

Sexism and Traditional Masculinity in Country Music: Practicing Inclusivity and Innovation in Research and Education

Nancy C. Jones*, Mathieu Deflem**

Abstract

This paper discusses an effort in inclusivity and innovation in (higher) education by reporting on the results of a research study on popular culture that was conducted jointly by a student and a professor. The study focuses on sexism and traditional masculinity in contemporary country music lyrics to examine the portrayal of conventional heterosexual relationships and its potential impact for gender relations. The methodology involves an analysis of the lyrics of the most popular country music songs in 2019 and 2020 to investigate the presence of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, traditional masculinity, and heterosexual relationships. Additionally conducted was an analysis of the relative proportion of sexist songs and its distribution by gender of the performing artist. Results show that a majority of contemporary country songs display sexism and, even more so, traditional masculinity. While songs by female country artists were found to oftentimes rebuke sexism, songs by male country artists promote them. Through its successful execution, this collaborative study shows the value of practicing inclusivity and innovation in research and education, which institutes of learning should promote.

Keywords: Country music, Gender; Music, Popular culture, Sexism

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Introduction

The currently ongoing transformations of education are manifold. As the world changes, so too does the manner in which we teach and learn at our schools, colleges, and universities. In the United States, institutes of higher learning today face at least two critical challenges. One, the cost of higher education has skyrocketed and, as a result, there are enormous pressures on

* Analyst, Consulting firm, Charlotte, NC (USA). E-mail: ncwebbjones@gmail.com.

** Professor, Department of Sociology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC (USA). E-mail: Deflem@mailbox.sc.edu.

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colleges and universities to increase student enrollment. Two, challenges also exist to provide an education that is useful in view of important changes in society, specifically changing cultural conceptions of valid and valuable knowledge as well as, economically, shifting demands in the labor market.

The dual forces of cultural and economic changes affecting higher education in the United States have, amongst other consequences, brought about that colleges and universities have dramatically increased their efforts to secure inclusivity and, furthermore, have also enhanced efforts for the integration of research and teaching. The movement towards inclusivity has taken place under the banner of a movement to secure the threefold goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). At the University of South Carolina, where the first author of this paper received her B.S. degree and where the second author has been a professor for two decades, efforts to secure these ideals are institutionalized in an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Office emphasizes the merit of diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to achieve academic excellence, whereby it is upheld that every member of the university matters and that “unique perspectives are the core of our strength and our success” (University of South Carolina, Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion). These concerns are especially applied to differences in terms of gender, sexuality, and race, yet they also pertain to other social categories, particularly those that are protected by U.S. federal law, including race, color, sex, religion, national origin, citizenship, disability, age, veteran status, and genetic information.

The criteria of inclusion (and anti-exclusion) apply both at the level of employment (of staff and instructors) and teaching (for students). In the latter case, efforts to integrate the research of instructors and the learning of students can accordingly be seen as an extension of diversity. Across institutes of higher learning in the United States, such integrative efforts have in recent years been greatly promoted. Professors who conduct research are encouraged, not just to teach from their work in the (online and physical) classroom, but also to directly involve students in their research efforts. Students, in turn, are encouraged to seek out professors with whom they can work to conduct their own projects with the support and guidance from experienced scholars. These efforts of innovation are institutionally supported as well. At the University of South Carolina, a dedicated Office of Undergraduate Research has been set up to help students, under auspices of the University’s research office, to acquire “the tools they need to pursue their own answers” for their research questions (University of South Carolina, Office of Undergraduate Research). This trend towards the innovation of didactic goals, in other words, relates learning (as knowledge acquisition) to research (as knowledge production) by means of the inclusion of students into the world of active research. By securing a degree of

inclusivity of students into the sphere of academic research, an important step towards the innovation of educational goals is thus also brought about.

This paper is a direct response to these two important developments of inclusivity and innovation in (higher) education. It presents the results of a study that was originally conducted by the first author, as a senior undergraduate student, under supervision of the second author, a tenured professor. The study involves a sociological examination of sexism and masculinity in the lyrics of country music, a form of music that is especially popular in the southern parts of the United States, where the University of South Carolina is located. Collaboration for this project came about by the student contacting the professor as mentor because of his known expertise in the area of popular culture. Having carried through the collaboration, the resulting work was successful in all relevant respects, leading to the student's graduation with Honors and, on the basis of a related paper, her receiving the Joel Thayer Undergraduate Paper Award from the South Carolina Sociological Association, at which association's annual meeting she also presented her work (Jones, 2022). The present journal article constitutes an additional noteworthy aspect of the success of the student-professor collaboration.

