Peace Up, A-town Down: Exploring the Evolution of Popular Music

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ABSTRACT

People listen to music for a variety of reasons and these reasons are different for everyone. What specifically are the reasons large numbers of people tune into the most popular songs? This qualitative study thematically examined the lyrical changes in popular songs across three decades. Discovering the lyrical characteristics of popular songs over time could give some insight into how people were feeling at a certain point in time, their opinions towards various subjects, or how they enjoyed themselves in their free time. This can be illustrated by which particular song is most popular over a specific year and how this song is structured lyrically. Conceivably, uncovering the lyrical progression and evolution of music over time will provide a better understanding of society in general, how society changes over time, and where society and its preferences are headed towards moving forward.

KEYWORDS: Music Interpretation, Qualitative Research, Social Identity, Society, Lyrics, Music

Introduction

Throughout history, music has been an important aspect of human life (Wright & Rubin, 2016). Starting at birth people are exposed to various forms of music, and sometimes go as far as creating their own music during early stages of life (Ilari, 2016). Essentially, as humans, we are born with an appreciation for music and it continues to be a source of enjoyment throughout people's lives.

Music is a lifelong area of interest throughout the lives of many people and has also been found to be a contributing factor in how a person shapes their personal identity (Wright & Rubin, 2016). In other words, a person's music taste can directly affect how people define themselves, which influences how other people perceive them on a daily basis. Obviously, due to the importance of music, people often have strong opinions towards music and distinct musical preferences. In fact, the music industry is a multi-billion-dollar industry due to people supporting their favorite musical acts in various ways (Au, 2005).

Music is clearly an important part of human life, but music preferences and trends in the music industry are constantly changing. The sounds and lyrics of popular music constantly varies, and certain decades of music can be identified by the popular music within that specific decade

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(Hodges & Wilkins, 2015). For instance, it is conceivable to believe a person could classify a "90s song" simply by hearing it.

Music evolves and changes frequently for a number of reasons. Preferences of consumers is a convenient way to explain this phenomenon, but popular music can be directly impacted by other incidents as well. There are times when an event in society occurs and the trends in music are directly affected. For example, whenever a popular artist dies, their music tends to sell more. Recently, an artist by the name of Mac Miller passed away and streams of his music increased 970% (Caulfield, 2018). Another example occurred when Princess Diana passed away in 1997 and the artist Elton John rewrote and rereleased his song "Candle in the Wind" as a tribute to her. This song was originally released in 1973 and the rerelease was the top song of the year 1997 because of the passing of Princess Diana (Billboard, 2018).

These are a couple examples illustrating the impact on the music industry due to events occurring in society because music can be used in a plethora of ways. In these two instances, one could argue music was being used as a coping mechanism. These two examples also illustrate how music can make an impact towards people of all ages and backgrounds because Mac Miller and Elton John's audiences most definitely target very different demographics. Music has the incredible ability to adapt and evolve based on the ever-changing preferences of consumers and music lovers (Mauch, MacCallum, Levy & Leroi, 2015). Music can also transcend its place in society, which is a form of entertainment, as illustrated by the aforementioned examples. Therefore, popular music can shed insight into how people from a certain era were feeling internally by discovering how musical tastes change year after year.

Discovering how popular music changes can conceivably explain society as a whole during the time the specific songs of that time are most popular. More specifically, what the political climate was, occurrences of significant societal events, how experiences of those different from ourselves differed from our own, extensive opinions towards love and the human condition, etc. Music has the ability to be an outlet or a support system during a plethora of scenarios. Therefore the guiding question for this study was, how have lyrics to popular songs changed over the years? The differences in the way these songs sound is obvious, but are the lyrics to popular songs consistent over time? How specifically has the most popular music from various eras evolved lyrically, if at all? Exploring the changes in popular music, and understanding these changes can provide an interesting understanding of how previous generations coped with various events, grieved, enjoyed themselves, relaxed, established an identity during different stages of life.

Literature Review

Popular music is a means of self-expression and a form of entertainment for individuals who find enjoyment from consuming music. Research on popular music, specifically lyrics, has been lacking when compared to visual media (Hahn et al., 2018). Meaning, content analyses have been centered on film and television, but there appears to be a missing area within music and lyrical interpretation. Analyzing music and its lyrics should be done because music is a way individuals reinforce their beliefs and music also has the ability to reinforce societal norms (Hahn et al., 2018). Thus, understanding music goes further than simply being a form of entertainment for consumers should be explored.

Music is also a way for people to express themselves, and sometimes alter their public persona. Music has been identified as a manner in which individuals can alter and express their

own form of personal identity (Palaiologou & Gialamas, 2015; Pattinson, 2018). Music has the ability to be such an important aspect of many people's lives that it results in people changing their behaviors. For example, certain genres of music suggest a proper way for fans of said genre to act or dress. The "emo music" culture could be an example of this, with male fans wearing eyeliner and skinny jeans. Also, fans of country music wearing cowboy boots and large belt buckles, or fans of "electronic dance music" using glow-sticks and "head banging" at EDM festivals. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon, which implies a particular genre of music one enjoys, inherently recommends an identity its fans should adopt.

