

PRESENTATION/POSTER

A CORPUS-ANALYSIS OF GENDERED ITEMS IN POP AND COUNTRY MUSIC FROM THE 90s TO NOW

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This study examines how gender has been portrayed in Pop and Country music across the last 30 years. Using a corpus-based approach, we examined the lyrics of 80 songs across the Pop and Country music genres from the 1990s and now. The results suggest that use of language has changed over time and genres and the scope of these nouns is wider than their traditional definitions. Our findings indicate that the word *baby* is the predominant word used to refer to men and women in both genres, and that mostly this refers to women either as a lover or an individual that is attractive or desirable. In addition, Pop music sexually objectifies women frequently while country music typically refers to women as beautiful or in a way that expresses romantic worship or desire.

INTRODUCTION

Different music genres involve different uses of language which provides an interesting area for exploration of various linguistic features, such as vocabulary, grammar, social, and cultural representations of groups of people. Because of this, music lyrics present an interesting ground for linguistic research. One way to analyze the variation between these aspects of language is through corpus-based methods, which are a practical and useful way to examine language use. By using corpora, a large amount of data can be analyzed to explore and compare artists' creative use of language. For instance, researchers have explored lyrics from various genres including Hip-Hop (Daniels, 2014; Shin, 2016), Pop (Motschenbacher, 2016), and Country music (Shin, 2016).

Song lyrics reflect the social and cultural context of a society and present an interesting area for language exploration. Language and music are brought together in songs (Barwick, Birch, & Evans, 2007). The meanings of words can very often go beyond the traditional dictionary definition. In that regard, an interesting trend to explore in song lyrics is the way males and females are portrayed in different music genres. A few studies have explored gendered lemmas (a base word and its inflection, e.g. *girl, girls*), such as Pearce (2008) who used a corpus-based approach to examine how the lemmas *man* and *woman* were used in the British National Corpus, a 100 million word collections and samples of written and spoken language, and Baker (2013) who focused on a critical approach of using corpora in sociolinguistics.

Motschenbacher (2016) observed that while skepticism towards using lyrics for language exploration existed, they are increasingly being analyzed. He argues that one reason for this skepticism is the doubt of authenticity of this type of language because lyrics are carefully crafted, adapted, and written for a wide audience. While it is true that lyrics are not the most authentic use of language, the language can spread worldwide and impact the social, cultural, and linguistic habits of generations. A few lyrics corpora have been built so far, including a corpus of Hip-hop

lyrics at Carnegie Mellon University (Friginal & Hardy, 2018) and the *Hip-Hop Word Count*, a searchable database containing 40,000 Hip-Hop songs built from 1979 and still growing (Hopkins, 2011).

Different music genres promote different values and perspectives on males' and females' roles in society. One such study which investigated this is Shin (2016), who explored gendered items in Hip-Hop and country music. She found that in Hip-Hop females are often sexually objectified, associated with beauty, and described as dependent. On the other hand, country music usually portrayed female as romantically worshiped and the lemmas *girl* and *woman* often referred to family members. She found that both females and males are still stereotypically presented in song lyrics, especially in Hip-Hop.

While existing studies have shown the sociolinguistic importance of analyzing lyrics, the research of lyrics is limited and there is a need for further exploration. Inspired by Shin's (2016) study, our paper examines how gender has been portrayed in Pop and Country music across the last 30 years. The purpose of our work is to reveal more insightful perspectives and attitudes toward gender, as well as interesting trends of language use in two music genres. The following two research questions guide our study:

- **RQ 1.** What do the four gender lemmas (*girl*, *woman*, *boy*, & *man*, and the neutral-gender lemma *baby*) primarily refer to in Pop and Country music, and how have they changed across time and genres?
- **RQ 2.** How is gender portrayed in Pop and Country music, and how have these portrayals changed across time and genres?