The study of popular culture has advanced well in recent decades on a variety of topics, such as music, TV, internet, cinema, fashion, and the like (Deflem, 2017, pp. 11-14). It is nonetheless also the case that any study on popular culture still retains an aspect of novelty unlike other, more conventional areas of inquiry. As such, this study on sexism in country music again reveals an aspect of innovation. This quality is all the more important to recognize as it relates well to didactic goals of introducing students to important social and cultural developments (such as sexism) by means of a theme of study (such as popular music) that relates closely to students' experiences and lifeworld.

Presenting our research in this paper, we begin by explaining the perspective and methodology of the study in the light of the contributors' relevant experiences and backgrounds. We subsequently explain the research design and the questions of research, specifically to analyze themes of sexism and traditional masculinity in contemporary country music. Separately examined will be the relative share of these gender themes compared to country music as a whole. In a concluding section, we reflect back on some of the consequences of the study for the understanding of popular culture and sexism in society today and for the didactic aspiration to integrate research and education.

Background: Personal Interests and Scholarly Perspective

In the study of (popular) culture, the location of the researcher is of great importance. Where the researcher stands and what the researcher stands for will

color how a cultural theme is approached, even when replicable methods of measurement are applied. It is in this critical respect that the two authors of this study found an important common ground for their collaboration.

The first author of this paper, a woman who at the time of the study was 22, is a fourth-generation Southerner on her mother's side of her family and a fifth-generation Southerner on her father's side. After a period of listening to children's songs, country music soon became her favored genre. As a teenager, she loved the music deeply and became very knowledgeable about the genre throughout the 2010s. However, as she grew older and, especially as she began to learn about feminism, a disillusionment about country music began to set in. As she listened more closely to the lyrics of country music, she began to notice how pervasive sexism was in her favorite music genre. Songs that she once loved now had become problematic and, accordingly, her musical tastes broadened beyond country.

The second author of this paper, who supervised the student's research efforts, was born in 1962 and raised in Belgium. He is a long-time fan of popular music, including rock and R&B, but not country. Following his migration to the United States in 1992, he has been a sociology professor since receiving the Ph.D. in 1996 and has conducted research on social control, theory, and popular culture. His work on popular culture has involved research and teaching on music, cinema, and the sociology of fame and celebrity culture (Deflem, 2017, 2019, 2022). An earlier collaboration of his with another student recently culminated in a book-length study about the role of gender in metal music (Rogers and Deflem, 2022). As such, the second author's experience neatly matched the first author's interests to conduct this project.

The personal motivations of the researchers alone cannot justify a scholarly study. Also needed is a perspective that can be independently designed and applied to explore specific aspects of a topic of investigation. This study relies on the study of gender and popular culture from a sociological perspective (Deflem, 2017, pp. 14-17). In the United States, such work has benefited from two important developments. First, in the 1980s, a movement in the U.S. to label the recordings of rock and pop music because of their presumed dangerous content was responded to with a wave of studies examining the lyrical content of various forms of popular music (Deflem, 2020). Second, an interest in the lyrical themes of country music, in particular, took place during the 1990s when researchers had argued that the popularity of country music was related to suicide rates (Stack and Gundlach, 1992).

What makes a study of country music especially interesting and meaningful is that it is the most popular music genre in the United States today, with 51% of adults in the U.S. regularly listening to country music in both rural markets and metropolitan cities alike (CMA, 2019). While country music listeners have

historically been overwhelmingly white, the music's fanbase has steadily become more diverse, as shown by a 55% increase in the number of Black listeners and a 15% increase in the number of Latino listeners from 2014-2018 (CMA, 2019). By region, the highest percentage of country music consumers is about 60% of music listeners in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, while the lowest percentage is still a respectable 46% in states such as Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts (CMA, 2019).

Popular music as a whole and gender portrayals within music, more exactly, may exert a strong influence on listeners' opinions of, and behavior towards, women and men. Given the popularity of country music, the themes and values expressed in its songs reach an audience of more than 139 million Americans over the age of 12 (CMA, 2019). As compared to many other forms of popular music, country music may also be particularly aspirational towards its listeners. Because of the centrality of the lyrics in country music, its listeners may long to emulate what they hear in a way they will not for other genres such as pop. Any ideas of sexism and traditional masculinity in country music can therefore greatly impact American culture.

Merging the researchers' personal experiences and scholarly interests, this study seeks to answer important questions on gender. How prevalent are hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and notions of traditional masculinity in mainstream country music in 2019 and 2020, and how may these matters have affected the genre's portrayal of the conventionally 'ideal' heterosexual relationship? Does the degree of sexism and rigid gender roles in country music differ with the gender of the artist? Based on both personal knowledge of country music and findings from previous scholarly research on gender and popular culture (Leap, 2020; Rasmussen and Densley, 2017; Rogers and Deflem, 2022), it is hypothesized that there will be a high degree of hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and notions of traditional masculinity in contemporary country music. However, it is also postulated that country songs by female artists will exhibit a much lower degree of these gender dynamics than those performed by male performers. Before explaining the methodology employed to examine these questions, it will be useful to explain some basic aspects of the world of country music in the United States.

