

Gone Country: An Investigation of *Billboard* Country Songs of the Year Across Social and Economic Conditions in the United States

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Researchers have found that within the unfolding trends in pop culture, both pop music and the artists who perform pop songs vary predictably according to socioeconomic conditions. Popular songs are longer, slower, more lyrically meaningful, and in more somber sounding keys during difficult social and economic times. Furthermore, male and more mature-looking pop music performers are more successful during difficult economic times. In the current study, we assess the musical and lyrical properties along with the sex and age of the artists who recorded the 63 songs to reach No. 1 on the *Billboard* Annual Country Charts between 1946 and 2008. In contrast to findings on pop songs, country songs of the year are lyrically more positive, musically upbeat, and use more happy-sounding major chords during difficult socioeconomic times. While older country musicians are more popular in difficult socioeconomic times, unlike pop performers, the country artists of the year are more likely to be females when the social and economic environment is threatening. We hypothesize these differences exist because unlike the middle-class audiences who consume sadder popular songs because they match their affective mood in times of recession and social threat, the more marginalized working-class listeners of country music use happier sounding songs from comforting female figures, like the wives and mothers portrayed in country songs, as a catharsis in difficult socioeconomic times.

Keywords: music, economy, *Billboard* charts, music preferences, country music

“A good country song takes a page out of somebody’s life and puts it to music.”

—Conway Twitty

“Country music is the people’s music. It just speaks about real life and about truth and it tells things how they really are.”

—Faith Hill

Because recording technology and mass media have now existed for almost a century, researchers are able to conduct longitudinal assessments of popular culture. Social scientists’ ongoing retrospective analysis of trends in popular culture is revealing how the properties of songs and movies, along with the characteristics of artists and performers, are influenced by the

cultural, social, and economic context(s) in which popular culture is produced and consumed. The current research builds on these previous studies by investigating U.S. country songs and the artists who perform them across changing social and economic conditions from 1946 to 2008.

The Relationships Between Media and the Socioeconomic Context

Because of an ongoing and heated debate about the power of media images on body dissatisfaction within the population, the most researched trend in popular culture is the ongoing shift toward thinner female models in fashion and media (Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011). However, some researchers find the thinning trends of female models are not entirely linear, as the body types of beauty icons vary according to socioeconomic conditions. For example, Barber (1998a, 1998b) links thinning females in the media with two indicators of economic expansion (per capita gross national

This article was published Online First April 14, 2014.

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product and Standard & Poor stock index) and an increasing percentage of women in education and the workforce. Pettijohn and Jungeberg (2004) used their General Hard Time Measure (GHTM), which captures both social and economic difficulties, to uncover how *Playboy* Playmates of the Year have more mature (taller, older, and heavier) and therefore comforting features in times of social and economic struggle. Similarly, Webster (2008) found that *Playboy* Playmates of the Year are older and heavier when the Doomsday Clock (an indicator developed at the University of Chicago estimating the likelihood of a man-made global catastrophe) shows an increase in the threats facing humankind. However, Webster also found a reverse relationship between the body types of Playmates of the Year and the Dow Jones Industrial Average, as models became shorter and thinner when stocks performed poorly, thus capturing how social and economic threats (which often, but not always, arise concurrently) may independently and uniquely be related to preferences for beauty icons in different ways. Still, because *Playboy* Playmates (and also models in many other publications) are selected by a small group of publishers with a vested economic interest in their magazine, there is some question as to whether or not these women reflect what the populace of a society finds attractive in a given social and economic context.

TV and movie content also varies according to social and economic conditions. Crime dramas are more popular when unemployment rises, perhaps because the shows depict law, order, and justice in times of uncertainty (Reith, 1987, 1996). Furthermore, TV shows that viewers rate as more meaningful, more real, and more complex are preferred by audiences both when the consumer price index indicates an increase in the cost of living and the rates of unemployment, crime, suicide, homicide, and divorce rise (McIntosh, Schwegler, & Terry-Murray, 2000). Consistent with findings on Playmates of the Year, Pettijohn's analysis finds popular movie actresses are more likely to have comforting mature facial features such as small eyes, thin cheeks, and thick chins when the GHTM indicates more threatening social and economic times (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999). These relationships do not exist with actors, presumably because of the relatively lessened emphasis audiences place on male looks com-

pared with females (Pettijohn & Tesser, 2003). However, Pettijohn (2003) also finds during threatening social and economic times audiences prefer younger male actors over females, and unlike TV dramas that become more popular during difficult socioeconomic periods, movie audiences turn to comedies. Within the comedy genre, films produced during times of high unemployment, divorce, homicide, and inflation portray more comedic violence (McIntosh, Murray, Murray, & Manian, 2003). These somewhat contradictory findings on films compared with other media may stem from the unique ways audiences use movies. Whereas viewers seek out many types of more readily available media like TV because they identify with the characters, audiences are likely drawn to theaters in difficult times because films provide a temporary period of escape (Addis & Holbrook, 2010; Tesser, Millar, & Wu, 1988).

