

A Comparison of Ageist Lyrics in Pop & Country Music Genres:

An Important Difference

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the lyrics of American country and pop music for an understanding of the perceptions and implied truths related to the concept of aging. A review was made of the limited prior research available regarding ageist lyrics as well as prior research exposing the consequences of the use of ageist stereotypes. Songs for this study were selected from the Billboard Top 100 lists for the past 10 years with a total of 33 songs containing either an implicit or explicit reference to aging: 16 country and 17 pop songs. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, song lyrics in each genre were evaluated in terms of positive and negative attitudes related to aging. Recurring themes of optimism, pessimism, acceptance, fear, vitality, loss, respect, and love expectations were found. Conclusions drawn from this research study indicate the majority of country song lyrics present images of aging in a positive light, whereas pop song lyrics continue to focus on negative stereotypes. Based on this observation and research provided on the negative consequences of reinforced stereotypes, my research demonstrates the potential victimization of us all as we age if negative stereotypes with respect to aging are perpetuated in music, especially in the pop genre.

Keywords: views of aging in songs, old age, ageist song lyrics, consequences of ageist lyrics, ageist stereotypes in music, ageist lyrics in pop music.

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This thesis is a comparison of song lyrics in the pop and country genres that reference aging in some fashion. The scope is limited to songs found in the Billboard Top 100, primarily in the last 10 years. All songs will be identified by title and artist, with songwriting credit provided in the discography. I will provide a brief account of why this topic was selected; report my examination of the current body of literature on song lyrics referencing age and using stereotypes; address the implications of ageist stereotypes in song lyrics; and provide evidence of a continuing contrast in outlook between the two genres. The thesis will add to the very scarce body of knowledge about this topic.

I am a graduate student, earning my Master's degree at age 72. I hold a B.A. in anthropology and a passion for pursuing cultural anthropology, particularly involving ageism in its various forms. I enjoy music, and while listening to one of my favorite artist's songs, Ed Sheeran's *Thinking Out Loud*, I felt both dismayed and frustrated with the implication that at age 70 all the good things from life would be gone.

When my hair's all but gone and my memory fades...
When my hands don't play the strings the same way,
When your legs don't work like they used to before
And I can't sweep you off of your feet.

Will your mouth still remember the taste of my love?
Will your eyes still smile from your cheeks?
I will be loving you 'til we're 70.

Being an active, vital 72-year-old, my immediate thought was, "Why *wouldn't* someone still be loved at age 70?" It made me reflect on the Beatles song I've listened to since age

16; *When I'm 64*, depicting a person at the typical retirement age so decrepit he is unable to feed himself.

When I get older losing my hair
Will you still need me, will you still feed me
When I'm sixty-four?

Thinking further, it was easy to remember several pop songs with a negative view of aging. I was also aware that various country music songs I remembered well spoke positively about aging. Older songs such as Conway Twitty's 1982 hit, *In My Eyes*.

She's only human
And she cries sometimes when she looks in the mirror
And counts a new line that seemed to appear overnight
She's only human
It's not that she's vain, she's just afraid
That there'll come a time when I'll turn away at the sight
But I swear that's not right.

And in my eyes
She just grows lovelier to me
And in my eyes
She's only aging gracefully
And a thousand strands of gray won't disguise
The woman she'll always be in my eyes.

And *Remember When*, by Alan Jackson in 2003.

Remember when we said when we turned gray
When the children grow up and move away
We won't be sad, we'll be glad
For all the life we've had
And we'll remember when.

Up to Luke Combs' present-day hit, *Growin' Up and Gettin' Old*.

I'm still bending rules but thinkin' 'fore I break 'em
And I ain't lost a step, I just look before I take 'em.

The realization that ageism is still a factor in today's music piqued my interest to examine the problem in more depth as it is not only reflective of American culture, but it mirrors an interpretation of reality that distorts the process of aging and older age. Investigating the topic further, I found very little research concerning ageism in song lyrics, so I decided to pursue my investigation with as little implicit bias as possible. In addition to establishing up-to-date research on the topic, my hope is to also bring attention to how we portray older people in general with awareness as to the possible consequences.