Theme of Inquiry: Gender and Country Music

In relation to gender, the world of country music performers is highly skewed towards men, displaying what country star Reba McEntire has called a "bro culture" (Tyler, 2019). The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative recently published a research brief that investigated the percentage of female chart-

topping artists, female writers, and female award nominees and winners in country music between 2014 and 2018 (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019). The study found a wide gender gap, with only 16% of artists on the top country charts being female, a number that was significantly below the percentage of female artists for all musical styles. The percentage of songwriters in country music who are female is even lower, averaging 12% across the time period. This finding is critical because female country artists are significantly more likely to work with female songwriters. Further, the artists nominated by the Academy of Country Music for awards over the period were 85% male. Nominees for the ACM's most prestigious award, Entertainer of the Year, were only 11% female, with no females being nominated in either 2018 or 2019.

Even as awareness on gender inequality and feminism has grown among the American public in recent years under influence of such high-profile events as the Women's March on Washington and the #MeToo movement, the country music industry has continued to show the same level of gender disparity in recent years (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019). This continuity has been argued to result from a deliberate effort by leaders in the country music industry to marginalize female artists (Watson, 2019). In 2015, the lead radio music consultant for country music, Keith Hill, was infamously quoted as saying, "If you want to make ratings in country radio, take females out... they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are females" (cited in Watts, 2018). Published as part of an article giving advice to radio stations in a major country music magazine, Hill's words caught national attention as an incident termed 'Tomato-gate.' Further, evidence shows that the women in country who are successful tend to have shorter periods of success than their male counterparts. The top male artists of country music had a mean age of 42 in 2018, while the most successful female country artists had a mean age of only 29 (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019).

Gender disparity and sexism in country music can have serious consequences for the broader culture. A study by Fischer and Greitemeyer in 2006 investigated the impact of sexual-aggressive, misogynistic song lyrics on aggression-related thoughts, emotions, and behavior towards women and men (Fischer and Greitemeyer, 2006). The study results showed a significant link between exposure to sexist song lyrics and both cognitive processes and actual behavior of aggressiveness towards women. This finding would suggest that any degree of sexism in country music lyrics should raise concerns over the effects such music has on the degree of sexism Americans might exhibit in their everyday relations.

Any sexism found in country music also has the possibility of promoting unhealthy dynamics within heterosexual relationships. A study by Luft,

Jenkins, and Cameron published in 2012 has in this respect analyzed how adolescent girls in rural areas manage romantic heterosexual relationship (Luft, Jenkins, Cameron, 2012). The authors found that these young women considered their main struggle in their relationships to be wrestling with gender expectations that were partly shaped by what they saw in the media. Specifically, it was found that sexist portrayals of heterosexual relationships in media such as music made it difficult for adolescent women to develop healthy heterosexual relationships, as they felt pressure to conform to media-portrayed expectations. Given that women (and men) develop a sense of self and long-term habits in their adolescent relationships, such early skewing of the heterosexual romantic dynamic towards misogyny may have lasting effects over the life-course. In sum, as indicated from prior research, it is useful to gather valid and reliable data on the degree of sexism and traditional masculinity in country music, which our study seeks to achieve.

Methodology

To examine sexism in country music lyrics, a three-phased process was followed (conducted by the first author of this paper). First, gender issues were conceptually specified as including benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and traditional masculinity. Guided by the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 2001), benevolent sexism refers to a “subjectively favorable, chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional roles,” while hostile sexism is demonstrated by “antipathy toward women who are viewed as usurping men’s power” (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 109). Traditional or toxic masculinity is defined as a set of behaviors and beliefs wherein a man must suppress emotions or distress, be powerful, both physically and otherwise, and maintain a tough persona at all times (Salam, 2019).

In the second phase of research, Fiske and Glick’s (1996, 2001) hostile and benevolent sexism scales were relied upon to create a list of behaviors and topics in country music lyrics that could be classified as indicators of sexism and masculinity (Appendix A). Containing various manifestations of relevant attitudes and behaviors, this list was subsequently used to code individual country music songs as either containing or not containing benevolent and hostile sexism and traditional masculinity and the degree in which this is the case. In the coding process (see below), this list served as an objective measurement instrument to ensure that the analysis was evidence-based.