METHODS

Using a mixed methods approach, we analyzed our corpus first with AntConc (Anthony, 2017), and then conducted a qualitative analysis of the pragmatic function of each lemma within its context. We then identified common trends between and within our data sets. We examined the lyrics of 80 songs across Pop and Country music genres from the 1990s and now (20 from each decade for both genres, totaling 80) by analyzing five previously selected lemmas: *girl*, *woman*, *boy*, *man*, and *baby*. Initially, only the four gender lemmas (*boy*, *man*, *girl* and *woman*) were included; however, we discovered that both males and females are much more commonly referred to as *baby* in popular songs and therefore we included it in the analysis. Even though the primary notion of the noun is to refer to “a very young child”, the informal definition of *baby* is: “A lover or spouse (often as a form of address)” (Oxford, 2018). Related findings from Motschenbacher's (2016) analysis of Eurovision song lyrics show the noun *baby* is the 17th most common collocate of love. Hence, the neutral lemma *baby* was included in the research to discover its wider scope and reference.

Corpus design and quantitative analysis

In order to obtain a sample of the most popular music, we searched for lists of the top hits in each time period. We used Billboard (2018) which provided complete lists of (1) the top 20 billboard pop hits between 2010-2017, (2) the top 20 billboard pop hits between 1990-1999, and (3) the top

20 country billboard hits between 2010-2017. Billboard did not have the same information for 90's country songs, so this data was found from Buzz Feed (Burton, 2013). We then extracted the lyrics and converted them into .txt files. The corpus data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of song texts and word counts across genres and time periods

	Pop Music 90s	Contemporary Pop Music	Country Music 90s	Contemporary Country Music	TOTAL
Texts	20	20	20	20	80
Word Count	7412	8250	5140	6378	27180

Each of the sub-corpora was analyzed by using AntConc 3.5.6 developed by Anthony (2017). The selected word lemmas were identified using regular expressions. We retrieved the results from AntConc and saved them as .txt files for further qualitative analysis (see Table 2 below). One example of the search for the lemma *girl* is illustrated in Figure 1.

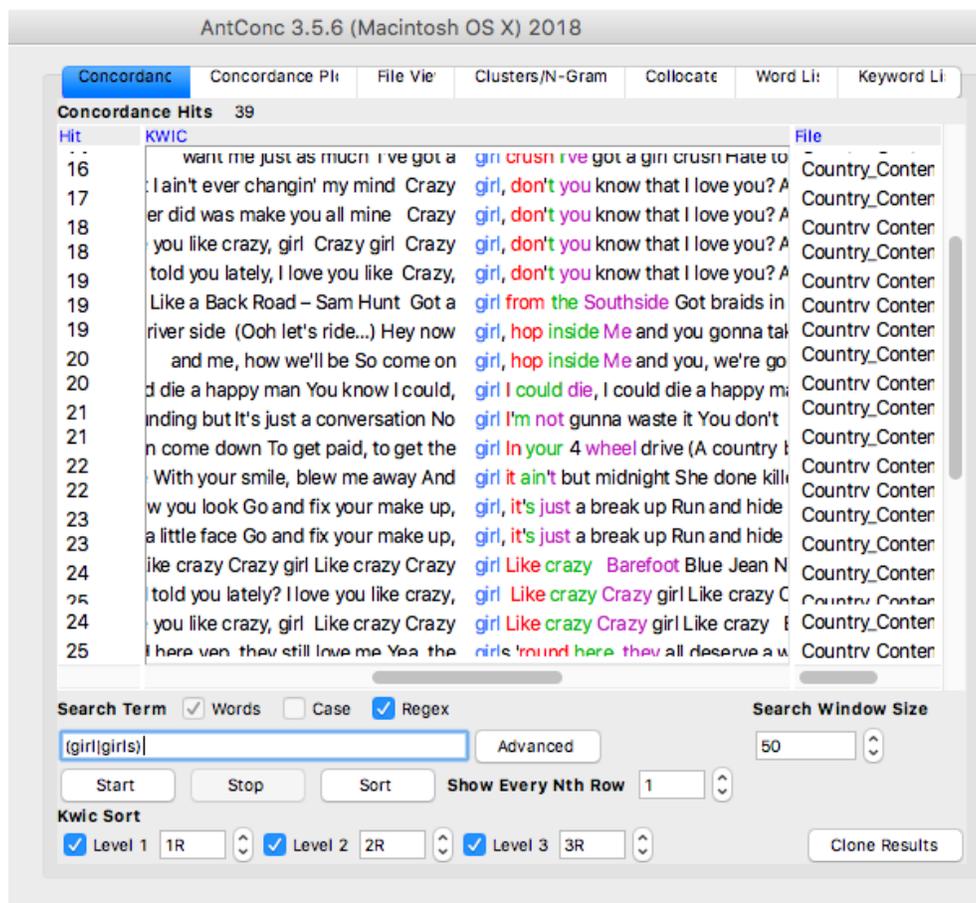


Figure 1. Regular expression search of the gender item *girl*.

