

“These *** They **** and Suck *****”:
Changes in Lyrical Content of Popular Music from 1959 to 2021.**

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to inspect and analyze the changes in popular music lyrics from 1959 to 2021 in terms of references to explicitness (sexual content, profanity) and substances (drugs, alcohol). The songs for the study were selected from the top 10 of *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles*, *Billboard Top 40* and *Billboard Hot 100*. Drawing on findings presented in previous research and adopting a discourse-analytic approach, the thesis examines the selected lyrics in some detail and considers the changes in lyrical content in popular music in the changing societal context. It should be noted that since the U.S. is a top contributor to the global music scene both in terms of consumption and songwriting, and the fact that *Billboard*-charts track sales, streaming and radio play in the U.S., this study mainly focuses on the U.S. context.

The results show that popular music lyrics in 1959–1980 were mostly free from explicit content and substance references, but starting from the 1990s, there has been a significant rise in such content and references, continuing all the way to 2021. Possible reasons for this are as follows: changes in societal norms (attitudes towards recreational substance use, discussing sex and sexuality, profanity), the decline of *Parents Music Resource Center*, and its effects on censorship, and the emergence of the streaming model (*Spotify*, *Apple Music*, *Pandora*, etc.) and the consequent decline of physical sales.

Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella ja analysoida muutoksia populaarimusiikin sanoituksissa vuosina 1959–2021 Tutkimuksen kohteena ovat niin kutsutut sopimattomat tai kiistanalaiset aiheaininnat (seksuaalinen sisältö, kiroileminen) sekä maininnat liittyen päihteisiin (huumausaineet, alkoholi). Kappaleet valittiin *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles* (kymmenen suosituinta), *Billboard Top 40* ja *Billboard Hot 100* -listoista. Hyödyntämällä aiempien tutkimusten havaintoja ja diskurssianalyttistä lähestymistapaa tutkielmassa tarkastellaan valittuja sanoituksia ja pohditaan sanoitusten muutoksia muuttuvassa yhteiskunnallisessa kontekstissa. Koska Yhdysvallat on suurin vaikuttaja globaalissa musiikkiyhteisössä niin musiikin kulutuksessa kuin luomisessa ja

Billboard-listat seuraavat myyntiä, striimausta sekä radiosoittoa Yhdysvalloissa, tämä tutkielma keskittyy pääasiassa Yhdysvaltoihin.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että vuosina 1959–1980 populaarimusiikin sanoituksissa ei ollut juurikaan viittauksia sopimattomaan sisältöön tai alkoholiin ja huumausaineisiin, mutta vuodesta 1990 lähtien aina vuoteen 2021 asti edellä mainittu sisältö on ollut huomattavassa nousussa. Mahdollisia syitä tähän ovat muutokset sosiaalisissa normeissa (asenteet päihdeaineiden viihdekäyttöä, seksistä ja seksuaalisuudesta keskustelemista sekä kiroilua kohtaan), *Parents Music Resource Center* -lautakunnan lakkauttaminen ja sen vaikutukset sensurointiin, sekä striimauspalveluiden (*Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora*, jne.) yleistyminen ja sitä seurannut fyysisen median myynnin lasku.

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1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to inspect changes in lyrical content in popular music, especially focusing on the portrayals of explicitness, drugs, alcohol, romance, and sexual content. Analyzing the lyrics of popular music provides an interesting viewpoint on to how the daily use of language, in this context specifically English, has changed in the U.S. Specifically, which topics and words have become more acceptable to use in such wide-reaching medium as popular music.

The focus of this study is specifically on songs from 1960 all the way to 2021. The lyrics of popular music have changed quite considerably in the aforementioned ways, and in this thesis, I present the argument that those changes reflect changes in society. Thus, I attempt to find out what, if any, impact, political movements, events, and the changing roster of known songwriters have had on the lyrics of popular music. It is worth noting that this study focuses on the U.S. The reasoning for this is the fact the U.S. was and is projected to be the leader in the consumption of music (Statista, 2023). Also worth noting is the fact that the U.S. is also the top contributor to the global music scene in terms of hit songwriting (Garcia, n.d.).

Regarding the songs discussed in this thesis, the focus is going to be on so called mainstream artists and bands, who are (or were) very visible to the public and whose songs are (or were) played a lot, which, for example, in this context means a placement in the *Billboard Hot 100*.