Furthermore, music has the ability to be a large part of any particular culture (Verboord & Brandellero, 2016). Therefore, understanding how popular music has changed over the course of time can help illuminate how members of society have changed, or not changed, over time. Music is sometimes referred to as a tool for certain cultures, and can change depending on where the music is being generated geographically (Verboord & Noord, 2016). Geographic locations are sometimes associated with a particular type of music and this can directly influence the culture of the location. For instance, Nashville, Tennessee is associated with country music, Compton, California is a well-known city in hip-hop culture, and the country of Jamaica is associated with Reggae music. Beyond having an association with particular cultures, music can also create particular cultures (Morris, 2013). Meaning, a sense of community can be generated by fans of a particular genre or artist because of how strongly the fans identify. Think genres of music people are fans of that will never be played on the radio, like "pirate rap" for instance. The fans of these unique types of music have the ability to create their own sense of community and culture from the music they most enjoy. The influence music has on people and society should be further explored to understand the extent its influence.

Music is extremely influential within our society and politically speaking, music can be a contributing factor during political campaigns. Political figures make specific decisions when deciding which song will serve as a particular theme for their campaign because the song will be connected to their political persona (Dewberry & Millen, 2014). If the lyrics of a song can be interpreted in a negative way, then political candidates will try and avoid the negative association by using a different song. This example illustrates how even subtly, the lyrics of songs are an important area of research. Lyrics can be interpreted in a variety of ways and impact how a person views the world, as well as themselves.

Beyond politicians using songs for campaigns and during events, the music industry in general has had an active voice in politics for several years. P Diddy's "Vote or Die" campaign is an example of this by popular artists using their voice to generate a higher voter turnout in a presidential election. Internationally the music industry has attempted similar actions by the music industry using social media to generate higher voter turnout in Mexico (Red, 2013). Nowadays, artists, producers and music executives have the ability to directly communicate with their fans on social media and possibly impact civic engagement (Carothers, 2018; Verboord & Noord, 2016; Tarman & Kılınc, 2018). This is made possible by the identification some fans feels with these music artists, which is arguably a result of the impact song lyrics these artists write and sing have on fans.

Music has been a consistent part of culture throughout everyone's life (Wright & Rubin, 2016). Nowadays, music is easily consumed due to advancements in technology. For instance, social media is a useful tool within the music industry to disseminate information related to music,

and share music with consumers (Verboord & Noord, 2016). Artists can share their music directly with their fans with the click of a button, whereas this action was impossible in years past. Compare this to the past years when the radio was one of the largest media platforms and the only way consumers could listen to music, one may believe that the influence of music has decreased (Mazzarella, Hains & Thiel-Stern, 2013). However, the fact music has become extremely easy to consume, while remaining highly influential, suggests music has extended its influence by giving a larger platform for a plethora of artists rather than influential artists being limited to AM and FM radio. This suggests the need to understand music and the evolution of lyrics should be an important aspect of research because of the accessibility people have in consuming music, as well as the impact music has on society and a person's identity. Therefore, the evolution of song lyrics should have implications into how society has changed, in addition to how people within our society have changed over the years. Understanding the evolution of lyrics in popular music is essential in understanding how our society has changed, or not changed over the years.

Methods

Research Design

The goal of this study was to analyze how/if lyrics to songs have changed over time, and if so, how have they changed. Specifically, how did music lyrics of the top popular billboard songs change from 1980-2009? Analyzing these songs qualitatively is the best manner in which to discover these changes. Qualitative methods offered the greatest opportunity to most effectively answer the research question because it allows me to analyze each musical artist's specific message, rather than solely measuring frequencies within the lyrics. Other methods of research did not allow for the desired level of flexibility offered by analyzing data qualitatively because songwriter's intent could not be as easily identified. The data being analyzed allowed for the identification of major and minor themes within the songs. Again, these songs were being analyzed in an effort to explain possible trends in song lyrics and potential phenomena within the music industry. This study was based in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 5) because there was no way of knowing what the assessment of lyrics would uncover.

The examination of lyrics suggested a document review method to be the most beneficial towards answering the research question. Each song's lyrics were read and analyzed to help better answer the research question. The lyrics were coded and during the coding process, major and minor themes were found. Open coding began with using the lyrics of each song analyzed to identify the aforementioned major and minor themes. Open coding led to the process of axial coding by comparing themes across the decades (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Finally, the themes were selectively coded to provide an answer to the question, "how have lyrics changed over the years?" Selective coding allowed meaning to be applied to the results generated by the coding process.

It should be noted this study was viewed through a critical lens during the examination of the songs, the coding of the data, and the interpretation of the codes and themes found. This is shown during the process of applying specific meaning to various themes during coding because lyrics are understood by having prior knowledge of social structures and societal norms. For example, breakups are directly related to societal practices of finding a romantic partner and making the decision to enter into a monogamous relationship, as society suggests. Breaking up

occurs when one or both parties ultimately deciding to end this relationship, which is a common idea known within our society. Therefore, songs referencing a breakup within this study will be understood and interpreted properly. This is only one example illustrating this point, but there are similar observations found throughout the investigation, which further explains the paradigm applied in this study.