Qualitative analysis

We manually categorized lemmas based on Shin (2016) and adapted them towards our data by adding or removing categories as needed. In terms of their reference, the lemmas were categorized as: Partner/Lover, Attractive/Desirable, Male/Female, Adult Male/Female etc. As for their portrayal, the authors categorized the data as follows: Beautiful, Strong/Weak, Romantically Worshipped, Sexually Objectified, Submissive, Insecure. Data were coded by both authors. In Tables 2 and 3 below, we provide examples of the function for each of the categories. These examples serve to provide an overview for how coding functioned in this study.

Table 2

Female portrayal examples

Portrayal	Lyrics
Beautiful	some pretty faces, been with some beautiful girls
Faithful	heart of a faithful woman
Romantically worshipped/ desired	Always treat your woman like a lady
Sexually objectified	Girl , look at that body
Submissive	When I walk on by, girls be looking like "damn he fly"
Insecure	I was caught somewhere between a woman and a child
Strong	I learned something from my blue eyed girl , Sink or swim you gotta give it a whirl

Table 3

Male portrayal examples

Portrayal	Lyrics
Confident	all the other boys try to chase me But here's my number
Weak	hand in my hand Baby I could die a happy man
Desirable	Boy , you're my lucky star I wanna walk
Strong	Wanna be your victim, ready for abduction boy
Dependent	I can't live without you, baby

Undesirable **Boy** you're an alien, your touch so foreign

Insert First time I seen her walk by, **Man** I 'Bout fell

Occasionally, lemmas fell into two categories and were coded as such upon agreement of the two authors. For example, in the following example, the word *girl* was coded to portray females as both Beautiful and Romantically Worshiped:

“...when you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while 'cause, **girl**, you're amazing just the way you are.” (Contemporary Pop music)

The categories Beautiful and Romantically worshiped may appear to overlap, but in our study they are considered different concepts. The category Beautiful includes description of physical appearance, while Romantically worshiped illustrates that the speaker adores, desires, or respects the woman, for example: *Always treat your woman like a lady.*

RESULTS

First, we display the frequency for each lemma throughout time and between genres in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Frequency of lemmas throughout time and genres

No. of occurrences	Woman	Girl	Boy	Man	Baby	Total No. of gender items per period
Pop Music 90s		11	20	6	39	76
Contemporary Pop Music	1	37	12		35	84
Country Music 90s	2	16	18	5	15	56
Contemporary Country Music	5	44	8	14	72	143
Total No. of word lemmas	8	108	58	25	161	360

Baby is the most common throughout 90's pop music, while the actual words *man* and *woman* are infrequent. The situation is similar in Contemporary pop music; the use of the lemma *girl* increases in Contemporary pop music and the word *man* completely disappears.

When it comes to Country music, the frequency of the lemmas *girl* and *man* also increased over time. The most surprising finding was the increase across time of the word lemma *baby* from 15, in the 90s, to 72 in Contemporary country music. That suggests that this terminology is used to refer to both *men* and *women* more than the other lemmas in this study.

Gender items in pop and country music - What do they refer to?

In order to respond to RQ1 of what the five lemmas primarily refer to in pop and country music and how have they changed across time and genres, the authors assigned each lemma a category based on how the lemma was used in the context of the lyrics. Then, we assigned each lemma was assigned a category based on its context within the lyric before coding distribution for both music genres.

Table 5

Girl, woman & baby and their reference in Pop Music

Time Period	Partner/ Lover		Adult Females		Attractive/ Desirable		Young Female		Friends	
	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.
Girl	9	5	1	1	1	27		1		2
Woman				1						
Baby	5	6		1	14	15				

Table 5 shows the reference for the lemmas *girl*, *woman*, and *baby* across both decades for Pop music using Shin's (2016) classification. Attractive/Desirable (n=57) was the most frequent category for all gender lemmas in 90s Pop music and Contemporary 90s music across both time periods, and Partner/Lover was second (n=25). These two categories depicted the majority of gender lemma occurrences throughout this genre.