Significance

While growing older is universal, and theoretically desirable considering the alternative, there is little encouragement to do so past the elementary school years. While exceptions exist, much of American culture (as well as a good deal of the industrialized world) eschews all physical evidence of aging. One need only think of the ubiquity of anti-aging product advertisements we are confronted with daily, the bulk of which are geared toward women. Showing evidence of aging has been disapproved at least since the mid-20th century. Hausknecht et al. (2020) note that in the early 1960s, older age was seen as a time one was doomed to withdrawal and decline: physical deficits were the focus, and aging was something to fight against. Particularly in the 21st century, efforts have been made in America to change the perception of being 'old.' Referring to research by previous authors (Vincent, 2006; Bowling, 2008; López-López & Sánchez, 2019), the authors found newer frameworks of *active aging* and *positive aging*

now focus on the prioritized quality of life and active engagement in life. Liberation in the latter years brings a time of more social engagement and recreational activity.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *stereotype* as: “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern *especially*: a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.” Kurylo (2012) says stereotypes are fixed, oftentimes rigid, generalizations about a group of people. Stereotypes are constructed by taking what is true for some members of a group and generalizing those traits to everyone in the group. Research overwhelmingly confirms that not only are U.S. stereotypes of older adults decidedly negative, but those negative stereotypes have become ubiquitous in our society. They are perpetuated not only by intentional derogation but by ignorance in all forms of modern-day media, including, as we shall demonstrate here—song lyrics. After all, lyrics create images. Lewis (1983) notes the ‘conventions’ of popular music perpetuate “the socially shared stereotypes, formulae, [and] myths...lodged in the ‘collective mind’” (p. 137). Kelley (1984) informs, “music plays a pivotal role both in reflecting and shaping the culture of a particular group” (p. 34). She goes on to say, “The impact of popular song is so strong that some have suggested it has had the largest influence on American society of any art form” (p. 38).

Stereotypes, as described above, are intimately associated with—and oftentimes the basis of—*ageism*. Ageism is discrimination based on age (Kusmaul, 2022, p. 27). Butler (1969) cited ageism as the ‘systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old’ (p. 243). A gerontologist, Butler actually coined the term in

1969. But who is old? Butler (1975) advises that the concept of old age beginning at sixty or sixty-five years of age, as has been commonly accepted, was not original to the United States, but borrowed from 1880s Germany. According to Kusmaul (2022), the average lifespan in 1900 was 46-48 years. Fifty years later, lifespans had increased to 66-71 years. By the year 2000, one could expect to live 76 to 81 years (p. 121). And according to the Congressional Budget Office, in 2024 the expected lifespan has inched up to 80-84 years. Given this information, it appears obvious that a 65-year-old individual being considered old is quite outdated in the 21st century. Sadly, the ephemeral idea of 'old age' is now so pervasive in our culture that as Calisanti et al. (2012) reported on Andrews' (1999) statement: "old age is the only life stage people seek to avoid, even eradicate" (p. 20).

It is quite contradictory that in general we want to live as long as possible and avoid death, yet we denigrate those who do so. Denigration is oftentimes in the form of humor: 'over the hill' birthday cards and party themes; sitcoms with older individuals showing loss of social awareness and tact; loss of hearing/eyesight/memory jokes; even fairy tales portray older age negatively. The following spoof of 1960s songs with a current bent in titles came from a Canadian nursing home professional journal. While I can't deny the humor in this piece, nor in some of the other forms of media, the ubiquity of ageism is undeniable.

In order to accommodate aging baby boomers, the artists of the 1960s are revising their hit songs with new lyrics

- Herman's Hermits - (*Mr's Brown, you've got lovely daughter*).

Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Walker.

- Ringo Starr - (*I get by with a little help from my friends*).

I Get By With a Little Help From Depends.

- The Bee Gees - (*How can you mend a broken heart?*).

How Can You Mend a Broken Hip?

- Bobby Darin - (*Splish, splash, I was taking a bath*).

Splish, Splash, I Was Havin' a Flash.

- Paul Simon - (*Fifty ways to lose your lover*).

Fifty Ways to Lose Your Liver.

- The Commodores - (*Once, twice, three times a lady*).

Once, Twice, Three Times to the Bathroom.

- Marvin Gaye - (*Heard it through the grape vine*).

Heard it Through the Grape Nuts.

- Leo Sayer - (*You make me feel like dancing*).

You Make Me Feel Like Napping.

- The Temptations - (*Papa was a Rolling Stone*).

Papa's Got a Kidney Stone.

- Abba - (*Dancing Queen*).

Denture Queen.

- Tony Orlando - (*Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me*).

Knock 3 Times On The Ceiling If You Hear Me Fall.