Sampling and Data Collection

To examine changes in song lyrics, I selected a sample of songs from each decade based on specific criteria. Songs were chosen by their popularity during the years they were released. The level of popularity per song was known due to them being identified by Billboard as the most popular song from each year ranging from 1980 to 2009 (Lynch, 2018). For example, Billboard indicates the song "Call Me," by the artist Blondie was the top song of 1980, "Hold On," by Wilson Phillips was number one in 1990, "Breathe," by Faith Hill was the top song of the year 2000, and so on. This process was a way to remain consistent over the three decades and reduce researcher bias by making it an objective process that excluded my personal song preferences. To better illustrate this point, any songs released by the band Nickelback (who released the number 1 song of 2002) would have not been analyzed during this project without the distinction from Billboard (2018), due to personal preference.

The songs were then separated by decade in order to better understand the trends of music over time. For example, the songs from the years of 1980 through 1989 were categorized as 80s songs. The same strategy was implemented through each year and three categories were generated: 80s songs, 90s songs and 2000s songs. Once each song's title and artist were identified and placed in the appropriate category, the lyrics of each song were obtained. Lyrics to each song were found through a standard search engine. A full list of the songs and themes found are located in the appendix.

Data Analysis

Because this study followed a grounded theory process, songs were analyzed via open coding and the main, underlying theme of each song was found to establish the overall meaning of the artist and general theme of the song. The main theme of each song was discovered by assessing every verse and chorus of the song and determining the artist's intent through basic, human interpretation. This strategy provided a theme for every song analyzed. For example, the song "Careless Whisper" by the band Wham! The first half of the chorus reads, "I'm never gonna dance again/Guilty feet have got no rhythm/Though it's easy to pretend/I know you're not a fool." Judging only by this section, or chunk of the song, one could assume that this song were written about dancing, or has no decipherable, specific theme. However, when all of the lyrics are included during analysis, it becomes apparent that the lyrics are directed towards a former lover and this song is referencing a breakup with a significant other. This is indicated by additional lyrics grouped with the previously explained lyrics such as, "I'm never gonna dance again, the way I danced with you," "Maybe it's better this way/we'd hurt each other with the things we'd want to say," and, "now that you're gone/what I did's so wrong/that you had to leave me alone." When all of these lyrics are accompanied together, the intent of the songwriter becomes clear that this song was written after significant others ended their relationship.

However, not every song analyzed presented a main theme during evaluation process. For example, the song, "Macarena" by Los Del Rio illustrates this occurrence. It should be noted that this particular song has sections sung in Spanish, therefore, these sections were translated to English for the purposes of this project. Some examples from this song are, "Give happiness to your body Macarena," "Macarena, Macarena, Macarena/you're popular in the summers in Maribella," and, "Macarena has a boyfriend who's called/who's called the last name Vitorino/and while he was taking his oath as a conscript/ she was giving it to two friends… Aaay!" These lyrics, as well as the rest of the song's lyrics, appear to lack substance, hidden meaning or significance when attempting to identify an overarching theme. Therefore, the label "no theme" was used to indicate instances where the lyrics of certain songs did not contain an observable theme.

Minor themes were also found, but not always easily identified by analyzing each individual line of the songs through open coding. Open coding is the inductive process of identifying a theme from each individual line, or limited lines of data, which as previously stated, was often times impossible for this project (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, there were instances discovered when an individual, or limited lines of certain songs contained a minor theme or fell into a specific category. These were identified on a case-by-case basis because again, not every individual line of each song indicated a clear theme or meaning as it was analyzed by itself. This is another reason the discovery of the overarching themes of the songs were pivotal during this study.

For example, in the Whitney Houston song, "I Will Always Love You," there is the line, "I hope life treats you kind." The main theme of this song is referencing a breakup, or the end of a relationship. This line analyzed by itself indicates the artist has accepted a relationship has ended and wishes the best to whomever she is addressing. This implication is supported by the following line, "and I hope you have all you've dreamed of." This lyric also indicates that the singer is accepting the termination of a relationship and is coming to peace with the event. Therefore, a minor theme found in this specific song is acceptance.

Another strategy utilized was chunking together certain lyrics of certain songs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As discussed previously, individual lines of songs did not always contain themes when examined. However, at times, a lyric immediately following another individual lyrics contained a clear message or meaning. For example, the song "Breathe," by Faith Hill has the line, "I can feel the magic floating in the air." This line on its own did not offer a clear theme. However, when accompanied with the line immediately following it, "Being with you gets me that way," the singer's message becomes clear. The singer is clearly discussing a relationship and has strong feelings of love towards this person. This strategy was implemented appropriately while examining each song.