Socioeconomic Trends and Music

Popular music is inevitably influenced by both social and cultural changes, and thus, music is the subject of a great deal of social-scientific research. Many of these studies rely on the *Billboard Magazine* to identify popular songs of a particular time. The *Billboard Magazine* charts are considered especially valid and reliable indicators of a populace's tastes because unlike magazine models or even the winners of *Oscars* and *Grammies*, which are selected by a few industry insiders, *Billboard* accounts for music consumption by incorporating record sales and radio airplay driven by audience requests.

DeWall, Pond, Campbell, and Twenge (2011) use the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software to illustrate how the lyrics of *Billboard Magazine's* top 10 songs of the year between 1980 and 2007 became more self-focused, more disconnected, more antisocial, and less likely to express positive emotions. This study controls for genre and finds lyrical changes are not a function of different types of music becoming more and less popular. Hobbs and Gallup's (2011) cross-genre research finds there are consistent amounts of reproductive themes in pop and country songs since 1959. However, the researchers find songs on the R&B charts contain significantly more references to reproduction themes historically,

and these themes are increasingly prevalent in recent years. Schellenberg and von Scheve (2012) assess the beats per minutes, length, and the presence of minor key signatures of 1,000 songs and found that since 1965, *Billboard Top 40* hits became sadder and emotionally ambiguous. They also found female artists became more successful during this period; women's highest levels of success came in the 1990s, one of the most economically prosperous times in U.S. history.

Within these general trends in popular music, Pettijohn and his colleagues used the GHTM to explore how songs and the performers who sing them vary according to the social and economic context. In an investigation where listeners rated *Billboard* pop songs of the year, Pettijohn and Sacco (2009b) found songs that were popular in threatening social and economic conditions are longer, slower, more meaningful, more comforting, and more romantic—perhaps because these tunes console threatened listeners. A lyrical analysis conducted using LIWC and the GHTM finds during bad social and economic times, *Billboard* pop songs of the year use more words per sentence and focus more on the future and social groups (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a). A quantitative analysis of these *Billboard* pop songs of the year also reveals in threatening social and economic conditions, songs have less beats per minute and are more likely to be in key signatures that are somber and serious sounding (Pettijohn, Eastman, & Richard, 2012). Pettijohn and Sacco (2009b) also use the GHTM to highlight how musicians with mature facial features are more popular during times of social threat and economic hardship. Thus, performers of *Billboard* songs of the year are similar to *Playboy* Playmates of the Year who get older and more mature looking during times of hardship because they provide comfort, but unlike female movie stars who tend to be younger and mature looking during difficult social and economic times. Furthermore, Pettijohn and colleagues find anomalies during times of social conflict, providing indirect support for the sociological hypothesis claiming social upheavals influence the characteristics of pop music performers independently of the economic cycles (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998).

Scholars working from the economic-based “production of culture perspective” claim the music produced in a given period is contingent on market concentration, which usually

increases in slow economies, as small music producers fail and large companies acquire oligarchical control over the culture industry. According to the theory, less competition tends to homogenize both the products and performers that reach audiences because smaller producers are unable to infuse creative innovation and artist diversity into the marketplace when production slows in times of economic stagnation and recession (Peterson & Anand, 2004; Ross, 2005). For example, Dowd and his colleagues explored >20,000 weekly *Billboard* pop hits between 1940 and 1990 and found in concentrated production markets, Blacks and women were less commercially successful (Dowd, 2004a, 2004b; Dowd & Blyler, 2002; Dowd, Liddle, & Blyler, 2005). Rothenbuhler and Dimmick (1982) find between 1948 and 1980, lyrics of songs changed from an almost exclusive focus on conventional love to discussing social and cultural issues, many of which stemmed from the racial and class conflicts of the time that opened up new markets for women and minority performers (Peterson & Berger, 1975). Similarly, Lena's (2006) lyrical analysis of the *Billboard* R&B charts finds rap songs became more focused on establishing the “street authenticity” of their artists, as the production industry became increasingly dominated by major labels and distant from the urban poverty the music grew out of. Although later production of culture studies exploring the number of new artists and new songs, as opposed to the characteristics of performers, challenge the thesis that market concentration reduces innovation and diversity, most of these studies still find economic conditions influence music through the development of new genres and advances in technology (Anderson, Hesbacher, Etkorn, & Denisoff, 1980; Christianen, 1995; Lee, 2004; Lopes, 1992). However, Alexander (1996) examines the sheet music of *Billboard* hits and reveals a nonlinear relationship between market concentration and product diversity, or that innovation is the most likely to occur when markets are moderately concentrated.

The Social Psychological Importance of Music

The unique nature of music makes it especially of interest to social scientists. Music is not only ever present in our lives, but many

listeners use their musical preferences to help define their very identity, place, and perspective on social reality primarily because different music genres are marketed toward a specific demographic group (DeNora, 2000; Roy & Dowd, 2010). Thus, whereas many movies, TV shows, and magazines are produced to appeal to mass audiences of all demographics for passive consumption, individuals actively use specific music genres to define their place and purpose in their world (DeNora, 2000; Kotarba & Vannini, 2009).