Table 6

Girl, woman & baby and their reference in Country Music

Time Period	Partner/ Lover		Adult Females		Attractive/ Desirable		Young Female		Friends	
	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.
Girl	12	22	1	7	2	3	1			6
Woman	1	2				4	1			
Baby	1	52				20				

Table 6 shows what the lemmas *girl*, *woman*, and *baby* referred to across both decades for Country music. Most interestingly, *baby* only occurred once in 90s music while it occurred 72 times in contemporary country music. *Baby* referred to Partner/Lover 52 times and to Attractive/Desirable

20 times. Overall, the lemmas *girl*, *woman*, and *baby* most frequently refer to Partner/Lover (n=100) and Attractive/Desirable (n=29).

Table 7

The lemmas boy, man & baby and their reference in Pop music

Time Period	Adult Males (In General)		Partner / Lover		Authority Figure		Attractive/Desirable Male	
	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.	90s	Cont.
Boy	4	4	1			3	14	5
Man	1							
Baby			11	4			9	9

Table 7 shows what the lemmas *boy*, *man*, and *baby* referred to across time periods or Pop Music. The lemmas most frequently referred to Attractive/Desirable Male (n=37) and Partner/Lover (n=16). The lemma *baby* most often referred to Attractive/Desirable (n=18) and Partner/Lover (n=15) while the lemma *boy* most often referred to Attractive/Desirable (n=19).

Table 8

The lemmas boy, man and baby and their reference in Country music

Time Period	Adult Males		Tough/ Brave		Partner/ Lover		Attractive/Desirable Male	
	90s	Cont	90s	Cont	90s	Cont	90s	Cont
Boy		10		2	17	1		4
Man	2	1		3		8		
Baby					14			

Table 8 shows what the lemmas *boy*, *man*, and *baby* referred to across both time periods for Country music. For Country, all lemmas most frequently referred to Partner/Lover (n=40) across decades. The lemma *boy* referred to Partner/Lover 17 times in the 90s and only once in Contemporary music; however, it referred to Adult Male 10 times in Contemporary music and only once in the 90s. Where Pop music (Table 6) most often described men as Partner/Lover or Attractive/Desirable, Country music varied between Partner/Lover and Adult Male.

Female and male portrayal

This section responds to RQ2, how gender is portrayed in pop and country music, and how these portrayals have changed across time. While our first question looked at how gender lemmas referred to men and women, this section looks at how gender lemmas portrayed men and women. Figure 1 illustrates female portrayal for Pop music.

