

Let It Be: The Beatles in Sticker Form, a Genre Analysis

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What do Beatlemania and decorating water bottles have in common? You guessed it (or maybe you didn't if you didn't read the title): Beatles stickers. Felicity Schryer looks in-depth at the genre of vinyl stickers and how Beatles vinyl stickers operate as texts for Beatles fans.

Here, There, and an Introduction

“We’re more popular than Jesus, now.” —John Lennon

With this extremely controversial quote, Lennon showed the world how big the Beatles had become in the 1960s. He later retracted his statement in response to the public reaction, but to be able to say that, true or not, shows how popular the Beatles were.

Beatlemania is something that will never be replicated. No superstar, not Taylor Swift or Harry Styles, will ever have what they had. Screaming girls, police escorts—you don't see that type of thing today. OK, so you might. But that particular type of mania, Beatlemania, is a thing of the past, and it's a thing of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. Their influence on music is still felt today. They were the first boy band and one of the first rock bands; the music and the impact that the Beatles created will still be felt long after they've all died. Their music and style has left an enormous mark on the industry. Widely considered the best rock band of all time, so much of rock and pop music (and their offshoots) can be directly traced to the Beatles.



Figure 1: Scan this QR code to visit the official Beatles online store (*The Beatles Store*).

Many musicians, like Bruce Springsteen and Dave Grohl, are consciously influenced by the Beatles and will list them among the bands that have shaped them.

It follows that the Beatles still have fans 60 years after their meteoric rise. These include people who, whether they are musicians or not, enjoy the music and feel connected to the band. And how do those Beatles fans express themselves? Well, one way they do this is by purchasing a huge range of different kinds of gear. The licensing of these products is big business. People can purchase official Beatles gear on the online website, *The Beatles Store* (Figure 1).

Speaking for myself, as a huge Beatles fan, one way I engage in fan expression is through Beatles vinyl stickers.

The Long and Winding Road Begins

When I was working to come up with an idea for a *Grassroots* article, I struggled with choosing a topic more than anything else. But at one point in the process of brainstorming, I looked down at my water bottle and saw something: a vinyl sticker of the famous photo of the Beatles strolling down a street in Bloomsbury in the 1960s (Figure 2).

Inspiration struck—what if I wrote about Beatles stickers? At this point in the writing process, I was practically out of options and would've done



Figure 2: The inspirational sticker.

anything that sounded remotely interesting. The Beatles were interesting to me. They have always been my favorite band and I could spend hours talking about how important the Beatles were to the development of music (though this didn't end up having much to do with this article).

Stickers would be the hard part, I decided, as I studied the rest of my water bottle, turning it slowly around and staring at all the stickers decorating it. I obviously used this genre plenty, but I wasn't sure how to write about it. And stickers didn't feel like something most people would consider a genre, which kind of just made it more interesting to me. In the ISU Writing Program, **genres** are “many different kinds of written texts,” like stickers, that we can see “as recognizable responses to recurring situations” (having a place to put a sticker and wanting to express something about yourself) “that accomplish specific social action in the world” (like showing people you are a Beatles fan) (“Genre Research Terms”). As I researched the world of vinyl stickers, I realized how complex and interesting this genre really was.

Here Comes the (Beatles) Sticker

All genres have histories. They are connected to other genres, and they evolve over time. You might ask, what history could there possibly be in vinyl stickers? And what even is a vinyl sticker? What great questions!

You have probably heard of vinyl records, and the material in those records is the same in the stickers covering your water bottles and laptops. It's used for its waterproof properties and because it can be colored easily (Novak, et al.).