Furthermore, even though elite arts of many mediums are losing their significance as cultural capital, given how snobbish audiences are becoming more “omnivorous” (Peterson & Kern, 1996), different music genres are still powerful symbolic indicators of racial and class communities (Bryson, 1996, 1997; García-Álvarez, Katz-Gerro, & López-Sintas, 2007; Katz-Gerro, 2002), as music helps groups maintain boundaries and their in-group identity (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Thus, specific genres still speak to, and for different ethnic or socioeconomic groups (DiMaggio, 1987); this is especially true for the “univores” of the lower classes who often develop a narrow set of “lowbrow” tastes (Peterson, 1992, 2005; Tampubolon, 2008).

However, despite the importance of specific genres of music that are targeted to marginalized populations, most of the studies on the relationship between the socioeconomic context and audience tastes focus exclusively on popular songs targeted at a general middle-class demographic. The few studies that do examine music associated with a subordinated group who is marginalized by race or class mostly focus on comparing songs across the different *Billboard* charts rather than looking at trends within a genre. Thus, to date there has been no examination we are aware of exploring how the overall socioeconomic context influences the popularity of songs and performers from genres other than pop. This is an especially intriguing research problem, as the ways people experience economic downturns depend on how many social and economic resources are available to people to help them through difficult times—including music that can be used as an emotion management resource during difficult times.

Country music is one genre that could be explored to assess the types of songs listeners gravitate toward during a given socioeconomic

context because the genre remains firmly grounded in the cultural traditions of poor, usually southern, rural, working-poor, and working-class Whites (Ching, 2001; Cobb, 1982; Fox, 2004; Malone, 2006). Researchers show this narrow demographic target results in music that lyrically focuses on a small number of specific themes about the trials and tribulations of small town life. For instance, an assessment by Peterson and DiMaggio (1975) finds country music is fraught with traditional gender roles, unquestioning religious faith, firm commitment to family, and the darker aspects of poverty that include violence, substance abuse, financial struggle, prison, and even death. Jimmie Rogers’ (1989) analysis of the 400 most popular country songs from 1960 to 1987 finds songs about love lost (usually owing to infidelity) is the most common theme. Hortsman’s (1986) content analysis concludes all country songs fall into one of 15 categories: home, religion, death and sorrow, comedy and novelty, winning love, lost and unrequited love, cheating, honky-tonk, social comment, war and patriotism, prison, working, cowboy, traveling, and stories. Ellison (1995) replicates this study on the most popular country musicians of the last century and finds both their song catalogues and their personal biographies reflect these major themes. In fact, the prevalence of these themes in country music is so persistent that most researchers have since turned their attention away from descriptive studies and instead, now debate whether these messages are authentic expressions of “Middle America” or a cleverly fabricated marketing gimmick by the very economically successful Nashville culture industry (Cobb, 1999; Eastman, 2010; Fenster, 1988; Hughes, 2000; Jensen, 1998; Peterson, 1997).

With ever-present themes of overcoming challenges and despair with faith and family (or the gun and the bottle) in country music, songs in this genre may vary with the socioeconomic context in ways entirely different than pop music. For example, in their lyrical analysis, Hobbs and Gallup (2011) illustrate the differences between songs on the R&B, pop, and country *Billboard* charts. They find the amount of reproductive themes remains relatively constant in pop and country songs since 1959, and there are no significant differences between pop and country songs in how often they mention repro-

ductive themes. However, the ways these genres approach love and family differ.

The four most frequent reproductive categories contained in the lyrics of country songs were commitment, parenting, rejection, and fidelity assurance, in that order. For Pop songs, the most frequent reproductive categories were sex appeal, reputation, short-term strategies, and fidelity assurance (Hobbs & Gallup, 2011, p. 397).

Since there is evidence the themes of different genres vary, there is also reason to suspect these genres are not affected by the social and economic context in the same way that pop songs are.

Current Study Predictions

The current study examines how *Billboard* country songs of the year vary according to the social and economic context between 1946 and 2008. We assess three dimensions of these songs: (1) artist's age and sex, with controls for market concentration, (2) lyrical themes, and (3) song properties.

Artist's Sex and Age

Previous studies on musicians and models find audiences prefer mature performers during difficult economic times (Pettijohn, 2003; Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009b; Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999, 2003). Therefore, we predict older artists will record the *Billboard* country song of the year during social and economic tough times because their maturity makes them more comforting figures to threatened audiences.

According to the culture of production perspective, women performers have more career opportunity in the less concentrated production markets that are more likely to occur during times of economic prosperity (Dowd, 2004a, 2004b; Dowd & Blyler, 2002; Dowd et al., 2005; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Ross, 2005). However, social psychologists predict that audiences seek out comforting media figures in difficult social and economic times. For a genre like country where women are portrayed as wives and mothers instead of sex objects (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007; Freudiger & Almquist, 1978), we hypothesize females will be more likely to record *Billboard* country songs of the year in difficult socioeco-

nomie times because they provide comfort to listeners experiencing social and economic hardship.

