

Introduction

Country music as a whole is a popular genre that stems back to the early 20th century branching from old folk songs and songs from settlers in the Appalachians. Originating in the West and South, these are the areas it is often associated with in today's society. The term country music is not what it was always called. "The term country and western music (later shortened to country music) was adopted by the recording industry in 1949 to replace the derogatory label hillbilly music." (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025) Now the genre of Country Music has grown to include many different sub-genres. These include bluegrass, western swing, honky-tonk, and many others. It has been a key part of American culture often showcasing strong storytelling, emotional depth, and representation of rural life and traditional values.

Throughout the history of country music, the visibility, and roles of male and female artists in country music has shifted dramatically. Overtime, it is seen that this genre was heavily dominated by male voices, previously restricting female musicians through limited airtime, lack of recognition, and low chart presence. Even with these barriers, many women overtime like Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, Lainey Wilson, and many others have both challenged and reshaped the gender norms of the genre. This paper explores how gender representation has changed within the genre of country music by looking at the culture, industry, and influences. While there has been a lot of progress, there is still stereotypes and narratives that linger throughout the genre. It is important to examine how far the industry has come with inclusion for women to see how we can continue to grow and create a welcoming and equal environment for all of the artist that are currently in country music and those who would like to break into the industry in the future. It is also important to look at how fans have

interacted with the genre as the representation of men and women have change throughout history.

Literature review & background research

Throughout its history, country music has been predominantly masculine. You will often see men represented as rugged, stoic, and independent. The idea of the “cowboy” image is often showcased in many songs both old and new. This paints the men as “wild” and “free.” “The cowboy of old (whether a literal cowboy or the metaphorical country singer, truck driver or other working man as cowboy) has largely been replaced in this data set by the Country Boy archetype. Instead of busting broncos and roping steers, this pop-country protagonist parties on the riverbank and drives a tricked-out pickup truck.” (Pruitt, 2019) In this article Pruitt explore the masculine identity found within country music. In part the article, the author discuss how the tradition “cowboy” image that was previously mentioned has adapted into the “country boy” image. This involves the showcasing of more “masculine activities like driving trucks, partying, farming, etc. Songs like “Boys ‘Round Here” by Blake Shelton re-enforce this idea, stating many things may be traditionally considered masculine with lyrics like “Yeah the boys 'round here Drinking that ice cold beer Talkin' 'bout girls, talkin' 'bout trucks Runnin' them red dirt roads out, kicking up dust” almost giving a sort of outline for this lifestyle. This type of image is also frequently served with a side of objectifying women. Just from listening to this genre myself, many male artists like Luke Bryan, Blake Shelton, Florida Georgia Line, and others create music where women are the focus and are frequently portrayed as object to win or obtain. Some examples are “Country Girl (Shake it for Me)” by Luke Bryan and “Cruise” by Florida Georgia Line just to name a few. Songs that depict these kinds of behaviors can perpetuate the idea the

women are less or that they are objects, which will continue to negatively affect the women in the country music industry.

Overtime, women have been shown in various ways, both as part of the industry and within the music itself. Within the industry, women have long since faced barriers and challenges trying to fight for equal pay, airtime, and roles behind the scenes. Songs by early female artists often depicted themes of love, heartbreak, motherhood, and traditional domestic roles. Female industry leaders like Reba McEntire and Dolly Parton stood against these stereotypes, producing music about female independence, resilience, and autonomy. Dolly Parton is a name that is synonymous with country music, being a huge influence on the changing culture of the industry. “Earning 25 Number Ones and 54 Top Ten hits on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, “Dolly Parton – Chart History”), Parton is not only one of the most successful recording artists of all time, but also one of the most iconic figures in pop culture. She has received multiple number ones in other genres, crossing over to charts such as Billboard’s Hot 100, Christian Airplay, Adult Contemporary, and Dance/Electronic Digital Song Sales (Billboard, “Dolly Parton – Chart History”).” (Payne, 2020). Even with such strong female presence, women in country music continue to face systemic barriers. Studies show a consistent gender gap in radio airplay and chart success. In an interview with Russ Pennuelli of *Country Aircheck*, he gave honest insight into how women artists are factored into the genre’s airplay rotation. “Not only did he caution against playing songs by too many female artists in a one-hour rotation, but he also claimed that playing their songs back-to-back was against the rules” (Gender Representation in Country Music). This shows how many have a preconceived perception of music by female artists. According to Watson, there was more than a 50% percentage point gap in the number of songs by men and women in the Top 10 on the weekly airplay reports each year from 2002-2018

(Watson, 2019). With all of these disparities, it is easy to see why we are still fighting for gender equality in this genre.

With the existence of sexism in the country, comes movements that push for equality and fight against the stereotypes depicted with in the music. Social media has played a big role in creating an even playing field for artists of all genders with the popularity of Tik Tok and Instagram. This has created a way for artists to reach their audiences directly without having to go through traditional platforms like radio or music apps. These have given a voice to those who may not have had one previously. Female artist have also got an extreme amount of support form Country Music Television (CMT). They have launched several campaigns like the Next Women of Country in 2013 along with branches like the annual Next Women of Country Tour in 2015. “Alongside the campaign, CMT launched the annual Next Women of Country Tour in 2015 – the network’s first ladies-only tour. Each year, the tour has featured all female lineups. Headliners have included stars like Jennifer Nettles of the duo Sugarland in 2016, Martina McBride in 2017, Sara Evans in 2018, and Tanya Tucker in 2020. Support acts have included new up-and-comers such as Lindsay Ell and Lauren Alaina (CMT Press)” (Pg. 59, Payne, 2020). Payne describes how CMT has made a dedicated effort to include and spotlight the women in the country music industry and their contributions to the genre.