Previous research presented in this thesis covers the years 1959 to 2013, and the research carried out in this study continues from the year 2010 to 2021, while also re-examining the lyrical content in top 10 songs in the *Billboard Year-End Hot Singles*-list from the years 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. The research questions addressed in this thesis are as follows: 1) How have the lyrics in popular music changed from 1960 to 2021? and 2) Are there connections between the changes and events in the society, the changing roster of songwriters, and the changes in lyrics, and if so, what are they? Section 2 discusses previous research on lyrical content in popular music and section 3 describes the research material used as well as the theoretical and methodological framework adopted in the present study.

Section 4 presents the analysis of the material and the findings of the study. Section 5 provides a summarizing discussion and conclusion.

2 On changes in society and lyrical content in popular music

Studying the lyrics of popular music also gives us a viewpoint on the authentic use of English language in popular music. Society has changed over the years and with it the language used daily has changed as well. It would seem that the lyrical content of popular music reflects, at least partly, these changes, as written by Christenson et al. (2019).

The article *Maledictive Language: Obscenity and Taboo Words* by Janet McIntosh delves into the history and use of obscenity and taboo words. While the article does not discuss popular music in the U.S. it provides a possible explanation to why lyrics in popular music now have more explicit content. McIntosh (2020) writes that a word such as “damn” has become more socially acceptable because the church has lost much of its influence in modern society. Words related to sex and sexuality have also lost their shock value due to the fact that sex and sexuality have been and are now more openly discussed.

One cannot discuss the increased explicit content in popular music lyrics without mentioning the infamous Parent’s Music Resource Center committee (PMRC), whose actions led to the birth and appliance of the “Parental Advisory” warning label placed on audio recordings. The purpose of this label is to warn parents about references in the music which are not suitable for children (sexual content and profanity). In his article, Claude Chastagner delves into the birth, background and goals of the committee, its actions against lyrical content in music it deemed unsuitable for the youth of U.S. and the aftermath of the infamous senate hearings in 1985, in which the alleged “pornographic” content of rock music was investigated (Chastagner, 1999). Considering the topic of this thesis and the fact that most people now consume music by streaming (Götting, 2023), with less interruptions from labels, it is clear that the now defunct PMRC’s attempt to sanitize song lyrics did not quite succeed.

This thesis provides supplementary data and a continuation to three previous studies on how changes in society are reflected in the lyrical content of popular music: *Sexualization in Lyrics of Popular Music from 1959 to 2009: Implications for Sexuality Educators* by P. Cougar Hall, Joshua H. West, and Shane

Hill; *Booze, Drugs, and Pop Music: Trends in Substance Portrayals in the Billboard Top 100—1968–2008* by Peter Christenson, Donald F. Roberts, and Nicholas Bjork and *“What has America been singing about? Trends in themes in the U.S. top-40 songs: 1960–2010* by P. G. Christenson, S. de Haan-Rietdijk, D. F. Roberts, and T. F. M. ter Bogt. The chosen research method in all three articles was based on content analysis. The findings of the articles provide a vast array of material to which the results of the present study can be then compared to. The discussion presented in the articles also help to provide answers and credible support to some of the research questions and claims presented in this thesis.

The present study focuses especially on the changes in presentations on explicitness (sexual content and profanity), drugs, alcohol, and romance. The first article drawn upon is a study carried out by P. Cougar Hall, Joshua H. West, and Shane Hill titled *Sexualization in Lyrics of Popular Music from 1959 to 2009: Implications for Sexuality Educators*. Like the title suggests, the article analyzes sexualization in popular music lyrics from 1959 to 2009, or more specifically, the last year of every decade onwards from 1950. The study’s findings coupled together with previous research demonstrate “a connection between exposure to objectifying media and self-sexualized behavior” (Cougar Hall et al., p. 117). The study concludes that sexualization in popular music has increased significantly: the content in popular music lyrics has indeed changed, at least in terms of sexual content in the lyrics.