Lyrical Themes

While previous studies uncover lyrical trends in popular music (DeWall et al., 2011; Hobbs & Gallup, 2011; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a; Rothenbuhler & Dimmick, 1982), analysis of country music lyrics finds the trials and tribulations of life in culturally and religiously conservative small towns have been a constant theme since the genre's inception (Ellison, 1995; Hortsman, 1986; Peterson & DiMaggio, 1975; Rogers, 1989). Thus, because the genre historically focuses almost exclusively on a small number of traditional themes, we expect that unlike popular music where lyrics about different social processes (home, money, religion, death, leisure, work, sex, and family) vary, *Billboard* country songs of the year will not vary according to the larger social and economic conditions. However, we do predict that the larger social and economic conditions will influence the affective framing of these traditional themes in songs, or we hypothesize lyrics will vary in their expression of emotions according to socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, research implies that whereas middle-class individuals likely seek out somber popular culture to match their mood in difficult socioeconomic times because they are socialized to take charge of their lives and their emotions, working-class individuals are socialized to be accepting of their social and economic disadvantage (Kohn, 1989; Lareau, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize the lyrics of *Billboard* country songs of the year will be more positive in difficult social and economic times, as working-class audiences seek music that serves as a catharsis during periods of economic stagnation and social uncertainty.

Musical Properties

Studies on popular music find songs tend to be longer, less upbeat, and in less comfortable sounding keys when the social and economic environment is threatening, as these songs generally match the affective mood of the time (Pettijohn, Eastman, & Richard, 2012; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a, 2009b). However, pop music is demographically targeted at middle-class audi-

ences, while country music is consumed mostly by poor and working Whites, who likely seek out happier and comforting sounding music during difficult periods. Thus, we hypothesize the musical properties of *Billboard* country songs of the year will mirror the emotions expressed in the lyrics, or we predict in times of social and economic hardship, country music songs will be more upbeat and use more happy-sounding chords.

Method

Like numerous other studies, this examination relies on the *Billboard* charts to identify the most popular song in a given year. We collected the 63 *Billboard* country songs of the year between 1946 and 2008 in mp3 format for examination. The song title and artist are listed by year in the [Appendix](#).

Country Artists

Country artist sex and age when their song reached No. 1 were collected from various biographies and online sources. When bands as opposed to solo acts placed songs on the annual charts, the average age of the group was used. The mean age of country singers with *Billboard* songs of the year was 35.63 years ($SD = 6.3$). We indicated the sex of performers using a variable that codes for the proportion of singers in a song that are male. For example, a solo male act is coded 1, while a male–female duet is coded .5, because half the singers of a song are male. Ninety-one percent (91%) of musicians with country songs of the year were male. We could not examine race for country artists because, with perhaps the exception of Julio Iglesias who was from Spain and half Jewish, no nonwhite artist had ever recorded a *Billboard* country song of the year through 2008.

Market Concentration

We counted the number of songs to reach the top spot (e.g., No. 1) on the weekly *Billboard* charts within a given year to use as an indicator of market concentration. On average, there were 24.54 ($SD = 13.54$) songs to reach No. 1 on the weekly charts within a given year. Larger values indicated less concentration in the production markets because there was more turnover

on the charts from which the *Billboard* country song of the year was selected.

Country Song Lyrics

The lyrics for each song were transcribed from the mp3 files, which were compared with online lyric Web sites for accuracy. The transcriptions were assessed using LIWC (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2001), a text analysis software program that counts the number of words in a text that appear across certain categories and then reports those counts in proportion to the overall number of words in a document. We use three broad dimensions on the transcripts of the *Billboard* songs of the year to assess personal concerns and the social, affective, and biological processes in lyrics.

Country Song Properties

Lyrics are only one way music communicates emotion, and in actuality, more emotional messages are sent by the sounds of a song as opposed to the words (Gabrielsson & Juslin, 2002; Juslin & Slobada, 2010; Powell, 2010). Within a culture, music tones and tempos essentially become a symbolic language, as individual listeners are socialized and even conditioned to associate these different sounds and beats with particular emotions (Dalla Bella, Peretz, Rousseau, & Gosselin, 2001; Dowling, 1999; Kastner & Crowder, 1990), even if unlike professional musicians, they may not be able to identify the musical elements they hear by name (Levitin, 2006).

To examine the chord structures of *Billboard* country songs of the year, we used a simplified version of a method designed to analyze the symbolic codes of music within a population of songs that was first developed by Cerulo (1988) and refined by Dowd (1992, 2000). First, a musician with over 25 years of experience listed the chords used in each song that are both repeating and sustained for more than one beat. From this list, we calculated the percentage of major chords used in a song, which researchers find most Western listeners associate with positive emotions like happiness (Crowder, 1984; Heinlein, 1928)—especially relative to minor chords that are associated with feelings of “sadness, suffering, and anguish” (Meyer, 1956, p. 227), and/or other types of chords that are diminished, augmented, suspended, and so forth

and sound “colorful, interesting, or tense . . . because they do not sound relaxed or final” (Powell, 2010, p. 157). On average, 62% ($SD = 20\%$) of the chords in *Billboard* songs of the year were major.

