Reflections on a Century of Living: Gendered Differences in Mainstream Popular Songs

Melissa A. Click and Michael W. Kramer

University of Missouri–Columbia

The study of popular music developed in part to correct the elitist dismissal of the popular and to validate popular music as a legitimate object of inquiry. Despite this, there is little popular music research that focuses on the most mainstream popular music. In this study we call for a return to the examination of the most mainstream popular songs and music videos through a preliminary investigation of two concurrent hits from the Adult Contemporary (AC) format: Martina McBride’s “This One’s for the Girls” and Five for Fighting’s “100 Years.” Although both similarly focus on images and issues of life for American women and men during a century of living, they present dramatically different images of women’s and men’s lives in the lyrics and videos. Through examination of these songs and their accompanying videos, we call attention to the neglect of the most mainstream popular music and reiterate the importance of examining important aspects of U.S. culture, in this case gender, through its most mainstream, and seemingly mundane texts.

Life expectancy has increased dramatically during the 20th century from 46.3 years for men and 48.3 years for women in 1900 to 74.4 for men and 79.8 for women in 2000 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). Although researchers predict that average life expectancies of 100 years will not be common for a few more decades (“Life Expectancy,” 2002), two recent popular hit songs celebrated the ever increasing life expectancy. Martina McBride’s “This One’s for the Girls” (Girls) celebrates women “from 1 to 99” and Five for
Fighting’s “100 Years” (Years) reminds men “you only have a hundred years to live.” Both songs chronicle aging from the teen years to adulthood.

Both songs were hits on the Billboard and Radio and Records Adult Contemporary (AC) charts. During the summer of 2004 Years and Girls traded places as the number one and number two songs based on national airplay. Both had staying power on the charts as well. Years was the number one song on the Radio and Records AC charts for 12 weeks, spent over 52 weeks in the Top 20, and was the number three song for the year; Girls spent 7 weeks as the number one song on the Radio and Records AC chart, spent over 45 weeks in the AC Top 20 (in addition to time on the country charts), and was the number nine song on the AC chart for 2004. Their concurrent hit status was particularly apparent when the second author heard the songs back to back on the brief ride home from work one evening in late May 2004.

Despite the similarities, the two songs present significantly different views of women and men. Even after a century of social change, the two songs present images of men and women that continue to reinforce traditional gender roles. After reviewing previous research on popular music and music video, we present our method and comparative analysis of the two songs.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As an integral component to daily situations and interactions, music structures our everyday social interactions—offering us frameworks to construct our identities and to evaluate others (Hawkins, 2002; Lull, 1992). Popular music is shaped by and shapes social, political, and cultural concerns; music produces and reproduces meanings so effortlessly that we often do not notice its impact on our daily lives (Hawkins, 2002). As sociologist Simon Frith (1996) suggests, “Music gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it” (p. 272).

Popular music is an inescapable part of our daily environment. Radio reaches more than 92.9% of the U.S. population older than 12, and Americans spend an average of 19 hours a week listening to radio (Arbitron, 2006). Listeners seem to like what they hear; in 2004, the U.S. recording industry sold over $12 billion of CDs and music products (“Music Sales,” 2005).

The Adult Contemporary Format

While Country and News/Talk radio dominate the radio market, Adult Contemporary (AC), the format that is home to the songs we discuss here, has become increasingly popular, and in 2005 was the third most popular radio format. AC formats contain the most mainstream of popular music, ranging from oldies to soft hits (Arbitron, 2006). AC playlists “generally do not include hard rock or rap
music, and on-air personalities cater to adult audiences” (Leigh, 1998, p. 4). Adult Contemporary is a frequent choice for radio play in the workplace and has had “consistent popularity” across the United States in all market sizes (Arbitron, 2006). The AC format draws a mostly middle- to upper-class female audience (62%) between the ages of 25 and 54 (Arbitron, 2006). AC listeners are popular with advertisers because they are “active consumers” with solid incomes and are well-educated and ethnically diverse (Arbitron, 2006).