In the third phase of the research, the most popular country music songs of 2019 and 2020 were selected for analysis on the basis of four sources: Billboard’s Top Country Charts; Taste of Country’s Top Country Songs list;

and both Apple Music's Country Hits and Spotify's Hot Country playlists. These multiple sources were relied upon for song selection in view of the changing nature of the music industry and the currently predominant forms of music consumption. Whereas Billboard reflects the songs that are most played on radio, Spotify's and Apple Music's playlists reflect the songs most popular on their respective streaming platforms, while Taste of Country reflects the most popular songs across both radio and streaming platforms. Much of the listenership among younger audiences today occurs via streaming platforms, but it is nonetheless important that both types of charts are included in view of the continued popularity of radio among listeners at large. Relying on sources for both radio as well as streaming, this study includes country songs that are most popular across the entirety of the genre's listenership. The focus on popularity is important to the present study because the selected songs are the most played (and heard) 'hit' songs which, regardless of their artistic merit, many people will be exposed to and which, accordingly, are most likely to shape the attitudes and behaviors of many.

Song selection was conducted in the fall of 2020, relying upon the Billboard and Taste of Country charts of top country music songs in the period between January and October of 2020 as well as the relevant Apple Music and Spotify playlists for the year 2019 and the period January through October 2020, respectively. The Apple Music Country Hits playlist for 2019 and the Billboard top country music charts for that same year overlapped, as expected. But while Apple Music's Country Hits playlist contained almost 70% of the songs included in the Billboard top country music charts, additionally including the top country songs specific to the streaming platform in this study provided for a more fully robust list of popular country songs across many listeners in 2019. The consulted Billboard charts include its Hot Country Songs and Country Airplay charts, which are reported in a dedicated page on Wikipedia (2021). From these charts, every number-one song was selected over the course of the period January-October 2020. From the Taste of Country charts, all top-10 songs were selected from the website's top-40 country songs lists for the same period (Taste of Country, 2020).

Apple Music and Spotify are currently the two dominant platforms for the streaming of popular music, including country. Each platform publishes a regularly updated playlist of top country songs that is based on the streaming habits of their respective listeners: the Country Hits playlist for Apple Music (Apple Music, 2019) and the Hot Country playlist for Spotify (Spotify, 2020). Testifying to the increasing relevance (and popularity) of these streaming services, Spotify's Hot Country playlist presently has almost seven million followers and has amassed no less than five billion streams since its inception

in 2015. For the analysis, every song on both the Apple Music and Spotify country playlists was selected.

All selected songs were cross-referenced to eliminate duplicates, which, as might be expected, were quite numerous. This overlap in itself suggests that the songs selected in this study are indeed the most popular in the considered time period. Relying on popular country songs in the most recent years at the time of the song selection, this study is usefully focused on contemporary country music that is most broadly appealing. The search strategy was also expected to provide a large enough number of songs to provide for robust statistical analysis. This goal was achieved as the adopted method produced a total of 134 songs (Appendix B), all of which were subsequently analyzed.

The lyrics of each of the selected songs were retrieved via specialized websites (AZLyrics; Genius). All lyrics were read and (qualitatively) coded on the basis of their presence of one or more indicators of benevolent and hostile sexism, traditional masculinity, and mentioning of a heterosexual relationship (Appendix A). Using this coding strategy, a (quantitative) sexism-feminism rating score was established for each song. This rating varies from 1 to 10, whereby a score of 1 indicates songs which exhibit extremely strong hostile or benevolent sexism and/or conveys notions of traditional masculinity, while a rating score of 10 refers to songs which explicitly repudiate sexism (Appendix C). Based on the rating score for each song, all 134 songs were ranked (from very sexist to very anti-sexist or feminist).

Adopting a ten-point scale allowed all songs to be rated in a usefully differentiated manner, rather than as a mere dichotomy of either sexist or not. By example, differences among songs that were rated as “extremely strong”, “strong”, “medium to strong”, or “some” in terms of degree of sexism are based on both the number of separate incidences of sexist or traditionally masculine themes as well as the number of times a given theme was repeated (e.g., a woman is characterized as hysterical in the chorus, which is typically repeated about three times during the song, versus a man is said to suppress his emotions once in a unique verse). The higher the number of incidences of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and traditional masculinity, and the greater the level of repetition of these themes, the lower the rating.

In a final stage of analysis, the proportion of songs that contained hostile and benevolent sexism about heterosexual relationships was examined relative to all selected songs, specifically in terms of the gender of the performer(s), including female artists, male artists, or both (duos and bands). Two-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether or not the differences were significant to enable a proper interpretation of the data.

Study Results

Overall, the findings of the analysis of the 134 country music song lyrics are in some sense very straightforward, albeit with a noted qualification in terms of the gender of the performing artist. Data show that there is an overwhelming amount of hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and traditional masculinity in contemporary country music, but also that these gender dynamics are much less prevalent in songs performed by female artists rather than men. Of the 134 selected songs, no less than 53% were found to display some form of sexism, with an additional 16.4% promoting traditional masculinity. Only 17.9% of the songs overall rebuked either sexism or traditional masculinity. Yet, these proportions differed greatly depending on the gender of the performing artist(s). Of the 101 songs performed by male artists, 63.4% were sexist, scoring less than or equal to a score of 5 on the 10-point rating scale. Among female country artists, songs of such quality constituted only 13%. For songs performed by both men and women, the relative share of sexist songs again increased to 40%. Observed trends of gender inequity are confirmed by a closer look at the number of songs rebuking or countering sexism or traditional masculinity, as measured by scoring an 8 or higher out of 10 on the rating scale. Only 8.9% of songs by male artists ranked this high. By comparison, 52.2% of the songs performed by female artists, and 30% of songs performed by both male and female artists, rebuked sexism and/or traditional masculinity.