To further support the present study, specifically the observation about the links between lyrical content and changes in society, I draw on the article *What has America been singing about? Trends in themes in the U.S. top-40 songs: 1960–2010* by P. G. Christenson, S. de Haan-Rietdijk, D. F. Roberts, and T. F. M. ter Bogt. The article delves into what kind of content is present in the lyrics of popular music and why. The results are examined in the context of cultural changes in the social position of adolescents (Christenson et al., 2019). The writers conclude that “[l]istening to popular music is leisure, not work, and it makes sense that the music of adolescents is about love, sex, and the fun of being young” (Christenson et al., 2019, p. 209). They also point out that they did not find any support for the claim that singing about love, sex and substance abuse is reflected in adolescent behavior.

The third article drawn upon in the present study focuses on the portrayals of drugs and alcohol in popular music. The article was written by Peter Christenson, Donald F. Roberts, and Nicholas Bjork, and it is titled *Booze, Drugs, and Pop Music: Trends in Substance Portrayals in the Billboard Top 100—1968–2008*. Similar to the previous article in terms of data gathering, the article also focuses on one year per decade, from 1968 to 2008. According to the article, “a substantial increase was found over the decades, and in particular over the last two: in 1988, 12% of songs referred to either or both classes of substance, compared to 30% in 2008” (Christenson, et al., p. 121). The authors also note that “[b]oth alcohol and drugs were much more likely to be portrayed positively than negatively, especially in recent decades.” (Christenson, et al., p. 121).

It is worth noting that the years selected as the focus in the three articles are so close to one another that they present an opportunity to compare the quantitative observations made in each. For the research done in the first article, the lyrics of 600 songs (from *Billboard Hot 100*) were analyzed from the years 1959, 1979, 1989, 1998 and 2009 for sexual references, which were then categorized in terms of described sexual activity and references to sexualization. The backgrounds (race/ethnicity and gender) of each performing artists in the list was also included into the study, but such data is not explored in the present study. For the research done in the second article, the lyrics of 496 songs (from *Billboard Top 100*) were analyzed from the years 1968, 1978, 1988, 1998 and 2008 for any kind of references to alcohol or drugs. The references were then divided into various categories and subcategories, such as the substance referred, how it was referred to, and whether the reference was portrayed in a negative or positive tone. For the research done in the third article, the lyrics of 1040 songs (from *Billboard Top 40*) from 1960 to 2010 (every even-numbered year) were analyzed for different themes. The themes were then divided into 19 different categories, of which relevant to the present study are the following: Relationship/Love, Sex/Sexual Desire, and Alcohol/Drugs.

3 Research materials and methods

For the present study, the lyrics of 170 songs were analyzed. The years are as follows: 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010-2021. The songs were selected based on their popularity among consumers of music, which was deduced by using the *Billboard Year-End Hot Singles* list. This is a music industry standard record chart for songs, whose chart ratings are based on sales, both physical and digital. Each selected year contains the top 10 songs from the *Billboard Year-End Hot Singles* list.

The lyrics were gathered from the website *AZLyrics* (www.azlyrics.com). The lyrics on the site are unofficial, meaning that they are submitted by users of the site, rather than by the artists or music producers themselves. This introduces the possibility of slight errors in the submitted content but considering that most songs have their lyrics officially posted somewhere (official *Youtube* videos, *Spotify*, *Apple Music*, etc.) and that the users of *AZLyrics* most likely get their content from these sources, the margin of error is at best negligible. It should also be stated that even the official lyrics can sometimes have slight mistakes in them. Due to high amounts of slang in some of the lyrics, *Urban Dictionary* was also consulted when deemed necessary in the process of analysis in this study. A minority of the songs also contained other languages than English in the lyrics. In these cases, *Google Translate* was used to decipher the meaning of the words. Although not comparable to a professional translator, this method proved to be sufficient enough for the needs of this particular study.

The credited writers for each song were either found on *AZLyrics* or on *Wikipedia*. Because this study discusses the lyrics in each song, it is worth pointing out that just because a person is credited as a songwriter, it does not mean that they necessarily had anything to do with the actual lyrics. Additionally, someone credited as a “producer” may have written some of the lyrics, without any mention about the fact. For the purposes of this study, only those credited as “songwriters” were included, but it is good to be aware of the fact that in the music industry, credits are rarely 100% reliable, as the process of adding the correct metadata for a song can be incredibly complicated and susceptible to multiple errors (Deahl, 2019).

The selected song lyrics were examined using a discourse-analytic approach: relevant lyrical content was first identified in each song and then considered from the viewpoint of

1. the era they originated from and
2. current day society.