The Adult Contemporary format includes playlists by popular artists whose music is categorized as contemporary hits or Top 40 (Leigh, 1998, p. 4). This includes the styles of the two songs that serve as the focus of our analysis: crossover country and singer-songwriter. Crossover music is best explained as music “intended for a specialized audience that proves a hit in the broad pop music market” (Gomery, 1998, p. 109). Crossover country music, which blends the conventions of country with that of popular music, grew in popularity in the mid-1990s and remains popular today (“Country Music,” n.d.). The singer-songwriter genre consists of music written and recorded by the same performer. Singer-songwriter music developed in the United States in the 1960s, and in the 1980s and 1990s became associated with female “indie” musicians. Unlike pop artists, “singer-songwriters are better known for their meaningful lyrics than for the presentation of the song” (“Singer-songwriter,” n.d.).

Popular Music Scholarship

Despite AC’s popularity, its music has received little scholarly attention, perhaps in part because of little scholarly interest in the most mainstream popular music and because the majority of its audience is female. Mainstream popular music often has been considered unworthy of study because it is commercially produced for a large heterogeneous audience. Despite popular music scholarship being developed to correct this oversight, many popular music studies unfortunately have reproduced this bias. Similarly, popular music has long been organized around a gendered divide which gives value to music produced by and for men while devaluing music produced by and for women (Douglas, 1995; McLeod, 2001). These divisions in the music industry and popular music scholarship have real consequences for the types of music audiences hear, the messages music contains, and the critical acclaim music receives. By calling attention to differing messages about gender in two mainstream songs, we draw attention to the fact that the most overlooked popular music contains many interesting and important areas for study.

The interdisciplinary field of popular music studies emerged in the 1970s through the work of sociologists, media scholars, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, journalists and fans (Hesmondhalgh & Negus, 2002). Working to unravel the elitism inherent in the dismissal of the popular, popular music scholars worked to
break the artificial distinctions between high and low culture and to legitimate the study of popular music. Interestingly, many popular music scholars passed over truly mainstream music texts to focus on subjects presumably more interesting, such as new genres (punk, riot grrrl, hip hop), musical icons (Madonna, Michael Jackson), and active audiences (working class youth in the United Kingdom) (Hesmondhalgh & Negus, 2002). While valuable, these studies say little about mainstream popular music and similarly (re)construct the mainstream as a majority category devoid of all meaning except for capitalist ideology and profit (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Negus, 1997). The most mainstream music again became the empty category against which subcultural music was defined; as an empty category, mainstream popular music was inadvertently constructed as unworthy of study.

The split between mainstream and subcultural music and their audiences reasserts itself in the gendering of music in the split between rock and pop. Though this gendering is undoubtedly socially constructed, the constructs have an enduring meaning and continue to shape musical production, reception, and scholarship. Frith and McRobbie (1990) were among the first scholars to discuss the ways in which the gendered characterizations of rock music (male or masculine) and pop music (female or feminine) affected the valuation of each genre. In their analysis, rock exhibited an aggressive, explicit, and crude male sexuality, while pop expressed romantic conventions and was almost entirely consumed by females. Because of the cultural value of male attributes, rock has come to signify a more authentic music, infused with emotional honesty, social criticism, and mastery of technological skill (Barton, 1997; Coates, 1997; Douglas, 1995; Frith & McRobbie, 1990). Pop, gendered female, has been constructed as a fabrication, a synthetic and inferior version of the more authentic rock (Coates, 1997; Douglas, 1995; Frith & McRobbie, 1990).

Music Video Scholarship

The popularization of music videos and music television with the development of MTV in 1981 made the gendered divisions between male and female musical artists and their work visual. As the merging of two distinct, often misogynistic media—popular music and television—music videos amplified the associations of men with dominance and violence and women with physical appearance and sexual desire already so prevalent in popular culture (Lewis, 1993). Research on music videos in general has examined these specific stereotypical representations of men and women.

In 1986, Sherman and Dominick analyzed 166 videos and reported that men in music videos outnumbered women two to one. In addition to being underrepresented, especially as musical performers, half of all women in music videos were dressed provocatively. They linked the underrepresentation of women in music video to the underrepresentation of women as musical performers. In
a replication of his 1987 content analysis, Seidman (1999) observed that sex role stereotypes found in his earlier study persisted. He found male music video characters were more likely to be portrayed in stereotypical male occupational roles (manual laborer, police officer, soldier, photographer) and were more likely to be adventurous and violent. Female characters were more likely to be affectionate, nurturing, dressed scantily, and pursued sexually. Female characters were most likely cast in stereotypically feminine occupational roles, such as dancers, models, maids, and prostitutes.