Additional analysis provides further detail and nuance. The average rating on the 10-point scale for songs performed by male artists was 4.21, implying that the average song exhibited benevolent sexism and may or may not have exhibited traditional masculinity. The mean rating for songs by female artists was considerably higher at 7.52, with their average songs implicitly challenging notions of traditional masculinity, sexism, and gender roles in heterosexual relationships. The average rating for songs by both male and female performers was found to be 5.6, thus showing that they did not exhibit sexism but nonetheless conveyed notions of traditional masculinity.

Two-sided two-sample t-tests conducted with an alpha level of 0.05 showed that the difference in the average rating between the male and the female country artists' songs was statistically highly significant, with a p-value of as little as 0.00000004. The difference in the average rating of female artists' songs versus the rating of songs performed by both men and women was also statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.0261. Interestingly, the difference in the average rating of songs by male artists and songs by both male and female performers was not statistically significant at the 5% level, with a p-value of 0.0813, but was significant at the 10% level. Thus, the data show that there is a great difference in the gender-related content between country music songs

performed by men and by women. In general, songs by male country artists display and promote sexism and traditional gender roles, while female country singers exert a countering influence against this trend. In the broader context of the skewed representation of men and women in the country music scene, as well as in light of the small proportion of top country songs performed by women, however, it must be noted that the sexist influence of country songs by male singers far outweighs the feminism of female artists' country songs.

Finally, analysis revealed that the presence of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and traditional masculinity in country music was related closely to the portrayal of heterosexual relationships. Of the 134 analyzed songs, no less than 104 touched on the subject of heterosexual relationships. Some songs among the remaining 30 discussed a romantic relationship without further specification of its nature, while others did not involve a romantic theme at all. Of the 104 songs dealing with a heterosexual relationship, 36.2% portrayed the woman in the relationship in a hostile-sexist manner, while 45.7% couched the heterosexual relationship in benevolent-sexist terms. No less than two-thirds of the songs (66.7%) placed the man in the relationship in a traditionally masculine role. As such, the heterosexual relationship that is portrayed as 'ideal' or aspirational in contemporary country music, and that accordingly will be reinforced by a substantial segment of the American public, can be considered anything but ideal in terms of gender inequality.

Discussion

From the viewpoint of the co-authors' respective and shared backgrounds in popular music and sociological scholarship, the results of this study contain both surprising and unsurprising elements. First, it was expected that sexism and traditional masculinity would generally be found to be characteristic of many songs in country music, even today. It was therefore anticipated that a high percentage of contemporary country songs would exhibit benevolent sexism, which includes such themes as the idea of a man taking care of a woman or being her protector, given that notions of male chivalry are typical of Southern culture. It was also expected that a high percentage of the analyzed songs would promote the idea of a man as a traditionally masculine figure, doing such things as suppressing emotion, being tough, performing manual labor, and playing sports, cultural aspects that again typify the (ideal of the) Southern man. The data of this study confirm both expectations. Less expected, however, was the high degree of hostile sexism that is (still) found to exist in contemporary country music. In the present age of a generally increased awareness on matters of gender disparities and sexism, it is not evident to find

that, in many a contemporary country song, women can still be vilified, rendered as useful only for sex or a man's pleasure, and/or portrayed as incompetent or irrational.

The results of extant research on gender and sexism in popular music, in country as well as in rock, rap, and other forms, generally supports this study's findings. Indeed, studies have typically found that sexist themes persist across musical styles ranging from rock and metal to pop and rap (Rogers and Deflem, 2022). Empirical research on country music supports this overall finding, specifically in terms of the inequality that exists in how women are portrayed in both country music videos (Andsager and Roe, 1999) and song lyrics (Leap, 2020; Rasmussen and Densley, 2017). Of special note in this context is the research by sociologist Anna Rogers, also conducted as a student at the University of South Carolina, that was published in 2013 (Rogers, 2013). Rogers found that romantic love from a man to a woman was the most common theme in country music (Rogers, 2013). The study's second-most observed theme was that men are depicted as traditionally masculine and women as stereotypically feminine, which harmonizes with the benevolent sexism and traditional masculinity observed in our study. Likewise, Rogers's findings that the physical beauty of a woman matters greatly and that men should be sexually aggressive, as the next most common themes in country music, correspond to our study findings on hostile sexism in terms of reducing a woman's worth to a man's appreciation of her appearance and reducing women to sexual objects of male desire. It is telling, finally, that our study was conducted quite a number of years after Rogers's publication (2013), yet that the results have been remarkably stable. This continuity might indicate that recent public debate and movements on anti-sexism and gender equality are more aspirational than realized.

