often frame it as a fall from moral grace, a threat to social order, or evidence of spiritual corruption. This is especially pronounced in religious forums and family-focused WhatsApp groups.

Yet, among users themselves, positive affect coexists with moral ambiguity. Drug use is linked to creativity, ambition, or pain relief, and is framed as a functional response to suffering or structural neglect. Slang terms such as *Mayan* (to lose one's mind), on *colos* (to be mentally detached), or *blow* (to succeed or escape) carry layered meanings that reflect both aspiration and despair. These affective registers shape how drug use is understood, not just as consumption, but as communication.

## Methods

### Data Collection



**Figure 1:** Data source distribution

We sampled 5,240 textual units across three platforms: Twitter ( $n = 3,100$ ), Nairaland discussion threads ( $n = 920$ ), and Nigerian hip-hop lyrics ( $n = 1,220$  lines). Keywords for data retrieval included colloquial drug references such as “loud,” “colorado,” “sk,” “skushi,” “roachies,” “refnol,” “tramadol,” “codeine,” “plug,” “kush,” and “trabaye.” Lyrics were extracted from official artist pages and curated music repositories between January 2021 and March 2024. Forum posts and tweets were scraped using custom Python scripts that filtered by geolocation (Nigeria) and timestamp.

### Sentiment Distribution by Source.

Sentiment scores were classified as positive, neutral, or negative based on VADER analysis across Twitter posts ( $n = 3,100$ ), Nairaland threads ( $n = 920$ ), and lyrics ( $n = 1,220$  lines).

### Preprocessing

All texts were normalized by converting to lowercase, removing emojis (except for dedicated emoji analysis), and filtering stopwords. Lemmatization was applied using spaCy’s Nigerian English-adapted pipeline. Code-switched segments and non-standard vernacular were retained for separate annotation.

### Sentiment and Moral Language Analysis

Sentiment scoring employed the VADER algorithm, modified by incorporating Nigerian-specific slang and lexical items common in Twitter and lyrics datasets. Moral foundation coding was performed using a custom-extended version of the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2013), which included culturally specific entries (e.g., “aboki,” “wahala,” “ogun,” “ritual,” “igbo,” “weed”).

### Emoji and Lexical Classification

Emoji were analyzed using a curated lexicon of affective and drug-use-related emojis (e.g., 🍷, 🍓, 🤔, 😘, 🙄). We categorized usage based on co-occurrence with text themes. Lexical diversity was measured using Type-Token Ratio and Shannon entropy.