Jhally’s (1995) critique of music videos, *Dreamworlds II*, echoed these earlier findings and suggested that many male artists’ music videos, directed and produced almost entirely by men, display a male fantasy world in which women exist only to be gazed upon or sexually exploited. Gow (1996) found that even after MTV had undergone programming changes at the end of the 1980s to respond to both scholarly and activist criticism of many of the videos it broadcast, women in music videos continued to be underrepresented and portrayed in ways that emphasized their physical appearance. In contrast, men were shown in a variety of roles that highlighted their musical abilities.

Andsager and Roe’s (1999) study of women in country music videos found that despite country music’s declaration of 1997 as the “Year of the Woman,” women in country music videos, the format in which Martina McBride’s career developed, were “symbolically annihilated” much like women in rock and pop music videos (p. 69). Men appeared in country music videos three times more often than women. Women were more likely younger and dressed in alluring clothes than men. Interestingly, female characters in male artists’ videos were more likely condescending or traditional portrayals than female characters in female artists’ videos, who were more likely portrayed as fully equal to men. Andsager and Roe tied these portrayals of women to the directors’ visions for the videos; almost all of the 285 videos they analyzed were directed by men.

Given the gendered divisions and discriminations in the music industry, the stereotypical depictions of men and women in song lyrics and music videos are disappointing yet not particularly surprising. However, in terms of the most researched aspect of masculinity in music videos, violence, Smith and Boyson (2002) found that Adult Contemporary videos contain the least amount of violence, compared to rap, rock, and rhythm and blues videos. Thus, while our analysis included an examination of the above described stereotypical female roles, male violence was not the subject of our investigation of male roles. Instead, we focused our attention on the seemingly more subtle aspects of gender roles in music videos, and thus to some degree we explored what we believe is a fruitful, yet understudied, approach to the gendered messages in popular music and music video.

Far more surprising than the stereotypical nature of gender representations in music videos is the lack of scholarly attention given to the most played, most
mainstream songs. Reproducing the elitism that spawned the growth of popular music scholarship, much popular music scholarship has overlooked and ignored the music formats with the greatest reach. The devaluation of the popular, tied to ideologies that produce unequal valuation of gender traits, has kept many scholars from addressing the production, content, and reception of these messages in any descriptive way.

To address the issues raised in this review, we examine two popular songs and their videos from the AC format, *100 Years* and *This One’s for the Girls*. The two songs resonated with their target audience throughout 2004, ending the year as the number three and number nine songs on the *Radio and Records* Adult Contemporary charts. Specifically, we analyze the lyrics and videos of the two songs to determine the images of men and women portrayed in these popular songs.

**METHODS**

Profoundly interdisciplinary, it is difficult to categorize popular music scholarship by method. However, many popular music studies employ three basic approaches: institutional analysis (focused on production, industry and economics), textual analysis (focused on meaning and representation), and ethnographic analysis (focused on audience and the everyday environment in which music is heard) (Herman, Swiss & Sloop, 1997). As defined by Frith, an overarching goal of popular music scholarship is to examine “not how a piece of music, a text, ‘reflects’ popular values, but how—in performance—it produces them” (1996, p. 270).

The study of music videos, like the study of popular music, is interdisciplinary, drawing from film studies, mass communication, and literary theory. Due in part to the newness of music videos, early analyses used film and postmodern theories to interpret the visual aesthetics of videos, and focused on the ways the visual and narrative conventions seemed fragmented and disjointed in music videos (Goodwin, 1992). Scholars Frith (1988) and Goodwin (1992) argue that this initial work misread music videos; Vernallis (2004) echoes this in her assertion that the study of music videos must be tied to the study of popular music—after all, music video visuals were constructed to enhance the musical tracks they illustrate. By connecting the visual elements of music videos to the sounds of the songs, we can, as Frith argues, understand music videos as “the visual equivalent of music built up out of studio sound layers” (1988, p. 219).

Our concern in this project is the way lyrics, images, sounds, and star images converge to produce two different stories about the lifelong expectations and experiences of men and women. Thus, the close reading of song lyrics and video images figured prominently in our project. Using ideological and textual analysis, we sought to highlight the gender ideologies each song and video contained by reading them against one another, looking for places where the lyrics and the
visual images reinforce and/or reveal how each song and video constructs gender differences.