The analysis was performed in three separate stages. First, the lyrics of each song were carefully looked at and then categorized in the following ways:

1. Romance, non-explicit

The lyrics discuss romance in some manner but contain no explicit language.

2. Romance, suggestive

The lyrics discuss romance in some manner and contain language that is clearly suggesting sexual relations, but not in an explicit manner.

3. Romance, explicit

The lyrics discuss romance in some manner and contain explicit language.

4. Suggestive

The lyrics clearly suggest sexual relations, but not in an explicit manner.

5. Explicit

The lyrics contain explicit language. In the context of this paper, "explicit" language entails words used for swearing ("shit", "fuck") and derogatory terms such as "bitch".

6. Alcohol

The lyrics contain references to alcohol in any way.

7. Drugs

The lyrics contain references to drugs (cocaine, heroin, marihuana, etc.) or abusing prescription drugs.

Second, table graphs were made which show the percentage of romantic, suggestive, and explicit content in the lyrics of the top hits of that particular year. The same process was done for drugs and alcohol. Third and lastly, the songs which had explicit content in their lyrics were further analyzed in terms of who was/were credited as songwriter(s). After the songwriter(s) involved was/were recorded,

each name was checked for the case of having been involved with more than one song in the list. The results were then compiled into a table graph.

After the three analytic phases, the next step was to compare the findings with the results of earlier research done on the subject, as presented in the articles introduced in section 2. It should be stated, that even though the research in the present study builds on and continues research carried out in the articles, the scope of a bachelor's thesis is limited. Therefore, the amount of lyrical content analyzed in this particular study is significantly smaller compared with that presented in previous studies.

Also worth noting is the fact that the research carried out for this thesis does not differentiate between genres of music or the sex of the artists. However, despite the slight differences, it should be possible to look at the results both in earlier research and the research done for this thesis to get a satisfactory answer for the questions presented in this thesis.

4 Analysis

The results of this study will be presented in six parts: The focus is first on the romantic, suggestive, and explicit content. We examine the years 1960-2000, focusing on the first year of each decade, and examining if the results are consistent with those of the three studies introduced in section 2. The following part is dedicated to the results of the years 2010-2021, now drawing on materials from each year. We then discuss the potential reasons for the rise of explicit content in popular music lyrics in subsection 4.2.

The second part of this section is dedicated to the presence of alcohol and drugs in popular music lyrics. The flow of this subsection is the same as in subsection 4.1. Lastly, subsections 4.5 and 4.6 discuss the potential impacts of streaming, and songwriters on popular music lyrics.

4.1 Romantic, suggestive, and explicit content

4.1.1 Song lyrics in 1960-2000

Romance was a very popular subject in the research material: out of the 50 song lyrics analyzed, 34 contained references to romance (see Table 1). The years 1960 and 2000 are especially worth mentioning, considering that the first one had romantic content in all ten song lyrics, closely followed by 2000 with nine song lyrics containing romantic content. Suggestive lyrical content was only found in three songs. A good example of romantic content combined with suggestiveness from this era would be “Stuck on You” by Elvis Presley (1960): “...’Cause once I catch you and the **kissing starts/A team o’ wild horses couldn’t tear us apart**”. The lyrics clearly imply that more is happening than just kissing, but unlike in the later examples, the act itself is not spelled out.

Explicit content, which was relatively tame by today’s standards, was barely present, with only one reference made in 1990 in a song called *Poison* by Bell Biv DeVoe (1990): “**The low pro ho** she’ll be cut

like an afro/See what you're sayin', huh, she's a winner to you". According to a reputable online dictionary, "ho" is slang for the word "whore" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The "Low pro" part is understood to refer to a particular individual's skills in performing oral sex (NOT a low pro hoe bka Lena215, 2014).

Table 1.

Number of songs by decade containing romantic, suggestive, and explicit content in the lyrics.

	Romance		Suggestive		Explicit	
Year	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%
1960	10	100	2	20	0	0
1970	5	50	0	0	0	0
1980	5	50	0	0	0	0
1990	5	50	0	0	1	10
2000	9	9	1	10	0	0
Total Amount	34		3		1	

These results are consistent with the findings presented in the articles by Cougar Hall et al. and Christenson et al. The study by Cougar Hall et al. shows that the presence of degrading lyrics in the songs of both white and non-white artists was relatively low (considering the sample size of 100 songs per year). The percentage was 11,9% and 6,1%, respectively, in 1959 and 6,2% and 6,1% in 1969. For the years 1979, 1989 and 1999 the percentages were 9,2% and 14,3%; 4,8% and 13,5%; and 2,8% and 15,6%, respectively (Cougar Hall et al., 2012).