For my research, I will be focusing on the following questions:

How has audience reception differed between male and female country artists?

How do streaming platform playlists (e.g., Spotify's “Hot Country”) feature male vs. female artists in terms of frequency and ranking?

How have YouTube views and likes differed for male vs. female country artists' official music videos?

With these questions I hope to find how different the interactions of fans are between the genders and if there is a clear reason as to why.

Methodology

For my research, I studied different Spotify playlists like “Hot Country,” “Country Top 50,” “All New Country,” “Big Country,” and many others to find if the amount of music from male artists to female artists was different or if there was a relatively even field. I also looked at some of the top artists on these lists and looked at the streaming between these artists. I then looked up some of the popular artists from the last couple of years and made notes of the number of followers, views, likes, and comments to see if the interactions are similar to that of Spotify. With all of this, I hope to find if we have a big gap in representation and interaction with male and female artists. From reading how there has been gaps in the past, I want to see if this is something that carries into today’s country’s music culture or if we have continued to even out the representation and close the gap. Some artists that I chose to dive into deeper were Jelly Roll, Ella Langley, Megan Moroney, Lainey Wilson, Morgan Wallen, Thomas Rhett, Reily Green, and Kelsea Ballerini.

Some of their top music videos are listed below:

[Jelly Roll- Save Me \(New Unreleased Video\)](#)

[Megan Moroney- Tennessee Orange](#)

[Lainey Wilson- Heart Like a Truck](#)

Morgan Wallen- Whiskey Glasses

Thomas Rhett- Die A Happy Man

Riley Green- I Wish Grandpas Never Died

Kelsea Ballerini- Peter Pan

Results

As I was collecting my data to assess the current state of gender representation in country music, I analyzed several Spotify playlists including “Hot Country,” “Country Top 50,” “All New Country,” and “Big Country.” I found that across these, only about 23-37% of these playlists were songs by female artists or include a female artist. While there are playlists like “Women of Country” or individual artist playlists, those are more targeted to those who may be looking for them specifically where these other playlists give those looking for something new access to new and popular artists, and with them being predominantly male, this will hinder the growth of the new and upcoming female artists. Some of the top male artists are Jelly Roll, Morgan Wallen, Thomas Rhett, and Riley Green. The number of listeners on Spotify for these four range from 37.8 million to 11.6 million. These four are topping music playlists outpace even the most popular of their female counterparts. Some of the top female artists right now are Lainey Wilson, Kelsea Ballerini, Megan Moroney, and Ella Langley. The number of listeners on Spotify for this group ranges from 11.6 million to 7.6 million, with only Lainey Wilson breaking double digits.

While looking at their presence on YouTube, I found that they have a closer number of followers than on Spotify. The group of guys had anywhere from 4.54 million to 400 thousand with Jelly Roll being the largest and Riley Green being the lowest. The girls had from 752

thousand to 215 thousand with Kelsea Ballerini being the highest and Megan Moroney being the lowest. While there is still a gap, it seems to be smaller than the one found in the number of listeners on Spotify. While followers may not inherently equal listeners, it still shows the amount of people who were interested enough to engage with the artist. While looking at their most popular videos, I found each video from the different artists seems to have a different theme or “vide.” For Jelly Roll’s most popular video, “Save Me,” I think it has something to do with the emotional connectivity of the song and relatability that may pull in viewer. For Ella Langley’s video “you look like you love me” I think it has such a jump from the views on the rest of her videos because of it featuring Riley Green. While her other videos do well, it is hard to deny that the one with him has a significantly larger number of views. While the female artist may seem like they have less traction on paper, it can be seen that they still have a great amount of interaction. Many of them have high amounts of comments and likes on their videos that show that they are still highly sought after artists.

Conclusion

The evolution of country music has been created with a history of storytelling, cultural identity, and gender dynamics. While the genre has developed to include more diverse voices over the decades, this research highlights that significant disparities still exist in how male and female artists are represented and received in modern platforms like Spotify and YouTube. My analysis of top Spotify playlists such as “Hot Country” and “Country Top 50” revealed that male artists continue to dominate both in frequency of appearance and ranking. Despite the rise of female stars like Lainey Wilson, Kelsea Ballerini, and Megan Moroney, women are still underrepresented in high-exposure lists that shape listener trends and industry momentum.

Streaming numbers from Spotify showed a notable gap in monthly listeners between the top male and female artists studied, with Morgan Wallen and Jelly Roll far outpacing their female peers. YouTube metrics, while somewhat more balanced in terms of follower counts and engagement levels, also reflected a tilt toward male-driven viewership. However, female artists demonstrated strong fan interaction through comments and likes, pointing to a deeply engaged audience even if smaller in scale.

These findings suggest that the gender gap in country music is not merely a historical issue—it remains embedded in contemporary music culture and marketing structures. While female artists have built strong followings and generated critical success, they often face greater hurdles in achieving the same mainstream visibility and viral success as their male counterparts. Playlist algorithms, industry biases, and legacy perceptions all contribute to this imbalance.

Nonetheless, the growing visibility of women through social media, independent platforms, and advocacy efforts like CMT's "Next Women of Country" campaign show that change is continuing to happen. The fight for gender equality in country music continues, and fan-driven platforms are helping level the playing field. As we move forward, the industry must reflect on these disparities and invest in structures that support all artists equitably—not only for the sake of fairness, but to preserve the richness and diversity that country music can offer. Greater gender inclusivity will ensure that future generations of country music reflect the full spectrum of voices and experiences that shape this uniquely American genre.

Works Cited

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