- Helen Reddy - (*I am a woman - Hear me roar*).

I Am Woman, Hear Me Snore.

- Leslie Gore - (*It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to*).

It's My Procedure, and I'll Cry If I Want To.

- Willie Nelson - (*On the road again*).

On the Commode Again.

Figure 1

These things are all considered harmless, or all 'just in good fun,' but research by Prieler (2020) demonstrates that society's view of older adults is influenced by media depictions, and it also influences how we see ourselves as we grow older. Self-perception begins in early childhood, and children commonly grow up listening to music including the music to which their parents are listening. Roy and Dowd (2010) attest that music

“plays a crucial role in identity construction... in the defining of ‘me versus not-me’ and ‘us versus them.’” And as we shall show here, songs oftentimes portray ageist stereotypes which add to that dichotomy. They go on to say, “Music and its meanings inform people, quite profoundly, about who they are...and it helps constitute the identity of individuals and collectives” (p. 189).

When ageist stereotypes are accepted as accurate, this distorts younger generations’ expectations of their future and can negatively affect their experience of aging (Kelley, 1982). Kelley adds that, “Popular music, particularly for young people who have minimal experiences with the elderly, may portray Seniors in ways which influence orientations toward the aged and the process of aging” (p. 7). Hausknecht et al. (2020) refer to studies by Sheehan et al. (2017) showing the self-perceptions of older adults related to being older and aging influence their well-being and quality of life. Negative stereotypical media portrayals can result in self-stereotyping due to the internalization of these stereotypes.

Self-stereotyping is not typically a conscious process, but internalized over the life span (Levy, 2009). This is particularly true for audio forms of media, and we have likely all experienced it in one form or another. My experience of unintended participant observation will lend insight into the persistence and unintended consequences of song lyrics. In 1999, I attended a workshop sponsored by a radio station seeking my advertising account. The presenter was Roy H. Williams, author of a new book at that time, *The Wizard of Ads*. The full day workshop was a training session on the advertising value of radio and how invasive audio ads are, even when no attention is focused on them. After

listening to all the scientific reasoning, which was certainly understandable, Mr. Williams made me a full believer in the last 3 minutes of the day. He played seven simple notes of a jingle removed from the airwaves in 1970, the year I was 19, and asked the attendees to fill in the remaining four words which I did easily. The notes he played corresponded to, "Winston tastes good," and I filled in, "like a cigarette should." I had never had an interest in smoking, nor had I ever paid attention to the thousands of times I had heard that ad which had no relevance to me, but I instantly knew the words having not heard them for 29 years.

In Williams' subsequent book, *Magical Worlds of the Wizard of Ads* (2001), it is noted in the chapter entitled "Reality Begins with Imagination" that, "Studies have shown that the emotion accompanying an idea or image causes it to realize itself—the more emotion, the more quickly it becomes reality. By using music to evoke emotions, you give your fantasy a passionate, single-minded energy that can propel it right into your life." "Songs speak directly to some of the most primitive parts of the brain, evoking deeply felt emotional responses...and conveying powerful messages while bypassing the rational, analytical areas of the mind." "There is a whole area of your brain that doesn't make judgements at all, and it is here that songs are processed and make their deepest impression" (p. 20). As do the preceding books, this book goes on to explain the neurological whys and wherefores. The combined information provided here makes this a topic worthy of expanded research.

Focus of the Study

Portrayals of aging adults appear in many genres of music, with differences in both their representation and growing older in general. Some lyrics offer positive characterizations of aging while others convey negative stereotypes. Roy and Dowd (2020) note that modern Western music is distinguished by how genres categorize both people and cultural objects simultaneously. This categorization is precisely what will be demonstrated in this thesis. In narrowing the focus to a manageable scope, this study looks at song lyrics from two genres as reflective of conflicting images of older people in American culture: country and pop music.

Dolfsma (1999) states, “One's liking for particular kinds of music is a very powerful way of communicating one's basic, socio-cultural values for almost all people” (p. 1035). This is reflected in both the country and pop genres. And both genres are difficult to rigidly define as both are continually evolving, and overlap exists between various genres. Malone (2008) points to country music as being “a creation and organic reflection of southern working-class culture, changing as that society has changed, but it is, at the same time, a dynamic element of American popular culture... that cuts across social, generational, and geographic lines” (p. 48). He states, “Country songs convey a down-home approach to life and an elemental view of love, home, and patriotism that are absent from other forms of American music” (p. 55). Aday (2020) informs that country music has traditionally relied upon ballads, having evolved from folk music, and its songs are designed to focus on the lyrics.