The research carried out by Christenson et al. also shows that during the years 1960-1990 romance and relationships was a popular subject for songs (the percentage being from 65,5-71%), while mentions of sex and sexual desire were a somewhat rarer occurrence in comparison, with a percentage of 18-34% (Christenson et al., 2019).

4.1.2 Song lyrics in 2010-2021

Romance continues as a popular subject in song lyrics in the materials from 2010-2021 (see Table 3). Out of the 120 song lyrics analysed, 72 contained references to romance (i.e., 60%). The year 2021 is particularly noteworthy, with 9 out of 10 songs containing references to romance. As for suggestive content found in the lyrics, the number remains relatively similar to the findings presented from the materials from 1960 to 2000. Only 6 references in total, equalling to a measly 5%.

On the other hand, the presence of explicit content saw a sharp rise compared with the songs from 1960s to early 2000s. Out of the 120 song lyrics analysed, there were 41 songs (34,1%) which contained some form of explicit content (swearing or derogatory language) in their lyrics. An excellent example of this would be the song “Bad and Boujee” by the hip-hop group Migos (2016), the lyrics of which have astounding amounts of references to drugs, sex, and derogatory terms towards women: “These **bitches** they **fuck and suck dick** and they bustin' for Instagram, get your cloud up”.

Table 2.

Number of songs by year containing romantic, suggestive, and explicit content in the lyrics.

	Romance		Suggestive		Explicit	
Year	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%
2010	5	50	0	0	6	60

2011	8	80	2	20	4	40
2012	7	70	0	0	2	20
2013	4	40	1	10	1	10
2014	5	50	1	10	1	10
2015	6	60	0	0	4	40
2016	7	70	0	0	2	20
2017	5	50	1	10	3	30
2018	5	50	1	10	5	50
2019	5	50	0	0	4	40
2020	6	60	0	0	4	40
2021	9	90	0	0	5	50
Total Amount	72		6		41	

When comparing these figures with those gathered from the songs from 1960 to 2000, there seems to be a clear rise in explicit content in the lyrics of Top 10 songs on the *Billboard Year-End Hot Singles*. Christenson et al. (2019) also noted this trend and stated that their data implies that the trend seems to have intensified from the 1990s onward. This claim does not fully correlate with the data gathered for the present study, but it is worth pointing out that the selection of song lyrics from the 1990s only consisted of top 10 songs from *one* year (1990), whereas Christenson et al. looked at 40 song lyrics per year, from the 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 1998.

Curiously, the amount of suggestive content in comparison remains roughly the same as it did earlier. It could be theorized that since the lyrics can now seemingly reference sex and sexual relations more openly, there is no need nor room for subtlety anymore, unless the songwriters choose so. That being

said, some of the suggestive content found in the lyrics is clearly more risqué than what was found in the lyrics from 1960 to 2000, aptly demonstrated by Robin Thicke in his song “Blurred Lines” (2013): “So, hit me up when you pass through/I’ll give you something **big enough to tear your ass in two**”. It does not take much from a listener to decipher what the lyrics mean, a far cry from the days when Elvis sang about kissing and horses.

4.2 Potential reasons for the rise in explicit content in popular music lyrics

Madanikia & Bartholomew (2014) present the argument that the increased amount of explicit content is likely due to the cultural changes in attitude towards sexual and romantic relationships. This is also supported by Janet McIntosh (2020), who argues that many words, such as sexual terms or swear words, considered almost or completely taboo in the past, have lost their sting as society has evolved. Sexuality is now being more openly discussed and the church does not have the same influence it once had in the past, thus making a word like “damn” relatively tame in the modern age and cursing in general more acceptable. In music, this was clearly demonstrated by artists such as CeeLo Green with his hit song, delightfully titled “Fuck You!”. The song was placed in the top 10 of *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles* in 2011.