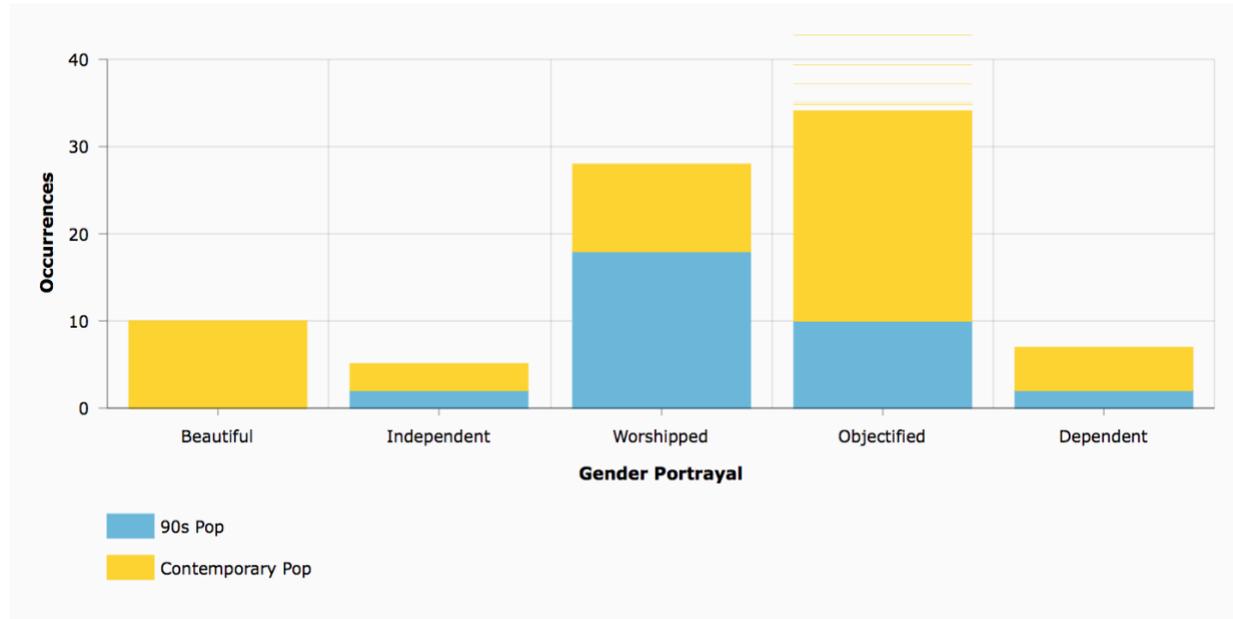


Figure 1. Female portrayal across years for pop music.

In the 90s, females were most frequently portrayed as Romantically Worshipped ($n=18$) followed by Sexually Objectified ($n=10$). Whereas in Contemporary pop music, Sexually Objectified occurred 24 times while Romantically Worshipped only occurred 10 times. Contemporary Pop music had more instances of sexual objectification while 90s Pop music had more instances of romantic worship. Figure 2 looks at female portrayal for Country music.

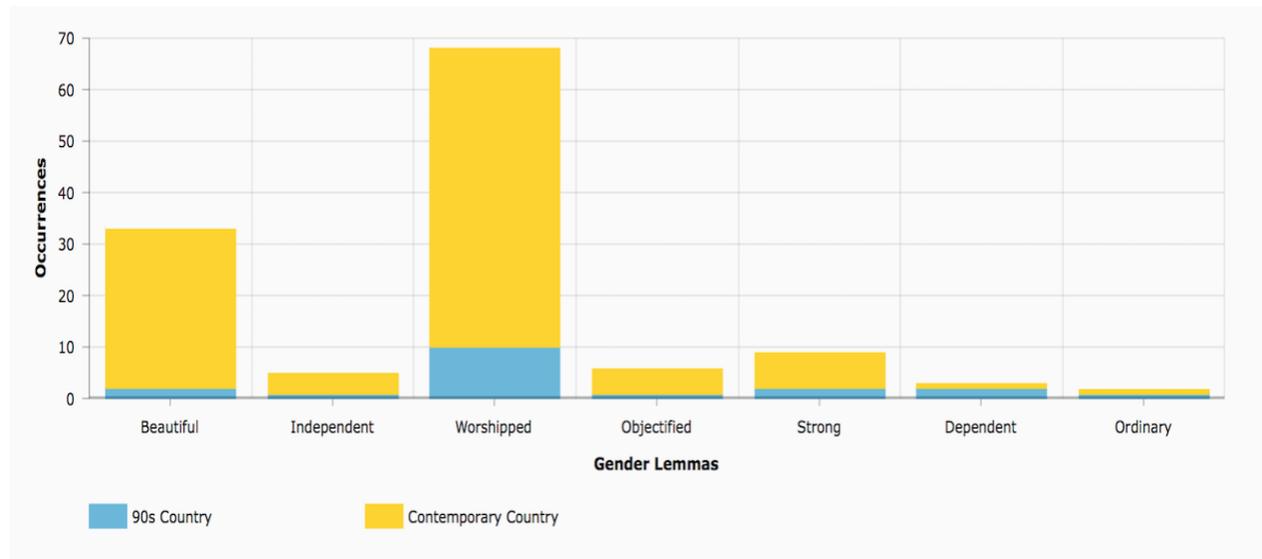


Figure 2. Female portrayal across years for country music.

Romantically Worshipped (n=68) and Beautiful (n=33) were the most frequent referent for women in country music across both time periods. There are considerably more instances of gender lemmas used in contemporary country music, and there does not appear to be clear trends in increase or decrease between time periods.