Once the major and minor themes of each song were identified, I moved into coding the songs axially. The songs' themes were compared and contrasted in a variety of ways. First, each song from the decade was compared with the other songs in the decade to determine the common themes across the decade, which ones were most prevalent, and if there were any outliers. Once all major themes were documented, differences and similarities within the specific decade were more easily observed. The similarities and differences of each individual decade were then compared to the other decades to determine the differences and similarities in lyrics over the years.

Ultimately, selective coding was utilized by assigning meaning to the differences and similarities found to explain how songs may or may not have changed over time. Essentially, a

meaning was applied to the similarities and differences found during the research process. This technique has the ability to explain the evolution or consistency of popular music over a 30-year span. For instance, the number of songs about relationships changed over time. Meaning was applied to this happenstance and conclusions were drawn based off of the findings.

Trustworthiness

As previously stated, the songs chosen for this study were the number one song the year they were released. Therefore, one could argue that the majority of people exposed to music regularly are aware of the songs chosen in this study. The high level of popularity of the songs indicates they had a substantial impact on people who heard them because they most definitely heard these songs multiple times. The fact the songs were highly popular also indicates a high level of exposure to individuals. This suggests that regardless of musical preference, individuals of the era are, at the very least, familiar with the number one songs of the time. If this study were replicated, to further support the study's findings, a larger number of popular songs from each year and decade could be analyzed to support the discussed findings. Perhaps analyzing the top ten songs from each year would further support findings.

One could argue that during the analysis of the songs in the present study, I was searching for similar themes within the songs of the three decades. In other words, my personal song preference could have altered how the data was interpreted. However, the major and minor themes found were required to fit a certain criteria before main themes for each song were finalized. These findings would then have to be defended in order for the theme to be documented and finalized. For example, if "relationship" was the main theme found for a particular song. Specific lyrics would be pulled to defend this theme being labeled as the main theme for a particular song. This process was applied to every major and minor theme for each song analyzed.

One could argue my personal positionality may have affected the analysis of the data, which will be explained further. I was born in the year 1990, which means I was not alive when the songs from the 1980s were released, which could indicate I lack the prior knowledge necessary to understand the extent of the impact these songs had during their time. The same could be said for the songs released in the early 1990s because I lacked the memory, understanding of society and the human condition, and brain function necessary to appreciate or comprehend any type of music. However, it should be noted that my parents were very young adults when I was born which led to the songs explored in this study being exposed to me at a very young age, as well as throughout my life. Therefore, regardless of whether or not I was not alive or capable of understanding the songs explored, my appreciation for all types of music across all decades and genres provides me with the ability to engage in quality research and valid examination of the songs assessed in this study.

Limitations

The study relied on the definition of "top songs" per ear exclusively from Billboard. Other sources may have conflicting reports on what defines a top song. One could argue the song that spent the most time at number one should be defined as the top song for that specific year. However, Billboard provided a list of top songs, and one may define their criteria as arbitrary or

flawed. Luckily, Billboard is a credible source in the music industry, but their definition of "top song" could be further explored.

As previously stated, only one song per year was analyzed which may have presented findings that were too focused. If replicated, this study should definitely include more songs from each year explored. Perhaps the top ten songs per year would present more concrete findings. However, the findings appeared fairly consistent during analysis, but again, including more songs in the study should theoretically provide a stronger argument.

Preliminary Findings

Themes could be identified across each decade, which made it possible to better answer the research question. Song lyrics over the years of 1980-2009 have definitely evolved in some ways, but also remained consistent in others. Many themes referencing relationships in various contexts were found, as well as stages of a relationship. Songs without clear themes were also found across all decades during analysis and additionally, the themes, perseverance, storytelling, and acceptance songs were found during the process of lyrical examination. The themes previously listed were the main themes found within each decade. Various songs had specific minor themes discovered as well, which are fully detailed in the appendix. The similarities and comparisons within and between each decade are discussed further in the discussion below.

1980s

The predominant latent themes found within the lyrics of the songs of the 1980s were types of relationships, stages of romantic relationships, or did not contain a clear main theme. The types of relationships discovered were sexual, romantic and friendly relationships. The beginning and ending of relationships were also referenced during the 1980s. Eight out of the ten years analyzed fell into one of these two categories. The remaining two songs were outside of the scope of the previously mentioned categories, did not appear to have a clear category, and were therefore distinguished as songs containing "no theme."

Types of relationships were defined by a song's lyrical theme heavily discussing a relationship. The determination of relationships was made by determining towards whom the song was directed. For example, in the song "Physical," the lyrics, "let's get physical" are directed towards a sexual partner. The song "Call Me," reads the same by telling a sexual partner to "call me," any day or night they desire to engage in sexual activity. Whether the discussion is referencing an explicit sexual relationship, a less sexual but albeit romantic relationship, or even a friendship, these songs were grouped together because they all discussed a relationship with another person. For example, the song, "That's What Friends Are for," is largely about a friendship having a positive effect on the lives of the singer and their friends. "When Doves Cry" is discussing a current romantic relationship and discusses relational struggles. Both of these songs are referencing a relationship with another person and the stage of that relationship was not discussed within these songs. In total, five songs' main themes fell into this category. The songs were, "That's What Friends Are For," "Call Me," "Physical," "Every Breath You Take," and "When Doves Cry."