Another reason for the change in content in popular music lyrics could be potentially linked to the creation and subsequent shutdown of Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) committee. The committee’s main goal was to bring attention to the “inappropriate” content of lyrics found particularly in rock music. The actions of the committee resulted in the creation and appliance of “Parental Advisory” warning label placed on audio recordings, which is still in use today. Coincidentally, when looking at the data presented earlier in this thesis, the rise of explicit content in popular music lyrics starts around the same time (late 1990s) when PMRC whittled out of existence.

The exact effect of PMRC’s influence and, by extent, the application of the warning label is somewhat hard to quantify, but according to Chastagner (1999), many stores refused to sell records with the label on to minors, or the records were not available to buy at all. According to Chastagner (1999, p. 188)

this led to record companies being more selective in their artist choices, or taking alternative measures against possible profit loss, such as encouraging their signed artists to “sanitise their lyrics and render them more acceptable commercially”.

4.3 Alcohol and drugs

4.3.1 Song lyrics in 1960-2000

Alcohol as a subject barely made an appearance in the research material for years 1960-2000 (see Table 2). Out of the 50 song lyrics analyzed, only 1 song (year 1980) contained references to alcohol (wine, to be specific, only mentioned once). Out of the 50 song lyrics analyzed, none contained references to drugs.

Table 3.

Number of songs by decade containing references to alcohol and drugs in the lyrics.

	Alcohol		Drugs	
Year	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%
1960	0	0	0	0
1970	0	0	0	0
1980	1	10	0	0
1990	0	0	0	0
2000	0	0	0	0
Total Amount	1		0	

These numbers are consistent with the results presented by Christenson et al. (2012, 2019). In the 1960s, 2,5% of songs in the *Billboard Top 40* contained references to drugs and alcohol. 1970s saw a slight rise with the percentage being 6,5%. In the 1980s the references dropped back to 2,5%. The 1990s saw a sharp rise in references with the number rising to 8.5% (Christenson et al., 2019).

4.3.2 Song lyrics in 2010-2021

The song lyrics in the years 2010 to 2021 also saw a slight but clear increase in references to alcohol and drugs when compared with the figures from the early 2000s (see Table 4). Out of the 120 song lyrics analyzed, 32 (26,6%) contained references to alcohol. As for drugs, they were referenced in 19 (15,8%) different lyrics out of 120. Every year had at least one reference either to alcohol or drugs. Both were usually referenced casually, as demonstrated in the song *Montero (Call Me by Your Name)* by Lil Nas X (2021): “**Cocaine and drinkin’** with your friends/You live in the dark, boy, I cannot pretend”.

Table 4.

Number of songs by year containing references to alcohol and drugs in the lyrics.

	Alcohol		Drugs	
Year	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%	Number of songs with at least one reference.	%
2010	3	30	1	10
2011	3	30	1	10
2012	3	30	2	20
2013	2	20	0	0
2014	1	10	0	0
2015	0	0	2	20

2016	3	30	1	10
2017	5	50	3	30
2018	4	40	1	10
2019	3	30	2	20
2020	2	20	3	30
2021	3	30	3	30
Total Amount	32		19	

In summary, when examining the numbers presented in the previous studies carried out by Cougar Hall et al. and Christenson et al. and comparing them to the results of the research performed for this thesis, it is clear that in the lyrics of popular music there has been a rise in explicit content and references to substances. Christenson et al. (2014, 2019) noted that the rise in both explicitness and substance references seems to start around the year 1990. When examining the numbers presented in Tables 2 and 4, we can see that this trend seems to continue all the way to 2021.

4.4 Potential reasons for the rise in substance references in popular music lyrics

Christenson et al., (2012) note the clear increase in references to alcohol and drugs in popular music lyrics in the early 2000s. Judging from the figures, the trend seems to have continued, at least in the top 10 of *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles*. References to alcohol were more common, but drugs did not fall far behind. Many researchers have noted that the timing of the perceived rise of various substance references in popular music coincides with the entry of rap and hip-hop music into mainstream music consumption. Herd, (2014) theorizes that rap and hip hop could be significant contributors to the rise of substance referrals in popular music, but until more research is done on the topic, a definite answer cannot be provided. However, Christenson et al., (2019) note that because

most of the popular music populating *Billboard* lists is listened by the youth, it makes sense for the lyrics to have fun, hedonistic content opposed to the more serious and “boring” sides of life.