For those who are interested in the history of stuff, here's a bit about the evolution of vinyl as a product. Vinyl was first discovered by accident in 1926 and was used in many products including piping. Vinyl usage in pressure-sensitive products started in 1937 when it was used for road signs (Nielsen). This failed, and vinyl fell off the radar until the 1950s when new developments in the industry allowed vinyl to be used across the country, from bumper stickers to US military logos (Nielsen). In 1960, short-term display signs also became available and kick-started massive advancements. Available vinyl colors widened from the original options of white, black, red, and blue, and advancements included film for windows among other things (Nielsen). Also in the 1960s, microreplicated air channels were created allowing air to escape so you no longer had to stop and pop air bubbles with needles and knives (Novak, et al.). And, in 1991, electrostatic printers were designed, allowing for liquid toners to be applied, which means that more graphics could be created faster (Benedek 627).

Are you still with me? If you are getting bored with the history of vinyl, all you need to know right now is that the vinyl stickers on your water bottle, laptop, or other belongings are a product of decades of development in the industry. And now, here comes the fun part.

The explosion in the use of vinyl stickers began in the 1990s, according to the website StickerYou:

By the 1990s the sticker craze was in full swing. Stickers could now be smelly, fuzzy, puffy, scaly, perforated, and some could even glow in the dark. Stickers were used as promotional items for TV Shows, musicians, movies, and toys. People collected stickers in books, put them on luggage, walls, cars, clothes, and everything in between. (“StickerYou 101”)

Stickers are everywhere today. They decorate street corners and light poles, and you can run across them in nearly every city (at least every city that I’ve been to). Stickers are often used to express personality and as a conversation starter. Because they are relatively affordable, they can be used everywhere and are an easy way to express personality in something simple and colorful.

And this brings us to back Beatles stickers. Part of the British Invasion era of music (“List of British Invasion Artists”), the Beatles are still celebrated today for their groundbreaking songs. Because of this, they still have many fans, including me. As I explained before, people use vinyl stickers to express aspects of their personality, so fans of the Beatles (including me) use vinyl stickers to show our love of John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

And while we’re talking about the history of Beatles stickers, I should talk about my interactions with Beatles stickers and vinyl stickers in general. My dad is a big fan of classic rock, so I grew up with the Beatles, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Bruce Springsteen, and others. I can’t remember a time without knowing who the Beatles were and knowing their songs.

I first used vinyl stickers when a good friend of mine gave me a gift of musical- and book-themed vinyl stickers (I love musicals, and I’m a big reader), and I immediately put them on my water bottle. I didn’t want to put them on something permanent or easily lost, so my water bottle was the best option. I would replace the stickers as they deteriorated over time.

On my birthday, a friend of mine gave me Beatles stickers as a gift. I immediately used them to replace some of the stickers on my water bottle. This is how they came to be on my water bottle on that fateful day when I looked down and wondered, “Hey, why don’t I write an article about that?”

All We Need Is Conventions

I discussed some of the history of vinyl stickers above, but what about Beatles vinyl stickers specifically? When I ask this question, I'm really asking about the genre conventions of Beatles stickers. According to the ISU Writing Program, "**genre conventions** refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" ("Genre Research Terms"). Simply put, if you understand Beatles stickers as a genre, you can ask questions to differentiate them from other kinds of texts.

To make a Beatles sticker a Beatles sticker, it has to clearly show that it is a Beatles sticker. (Did that sentence confuse you? It confused me.) What I mean is, the sticker has to include elements that would allow someone to recognize it as (a) a vinyl sticker, and (b) a sticker that is related to the Beatles. So really, it's pretty straightforward—or maybe it's not because Beatles stickers can be very different (in size, shape, and color) and still be Beatles stickers if the aforementioned basic conventions are met.

Beatles stickers usually have a picture of the Beatles with some flair, song lyrics, or an album cover. As I work to describe the conventions of the genre of Beatles stickers, I'm going to split it up into four categories: album covers, song lyrics, iconic photos, and puns. You must remember, though, that there can always be overlap in the categories, like when there is an album-themed pun.