Conclusion

This research concerning sexism in country music was conducted by the first author as a student under guidance of the second author as her thesis director, fostering a cooperative partnership that ultimately resulted in the present, jointly written paper. Through their overlapping interests in popular music as well as scholarship and, at the same time, by each bringing a unique experience and expertise to the table, their collaborative research was able to reveal important insights on questions of gender in country music. The study in this paper has illuminated a problematic aspect of country music, that the lyrics of many popular country music hit songs promote sexism and gender inequality.

Yet, it was also revealed that the women of country have responded to, and actively counteracted, trends of sexism and masculinity.

Sociologically speaking, sexism and masculinity are not necessarily values the listeners of country music exhibit, but instead are embedded in the culture of the country music industry and can be attributed to a lack of responsibility among male singers. On the part of the country music industry, therefore, a critical step would be to increase female representation and make the industry more equitable. Indeed, while research has shown that women in country music have for some years been making more attempts to resist sexism (Wilson, 2000), it is still the case that men dominate the charts and that women remain marginalized in the industry (Watson, 2019). To bring about greater equity, the men of country music therefore will have to change their tunes, too. As the women stars of country have already proven, one can reach great success by singing songs that promote gender equality and that do not constrain any one gender to a narrow set of roles. Key leaders in the music industry, such as record company executives, radio station hosts, music producers, songwriters, and country artists themselves should be sensitized to existing problems of gender inequality, especially when they are based on evidence and research. The recent increase in public discussions concerning the role and place of women in country music is in this respect a welcome development (Paulson, 2020).

Besides its findings on important gender dynamics, this research also has value as an effort in inclusivity and innovation. First, there is an added benefit from research conducted by two researchers with different backgrounds. Whereas the student could, as a young woman who grew up with country music, rely on her special knowledge of the music culture and an awareness of its gender dynamics, the senior scholar could rely on his expertise as a professional sociologist to guide the work in a scholarly appropriate way. Student and professor effectively relied on each other to conduct their work successfully. No doubt, this research could not have been completed by each alone. As such, inclusivity benefitted student and professor alike to foster both research-based education (to teach and learn by means of research) and education-based research (to conduct research as part of education).

Second, the special quality of innovation in this project, particularly the focus on gender in a study of popular culture, has usefully shown that country music is, from an informed scholarly viewpoint, more than just musical sounds. Sociologically, music is also a cultural reality that relates to important values and ideals surrounding gender, (in)equality, and attitudes and expectations in matters of sexuality, family, and more. As such, music relates to culture and social life as a whole.

Based on our research experience, we have good reasons to conclude that inclusivity and innovation are critical aspects of education which institutes of

learning should promote. Institutional support, such as in the form of diversity, equity, and inclusion (to promote inclusivity) and student research (to stimulate innovation) are important in this respect (Mura, Zurru, and Tatulli, 2019). Yet, we argue, individual educators and students also need to actively embrace the opportunities that are at their disposal to foster and practice these aspirations. As our study has shown, inclusivity through innovation established from the ground up can have very beneficial results for research and education alike.

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APPENDIX A

Sexism and Traditional Masculinity Indicators

Benevolent Sexism:

- She’s my better half/completes me, or a variation thereof.
- Man protecting a woman from a threat.
- Chivalry: explicit mention of holding doors, etc.
- A woman is presented to be more virtuous than the man.
- The woman is graceful, soft, kind.
- The woman puts others before herself (and is explicitly praised for it).
- A woman is identified by her beauty or attractiveness alone, or that is the most important thing about her (i.e., she is the center of attention and doesn’t even know it).
- A woman should aspire to be like her mother.
- A woman is cultured, while a man is uncultured.
- The woman should be the responsible one, while the man can go wild.

Hostile Sexism:

- The woman is made into a sex object.
- It is implied that women are hysterical, irrational, or overly emotional.
- A woman can’t get over a man, while a man has no problem getting over a woman.
- Women are considered to ensnare men with their wiles.

- Women are considered to hold men on a tight leash, be demanding, a pain to deal with.
- Dominant paternalism: a man controls what a woman does because she isn't competent enough to make that decision for herself.
- Men are smarter than women.
- Women cannot handle reality.
- A man is violent towards a woman.