A song discussing a period of a relationship were defined as "stages of relationships." More specifically, if a song's lyrics were clearly written about two romantic partners breaking up, the song would be placed into this category. Another example would be if a song were referencing an

emerging relationship, the song would be placed in this category as well. For example, "Faith" by George Michael regularly references being cautious with a new romantic partner because the relationship was recently initiated. The singer indicates that his previous relationships he moved too quickly and in turn, these relationships did not survive. Within the 1980s category, there were three songs classified within this category. The songs were, "Careless Whisper," "Look Away," and, "Faith."

The last major theme found in the 1980s were songs with no discernable theme. As previously discussed, these songs' lyrics could not be clearly placed into a category and therefore, are classified as songs without a theme. Two songs were placed in this category and they were, "Walk like an Egyptian," and, "Bette Davis Eyes." The latter was not placed into a specific category because the lyrics are mysterious and completely open to interpretation. "Bette Davis Eyes" and its lyrics could mean many different things to different people. Whereas "Walk like an Egyptian" and its lyrics analyzed line by line, analyzed by chunking, or generalized altogether did not contain a discernible meaning or theme. "Walk like an Egyptian," did not appear to contain a clear subject, let alone distinguishable theme. An example illustrating this point would be the section of the song which reads, "All the bazaar men by the Nile/they got the money on a bet/Gold crocodiles (oh whey oh)/they snap their teeth on your cigarette." The song is comprised of similar lyrics, and a main theme could not be found.

The minor themes found in the 1980s were, repetition, songs containing imagery, and uplifting or heavily positive messages. Seven out of the ten songs in the 1980s were heavily repetitive. For example, the song "Call Me," by Blondie contains the lyrics, "call me" 41 times in a three and a half minute song. The song "Physical" by Olivia Newton John was also repetitive by containing the word, "physical" 20 times in three minutes and 45 seconds. The last example used to illustrate this point is the song, "Every Breath You Take," by the Police. The word, "every" is used 46 times in four minutes. The other songs found to be repetitive contained similar statistics.

Songs with heavy use of imagery is best explained by the song, "When Doves Cry." The line, "this is what it sounds like when doves cry," appears to be symbolic. Another chunk of this song contains the lyrics, "Touch if you will my stomach/feel how it trembles inside/you've got the butterflies all tied up." Obviously, the singer's stomach does not physically contain butterflies; therefore, he is using a metaphor and continues this strategy at various times of the song.

The song, "That's What Friends Are for," contained very uplifting or overly positive lyrics. For example, the chorus of this song contains the lyrics, "Keep smiling and keep shining/knowing you can always count on me, for sure/that's what friends are for." The singer's intent is clearly a positive message to the listener.

1990s

Themes found in the 1990s were, stages of relationship, relationships, acceptance, day in the life/storytelling, perseverance and no theme. Immediately, it is visible that 80s and 90s music have some apparent differences because the 1990s contained more main themes. It is worth noting that out of the ten years examined, there were six distinct main themes identified, which is at least 60% of the songs of the decade containing different themes than the other songs of the decade.

The most common theme found in the 1990s was stages of relationships. There were four songs referencing a relationship ending. These songs were, "End of the Road," "I Will Always Love You," "Believe," and, "the Sign." The second most common theme of the 90s was songs about relationships. Two songs were found to contain this theme, which were, "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You," and, "Too Close." 1996's "The Macarena" did not have an apparent theme. Elton John's, "Candle in the Wind," was regarding acceptance, "Hold On," by Wilson Phillips was regarding perseverance, and Coolio's, "Gangsta's Paradise," was about storytelling or describing a day in the life of the singer.

The minor themes found in the 1990s were, repetition, sex, acceptance, and heavy use of imagery. Half of the songs of the 1990s were heavily repetitive. The song, "the Sign," by Ace of Base, can help explain this finding. The phrase, "Saw the sign," is said 17 times in a three-minute song. The song, "Hold On," by Wilson Phillips utters the phrase, "Hold on," 19 times in three minutes and 45 seconds. Lastly, "The Macarena" used the word, "Macarena," 23 times in roughly four minutes.

In addition to being a main theme found, acceptance was a relatively popular minor theme found in the 1990s. The song, "Believe," can illustrate this by chunking the lyrics, "Well I know that I'll get through this/Cause I know that I am strong." These lyrics indicate the singer has accepted the end of her relationship because she is a strong-willed person. The song, "Too Close," explains why sex was established as a minor theme. Lyrics such as, "You're dancing like you're naked/Oh, it's almost like we're sexing." Clearly, these lyrics are sexual in nature.

Lastly, imagery was found to be used similarly to how it was explained in the 1980s. Bryan Adams' "(Everything I do) I Do It for You," supports this finding. For example, "Search your heart/Search your soul/and when you find me there/ you'll search no more." A person cannot literally find another person in his or her heart or soul. Therefore, the lyrics are visibly symbolic.