Similarly, there is no hard and fast definition of pop music. Kotarba (2005) reports pop music evolved out of the rock 'n roll genre and was created for and marketed to young

listeners, and it became the dominant American soundtrack by the 1990s. Dolfsma (1999) agrees young people (teenagers) were the driving force behind the explosion and continued rise of pop music. “Authenticity and independence are important among the socio-cultural values people want to express through pop music” (p. 1038).

My research uncovered a substantial difference in how aging is represented between the two genres. One appears more nuanced, viewing aging with acceptance and a focus on the positive aspects of growing older. The other most often portrays aging as having no positive qualities: aging is instead rendered as something to dread and to avoid at all costs. As a result of my research, I argue that in most cases, country music lyrics portray a more hopeful, positive image of aging than does the pop genre.

Methodology

Qualitative text mining research was employed applying the Content Analysis approach to lyrics, some participant observation, and a broad review of prior research. The timeframe was generally constrained from the time of the research to the 10 years prior. Song selection criteria were based on the Billboard Top 100 songs from each of the 10 years, with a few exceptions selected due to the author’s awareness of their pertinence to the subject matter. Billboard’s published popularity charts have been the American industry standard since 1940, with “a level of credibility unknown by competitors” (Kelley, 1982, p. 9). Songs are positioned on the charts based on the public’s choices according to both retail sales and airplay. Google searches were also performed for lyrics using the following terms: growing old/older, old age, aged, aging, ageing, ageist, ageism, elderly, youth, young, beauty, and beautiful. Songs were matched

with the artist on the website www.songfest.com, and lyrics were copied from the site. Words and phrases within the song lyrics which directly or indirectly referred to aging or growing older were extracted for analysis. The vast majority of songs reviewed contained no reference to aging within the lyrics, with a final sample of 33 songs cited in this thesis (16 country, 17 pop).

A variety of research has been conducted in recent years on sentiments conveyed in music lyrics. Choi et al. (2018) researched the sentiments of lyrics in over 10,000 Billboard Top 100 songs in four genres including pop and country. While not focusing on aging, the songs were assessed for positive vs negative sentiments using the Natural Language Processing (NLP) tool called Stanford CoreNlp. Beyond negative and positive, the results were classified into six emotions: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise, from the NRC Emotion Lexicon. Fear was a theme noted a significant amount of time, though not specific as to the basis of the fear nor genre. Researchers have used various other processes such as SentiWordNet, a lexical resource available online offering sentiment scores of individual words (Sharma, 2016), and Naïve Bayes to perform similar studies. Some had the intent of revealing lyrics intended to create specific emotions which in turn may lead to associated specific moods and even actions, but no studies were found focusing on the *unintentional* effects of negative lyrics regarding physical aging.

Prior researchers focused specifically on aging as reflected in song lyrics. Kelley (1982) concentrated on ageist lyrics in popular music between the years 1964 and 1973, and Leitner (1983) reviewed nine pop/rock songs addressing aging in the 1960s and 1970s. Cohen & Kruschwitz (1990) researched sheet music from the 19th and 20th

centuries, while Aday & Austin (2000) narrowed their research to country songs published between 1950 and 1995, and suggested “it is likely that more positive images” will emerge in song lyrics. Kelly et al. (2016) looked at songs from the 1930s to the early 2000s related to aging. Walker et al. (2020) took a broad approach, looking at both manifest and latent messages about aging in the Top 100 Songs of 2016-2019 as well as the ages of artists.

In most cases, overlap is present among the songs identified in these studies and the prior research corroborates the existence of ageism in pop music lyrics. Kelley’s 1982 dissertation confirms some lyrics contain “a primarily negative vision of aging...accepted as inevitable and anticipated with terror” (p. v) along with distorted stereotypes that are promoted and reinforced. Kelly et al. (2016) agree that “mainly negative representations of age and ageing are available in popular music texts, [and] it is imagined that the negative representations of age and ageing can be dispiriting, confidence and esteem lowering for older people” (p. 1333). Aday & Austin (2000) found significant negative references to aging in country music during the years before 1996.

My research demonstrates that pop music by and large continues to portray aging in association with death and disability. Country music on the other hand portrays aging as a natural progression of life with positive attributes, particularly in reference to aged family members who are typically afforded the most honored status. Country music also takes a more positive outlook on death, expecting a reunion of loved ones in the future.