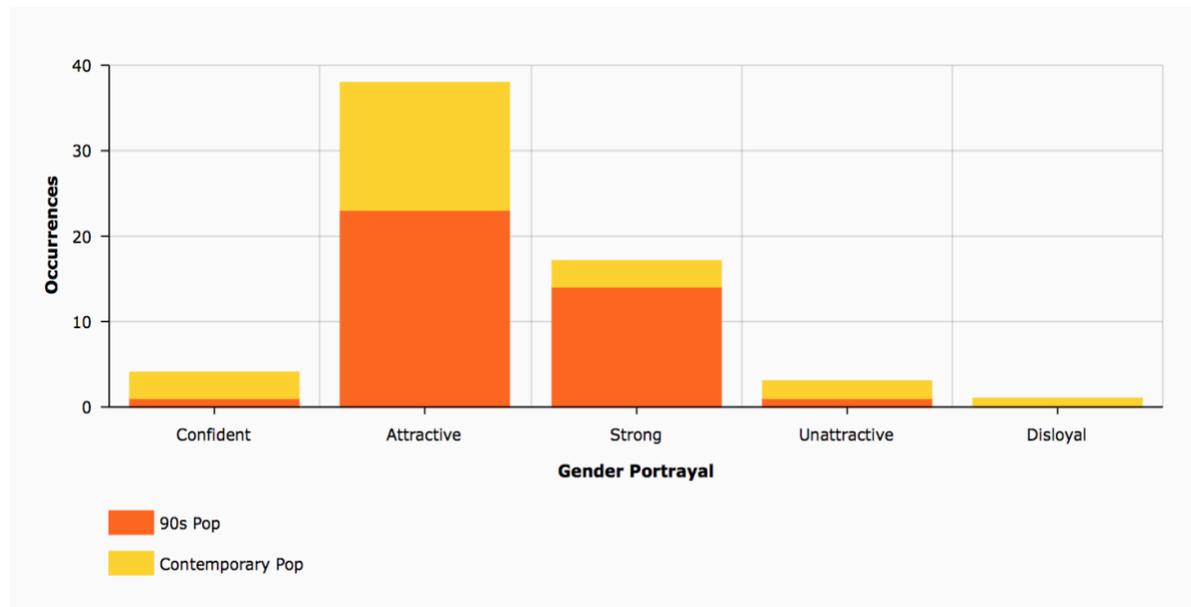


Figure 3. Male portrayal across years for pop music.

Figure 3 illustrates male portrayal for Pop music. During the 90s, men were most often portrayed as Attractive (n=23) and Strong (n=14), and within Contemporary Pop music, men were most frequently portrayed as Attractive (n=15).