In addition to chords, another way songs express emotion is with time and tempo. Research shows fast or literally upbeat songs tend to sound happier, while slower songs tend to sound sadder (Balkwill & Thompson, 1999; Gundlach, 1935; Hevner, 1937; Rigg, 1940). Song length also reflects emotion by mimicking the way feelings affect an individual’s subjective perceptions of time (Kellaris & Kent, 1992). Sadder songs can draw out feelings of melancholy by being longer, and happier songs often capture the brevity of this emotion by being shorter in length. For example, John Michael Montgomery’s *Billboard* country song of the year “Sold” is especially happy sounding both because it is only 150 seconds long and the “auctioneer-style” lyrics highlight the upbeat tempo of 116 beats per minute (the song also uses only happy sounding major chords). In this study, an experienced country musician calculated both beats per minute (BPM) and song length in seconds by assessing each with a stopwatch and a click-counter. The *Billboard* country songs of the year averaged 94.78 beats per minute ($SD = 21.92$) and lasted 181.63 s ($SD = 36.68$) in duration.

Social and Economic Indicators

To explore the ways country music varies according to the socioeconomic context with a measure that allows direct comparison with previous studies, we analyzed how attributes of the songs reaching the top of the annual *Billboard* country charts relate to the GHTM. The GHTM is a measure of society-wide well-being that ascribes a standardized score to every year (1946–2008 in this investigation) using the unemployment rate, death rate, birthrate, marriage rate, divorce rate, suicide rate, and homicide rate, along with changes in disposable personal income and the consumer price index (see Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a, 2009b; Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999). By combining several indices, the GHTM captures both the social and the economic difficulties experienced by the U.S. population within a given year. Larger values indicate relatively

harder times because of economic recession and the increasing prevalence of social problems that accompany difficult economies, whereas smaller scores indicate periods of economic prosperity and social comfort.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the study, Pearson correlations with one-tailed tests for statistical significance were used to examine the relationships between the artist demographics, the LWIC lyrical assessment, musical properties, and the GHTM.

Age and Sex of *Billboard* Artists According to Socioeconomic Conditions

First, we explored whether the demographics of the artists who perform country songs of the year vary according to the socioeconomic context. Previous studies on musicians and models find audiences prefer mature entertainers during difficult economic times (Pettijohn, 2003; Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009b; Pettijohn & Tesser, 2003). Consistent with our prediction, the relationship between age of country music performers and the GHTM was positive, $r(61) = .18, p = .08$. The weakness of this correlation in comparison with stronger findings in other popular culture arenas is likely partially a function of the limited diversity in the sample, as the majority of country singers with *Billboard* songs of the year are men on the verge of middle age.

As hypothesized, there is a negative relationship between the GHTM and the sex of country music performers, $r(61) = -.24, p = .03$, indicating females have more success on the *Billboard* country charts in difficult socioeconomic times. This contradicts both research concluding audiences prefer male actors during difficult times and predictions that women have more success when good economic times could increase competition in the culture industry by reducing market concentration (Dowd, Liddle, & Blyler, 2005; Pettijohn & Tesser, 2003). The presence of women’s success during difficult socioeconomic times could be partially a function of the relatively minute diversity on the country charts compared with the pop charts. The number of weekly *Billboard* songs in a year and the GHTM were positively correlated, $r(61) = .67, p < .001$. There is more turnover in

country music during difficult social and economic times, contradicting claims markets tend to produce less and therefore become more concentrated in times of recession. This implies that unlike pop music, a preference for both female country performers and increased turnover on the *Billboard* country charts is driven more by the social environment than the economics of cultural production. The gender differences likely reflect the divergent ways women are portrayed across the genres. Whereas women are highly sexualized in pop music and therefore appeal to listeners in nonthreatening times (Bretthauer et al., 2007), in country music females are usually depicted as mothers and wives (Freudiger & Almquist, 1978), figures who provide comfort during difficult social and economic times.

Country Music Lyrics According to Socioeconomic Conditions

The lyrics of the country songs of the year were analyzed using the LIWC software, and results were correlated with the GHTM. Although previous research on *Billboard* pop hits found in bad social and economic times, songs focus more on social groups and the future (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a), as we predicted for the country charts, there are no significant relationships between the GHTM and social processes. Furthermore, although research on the themes of pop and R&B music found thematic trends with the reproductive messages in the lyrics of these genres (DeWall et al., 2011; Hobbs & Gallup, 2011), for country music there are no significant relationships between the GHTM and biological processes (including sex) or the personal concerns measured by the LIWC including home, money, religion, death, leisure, work, and family. Because previous studies establish how personal concerns are constant and pervasive in the country music genre, it is not surprising the presence of these themes does not vary with socioeconomic changes (Ellison, 1995; Hortsman, 1986; Peterson & DiMaggio, 1975; Rogers, 1989).