Interestingly, the difference in outlook can be perceived physically in performers. It would seem that most aging male country music performers make little effort to

conceal their advancing age other than perhaps the use of hair dye and cosmetic dentistry. Aging appears accepted as natural and portrays experience gained. Conversely, a considerable number of male performers in the pop/rock genre over the age of 70 appear to attempt to deny having aged by maintaining their original images in dress and performance styles many decades after their physical prime. For some, this is combined with a 'sex, drugs, and rock & roll' lifestyle. This may be an effort to deny the passage of time, much like some of their song lyrics, or perhaps it is merely maintaining an expected image for their audience.

Recurring Themes

Determining the representation of identities of aging in a song's lyrics was not only considered in the broad terms of positive and negative sentiments, but also broken down into recurring emotional themes. Cultural indicators within those two terms were aspects such as facial lines, aging hands, calloused hands, blindness, memory loss, loneliness, and fading beauty. Country song lyrics were found to offer several positive themes connected with aging—some explicit, others implicit. A sampling of the country songs gathered in this research is provided here.

The Older I Get expresses not only gratitude for the past and present, but acceptance of physical change. The facial lines are equated with important memories. The lyrics exhibit a feeling of increased self-worth and satisfaction.

And the older I get, the better I am.
Funny how it feels I'm just getting to my best years yet,
The older I get.
And I don't mind all the lines
From all the times I've laughed and cried,

Souvenirs and little signs of the life I've lived.
And the older I get the more thankful I feel,
For the life I've had and all the life I'm living still.
The Older I Get, Alan Jackson, 2021

With a subtle nod to Freddy Fender's 1975 hit, *Wasted Days and Wasted Nights*, Blake Shelton's more current *Nobody But You* conveys the wisdom of learning from the past, acquired with age. While the wasted days and nights are viewed as negative, a 'silver lining' is recognized because they led to what is apparently a better present time. And the determination that no more days will be wasted is a positive sentiment.

All the wasted days, all the wasted nights,
I'll blame it all on being young.
Got no regrets 'cause it got me here.
But I don't wanna waste another one.
Nobody but You, Blake Shelton, 2019

The lyrics of the song, *One Man Band*, express the reality that life changes are inevitable, but they convey a positive expectation of the future.

When the spotlight goes cold, and the curtains come down,
The chairs are all stacked, and there's no one around.
And nobody's paying, we'll still be playing.
One Man Band, Old Dominion, 2019

A Brad Paisley country song a bit outside the 10-year parameter is a great example of such positive expectations of the future. In looking back, a *Letter to Me* recounts the cherished things growing older brought to his life, urging a younger person to be fearless as he ages.

You've got so much up ahead
You'll make new friends
You should see your kids and wife
And I'd end up saying have no fear
These are nowhere near the best years of your life.

Letter to Me, Brad Paisley, 2007

And Toby Keith's, *As Good as I Once Was*, is a humorous song conveying a positive outlook on the aging process. Through a humorous dialogue recounting a barroom brawl and shrouded sexual implications within the chorus, the lyrics assert a maintained vitality in later life, though it may be at a lesser level.

I ain't as good as I once was
I got a few years on me now...
... I ain't as good as I once was,
but I'm as good once
As I ever was.

As Good as I Once Was, Toby Keith, 2005

Respect for elders has been a common theme throughout the history of country music. In 1932, Gene Autry sang of *That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine*, and Eddy Arnold sang *I Wouldn't Trade the Silver in My Mother's Hair* (for All the Gold in the World) in 1948. Porter Wagoner had a huge hit in 1965 with *The Green, Green Grass of Home*. One of the biggest hits in 1985 was, *Grandpa (Tell Me 'Bout the Good Old Days)* sung by The Judds. That theme continues today. Some of the more recent songs which express honor for an older generation are *Good as You, My Old Man*, and *Humble and Kind*. The lyrics portray elders who have earned the respect of younger ones.

My old man, feel the callous on his hands
And dusty overalls, my old man.
Now I finally understand I have a lot to learn
From my old man.

My Old Man, Zach Brown, 2017

See the way you're takin' care of your mama.
Good as You, Kane Brown, 2019

Visit grandpa every chance that you can
It won't be a waste of time.
Humble and Kind, Tim McGraw, 2015

Sentimentality and nostalgia have also been very prevalent in country music lyrics—thoughts of ‘the good old days’ and warm memories of home. It is another way of conveying respect for home, family, and elders—the opposite of an ageist attitude. This perspective continues in country music, as evidenced in the 2019 hit, *Does to Me*.