Album Covers

For any band, albums are incredibly important, and this is the same for the Beatles. Depending on what you count as an album, the Beatles released 12–17 albums during their roughly eight years together. (They released US versions of some albums, which can count depending on who you talk to.) Out of these albums, I would make the case that the earlier Beatles albums are much less likely to be made into stickers. Early Beatles albums aren't as famous, and they often just have the Beatles' faces. For example, the Beatles have an album called "With the Beatles," which shows their half-shadowed faces (Figure 3). This would not make a good sticker because you're missing half of their faces, and there's not much that you can do with it. Their later albums like "Yellow Submarine," "Abbey Road," "Help," and others are much more famous and much easier to transform into stickers because they have more detailed and vibrant covers and, therefore, are better options to



Figure 3: Scan this QR code to see the cover of the Beatles album "With the Beatles" ("With the Beatles").



Figure 4: An example of an album cover turned sticker (“Beatles Stickers”).

transform into vinyl stickers that will also appeal to fans (Figure 4).

Song Lyrics

The Beatles wrote many, many famous songs which still have relevance and impact in popular culture today. Because of this lasting relevance, the Beatles’ song lyrics still impact music listeners today. Songs like “Blackbird” and their various love songs are made into stickers to allow Beatles fans to be able to remind themselves of the beauty in those song lyrics all the time.

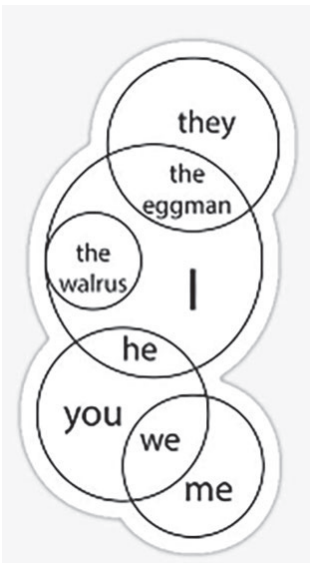


Figure 5: A sticker poking fun at the Beatles song “I Am the Walrus” (“Beatles Stickers”).

There is another reason why song lyrics get turned into stickers and that is their “hippy” or “weird” element. The Beatles wrote many great songs. They also wrote many weird ones, and some Beatles stickers poke fun at these weirder aspects. For example, in Figure 5, there is a picture of a sticker depicting how the song, “I Am the Walrus” could be interpreted. There are also stickers poking fun of songs like “Strawberry Fields Forever,” “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” and “Come Together.” They have lyrics like “nothing is real,” “in her kaleidoscope eyes,” and “one and one and one is three.” Often, these lyrics barely make sense in the context of the songs, and a listener can tell which songs may have been written while under the influence of certain mind-bending drugs. (The Beatles admitted the use of drugs while performing and writing some of their songs [Nelson].) Beatles fans lovingly poke fun at some of the trippier Beatles’ songs through stickers and other memorabilia.

Iconic Photos

Just like many modern stars, the Beatles were photographed wherever they went. Sometimes these would be staged photo shoots, and other times they would be paparazzi photos. This category has the most overlap with the other categories. For example, not only is Abbey Road an album cover, it is also a very famous photo. (Personally, I believe it falls into the album cover label, but an argument could be made.) And sometimes these famous photos will have song lyrics below them.

However, there are some stickers that must fall into this category. For example, Figure 6 shows a sticker of the famous photo of the Beatles walking down the street in Liverpool. This photo became iconic afterward, and there is a statute where that photo was taken today. There are other examples of this, but this is the most common adaptation of a famous photo.



Figure 6: A sticker depicting that famous photo in Liverpool (“Beatles Stickers”).

Puns

Personally, I don’t like puns. However, other people do, and there are stickers that appeal to this share of the population. An example of this is the “John Lemon” sticker (Figure 7). A play on the name of John Lennon, this falls into the category of puns and is the most obvious example. You can find multiple versions of this sticker, but you can also find other stickers with puns. Figure 8 shows the Sergeant “Peppurr’s” Lonely Hearts “Cat” Band, another example of a play on words to create an effective sticker.