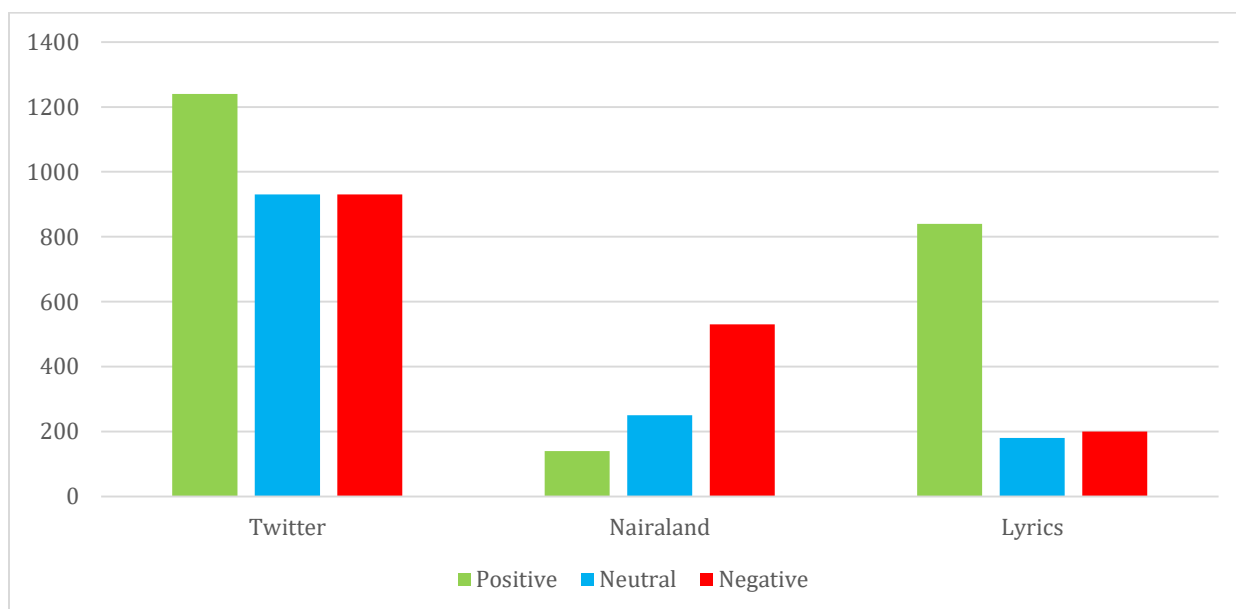
### Qualitative Coding

A stratified random sample of 200 texts was analyzed using NVivo. Codes focused on:

- Identity performance (e.g., aspirational framing, toughness, transcendence),
- Metaphor use (e.g., fire, sleep, water, air, breeze),
- Agency attribution (e.g., “I am on another level,” “I am inspired”).

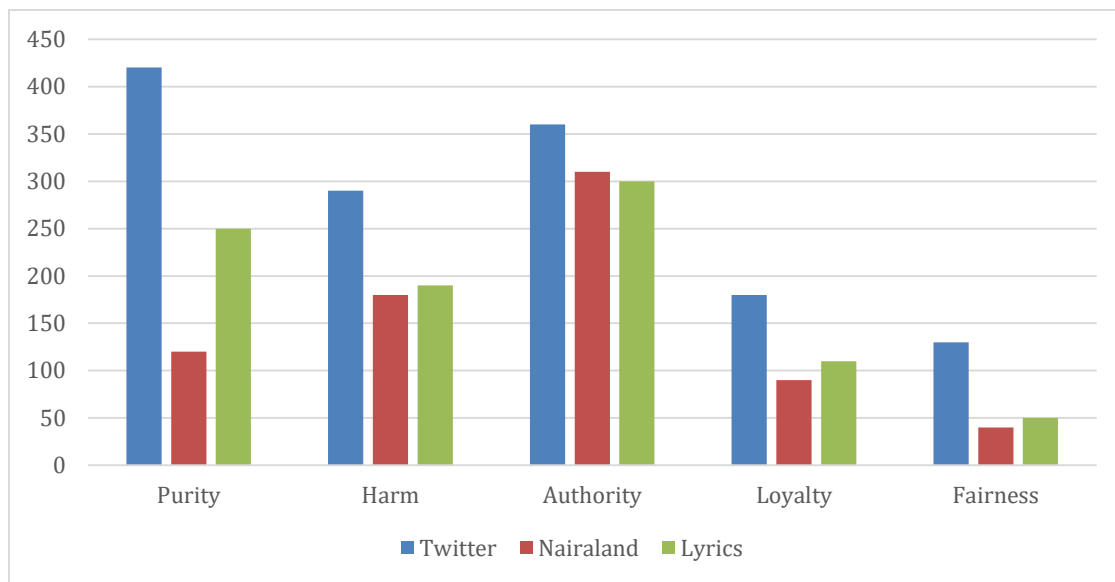
Intercoder reliability (Cohen’s  $\kappa$ ) exceeded 0.82 across all major codes (see Appendix A for full breakdown).

## Results



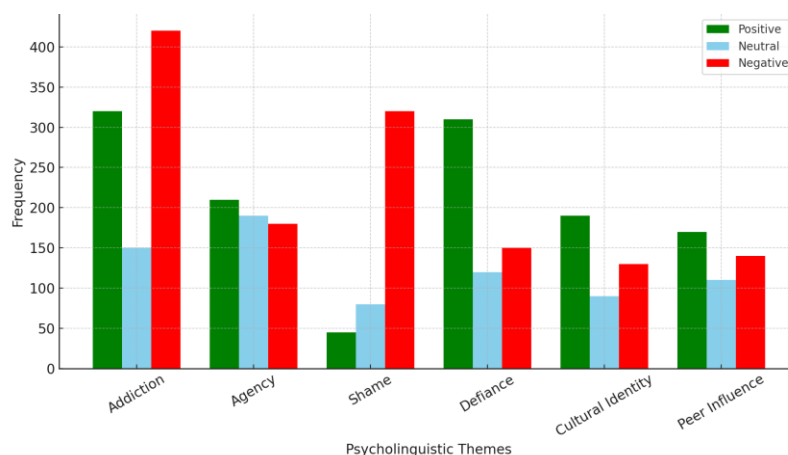
**Figure 2:** Sentiment Distribution by source