There's a worn-out blade that my granddaddy gave me
My mama's first Bible, daddy's Don Williams vinyl
That first-fish-catching Zebco thirty-three
Well, that might not mean much to you
But it does to me.
Does to Me, Luke Combs, 2019

Love that lasts through the aging process is a more common theme in country music than in other genres. In this genre, lyrics typically lack the fear associated with aging and loss of physical beauty, as reflected in the samples below. Both songs communicate acceptance of aging, ignoring negatives and focusing on sustaining their relationship and the expectation of a positive future with their significant others.

I feel like growing old with you
I'm growing old with you.
Growing Old with You, Restless Road, 2022

... our hands they might age,
And our bodies will change,
But we'll still be the same as we are.
Grow Old with Me, Tom Odell, 2013

This theme extends to love enduring beyond death.

I know there'll be that moment
The good Lord calls one of us home and
One won't have the other by their side
But heaven knows that that won't last too long
Maybe some things last forever after all.
Forever After All, Luke Combs, 2020

In *Humble and Kind*, life experience is portrayed not only as a positive quality, but something of value to be shared with those younger. Life experience only accrues as a function of aging.

When you get where you're goin'
Don't forget turn back around
Help the next one in line.
Humble and Kind, Tim McGraw, 2015

As demonstrated in these lyric samples of country songs, optimism, respect, esteem, and contentedness are common themes associated with growing older. Negative or fearful themes regarding aging are rarely, if ever, found in country music.

On the other hand, research shows pop genre lyrics generally convey a fearful, negative image of aging. Aging is equated with loss: loss of attractiveness, loss of memory/intelligence, loss of sexuality, and overall pessimism and resistance—the opposite expectations of the aforementioned country lyrics. Sellnow & Sellnow (2001) make the argument that “musicians are more than reporters documenting a succession of events...they present an ‘illusion of life,’ amplifying a particular perspective” (p. 399). Pop music lyrics often appear to conform to what Langer (1953) calls ‘tragic destiny’ (p. 352), where fate is predetermined and life’s events, such as aging and death, are just realizations of said predetermination. Consistent with this information, research of

current song lyrics found aging is most often equated with loss. The following samples demonstrate the common themes of fear and dread in pop genre lyrics.

One of the most popular songs currently is *I Used to be Young*, which portrays simple maturation as removing fun from life. Instead of portraying the maturation process as a positive transition, gaining wisdom through experience, growing older has robbed her of joy and fun.

I know I used to be crazy
I know I used to be fun.
You say I used to be wild.
I say I used to be young.

You tell me time has done changed me.
That's fine, I've had a good run.
I know I used to be crazy.
That's 'cause I used to be young.

I Used to be Young, Miley Cyrus, 2023

The lyrics of *Wasted Days* paints a depressing picture of obsessive anxiety about the years rolling by. Rather than looking back at any positive experiences gained over the years, these lyrics evoke a sense of anguish around a life of emptiness, and a pessimistic view of continued aging where one just fades away.

How many summers still remain?
How many days are lost in vain?
Who's counting out these last remaining years?
How many minutes do we have here?

Wasted days
Wasted days
We watch our lives just fade away too
More wasted days.

Wasted Days, John Mellencamp, 2021

Statue conveys a sadness associated with physical changes, namely loss of beauty. There is a touch of encouragement, but overall, the lyrics express the expectation that aging will continue to diminish beauty, and implicitly, life itself.

Stop touching your face like it's sad.
Every line is a story instead.
It'll only get worse (lining up for the hearse)
If you don't live in the moment aging's a curse.
Statue, Chris Wray, 2020

A Burden to Bear also characterizes aging with a depressing loss of physical attractiveness, and it goes on to enumerate humans' worst fears: loss of vision, memory loss, and loss of self.

Hold out my aging hands.
And as my eyes go blind
Too late to shift the sands.
Too late to turn back time.
Before my memories go
Before I fade away.
A Burden to Bear, Forlorn Hope, 2020

Maroon 5 also lament losses of various kinds throughout the lyrics of *Memories*. One ends this song feeling that through growing older, *all* has been lost.