2000s

Main themes found in the 2000s decade are as follows: stages of relationship, relationships, day in the life/storytelling, perseverance and songs with no theme. The 2000s decade did not provide any new themes and all songs were able to fit into categories initially found in the previous decades. However, the total number of songs within the themes varies in the 2000s.

The most common themes found in the 2000s were songs about relationships and storytelling. The relationships theme contained the following songs, "How You Remind Me," "Breathe," and, "Hanging by a Moment." The storytelling theme consisted of the following songs, "Yeah," "In Da Club," and "Low." Stages of relationships was the next most consistently found theme in this decade. This theme contained the songs, "We Belong Together," and, "Irreplaceable." "Bad Day," was the song of the 2000s regarding perseverance, and the song "Boom Boom Pow," was the song of the decade without an apparent theme.

Minor themes found in the 2000s were, repetition, sex, acceptance and the unique theme of bragging, or flexing. The term flexing is defined by slang.org (2016) as showing off and half of the songs of this decade contained instances of flexing. The term flexing will be used throughout the remainder of this study.

Most of the songs in the 2000s contained instances of repetition. For example, the song "Boom Boom Pow," contained the word boom 168 times throughout the duration of the song.

Furthermore, the song, "Low" says the word low 60 times throughout. An example of sex as a minor theme can be explained by the song, "In Da Club," by 50 Cent. This is illustrated by the chunk of the song, "I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love/so come give me a hug if you into to getting rubbed." Clearly, these lyrics are sexual in nature. The song, "Yeah," also utilizes themes of sex with lines such as, "Forget about the game I'm a spit the truth/I won't stop till I get em in they birthday suits." The singer is indicating that he will continue "speaking the truth" until women ultimately agree to take their clothes off.

Acceptance is another minor theme found in the 2000s. In the song "Irreplaceable," by Beyoncé, a chunk of the song reads, "I won't lose a wink of sleep/'Cause the truth of the matter is/replacing you is so easy." This example implies that the singer has accepted the breakup by not losing any sleep over the situation because replacing her former lover will be easy.

Lastly, the aforementioned idea of flexing. Several instances within songs of the 2000s contain lyrics of the braggadocios variety. For example in the song, "Low," there are the lyrics, "Make it rain, I'm makin' it snow/Work the pole, I got the bank roll." These lyrics contain a heavy use of slang, but the gist of these lyrics indicate the person singing is bragging about how much money they have at their disposal. The song "Boom Boom Pow," can also help illustrate the use of flexing within the songs containing the theme of flexing. For instance, "They try to copy my swagger/I'm on that next shit now/I'm so 3008/You so 2000 and late." This is flexing due to the singers bragging about themselves and degrading another person. Thus, supporting their own position as a person by putting down another and essentially showing off.

Discussion and Conclusion

Similarities and Differences within decades

The most consistent major themes found across all decades of songs were lyrics referencing relationships or stages of relationships. Each decade consisted of numerous songs being mainly about love, or various points of a particular relationship. This indicates that people can easily identify with feelings generated by relationships with other people, as well as falling in love, falling out of love, being a good friend, or engaging in sexual activity with another person. These findings were consistent across each decade assessed. However, the number of songs referencing relationships or stages of relationships varied from decade to decade. Eighty percent of the songs from the 1980s fell into one of these two categories. This implies that music in the 1980s was more consistent and conventional, but as the years went on, music began changing. It also implies that popular music followed a specific formula. This claim is supported by the fact that the majority of the songs from the 1990s fell into these two categories as well. Sixty percent of the 1990s' songs were categorized into one of these categories. Compare that to the 2000s where only half, or fifty percent, of the songs from the 2000s consisted of one of these two themes. The number of songs about relationships or stages of relationships decline. Half of the songs remains a significant number, but the decrease in total songs is worth noting.

This has the potential of explaining a potential shift in relationship norms, or society's views on the aspects of "dating" as a whole. For instance, breakup songs went from being a difficult or sad time for people, as explained by Chicago's, "Look Away," as well as the rest of

the breakup songs of the 1980s, to a moment of empowerment and seen as a positive as illustrated by Beyoncé's, "Irreplaceable." This finding has the ability to explain society's views on relationships, breakups, sex, etc. All decades did contain sad breakup songs, which specifies breakups as a hardship, but this major change in perception has the potential to explain significant changes society's opinions on relationships. For example, how a relationship begins, progresses, and ultimately ends because popular music discusses these processes often.