Sentiment analysis revealed clear distinctions in emotional tone across data sources (see Figure 2). Twitter posts were the most positively valenced, with 43.8% expressing pride, euphoria, or ironic celebration of drug use. Neutral sentiment constituted 12.6% of Twitter posts, with the remainder (43.6%) negative. On Nairaland, 6.7% of posts were neutral, with 37.7% positive and 55.6% negative. In contrast, Nairaland threads skewed negative (55.6%), often using disgust and fear frames. Lyrics, while emotionally varied, tended toward stylized neutrality or bravado. These differences suggest divergent roles of each medium: Twitter as self-performance, Nairaland as moral critique, and music as narrative styling.



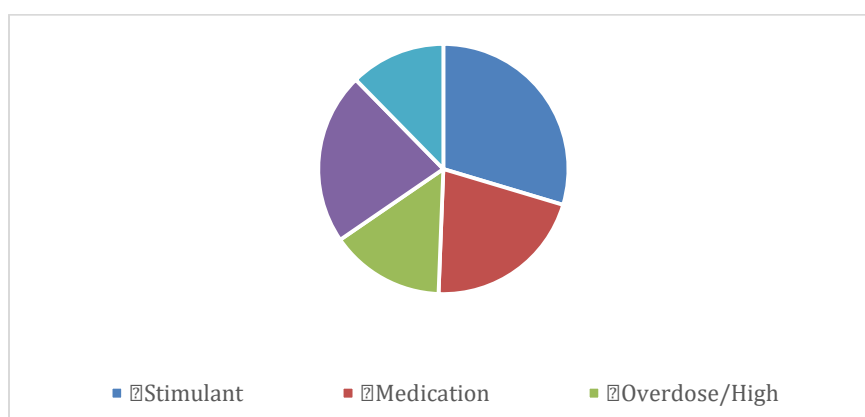
**Figure 3:** *Moral Language Distribution by source*

Moral foundation tagging (see Figure 3) showed that the most frequent themes were *Harm/Care* and *Purity*, especially in institutional and third-person references. Twitter posts often featured *Authority/Subversion* language, particularly when referencing police raids or government failures. Lyrics used *Loyalty* and *Fairness* metaphors to defend peer use or critique inequality in enforcement. Nairaland posts displayed high concern for *Purity*, with emphasis on spiritual decay and bodily corruption.



**Figure 4 :** Sentiment distribution by psycholinguistic theme

Sentiment patterns varied meaningfully across psycholinguistic themes (see Figure 4). Addiction discourse was dominated by negative sentiment ( $n = 420$ ), often framed in terms of hopelessness or social decay. Shame similarly drew overwhelmingly negative sentiment ( $n = 320$ ), especially in reference to female users and religious norms. In contrast, Defiance and Agency were more frequently associated with positive sentiment ( $n = 310$  and  $n = 210$  respectively), suggesting an expressive counter-narrative in which drug use serves as a marker of autonomy, rebellion, or masculine performance. Themes of Cultural Identity and Peer Influence showed a more balanced sentiment distribution, reflecting both normalization and latent ambivalence. These patterns support the interpretation that affective tone is closely tied to the social function of each theme, rather than drug use per se.



**Figure 5 :** Emoji Classification by Drug Type

Emoji analysis (see Figure 5) supported the thematic framing of drugs along psychophysiological lines. Symbols like 🔥, 🚀, and 🚰 marked stimulant use (e.g.,

“loud,” “colorado”), while 🚗 and 😴 captured sedative effects (e.g., codeine, rohypnol). Emojis also indexed identity: defiance (😡), dependency (😵💩), and spiritual escapism (🙏). These non-verbal cues reinforced narrative framings found in text, especially among youth subcultures.

## **Discussion**

### **Sentiment and Linguistic Norms**

Our findings reveal a layered affective terrain surrounding drug discourse in Nigerian digital spaces. Positive and neutral sentiments dominate self-referential expressions, particularly on Twitter and in music lyrics, and are associated with narratives of agency, pleasure, and self-curated identity. This pattern reflects the emotional framing of agency and identity affirmation within Roseman's appraisal theory, where emotions both reflect and reinforce motivational states in context-dependent ways. In contrast, more conservative forums like Nairaland exhibit pronounced negativity, often invoking disgust and fear; affective markers that signal disapproval and boundary defense. These alignments point at how digital architecture and community norms regulate emotional expression and moral tone. For example, Twitter's brevity may encourage bravado, while Nairaland's anonymity facilitates moral policing.