However, as predicted, significant correlations exist between the affective processes captured by the LIWC and the GHTM. During bad economic times, songs are less likely to use words that express negative emotions, $r(61) = -.34$, $p = .003$, anxiety, $r(61) = -.34$, $p =$

$.003$, anger, $r(61) = -.19$, $p = .06$, and sadness, $r(61) = -.28$, $p = .01$. Although the biological, social, and personal themes of country music are relatively constant, the emotional framing of those themes vary, as artists are more likely to focus on positive aspects of life in bad social and economic times. Furthermore, this contradicts pop lyrics that are happier in better economic times (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009b). Thus, even though country music is often stereotypically thought to focus almost exclusively on the darker and depressing aspects of life, *Billboard* country songs of the year are less likely to lyrically incorporate negative emotions during difficult social and economic times.

Musical Properties of *Billboard* Country Songs of the Year According to Socioeconomic Conditions

Previous studies on pop music found in good socioeconomic times, as indicated by low scores on the GHTM, songs are more likely to be in familiar and comfortable sounding keys (Pettijohn et al., 2012). However, contrary to pop songs that are sadder sounding in periods of social and economic difficulty, *Billboard* country songs of the year are more likely to use a larger proportion of happy-sounding major chords in difficult socioeconomic times, $r(61) = .32$, $p = .006$. In addition to chords, music communicates emotion with time and tempo. Previous studies on popular music find songs are more upbeat in periods of social calm and economic prosperity (Pettijohn et al., 2012). However, as predicted, the tempo of *Billboard* country songs of the year displays the opposite trends. There is a positive relationship between GHTM and the BPM of *Billboard* country songs of the year, which get more upbeat in bad times, $r(61) = .27$, $p = .02$. Yet, contrary to predictions, *Billboard* country songs of the year also get longer in bad socioeconomic times, $r(61) = .46$, $p < .001$, a pattern that was also revealed in pop music (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009b). Although this finding on length contradicts our findings that country songs have more positive lyrics, incorporate use of a larger proportion of happier sounding chords, and are more upbeat during bad social and economic times, duration is the least effective way music communicates emotion. Whereas beats per min-

ute, lyrics, and chord structure are near absolute in the emotions they symbolically communicate, sad songs can be short, and happy songs can be long.

Thus, the majority of the findings in the study indicate that unlike pop songs that are sadder and slower in bad social and economic times, country songs get more upbeat, have more emotionally positive lyrics, and use more happy-sounding major chords when socioeconomic conditions become more threatening and difficult. The near opposite trends between the pop and country genres is likely a result of the ways different demographic groups that consume these types of music are socialized and thus experience economic swings and threatening social conditions (Kohn, 1989; Lareau, 2001). Middle-class parents socialize their children to take control and master their environment. As the primary consumers of pop music, this audience likely seeks out sadder, more serious songs in bad socioeconomic times to match the negative emotions and anxieties they personally feel, but are ultimately confident they will overcome. In contrast, working-class parents are less secure because of their relative lack of power and resources, and thus socialize their children to be accepting of life's hardships. Thus, during bad social and economic times, the working-class audiences that consume country music likely seek out songs that serve as a catharsis, happy and upbeat songs that offer temporary relief from stress and anxiety they believe is inevitable, and inescapable.

Intercorrelations Between Variables and Multiple Regression Analysis

The intercorrelations between the variables used in this investigation are presented in Table 1. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the unique contributions of each predictor variable in its relationship with the GHTM. Therefore, we entered all 10 variables (artist gender, artist age, market concentration, song length, beats per minute, proportion major chords, negative emotions, anxiety, anger, and sadness) into a simultaneous model, which accounted for 60% of the variance in the GHTM, $F(10, 52) = 10.17, p < .001, R^2 = .60$. Regression coefficients are provided in Table 2. Within the context of this model, four of the variables had significant ($p < .05$) partial effects (market

Table 1
Intercorrelations Between Variables

Variable	GHTM	Country artist gender	Country artist age	Market concentration	Song length (Sec)	Song beats per minute	Proportion major chords	Negative emotions	Anxiety	Anger	Sadness
GHTM	1										
Country Artist Gender	-.243*	1	.175	.674**	.461**	.273*	.315**	-.339**	-.344**	-.194	-.284*
Country Artist Age	.175	.314**	1	-.185	-.074	-.023	.021	.169	.113	-.136	.184
Market Concentration	.674**	-.185	.301**	1	.075	.084	.024	-.192	-.105	-.197	-.111
Song Length (Sec)	.461**	-.074	.376**	.376**	1	.157	.063	-.300**	-.194	-.115	-.266*
Song Beats Per Minute	.273*	-.023	.084	.157	.081	1	.077	-.178	-.113	.037	-.204
Proportion Major Chords	.315**	-.023	.084	.157	.081	.077	1	-.091	-.256*	.164	-.076
Negative Emotions	-.339**	.021	.024	.063	.077	.255*	1	-.062	-.115	.047	-.123
Anxiety	-.344**	.169	-.192	-.300**	-.178	-.091	-.062	1	.510**	.398**	.799**
Anger	-.194	.113	-.105	-.194	-.113	-.256*	-.115	.510**	1	.189	.142
Sadness	-.284*	-.136	-.197	-.115	.037	.164	.047	.398**	.189	1	.064
		.184	-.111	-.266*	-.204	-.076	-.123	.799**	.142	.064	1

Note. N = 63 years. ** $p < .01$ (1-tailed). * $p < .05$ (1-tailed).