The decrease in songs about relationships or stages of relationships over time presents an apparent change in popular music's lyrics over time. There appeared to be a clear pattern popular music followed most consistently in the 1980s because people clearly identified with breakup songs, love songs, sexual experiences, and every type of relationship in between. In addition to the popularity of the two main themes relationships and stages of relationships, each decade consisted of songs who relied heavily on repetition. This is interesting because in the 1980s and the 2000s, seventy percent of the songs were found to be heavily repetitive. Whereas only half of the songs in the 1990s relied on repetitiveness. Regardless of the fluctuation, repetition within popular songs appears to be a consistent strategy found in popular music. Repetition explains a consistent finding across the decades, which suggests that regardless of subject matter, music remains consistent in some areas. This indicates that consumers of music may have different opinions on certain subjects, but on the musical surface, there has not been a significant change in musical preference over time.

The idea that musical preference has remained consistent in some aspects is supported by the manner in which music was used over time. Outside of the 2000s decade, popular music appeared to be a way individuals coped with various events, came together to accomplish a goal, or simply enjoyed themselves. During the 1980s and the 1990s, there were a few outliers, which are in need of further explanation.

First, songs that were released years earlier and then rereleased and eventually became the most popular song of a later year. The first song is, "That's What Friends Are for." This song was the top song of the year 1986, but was originally released years prior. According to the New York Times (1986), this song was rerecorded and rereleased as a benefit to AIDS research. This undoubtedly had an influence on the popularity of the song. This indicates that during the 1980s, music had the power to make a substantial societal and cultural impact.

Events happening outside of music influencing the popularity of certain songs continued in the 1990s with three separate instances of this. An instance of this occurrence is explained by the song, "Candle in the Wind," by Elton John, which was the top song of 1997. The original version of this song was released in 1973, over two decades earlier. Elton John rewrote some of the lyrics and rereleased the single after the death of Princess Diana (Powell, 2017). This song remains the highest selling song in Great Britain's history (Powell, 2017). One could argue that people used this song as a way to cope with the death of an adored public figure. This suggests that music, in general, was more than a means of entertainment, but a versatile tool, which can be applied over a number of scenarios. In this example, the song was applied as a way to cope with the premature death of a beloved public figure.

One of those scenarios in which music is applied, is obviously as a means of entertainment, but music sometimes goes beyond being simply a melodic experience. For example, the top song of the year 1993 is Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You." This particular song accompanied the movie, "the Bodyguard," as the theme song, suggesting the impact music can

have because this song is most definitely more memorable than the film for which it was originally released. This is another instance of a song originally recorded years prior and rereleased resulting in a wildly successful song and substantial cultural impact (Effron, 2012). Additional songs were released accompanying this film, but none were nearly as popular as the song, "I Will Always Love You."

The last outlier in need of explanation is, "The Macarena," in 1996. This song was accompanied with a dance and eventually swept the nation. This song became such a phenomenon; politicians began doing the dance at national conventions. Additionally, this song held the record for consecutive weeks spent atop the charts at 14 weeks. This record took 15 years to break, which in retrospect, is unbelievable. A song that started a dance craze was more consistently prevalent than any other song released for the next 15 years.

Implications

These songs illustrated the implication that music can be interpreted and utilized by people in a plethora of ways. As stated, music can help individuals cope, it can elicit an emotional response, and it can be an outlet for individuals to enjoy themselves. Outliers were not found in the 2000s, which implies popular music may have lost some of its impact. This may be a result of saturation, accessibility and advancements in technology, but outliers like the ones described and musical phenomena like "The Macarena," may be a rarity as time passes continues to pass by.

The findings and discussion provide an interesting insight into the evolution of lyrics, as well as music in general over time. Music has shown it is versatile in how people can utilize it over a plethora of situations, but more specifically, how music appears to have been able to adapt with the changing preferences and trends of society. This is supported by this study discovering what appears to be a formula that the majority of popular songs over a specific decade follow. However, there are outliers consistently found, songs without an apparent lyrical theme, and significant differences found in songs over time (the idea of "flexing," or bragging was only found in songs released in the 2000s and continues to be a popular lyrical strategy as time progresses). Lyrics and music will continue to change, but still provide individuals with an outlet society can turn to in a variety of ways. Popular music will be consistent with various changes and branch out of its proven formula when society needs it to. Therefore, music is much more than mere entertainment, it is the soundtrack the people's lives, how people shape their own identities, and a way for people to explain key moments they experience.

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Appendix A

Working Codebook

1980- Call Me
- Main:
  - Sex/Romantic Relationship
- Minor:
  - Repetition

1981- Bette Davis Eyes
- Main:
  - Description of another person
- Minor:
  - Romantic interactions
  - Sexual undertones

1982- Physical
- Main:
  - Sex
- Minor:
  - Repetitive
  - Semi-censored/mystery in tact

1983- Every Breath You Take
- Main:
  - Unrequited love
- Minor:
  - Repetitive
  - Romantic Relationship

1984- When Doves Cry
- Main:
  - Romantic Relationship
- Minor:
  - Relationship or Personal Conflict
  - Analogies/metaphorical

1985- Careless Whisper
- Main:
  - Romantic Relationship/Breakup
- Minor:
  - Pain/suffering

1986- That's What Friends Are For
- Main:
  - Friendship/relationship
- Minor:
  - Support
  - Motivational
  - Repetitive