Traditional Masculinity:

- The woman cooks, while the man works.
- The woman takes care of children and is placed in a maternal role (especially if it is to the exclusion of other identifying traits).
- The man suppresses emotion and/or is overly aggressive.
- A man's achievements are emphasized (especially while a woman's niceness is emphasized).
- Man's sexual desires drive their relationship; he is in charge in the bedroom.
- The man is a player.
- The man is hard, uncompromising, described as strong and tough.
- The man drives, loves trucks/manual labor.
- A man drinks, smokes, gets drunk and doesn't have to be responsible for his actions.

APPENDIX B

Top Country Songs by Artist, 2019-2020

Sources: Spotify (S), Apple Music (AM), Taste of Country (TOC), Billboard (B)

A Thousand Horses, "A Song To Remember" (S); Ashley McBryde, "Girl Goin' Nowhere" (AM); Billy Currington, "Seaside" (S); Blake Shelton, "God's Country" (AM); Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani, "Happy Anywhere" (S); Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani, "Nobody But You" (TOC, B); Blanco Brown, "The Git Up" (AM); Brantley Gilbert and Lindsey Ell, "What Happens in a Small Town" (AM); Breland and Sam Hunt, "My Truck" (TOC); Brett Young, "Here Tonight" (AM); Brett Young, "Catch" (B); Brooks and Dunn and Kacey Musgraves, "Neon Moon" (AM); Brothers Osborne, "All Night" (S); Brothers Osborne, "All The Good Ones Are" (S); Carly Pearce, "Next Girl" (S); Carly Pearce and Lee Brice, "I Hope You're Happy Now" (AM, TOC, B); Carrie Underwood, "Southbound" (AM); Caylee Hammack, "Family Tree" (AM); Chase Rice, "Eyes on You" (AM); Chris Janson, "Good Vibes" (AM); Chris Janson, "Done" (TOC, B); Chris Lane, "I Don't Know About You" (AM); Chris Stapleton, "Millionaire" (AM); Chris Stapleton, "Starting Over" (S); Chris Young, "Raised on Country" (AM); Cody Johnson, "On My Way to You" (AM); Cole Swindell, "Love You Too Late" (AM); Cole Swindell, "Single Saturday Night" (S); Dallas Smith, "Drop" (AM); Dan + Shay, "I Should Probably Go To Bed" (S); Dan + Shay and Justin Bieber, "10,000 Hours" (AM, TOC, B); Dierks Bentley, "Living" (AM); Diplo ft. Morgan Wallen, "Heartless" (AM); Diplo, Thomas Rhett, Young Thug,

“Dance with Me” (S); Dustin Lynch, “Ridin’ Roads” (AM, TOC, B); Eli Young Band, “Love Ain’t” (AM); Eric Church, “Some of It” (AM); Eric Church, “Stick That In Your Country Song” (TOC); Filmore, “Nothing’s Better” (S); Florida Georgia Line, “Talk You Out of It” (AM); Florida Georgia Line, “Long Live” (S); Florida Georgia Line, “I Love My Country” (TOC); Gabby Barrett, “I Hope “ (AM, TOC, B); Granger Smith, “Hate You Like I Love You” (S); HARDY, “GIVE HEAVEN SOME HELL” (S); HARDY, “BOYFRIEND” (S); HARDY, Lauren Alaina, HIXTAPE, Devin Dawson, “One Beer” (S); High Valley, “Grew Up On That” (S); Ian McConnell, “We Wouldn’t Know” (S); Ingrid Andress, “More Hearts Than Mine” (AM, TOC); Jake Owen, “Down to the Honkytonk” (AM); Jake Owen, “Homemade” (B); Jameson Rodgers, “Some Girls” (S); Jason Aldean, “Girl Like You” (AM); Jason Aldean, “Got What I Got” (TOC); Jimmie Allen, “Make Me Want To “ (AM, TOC, B); Jimmie Allen and Mickey Guyton, “Drunk & I Miss You” (S); Jon Pardi, “Night Shift” (AM); Jon Pardi, “Ain’t Always the Cowboy” (S); Jon Pardi, “Heartache Medication” (TOC, B); Jordan Davis, “Take It From Me” (AM); Jordan Davis, “Almost Maybes” (S); Jordan Davis, “Slow Dance in a Parking Lot” (B); Josh Kerr and Emily Falvey, “Thought This Through” (S); Justin Moore, “The Ones That Didn’t Make It Back Home” (AM); Justin Moore, “Why We Drink” (B); Kameron Marlowe, “Burn ‘Em All” (S); Kane Brown, “Cool Again” (S); Kane Brown, “Homesick” (TOC, B); Kane Brown, Swae Lee, Khalid, “Be Like That” (S); Keith Urban, “God Whispered Your Name” (S, TOC); Keith Urban and P!nk, “One Too Many” (S); Kelsea Ballerini, “Miss Me More” (AM); Kelsea Ballerini, “hole in the bottle” (S); Kenny Chesney, “Tip of My Tongue” (AM); Kenny Chesney, “Here and Now” (B); Lady A, “What If I Never Get Over You” (AM, TOC, B); Lainey Wilson, “Things A Man Oughta Know” (S); Lauren Alaina, “Run” (S); Lee Brice, “One of Them Girls” (S, TOC, B); Levi Hummon, “Good Taste” (S); Lil Nas X and Billy Rae Cyrus, “Old Town Road” (AM); Lindsay Ell, “wAnt me back” (S); LOCASH, “One Big Country Song” (AM); Luke Bryan, “Knockin’ Boots” (AM); Luke Bryan, “One Margarita” (TOC, B); Luke Bryan, “What She Wants Tonight” (B); Luke Combs, “Beer Never Broke My Heart” (AM); Luke Combs, “Even Though I’m Leaving” (AM, TOC, B); Luke Combs, “Lovin’ On You” (S, B); Luke Combs, “Better Together “ (S); Luke Combs, “Six Feet Apart” (TOC); Luke Combs and Amanda Shires, “Without You” (S); Luke Combs and Eric Church, “Does to Me” (TOC, B); Maddie & Tae, “Die From A Broken Heart” (AM, TOC, B); Maren Morris, “The Bones” (AM, TOC, B); Maren Morris, “Better Than We Found It” (S); Marshmello and Kane Brown, “One Thing Right” (AM); Matt Stell, “Prayed For You” (AM); Matt Stell, “Everywhere But On” (S); Miranda Lambert, “It All Comes Out in the Wash” (AM); Miranda Lambert, “Bluebird” (TOC, B); Mitchell Tenpenny, “Broken Up” (S); Morgan Wallen, “Whiskey Glasses” (AM); Morgan Wallen, “More Than My Hometown” (S, TOC); Morgan Wallen, “7 Summers” (S, B); Morgan Wallen, “Chasin’ You” (TOC, B); Nate Smith, “Wildfire” (S); Old Dominion, “One Man Band” (AM, TOC); Parker McCollum, “Pretty Heart” (S); Parmalee and Blanco Brown, “Just The Way” (S); Raelynn, “Me About Me” (S); Riley Green, “There Was This Girl” (AM); Riley Green, “I Wish Grandpas Never Died” (TOC); Runaway Jane, “Buy My Own Drinks” (AM); Russell Dickerson, “Every Little Thing” (AM); Russell Dickerson, “Love You Like I Used To” (S); Ryan Hurd, “To a T” (AM); Ryan Hurd, “Every Other Memory” (S);

