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Evolution of Pop Music: Literature Review

Music is an ever-changing art whose evolution has taken place from the beginning of human-life all the way to the present day. While it is inherently a subjective experience, music is an incredibly contentious topic especially for individuals of different generations. While those of younger generations feel as if the newest trends in music are clearly superior to those of the past, those of the older generation argue the opposite: that the latest trends have led to a deterioration of art. Even between periods of time like the seventy years between 1950 and 2020, which pale in comparison to the length of musical history in totality, changes in popular music have inspired debates over what musical elements have created the greatest changes and, therefore, distinguished eras in music. With the aid of modern statistical models, natural language processing algorithms, and numerous open-source music datasets, researchers have sought to answer these questions: How have specific musical elements changed over time? In what ways have song lyrics evolved? Why have songs changed to adopt negative musical valence?

There are very discernable differences between successful and unsuccessful songs even in their specific musical elements: mood, rhythm, and lyrics (Interiano et al.). Researchers found that successful songs, those which were included on the Top 100 Singles Chart by the Official Charts Company in the UK, were happier, more danceable, and had brighter timbres (among other musical factors) than their unsuccessful counterparts (Interiano et al.). These findings serve to suggest that there exist notable differences between successful and unsuccessful songs which led to discrepancies in their popularity (Interiano et al.). Besides finding differences between charting and non-charting songs, researchers also discovered that popular songs have changed in their musical characteristics (Interiano et al.). In a thirty year time span, charting songs have become less aggressive and utilize more female vocals as shown by a data analysis of 15,000 songs from 1985 to 2015 (Interiano et al). Lyrical content has also become more negative in the last thirty years, utilizing more first person singular pronouns and anti-social or violent language than before (Interiano et al).

A different study found similar results of increased negativity especially in the form of sadder-sounding songs (Glenn and Von Scheve). Leveraging computers and humans to find tempo, mode, and key of roughly 1000 pop songs, researchers were able to confirm the efficacy of potentially inaccurate computer algorithms with supplemental musician feedback (Glenn and Von Scheve). Recording the musical elements of these songs from both computers and humans, the researchers found that tempo has been on the rise, increasing roughly 1.3 seconds per year on average between years 1965 and 2009, and that the proportion of male artists has been on the decline, falling from roughly 80% of the charting pop songs in the late 20th century to only 60% in the 21st century (Glenn and Von Scheve). The most notable result from the study, which corroborates with other musical valence research, was that sad-sounding songs have become more prevalent alongside “ambiguous” songs–songs that are not obviously happy or sad (Glenn and Von Scheve).

Furthermore, sentiment analysis of music lyrics reaffirm the notion that song lyrics have become increasingly negative over the years (Brand et al.). Sentiment analysis, a subfield of natural language processing AI, is the act of categorizing language as positive, negative, or neutral (Brand et al). Researchers were able to effectively utilize sentiment analysis algorithms on a data set of roughly 200,000 songs from 1965 to 2010 and draw the conclusion that lyrics have become less positive (Brand et al.). Seeking possible explanations for this phenomenon, researchers continued by analyzing three possible biases that cause this shift in lyrical valence: success bias (artists imitating successful older songs), prestige bias (artists imitating successful past artists), and content bias (general audience preference) (Brand et al.). A multitude of statistical models–Bayesian, aggregated binomial, multilevel models–revealed that content bias was the greatest predictor for increasingly negative lyrics, as opposed to prestige bias or success bias which both had little impact on lyrical negativity (Brand et al.). Because of this, researchers attribute the increase of negative lyrics to random drift or possibly music-specific negativity bias (Brand et al.).

Researchers found song lyrics have become simpler over time by investigating the lyrical compressibility of popular music over a span of 58 years from 1958 to 2016 (Varnum et al.). Synthesizing song lyrics from the Billboard Top 100, a weekly chart denoting the rankings of the most popular 100 songs, researchers were able to find that simpler lyrics were strongly associated with the presence of newer musical production (Varnum et al.). Researchers believe that the trends towards simpler song lyrics is potentially caused by cultural influences or biological factors such as the fact that simpler songs lend themselves to be easily memorized (Varnum et al.). Lyrical complexity could obstruct the enjoyability of the song to certain listeners, deterring them from listening again, thus leading to the gradual simplification of song lyrics (Varnum et al.). Simpler song lyrics could also be the product of the increasing quantity of songs released each year by virtue of the internet or other distribution services (Varnum et al.). The researchers conjecture that artists who utilize simpler lyrics have the ability to attract new listeners to them while stifling competition with memorable song snippets (Varnum et al.).

Specific music theory and musical categorization has seen some changes and just as much stagnation (Mauch et al.). Dividing up pop songs into eight prominent categories ranging from “dominant 7th chords” to “male voice, vocal” and “piano, orchestra, harmonic” among others, researchers found that some musical topics like “major chords, no changes” have seen very little change in frequency between the 1960s and 2000s whereas other musical motifs like “minor-seventh chords” and “energetic, speech, bright” have seen gradual growth in frequency in alignment with the rise of particular genres in popular music (Mauch et al.). The rise and fall of genres has also potentially caused fluctuations in musical diversity which is categorized by the number of unique songs and styles (Mauch et al.). Musical topics like “drums, aggressive, percussive” and “guitar, loud, energetic” have followed the trends of genres like wave, disco, and hardrock showing notable growth before stabilizing at an equilibrium level (Mauch et al.). The results from this segment of the study serve to debunk the notion that music is becoming less diverse and more homogeneous as data seems to suggest that momentary diversity (or lack thereof) is correlated strongly with genre-specific growth or decline, not a permanent trend of music (Mauch et al.). Similarly researchers discovered that certain genres created noticeable changes in musical styles, leading them to describe such trends as “musical revolutions” like the rock era or disco era (Mauch et al.). These “revolutions”, where certain genres and their classifications of style appear not to have the same duration or impact on musical structure (Mauch et al.).

The state of popular music is always in flux as evident by the research papers presented above. Musical characteristics like lyrical complexity, musical valence, tempo, and instrumental motifs have seen great changes over the past half century. With musical lyrics gravitating towards simplicity, in place of complexity and sophistication, and the proliferation of popular music distribution websites, the trend of simpler lyrics is likely to continue. At the same time, regardless of any novel genre breakthroughs, one can expect to see a general equilibrium in musical styles. However, increasing trends in lyrical negativity is likely to continue. Regardless of one’s expectations for the future of popular music, it will never fail to evolve.

Works Cited

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