Look, I done lost love, lost 50s, lost dubs
Lost fights, nigga, lost life of loved ones
Lost time, press and rewind, it won't budge.
Memories, Maroon 5, 2019

The lyrics of *When We Were Young* are explicit in the anger brought on by aging. Sadness, restlessness, and recklessness—all due to aging—sung by an artist less than 30 years of age at the time of its release.

We were sad of getting old, it made us restless.
Oh, I'm so mad I'm getting old, it makes me reckless.
When We Were Young, Adele, 2016

7 Years Old chronicles the changes and associated possible losses that come with aging, beginning at age 7. The lyrics promote anxiety about a future painted with loneliness at every turn, combined with apprehension about possible outcomes.

"Go make yourself some friends, or you'll be lonely."
"Go get yourself a wife, or you'll be lonely."
I hope my children come and visit, once or twice a month.
Soon I'll be sixty years old,
will I think the world is cold?
7 Years Old, Lukas Graham, 2015

Young Grow Old depicts a struggle of aging with the younger defeated, weakened, fading away. Lyrics present no positives associated with growing, only losses, as if aging is an embodied enemy, a vampire.

Take a look now, see the boy is weakened
Watch him fade, watch him fade away
Take a bow and the boy is defeated
Is this the way, this the way?

So far in a distant land
There's a fight between boy and man
See the light through the open door
Sit and watch as the young grow old.
Young Grow Old, Creed, 2015

An outright fear of the future is the focus of *16 Shades of Blue* lyrics. The subject has lost the ability to have fun; she's disintegrating; her future is bleak, filled with anxiety; and the loss of her mind looms ahead. She is powerless over her 'tragic destiny.'

...it's over, disintegrating, lost, and there's nothing I can do.
There are those who say I am now too old to play.
See over there at 33 she fears she'll lose her job
Because they hear the ticking of her clock.
At only 15 I said 15, they say her future's bleak
She should have started this at 3.

As her heart is slowly ripping into pieces
Disconnecting from the circuits of her mind
She'll get over it you say in time
In time? Stop Father Time.

16 Shades of Blue, Tori Amos, 2014

Young and Beautiful is also explicit in the fear of aging bringing about a loss of female desirability—a loss of everything. The only thing of value is youth and beauty.

Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?
Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul?

Young and Beautiful, Lana Del Rey, 2013

In the middle of a love song, aging is described as a colder and colder life in *Not a Bad Thing*, as if they inevitably go hand-in-hand.

We keep getting older, the world keeps getting colder.

Not a Bad Thing, Justin Timberlake, 2013

Pop music has historically glorified youth, and some songs such as *Young Blood* and *Wake Me Up* continue in this vein. *Young Blood* appears to also reference a future facing dementia. *Wake Me Up* at least expects wisdom to come with age.

We've got young blood
Can't destroy us.
See it all before the pictures fade.

Young Blood, Bea Miller, 2014

Wish that I could stay forever this young
 Not afraid to close my eyes.
 So, wake me up when it's all over,
 When I'm wiser and I'm older.
Wake Me Up, Avicii, 2013

The table below succinctly presents the dichotomy between the messages being conveyed via country and pop music surrounding aging. Country lyrics: positive; pop lyrics: negative. Country music: accepting, optimistic—glass half-full; pop lyrics: fearful, pessimistic—glass half- to completely empty.

Table 1

Country Music		Pop Music	
<i>Expectations</i>	Lasting Love Reunion after death Continuity Commitment	<i>Loss</i>	Love Beauty Dreams Self Mental acuity Fun
<i>Vitality</i>	Aging well Life gets better Still strong	<i>Fear/Dread</i>	Aging Death Worsening life The unknown Change Loss of self
<i>Elder Respect</i>	Elders honored Sentimentality		
<i>Appearance</i>	Acceptance of changes		
<i>Gratitude</i>	Value of experiences Lessons learned Family	Loneliness	
		Glorification of Youth	

Exceptions

Research of lyrics during this timeframe turned up a few exceptions to the general attitudes on aging in these two genres, but very few. The lyrics of one country music song, 2023's *Fast Car* by Luke Combs, portrayed a man "too old for workin'," with his body deteriorated, but his condition was a reference to his alcoholism.

See, my old man's got a problem.
He lives with the bottle, that's the way it is.
He said his body's too old for workin'.
His body's too young to look like his.

This song was not original to Combs but was autobiographical when written by and released by Tracy Chapman in 1989. At that time, it was on the pop charts not country.