1987- Walk like an Egyptian
- Main:
  - Descriptions of actions
  - No Meaningful, Underlying Theme
- Minor:
  - Repetitive
  - Analogies
  - Song written about people walking strangely on a boat (CITE THIS)

1988- Faith
- Main:
  - Beginning of relationship/using caution
- Minor:
  - Repetitive
  - Metaphorical

1989- Look Away
- Main:
  - After a Relationship/ex SO moving on
- Minor:
  - Repetitive
  - Acceptance

1980s Findings
- Main Themes:
  - General Relationships (sexual, romantic, friendship): 5 total
  - Stages of relationships (ending or beginning): 3 total
  - Descriptions of others or No clear theme: 2 total (Bette Davis Eyes, Walk Like an Egyptian
- Minor themes
  - Heavily Repetitive: 7 total
  - Poetic/heavy use of analogies and metaphors:: 3 total
  - Uplifting or heavily positive: 1 total

1990- Hold On
- Main:
  - Perseverance/overcoming adversity
- Minor:
  - Sung to someone else
  - It gets better/acceptance
  - Repetitive

1991- (Everything I do) I do it for You
- Main:
  - Love/dedication
- Minor:
  - Persuasive
  - Announcing love in specific ways (die for you)

1992- End of the Road
- Main:
    - Breakup with significant other
- Minor:
    - Coping
    - Not moving on from breakup
    - Devastation

1993- I Will Always Love You
- Main:
    - End of relationship
- Minor:
    - Eternal love
    - Acceptance
    - Minimal lyrics

1994- The Sign
- Main:
    - End of relationship realization
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - Self-care/appreciation
    - Acceptance

1995- Gangsta's Paradise
- Main:
    - A day in the life/description of Gangster life
- Minor:
    - Exposure to different life
    - Poetic
    - Emotional/elicits emotion
    - Inclusivity

1996- Macarena
- Main:
    - No theme
    - Dance song
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - In Spanish
    - Promiscuous behavior

1997- Candle in the Wind
- Main:
    - Tribute to Princess Diana
- Minor:
    - Acceptance
    - Metaphorical/simile
    - Poetic/emotional

1998- Too Close
- Main:
    - Provocative dancing/sexualized dancing/sex
- Minor:
    - Suggestive
    - Sexually explicit
    - Repetitive

1999- Believe
- Main:
    - Breakup/end of relationship
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - Realization/self-worth
    - Acceptance

1990s Findings
- Main Themes:
    - Stages of relationship: 4 songs
    - Relationship/Love: 1 song ((Everything I Do) I do it for You)
    - Relationship/Sex: 1 song (too close)
    - Acceptance: 1 song (Candle in the Wind)
    - Day in the life/story telling: 1 song (Gangsta's Paradise)
    - No theme: 1 song (Macarena)
    - Perseverance: 1 song (Hold On)
- Minor themes
    - Repetitive: 5 songs
    - Sexually Explicit: 1 song
    - Acceptance: 5 songs
    - Poetic/heavy use of analogies and metaphors: 3 songs
    - Accompanied by something else (Dance or death event): 2 songs

2000s songs
2000- Breathe
- Main:
    - Love/connection with SO
- Minor:
    - Metaphorical
    - Overwhelming emotion from love

2001- Hanging by a Moment
- Main:
    - Love
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - Devotion

2002- How You Remind Me
- Main:
    - Difficult Relationship
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - This song sucks (positionality)

2003- In Da Club
- Main:
    - Partying
    - Personal experience
- Minor:
    - Braggadocios/Flexing (money, girls, drugs, alcohol)
    - Sexually and otherwise explicit lyrics

2004- Yeah
- Main:
    - Very beginning of a romantic/sexual relationship at a club
    - Personal experience
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - Flexing
    - Sex/Promiscuity

2005- We Belong Together
- Main:
    - End of relationship
- Minor:
    - Codependence
    - Regret

2006- Bad Day
- Main:
    - Perseverance
- Minor
    - 1st person
    - Repetitive
    - Minimal lyrics
    - Acceptance

2007: Irreplaceable
- Main:
    - End of relationship
    - Self-worth
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
    - Moving on/perseverance
    - Empowerment
    - Acceptance

2008- Low
- Main:
    - Personal experience
    - Woman dancing
- Minor
    - Repetitive
    - Sexually explicit
    - Dancing

2009- Boom Boom Pow
- Main:
    - No theme
- Minor:
    - Repetitive
        - Boom said 168 times

2000s Findings
- Main Themes:
    - Stages of relationship: 2 songs (We Belong Together, Irreplaceable,
    - Relationship/Love: 3 songs (How You Remind Me, Breathe & Hanging By a Moment)
    - Day in the life/story telling: 3 songs (Yeah, In Da Club & Low)
    - No theme: 1 song (Boom Boom Pow)
    - Perseverance: 1 song (Bad Day)
- Minor themes
    - Repetitive: 7 songs
    - Sexually Explicit: 3 songs
    - Acceptance: 2 songs
    - Flexing**:** 5 songs