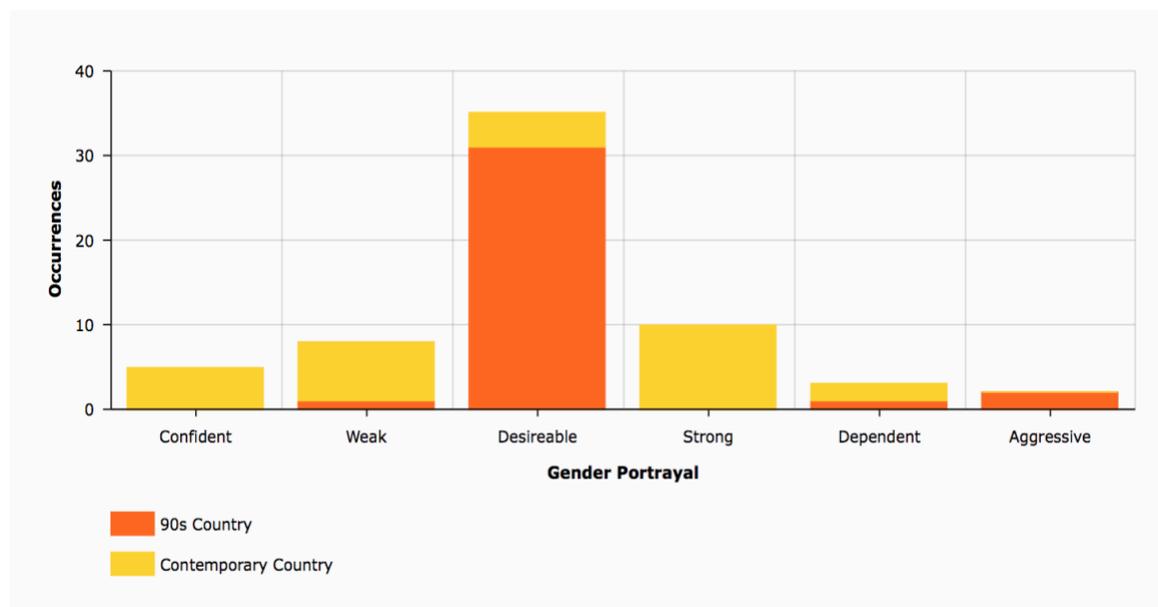


Figure 4. Male portrayal across years for country music.

Finally, Figure 4 depicts male portrayal within Country music. In 90's country, men were most often represented as Desirable ($n=31$) whereas there was more of a distribution between Confident ($n=5$), Weak ($n=7$), Desirable ($n=4$), Strong ($n=10$), and Dependent ($n=2$) in Contemporary Country music.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated how the use of selected gender lemmas changed across time in pop and country music and the way men and women are portrayed within or between music genres. In this section, we discuss the male and female portrayals in these song lyrics and what the results of this study imply.

Female portrayal

Our findings might suggest that representation of female have changed across time and across music genres. Pop music in the 90s mostly used to portray women in the traditional sense as part of families and partners, referring to them as Partner/Lover by using the word lemmas *girl* and *baby*, while Contemporary Pop music mostly portrays them as unofficial partners or object of desire, avoiding the use of the word *woman* in Pop music.

On the other hand, in Country music, we note the opposite. Most of the females are referred to as partners or lovers and their portrayal as Romantically Worshipped indicates the traditional sense of the word lemmas. Nonetheless, things have slightly started to change within Country music as well; in the 90s there were no instances of females being referred to as Attractive/Desirable Female and in Contemporary music the use of this category has started to grow.

Societal changes among the relationships between men and women has started to be reflected in the song lyrics too. Shin (2016) also found that most of the uses of *girl* and *woman* refer to adult females and girlfriends in both Hip-hop and Country music, and unofficial partners only in Hip-hop. While there are certain instances in our data of females being portrayed as Beautiful, Independent, Strong, Submissive, Country music in general mostly portrays females more respectfully compared to Pop music, and as Shin (2016) indicates, in Hip-hop music.

Male Portrayal

The word lemmas used for males in 90s Pop music are mostly referring to Attractive/Desirable people, Partner/Lovers, and Adult Males in general. In Contemporary Pop music, males are mostly referred to as Attractive/Desirable people while other portrayals almost equally present Adult Males, Partners, and Authority Figures. Similar to the female portrayals, there are changes over time where men in Contemporary music are more frequently described as part of nonofficial relationships. Also, males in Pop music are generally presented as attractive, strong, or confident. In addition, the word lemma *man* is rare while *boy* and *baby* are mostly used to refer to men throughout the decades. Males also appear to be portrayed as disloyal by female artists in Contemporary Pop music, which is another indicator that men are not portrayed as part of family in the traditional sense in Pop music.

On the other hand, men in Country music are frequently represented as Partner/Lover throughout both periods. There are instances of men being referred to as Tough/Brave which indicates a more traditional representation of man. In general, males are often portrayed as Attractive/Desirable, but there are some more recent portrayals as both Strong/Weak or Dependent. This finding suggests that males nowadays are presented in various aspects, whereas in the 90s they were mostly viewed as attractive, desirable figures. Contemporary Country had no instances where *baby* referred to males. However, this was may be due to the overwhelming majority of male artists in the top 20 Contemporary Country music songs.

CONCLUSION

Through a linguistic analysis of song lyrics across time and genre, we observed how lyrics language has changed within the American culture. The results suggest that the use of language has changed over time and genres and the scope of these nouns can be much wider than their traditional definitions.

In three instances, we encountered the use of *man* and *boy* as inserts, not referring to anything, for example: *Oh boy, I am so tired*. We excluded those examples from the data above because they were not relevant for our research questions, but this may also be a point worth mentioning to ESL learners. This is an example of a language use that cannot be typically found in the regular textbooks and EFL learners may find this useful.