Also worth considering are the general attitudes towards substance use and how they have changed in the course of history. According to an article in the *Associated Press* (2020), researchers have stated that there has been “a change in cultural attitudes toward drinking”. Judging from the quantitative findings presented earlier, it could be theorized that singing about alcohol and alcohol-related activities is just not something people of today would raise an eyebrow at, as recreational alcohol consumption is somewhat normal.

As for drugs, cannabis in particular has seen significant changes in its perception among the public. Cannabis was deemed illegal by the US Government in 1970, and the policies surrounding its use remained largely unchanged for the following two decades (Chiu et al., 2022). In general, based on the quantitative findings presented earlier, it is rather safe to state that drugs were not really something one casually mentioned in song lyrics, especially in the most popular songs. However, attitudes among the public have clearly changed, with “33 states, four territories and the District of Columbia having passed laws permitting the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes” (Chiu et al., 2022, p. 1052). According to Chiu et al., (2020), eleven states passed laws that allowed adults to use of cannabis for non-medical purposes in 2020.

The opinions surrounding the use of recreational and medical uses of cannabis have clearly changed in the 2000s, and it is reflected in popular music lyrics as well. Compared to the relatively low number of references to drugs in the 1960-2000s, the following years had significantly more, as seen in Table 4. Even though references to drugs were not categorized by the substance referred to, generally it can be said that most of the references in the lyrics were made to cannabis. For example, *We Are Young* by the band Fun (2011) has the line “My friends are in the bathroom **getting higher** than the Empire State”. The rest of the lyrics talk about drinking in a bar and going over a relationship. This is one of the many examples where drugs are referenced casually, often in a “fun” and “hedonistic” setting, as discussed by Christenson et al. (2019).

4.5 Potential impacts of streaming on popular music lyrics

The rise and current popularity of the streaming model is also something worth considering. Unlike radio stations, music streaming services such as *Spotify* and *Apple Music* do not require record labels to submit the dreaded “radio edit”, in which all potentially offensive lyrical content is either censored or replaced (due to the demands imposed by various government agencies) so that the song would be more suitable for airplay (Clarke, 2022). For example, the “radio edit” version of the song titled *Fuck You!* is called *Forget You*. Otherwise, these versions are exactly the same, except for the profanity present in the lyrics, which has been changed to non-offending words.

If we take a look at the numbers of music industry revenue distribution from 2022, presented by Götting (2023), we can predict that music streaming will most likely be the preferred way to consumer music: Streaming accounted for a staggering 67% of total global recorded music revenue, while physical music’s contribution has whittled down to mere 17,5%. What does this mean in the context of this thesis? First, it is now easier for artists to write whatever they want (in moderation) into their lyrics, since they do not have to fear that their music is not fit for the radio waves but can rely on many rather streaming the song. Second, the overall decline of physical sales as demonstrated above alleviates the possible negative effects of getting stamped with the parental advisory label. It has never been easier to consume music: you do not need to buy a record from a store, you can simply listen to it on a platform of your choosing. Third, as mentioned before, streaming services such as *Spotify* do not require record labels or artists to submit radio edits or “clean” versions of the songs. However, services such as *Spotify* do place an “E tag” for “Explicit” on any song in need of one. The users can also choose to filter out any songs with the aforementioned tag. In other words, the users of *Spotify* can take the same actions to filter out potentially offensive songs as they can in a record store. Therefore, it should be quite safe to state that *Spotify*’s actions in this matter are unlikely to negatively affect the freedom to write potentially offensive song lyrics.

4.6 Potential impact of songwriters on popular music lyrics

In a study such as the present one, it is worth considering the possibility of songwriters contributing to changes in popular music lyrics and influencing lyrics in a “negative” way. The total amount of credited songwriters in this study is 291 (see Table 5). Out of the total amount, 259 (roughly 89%) contributed to only one song. A significantly smaller amount contributed to more than one song: 25 (8,59%) were credited as a songwriter on two songs. Two (0,68%) songwriters, Benjamin Levin, and Adam King Feeney were credited on three songs. Adam Noah Levine (0,34%) was the only one to be credited on a total of four songs. Two (0,68%) songwriters, Aubrey Graham and Austin Post, were credited on five songs and only one (0,34%) songwriter, Louis Bell, was credited on seven songs.

Table 5.

Number of credited songwriters and the number of songs they have contributed to.