In pop music, a few instances were uncovered which portrayed positive expectations. *Say You Won't Let Go* depicts the commitment to remaining together through old age and beyond.

And I wanna stay with you until we're grey and old.
I wanna live with you
Even when we're ghosts.
Say You Won't Let Go, James Arthur, 2016

Feel It Still offers a peppy tune with lyrics representing a person who has aged but still feels the same vitality.

Ooh woo, I'm a rebel just for kicks, now
I been feeling it since 1966, now
Might be over now, but I feel it still
Ooh woo, I'm a rebel just for kicks, now
Let me kick it like it's 1986, now
Might be over now, but I feel it still.
Feel it Still, Portugal. The Man, 2016

And Ed Sheeran's 2014 hit song, *Thinking Out Loud*, while mostly describing negative expectations of aging, does include the positive expectations of abiding love for his partner, being loved throughout the years, and a perpetually young soul.

I will be loving you till we're 70.
I know you will still love me the same.
...your soul can never grow old, it's evergreen,"

Conclusion

This research found that a significant disparity continues to exist between the lyrics of country and pop music where aging is concerned. Some lyrics are explicit in reference to aging, but many more imply positive or negative associations. Country song lyrics during the time period reviewed were found to be more positive and compassionate regarding older individuals. They continue to convey a more optimistic view of aging and long-term relationships, and express acceptance of the physical changes which come with advancing age.

...the older I get, the better I am.
I don't mind all the lines,
...the older I get the more thankful I feel.

I feel like growing old with you
I'm growing old with you.

...our bodies will change,
But we'll still be the same as we are.

At the same time, conclusive evidence has been provided that lyrics in pop music addressing growing older or 'old age' continue to be overwhelmingly negative at this time. Lyrics equating physical beauty and abilities with love, such as—

Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?
Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul?

Hold out my aging hands.
And as my eyes go blind...

When my hair's all but gone and my memory fades...

—promote a stereotype that older people are universally no longer attractive nor valuable, and in doing so, they promote a fear of aging. Similarly, lyrics stereotyping growing older with a loss of fun and pleasure do the same:

I know I used to be crazy
I know I used to be fun.
You say I used to be wild.
I say I used to be young.

The possible reasons for country music portraying a more hopeful, positive image of aging than pop music will be a worthy research project. Perhaps it pertains to the age of the songwriters themselves and their stage in life: older individuals have more experience and have perhaps mellowed youthful expectations. For young songwriters, aging resides in the realm of the unknown, which can be a generally scary place, particularly if they have internalized ageist stereotypes themselves. Maybe the difference in positive and negative lyrics about aging reflects the songwriters' personal experiences with older individuals. Where negative lyrics are concerned, they may reflect the songwriter's personal fears or prejudices based upon family history. Or maybe. . . The possibilities are many.

Related to this topic, one might investigate the ages of the intended audience of each genre, and *within* each genre. While there is certainly overlap among the ages of

listeners, within country music, we would expect the primary audience for what is termed 'bro country' to not be the same audience who gravitates to more traditional country songs such as those of Alan Jackson. In pop music, we can reasonably expect the predominant Taylor Swift audience to hold a different reference point than does the Adele audience. As a result, the intended listener may have a direct effect on how issues are presented by songwriters and how they are perceived by different age groups.

Exposing ageist stereotypes is as important as revealing any other type of discrimination, considering that beliefs learned when young not only affect the way one regards others, but also how they see themselves as they age. Song lyrics are important as they can define reality to the listener, both as a reflection of current attitudes, and by the implication that the lyrics denote truth. It is the latter which presents a serious problem when it comes to lyrics about aging. The exposure of ageist stereotypes in song lyrics is important on a sociological level lest distorted images of innocent humans continue to be promoted through generations, fostering unintentional negative consequences for everyone. After all, the general hope is to live a long life, so as everyone becomes the 'older' people, the ageist attitudes essentially victimize us all.

The prevalence of ageist stereotypes in pop song lyrics by the use of seemingly harmless words needs to be conveyed to the general public, and hence to songwriters, to bring awareness of the consequences of ignoring the continued promotion of ageist tropes. The evidence is clear: what we hear repeatedly, whether we intend to absorb it or not, makes a long-lasting impression which can be internalized, eventually harming us all.

Music overall, but specifically pop music as applied to this research, needs to consider how it is characterizing growing older and the possible unforeseen negative outcomes if continued.

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