This category often falls into one of the above categories too. For example, a common sticker to appear is a famous photo of the Beatles but with actual beetles. This is both a pun and a famous photo adaptation and, therefore, is another example of overlap.



Figure 7: The John “Lemon” sticker (“Beatles Stickers”).



Figure 8: The Sergeant Peppurr’s Lonely Hearts Cat Band sticker (“Beatles Stickers”).

Researching Fields Forever

After all this research I had done, I thought I was in a pretty good place for recognizing the genre conventions. But there are always more questions to ask—and that’s where P-CHAT comes in. According to the ISU Writing Program, **P-CHAT** is a theory used to understand and study writing as complex (“Literate Activity Terms”). There are seven P-CHAT terms that we can use to understand how texts are understood, produced, and disseminated, and how texts—and their genre conventions—are used to make meaning in the world. So even after doing genre analysis in the previous sections of this article to identify some genre conventions of Beatles vinyl stickers, I can still use any P-CHAT term to ask more in-depth research questions about vinyl stickers as texts in the world. Even though there are seven terms, I’m going to focus on one that I see as most relevant to apply to vinyl stickers: reception.

Reception is defined as “how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (Walker 76). Reception isn’t just how other people perceive a genre or its conventions; it is also about how someone uses it in real life for their own purposes.

So how does reception work for vinyl stickers? As I mentioned above, I have vinyl stickers that decorate my water bottle. I also use them to decorate different notebooks and folders I own. My parents both have University of Illinois and National Parks stickers on their laptops, and my sister has various stickers on her water bottle too. I have friends who use stickers on their cell phones, and there are people in my school who put stickers (somewhat illicitly) on lockers. These are all common examples of ways that I’ve seen vinyl stickers used and what I believe were some of the intended uses when the stickers were made.

One of the most useful anecdotes that I know about reception is a story about what happened when my sister and I first got a pack of stickers. We both chose to put them on our water bottles. My sister and I took very different approaches. I like things ordered and planned out. My sister likes doing things spontaneously and going with the flow. When I put the stickers on my water bottle, I organized them and planned it out beforehand. I made sure that the stickers would be evenly spaced out and organized. I wasn’t going to have the same type of stickers next to each other, and I wasn’t going to waste any space on my water bottle. My sister went right at it, putting stickers everywhere. There were huge gaps, and the stickers were randomly placed. My and my sister’s receptions were so different that they caused us to approach the genre in completely different ways (Figure 9).



Figure 9: My and my sister's water bottles.

How many times have you seen a person stick a sticker on their forehead? Or their cheek? Or some other part of their face? And people put stickers elsewhere out in the world too: on street signs, on buildings, etc. They do this both with and without permission from the people who own or control those surfaces. In many cases, this isn't what was intended when the sticker was created, and this is a consequence of humans being unpredictable.

So, like all vinyl stickers, Beatles stickers are a complex genre and the way they are used or misused is all about people's reception in practice.

A Hard Day's Conclusion

What makes a Beatles sticker recognizable as a genre? How do people use vinyl stickers in different ways?

These were the questions I set out to answer when I started this article, and I think that I have had moderate success. Throughout my long and arduous journey through the history and an analysis of vinyl stickers, I hoped to answer these questions.

Did I succeed? I think the answer is a resounding maybe.

Really, Beatles stickers are a complex genre that has developed in interesting and unusual ways. Vinyl stickers themselves are fascinating, and the evolving forms that vinyl stickers take is a fascinating research area that lots of people write about. The Beatles made music 60 years ago, but modern technology allows Beatles fans to have a new way to represent their band that did not exist in the 1960s. As a very specific genre, Beatles stickers have many conventions that go into making them recognizable and appealing to fans. By researching and analyzing their genre conventions, I have learned that something simple I look at every day is more complex than I realized, which is what research can do for us as writers and users of everyday genres like vinyl stickers.

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Notes



Drawing by Grace Betts