When it comes to qualitative coding, there were occasionally certain instances that were difficult to interpret and that may belong to two categories at the same time. Personal bias may have influenced the decisions. Future research should consider increasing the corpus size and adding

more gender lemmas, such as *lady*, *madam*, or *mister*, to give a more complete understanding of the genre.

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APPENDIX A.

Top 20 Contemporary/Pop Songs	Top 20 90's Pop Songs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Party Rock Anthem – LMFAO 2. We Found Love – Rihanna 3. Somebody That I Used to Know – Gotye 4. Rolling in the Deep – Adele 5. Blurred Lines – Robin Thicke 6. Call Me Maybe – Carly Rae Jepsen 7. Happy – Pharrel Williams 8. Royals – Lorde 9. Dark Horse – Katy Perry 10. Moves Like Jagger – Maroon 5 11. Just The Way You Are – Bruno Mars 12. Thrift Shop – Macklemore & Ryan Lewis 13. One More Night – Maroon 5 14. All Of Me – John Legend 15. We Are Young – Fun 16. Counting Stars – One Republic 17. Radioactive – Imagine Dragons 18. Sexy and I Know It – LMFAO 19. Someone Like You – Adele 20. E.T. – Katy Perry 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How Do I Live – LeAnn Rimes 2. Macarena – Los Del Rio 3. Un-Break My Heart – Toni Braxton 4. Foolish Games/You Were Meant For Me – Jewel 5. (Everything I Do) I Do It For You – Bryan Adams 6. I'll Make Love To You – Boyz II Men 7. Too Close – Next 8. One Sweet Day – Mariah Carey 9. Truly Madly Deeply – Savage Garden 10. Candle In The Wind – Elton John 11. End of the Road – Boyz II Men 12. The Sign – Ace of Base 13. The Boy is Mine – Brandy and Monica 14. Because I Love You (The Postman Song) – Stevie B 15. Whoomp! (There It Is) – Tag Team 16. Rush Rush – Paula Abdul 17. You're still the one – Shania Twain 18. I Will Always Love You – Whitney Houston 19. Gangsta's Paradise – Coolio 20. Nothing Compares 2 U – Sinead O'Connor

APPENDIX B.

Top 20 Contemporary Country Songs	Top 20 Country Songs 90's
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Love Like Crazy – Lee Brice 2. Why Don't We Just Dance – Josh Turner 3. Crazy Girl – Eli Young Band 4. Barefoot Blue Jean Night – Jake Owen 5. Time Is Love – Josh Turner 6. You Don't Know Her Like I Do – Brantley Gilbert 7. Crusie – Florida George Line 8. Wagon Wheel – Darius Rucker 9. Boys 'round Here – Blake Shelton 10. Get Your Shine On – Florida Georgia Line 11. Mama's Broken Heart – Miranda Lambert 12. This Is How We Roll – Florida George Lina 13. Play It Again – Luke Bryan 14. Take Your Time – Sam Hunt 15. Girl Crush – Little Big Town 16. Highway Don't Care – Tim Mcgraw with Taylor Swift 17. Die A Happy Man – Thomas Rhett 18. Body Like a Back Road – Sam Hunt 19. Hurricane – Luke Combs 20. Sure Be Cool If You Did – Blake Shelton 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alan Jackson – Gone Country 2. Trisha Yearwood – She's In Love With The Boy 3. John Michael Montgomery – Life's A Dance 4. Tim McGraw – I Like It I Love It 5. Faith Hill – This Kiss 6. Little Texas – God Blessed Texas 7. George Strait – Check Yes Or No 8. Reba McEntire – Is There Life Out There 9. Shania Twain – You're Still The One 10. Brooks & Dunn – My Maria 11. Dixie Chicks – Wide Open Spaces 12. Martina McBride – Independence Day 13. Clay Walker – Hypnotize The Moon 14. Mary Chapain Carpenter -- Passionate Kisses 15. Rick Trevino – Bobbie Ann Mason 16. Pam Tillis – Cleopatra, Queen of Denial 17. Vinne Gill – When I Called Your Name 18. Deana Carter – Strawberry Wine 19. Clint Black – Killin' Time 20. Suzy Bogguss – Drive South