### **The Role of Moral Language**

Moral analysis revealed harm and purity as dominant foundations, with harm-based appeals centering on self-destruction, addiction, and community breakdown, while purity language invoked religious and familial imagery of contamination. Authority frames, often subtle, referenced figures like “the plug,” “elders,” or “the law,” suggesting diffuse and unstable moral anchors. These patterns mirror the language of moralization as strategic affective positioning (Brady et al., 2017) and support Roseman's contention that moral emotions arise when appraisals of blame or threat are fused with social scripts. Rather than offering guidance, this form of public moralizing may entrench drug use as both rebellion and self-statement.

### **Gendered Tropes and Digital Masculinities**

Masculine-coded discourse dominated both lyrical and social media data, often glorifying altered states, high thresholds for intoxication, and emotional detachment (“I dey on colos, I dey above you”). This aligns with objectification theory as refracted through masculine self-presentation, that is, where one's body and experience are performatively shaped for external validation (Markey, 2015; Bello, 2023). Female voices, by contrast, were rarer and more likely to depict intoxication as vulnerability or relational distress. These tropes evoke the asymmetry of objectification between genders and suggest that



digital drug discourse reinforces hegemonic masculinities while positioning femininity within moral caution or rescue narratives.

### **Implications for Public Health and Cultural Competence**

These findings complicate traditional models of drug education. Interventions anchored in moral condemnation or shame, particularly those targeting purity or authority, risk alienating users embedded in peer networks where drug use is normalized or aestheticized. As both emotion and identity are deeply woven into discourse, responses must be attuned to the emotional grammars that young Nigerians use (Roseman, 2017). Health communication efforts that fail to engage with these frameworks may inadvertently reinforce stigma and moral panic, thereby undermining trust and relevance. Instead, culturally literate approaches must address emotional, moral, and semiotic registers, particularly in digital spaces where language and legitimacy are constantly negotiated.

### **Conclusion**

Drug discourse in Nigerian online spaces is not merely descriptive, but actively generative, shaping how psychoactive substances are framed, experienced, and contested. This study found that the language surrounding drugs is often emotionally saturated, morally coded, and socially performative. While self-referential drug talk tends to adopt prideful or humorous tones, institutional and outsider commentary often triggers moral panic, invoking disgust, fear, and shame. These tensions reflect the emotional complexity of Nigerian youth identity, shaped by digital culture, socioeconomic precarity, and generational divides in moral ideology. Importantly, our analysis reveals that stigmatizing or paternalistic language may deepen rather than resolve the problem. The discursive divide between masculine valorization and feminine caution is indicative of broader inequalities in agency and moral burden.

### **Recommendations**

Public health campaigns on drug use in Nigeria need to move beyond moralising. Messages that tap into real-life emotions like curiosity, peer pressure, or the struggle to survive will resonate more than those based on fear or rigid abstinence. It's also important to recognise the different ways drug use is discussed across gender. While men are often celebrated for risk-taking, women tend to be framed as either victims or moral guardians. Effective messaging must reflect this imbalance and respond accordingly.

Language matters. Campaigns should incorporate local slang and cultural references, especially those shaping how young people talk about drugs online. Working with musicians, influencers, and digital creators can make prevention messages more

credible and engaging. Emotional framing is also key. Instead of guilt or shame, messages should highlight pride, dignity, and connection as reasons to avoid drugs. Finally, tracking how drugs are talked about online, especially new slang or viral narratives, can help public health actors respond quickly and stay ahead of emerging risks. Social media isn't just a mirror; it is a map.

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## **Appendix A. Intercoder Reliability for Qualitative Themes**

<i>Code</i>	<i>Cohen's <math>\kappa</math></i>
Shame	0.84
Defiance	0.86
Addiction	0.83
Peer Pressure	0.82
Agency	0.85
Masculinity Themes	0.88
Vulnerability (Femininity)	0.83
Moral Judgment	0.87
Spiritual Imagery	0.86