Sam Grow, “Song About You” (S); Sam Hunt, “Kinfolks” (AM, TOC, B); Sam Hunt, “Hard to Forget” (TOC, B); Scotty McCreery, “This Is It” (AM); Scotty McCreery, “In Between” (B); Spencer Crandall and Julia Cole, “Things I Can’t Say” (S); Tenille Townes, “Somebody’s Daughter” (AM); Tenille Townes, “Holding Out for the One” (S); Tenille Townes, “Come as You Are” (S); Thomas Rhett, “Look What God Gave Her” (AM); Thomas Rhett, Hillary Scott, Chris Tomlin, Reba McEntire, Keith Urban, “Be a Light” (TOC); Thomas Rhett and Jon Pardi, “Beer Can’t Fix” (TOC, B); Tim McGraw, “I Called Mama” (S); Travis Denning, “After a Few” (TOC, B); Waterloo Revival, “Something You Ain’t Ever Had” (S).

APPENDIX C

Song Lyrics Rating Scale

Song lyrics were rated on a scale from 0 to 10, whereby a score of 0 is most sexist and a score of 10 is most feminist, with specific scores indicating:

- 0 Extremely strong hostile sexism and extremely strong benevolent sexism; also conveying notions of traditional masculinity.
- 1 Strong hostile sexism and strong benevolent sexism, or an extreme of hostile sexism but no benevolent sexism; also conveying notions of traditional masculinity.
- 2 Strong to medium hostile sexism, with little to no benevolent sexism; also conveying notions of traditional masculinity.
- 3 Extremely strong to strong benevolent sexism, but little to no hostile sexism; may or may not convey notions of traditional masculinity.
- 4 Some benevolent sexism; may or may not convey notions of traditional masculinity.
- 5 Some benevolent sexism, but with elements that challenge conventional gender roles in heterosexual relationships instead of just lacking a portrayal of traditional masculinity.
- 6 No sexism, but does convey notions of traditional masculinity.
- 7 No sexism nor notions of traditional masculinity.
- 8 Implicit challenge of notions of traditional masculinity, sexism, and gender roles in heterosexual relationships; or dealing with a romantic relationship without characterizing it as heterosexual.
- 9 Explicitly challenging notions of traditional masculinity, sexism, and gender roles in heterosexual relationships.
- 10 Explicitly repudiating hostile and/or benevolent sexism.