Table 2
Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting GHTM

Variable	B	SE (B)	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Country artist gender	-.209	.122	-.159	-1.710	.093
Country artist age	.000	.005	.006	0.066	.948
Market concentration	.013	.003	.478	4.900	.001
Song length (seconds)	.002	.001	.233	2.638	.011
Song beats per minute	.002	.001	.115	1.296	.201
Proportion major chords	.398	.158	.215	2.527	.015
Negative emotions	.061	.044	.325	1.389	.171
Anxiety	-.132	.069	-.232	-1.926	.060
Anger	-.214	.088	-.266	-2.422	.019
Sadness	-.073	.055	-.254	-1.331	.189

Note. $R^2 = .60$.

concentration, song length, proportion of major chords, and anger), two had marginally significant ($p < .10$) partial effects (artist gender and anxiety), and four had nonsignificant partial effects (artist age, beats per minute, negative emotions, and sadness). The results of this analysis show that individual aspects of country artists, market concentration, and song elements are uniquely related to changes in social and economic conditions over time, and we are not just capturing the same overlapping variance with each of the simple associations previously reported.

Conclusion

Now that the culture industry is almost a century old, it is possible to conduct longitudinal studies on trends in popular mediums that grow out of cultural changes and evolution. However, studies find there are not only ongoing trends in popular culture; films, movies, TV, and songs, along with the characteristics of the men and women who perform in them, vary predictably according to the socioeconomic conditions.

Of all the different popular mediums examined by social scientists, those exploring music are especially important. Music is not only ever present in daily life; many individuals also seek out songs of particular musical genres to help them make sense of, and relate to, the social reality around them (DeNora, 2000, 2004; Kotarba & Vannini, 2009). Thus, it is somewhat surprising that previous studies focus almost exclusively on pop music, as it is just one of the many genres produced and consumed in con-

temporary society. The current study fills this gap by exploring how country music performers, lyrics, and song properties vary according to the social and economic conditions.

Relative to other genres, country music singers lack diversity, as the overwhelming majority of performers are white men in their late twenties or early thirties. Still, performer characteristics vary according to social and economic conditions. Although the relationships are not as strong as they are in other mediums and music genres, country music artists are more likely to be older and therefore more mature during difficult social and economic times. This likely occurs because more mature individuals provide security and comfort during challenging and threatening periods. Contrary to previous studies on both films and the cultural production of popular music, female country music artists are more likely to record the *Billboard* country song of the year in social and economically threatening times. A control for market concentration reveals women likely succeed not because of production economics and opportunity, but because their roles as mothers and wives in country music makes them comforting figures for audiences threatened by the larger socioeconomic environment.

Furthermore, a lack of market concentration and female success during bad socioeconomic times were not the only findings we uncovered with *Billboard* country hits that contradict patterns found in pop music. Whereas previous studies on the *Billboard* pop charts find songs tend to get more optimistic and more upbeat during good social and economic times, country songs are faster, use more happier sounding

chords, and are less likely to have lyrics about negative emotions during bad socioeconomic times. The only finding in line with previous studies on *Billboard* pop songs is that country songs of the year also tend to get longer during bad economic times, although this song property is the least effective at communicating emotion.

In revealing that different socioeconomic groups use media in different ways, this study opens up a new direction for researchers to further explore, and hopefully better understand how audiences use music expression in their lives given their socioeconomic position. Different genres have unique relationships with the larger socioeconomic environment in which they are produced because the distinct demographic groups of these musical genres are marketed toward, have different experiences with, and react in unique ways to social and economic threat. Studies further exploring the variations among genres could greatly enhance our understanding of how music plays a role in the daily lives of people who face unique challenges because of their own socioeconomic standing—and perhaps even their race, ethnicity, and maybe even gender. The findings of such research could be especially strong if they overcame the limited sample size of this study and analyzed a more expansive sample, perhaps by looking at more songs on the annual *Billboard* charts or examining the weekly charts that post the top songs every seven days. Larger sample sizes would allow for a more advanced statistical analysis that explores the interactions of song properties, or isolates the social and economic influences on music.

Because we used simplistic indicators to explore a new area of research, future studies might incorporate a complex analysis of song indicators, like those that assess the melody, rhythm, ordering of chords within a song, and even the way these song properties (and many others not listed) interact to further reveal the nuanced ways musical-expressed emotions relate to the socioeconomic context. These studies might also reveal how the expression of emotion as related to socioeconomic conditions changed historically, and how it might change in the future—perhaps even accounting for how different genres and their unique relationships to the socioeconomic context influence each other. For instance, in the mid-1970s, country

music was influenced by pop, as “chord structures and rhythms became more complex, orchestration became fuller, and the singing styles became smoother” (Peterson, 1978, p. 295). This transition included the incorporation of more minor chords and lessened use of the simplistic I-IV-V chordal structure traditionally used in the country genre. Furthermore, future studies might also consider mediums other than music, as different socioeconomic groups may also prefer different types of TV, movies, and print media during times of social and economic threat.