Songwriters (Out of 291)	Songs contributed to	%
259	1	89,0
25	2	8,59
2	3	0,68
1	4	0,34
2	5	0,68
1	6	0,34
1	7	0,34

Looking at the figures presented, it should be fairly safe to say that there are no songwriters whose sole purpose is to fill the lyrics of popular songs with references to alcohol, drugs, and sex. However, it should be, once again, noted that only the top 10 songs of *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Singles* were analyzed in the present study and that the figures could potentially change if more songs were to be included in the analysis.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate and answer the following questions: 1) How have the lyrics in popular music changed from 1959 to 2021? and 2) Are there connections between the changes and events in the society, the changing roster of songwriters, and the changes in lyrics, and if so, what are they? Previous research carried out on the topic has already established that there has been a rise in explicit content and substance references in popular music, starting roughly from the 1990s (Christenson et al., 2019), and the present study indicates that the trend has continued in the 21st century. The changes could be potentially linked to 1) changes in societal norms, 2) the decline of the PMRC and 3) the emergence of the streaming model.

Changes in our society are most likely the main reason for the changes in popular music lyrics. The increased profanity can be attributed to the fact that certain words, more offensive in the past than they are now, have lost their impact over the years, as discussed by McIntosh (2020). She also remarks how it is now more acceptable to discuss topics related to sex and sexuality compared with how it was before. “Acceptance” in general is an important theme in this study. Not only is there more explicit content in popular music lyrics today, but there are also significantly more references to drugs and alcohol, as demonstrated in Table 4. According to *Associated Press* (2020), researchers have stated that there has been “a change in cultural attitudes toward drinking”. This shift in attitudes is most likely a major reason for why references to alcohol in popular music lyrics are very common now compared to earlier decades. As for drugs, the same can be said for cannabis, which used to be illegal but was first allowed for medical use and is now even allowed for recreational use in certain states in the U.S. (Chiu et al., 2022). It is also worth considering that popular music is mostly listened by younger generations, so it is expected for the lyrics to discuss the less serious aspects of life, such as relationships and partying, as stated by Christenson et al. (2019).

The potential effects of censorship and emergence of the streaming model were also discussed and considered. Parent’s Music Resource Center (PMRC) was formed in 1985 to bring attention to the explicit lyrics present in popular music, especially rock and hip-hop. This led to the creation of the

parental advisory label. According to Chastagner (1999), the combined effects of PMCR's efforts and the parental advisory label influenced some artists to sanitize their lyrics for monetary reasons, as the parental advisory label could have an ill effect on potential sales. PMCR whittled out of existence towards the late 1990s, but the parental advisory label is still in use today.

The arrival of *Spotify* and other streaming platforms have changed the way music is being consumed today and it has been theorized that they have also had an influence on the rising amount of explicitness in popular music lyrics. Unlike in the world of radio broadcast, *Spotify* does not require record labels to submit "clean" or "radio edit" versions of songs with potentially offensive content removed or replaced. Since streaming is well on its way to become the most popular way to consume music, as demonstrated by Götting (2023), artists are now freer to express themselves in their lyrics.

Lastly, the potential impact of songwriters on popular music lyrics was also considered. Based on the figures shown in Table 5, it should be fairly safe to say that songwriters do not have a significant impact on the rising amounts of explicitness and references to drugs and alcohol in popular music lyrics— at least when it comes to the *Billboard Year-End Hot Singles*-list. The very small number of songwriters contributing to more than a single song, combined with the fact that being credited as a "songwriter" does not necessarily mean contributing to the lyrics, do not support the claim that external songwriters have influenced popular music lyrics in terms of increased profanity and drugs and alcohol references.

The present study has potential limitations: only the songs present in the *Billboard Year-End Hot Single*-list, as in ten songs per year, were selected for analysis. What is more, from 1960 to 2000 only ten songs per decade were analyzed. Here, however, it was possible to draw on previous studies on the topic and supplement the research materials with their findings on the (majority of) years in between. In the future, research on changes in the lyrical content of popular music could be widened to cover more extensive time periods and more songs per year. Alternatively, future research could focus on a particular area and study the context in which the flagged words appear. For example, research could address questions such as how alcohol and drugs are portrayed; how the portrayal differs between cannabis and "harder" drugs like cocaine; or which drug has the most references. Furthermore, the

genres of music and what possible impact they have on the lyrics is also something that could be examined in more detail. In summary, numerous options for further research concerning song lyrics are available.

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