Future studies might also further explore whether the social and the economic environment affects music in unique ways. This study used the same GHTM because it both effectively captures the social and the economic threats that often arise in tandem, and it allows for a comparison with previous research on trends in popular culture. Future studies may consider other indicators such as the poverty rate and gross domestic product that could better isolate the economic and social effects on music. Production of culture scholars also highlight how new technologies, like music videos or the ever-developing Internet platforms, influence trends in popular music. Furthermore, social-psychological research is also uncovering that the political elections may also influence media consumption patterns, especially the consumption of sexually explicit materials (Markey & Markey, 2010, 2011); perhaps, similar relationships exist between political events and other forms of popular culture.

Distinguishing between the social, economic, and perhaps even the technological and political environments is important because of the divergent theories used to explain the relationship between the socioeconomic context and trends in music. Many social psychologists claim swings in music occur because of patterns in consumption, or audiences seek out different types of songs because of their experiences in a given socioeconomic climate. Production of culture scholars claim trends are almost entirely dependent on production, or the market concentration dictates the types of artists and songs available to audiences. These two perspectives rely on entirely different assumptions about the audiences (Gauntlett, 2008). Social psychologists argue listeners take an active role in seeking out songs they relate to in a particular time

in their lives. The economic-based production theorists assume listeners somewhat passively accept the products available. By splitting the economic effects from the social effects, researchers will be better able to establish whether the trends in music stem from the *economics* of production markets or the tastes of listeners who seek out certain types of music because of their *social* experiences with unemployment, poverty, inequality, and other social problems.

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(Appendix follows)

Appendix

Billboard Country Songs of the Year and Artist, 1946–2008

Year	Song title	Artist
1946	New Spanish Two Step	Bob Wills
1947	Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)	Tex Williams
1948	Bouquet Of Roses	Eddy Arnold
1949	Lovesick Blues	Hank Williams
1950	I'm Moving On	Hank Snow
1951	Cold, Cold Heart	Hank Williams
1952	The Wild Side Of Life	Hank Thompson
1953	Kaw-Liga	Hank Williams
1954	I Don't Hurt Anymore	Hank Snow
1955	In The Jailhouse Now	Webb Pierce
1956	Crazy Arms	Ray Price
1957	Gone	Ferlin Husky
1958	Oh Lonesome Me	Don Gibson
1959	The Battle Of New Orleans	Johnny Horton
1960	Please Help Me, I'm Falling	Hank Locklin
1961	I Fall To Pieces	Patsy Cline
1962	Wolverton Mountain	Claude King
1963	Still	Bill Anderson
1964	My Heart Skips A Beat	Buck Owens
1965	What's He Doing In My World	Eddy Arnold
1966	Almost Persuaded	David Houston
1967	All The Time	Jack Greene
1968	Folsom Prison Blues	Johnny Cash
1969	My Life (Throw It Away If I Want To)	Bill Anderson
1970	Hello Darlin'	Conway Twitty
1971	Easy Loving	Freddie Hart
1972	My Hang-Up Is You	Freddie Hart
1973	You've Never Been This Far Before	Conway Twitty
1974	There Won't Be Anymore	Charlie Rich
1975	Rhinestone Cowboy	Glen Campbell
1976	Convoy	C.W. McCall
1977	Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)	Waylon Jennings
1978	Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys	Waylon Jennings & Willie Nelson
1979	I Just Fall In Love Again	Anne Murray
1980	My Heart	Ronnie Milsap
1981	Fire & Smoke	Earl Thomas Conley
1982	Always On My Mind	Willie Nelson
1983	Jose Cuervo	Shelly West
1984	To All The Girls I've Loved Before	Julio Iglesias & Willie Nelson
1985	She Keeps The Home Fires Burning	Ronnie Milsap
1986	Never Be You	Rosanne Cash
1987	Give Me Wings	Michael Johnson
1988	Don't Close Your Eyes	Keith Whitley
1989	Better Man	Clint Black
1990	Nobody's Home	Clint Black
1991	Don't Rock The Jukebox	Alan Jackson

(Appendix continues)

Appendix (*continued*)

Year	Song title	Artist
1992	I Saw The Light	Wynonna Judd
1993	Chattahoochee	Alan Jackson
1994	I Swear	John Michael Montgomery
1995	Sold (The Grundy Country Auction Incident)	John Michael Montgomery
1996	My Maria	Brooks & Dunn
1997	It's Your Love	Tim McGraw & Faith Hill
1998	Just To See You Smile	Tim McGraw
1999	Amazed	Lonestar
2000	How Do You Like Me Now?!	Toby Keith
2001	Ain't Nothing 'Bout You	Brooks & Dunn
2002	The Good Stuff	Kenny Chesney
2003	My Front Porch Looking In	Lonestar
2004	Live Like You Were Dying	Tim McGraw
2005	That's What I Love About Sunday	Craig Morgan
2006	If You're Going Through Hell (Before the Devil Even Knows)	Rodney Atkins
2007	Watching You	Rodney Atkins
2008	Just Got Started Lovin' You	James Otto

Received February 3, 2013

Revision received September 4, 2013

Accepted October 28, 2013 ■