As described by White, ideological analysis is “concerned with texts as social processes and as social products” (1992, p. 196). Thus, because music (like other cultural artifacts) is “bound up with questions of social power,” ideological analysis of popular music and music videos aims to examine the traces of power left from the production of these cultural texts and the structuring elements that will likely impact the interpretation of popular music and videos (Hesmondhalgh & Negus, 2002, p. 6). Centered particularly on the construction of meaning, ideological analysis is thus focused on “delineating the range of issues and questions” raised by a particular cultural artifact (White, 1992, p. 182).

Textual analysis, a method through which ideological analysis can be achieved, investigates the structures of texts in order to explore a text’s foundational elements and the functions they serve in the construction of meaning (Silverman, 2001).1 In popular music studies, textual analysis typically takes at least one of three forms: “musicological analysis of the structure of popular music, interpretation of lyrical content, or the examination of the visual iconography of music in the form of music video” (Herman et al., 1997, p. 4). Our study aims to combine the two latter approaches and thus examines the lyrics in McBride’s and Five for Fighting’s songs and the images in both accompanying videos.

Some features of a text are more significant than others and thus textual critics “pick out the bits of the text that, based on your knowledge of the culture within which it’s circulated, appear to you to be relevant to the question you’re studying” (McKee, 2003, p. 75). For example, Goodwin suggests that “it is the overall mood of the lyrics and the ‘hook’ in the chorus that establish what the song is (lyrically speaking) ‘about’” (1992, p. 122). Because we were primarily interested in the gendered meanings in both songs and their accompanying videos, and the ways in which these meanings may impact their audiences, we emphasized the elements of the texts that we believed were most relevant to understanding the gendered messages constructed in the texts.

Analyzing both songs and videos concurrently allows us to identify gender messages in each that may not have been as conspicuous in the text of only one song or one video. Alone, each song or video might be unremarkable; read together, both songs and their videos provided a unique opportunity to examine the ideologies present in everyday popular culture texts and the ways they work to establish and sustain unequal power relations. However, songs are not only composed of lyrics, and videos are not only composed of images. While our primary emphasis was the connection of lyrics and images, we recognize that not all

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1For exemplary examples of ideological and textual analysis of popular music and videos, see Goodwin (1996) and Middleton (2003).
words in the songs carry the same weight and thus we have used the emphasis constructed by the correspondence of lyrics, sound and image to help isolate the dominant meanings in both songs (Vernallis, 2004).

One final note about method: The texts we examined are popular as defined by industry figures; both songs clung to the one and two spots on both the *Billboard* and *Radio and Records* Adult Contemporary charts for fourteen weeks, and the Recording Industry Association of America has recognized the albums from which both songs came for superior sales: McBride’s *Martina* is platinum and Five for Fighting’s *The Battle for Everything* is gold. We assume that through their heavy radio rotation listeners could not help but hear both songs, and that sales demonstrate that the songs resonated with their audiences. By employing textual analysis of lyrics, images and sounds to conduct an ideological analysis, we cannot make claims about how listeners understand and enjoy both songs. We therefore know very little about how audiences used and understood these texts. Though the clarity with which both songs and videos construct messages of gender suggests that these messages about gender must have some resonance with listeners, we cannot claim that listeners wholeheartedly accepted the stereotypical nature of the ideas about men’s and women’s lives present in these texts as such.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

In addition to both songs’ consideration of a century of living and their concurrent hit status on the adult contemporary charts, there are a number of similarities that justify analyzing *Girls* and *Years* together. Both had broader appeal and success with audiences besides AC. *Girls* initially appeared on the *Billboard* Country charts and *Years* rose as high as 21 on *Billboard*’s Top 100 chart. Both songs encourage listeners to reflect on their lives. McBride says *Girls* “encourages females of all ages to stand up for and believe in themselves” (Whitmire, 2003, p. 45). *Years* songwriter John Ondrasik says, “Literally, the song is about a guy looking back on his life markers: Find love, family, crises. And asking himself, did he live it or watch it go by?” (Cidoni, 2004, n.p.). Both songs even refer to some of the same decades in life—the teen years, 20s, and 40s, and, of course, the century mark.

Despite these commonalities, the messages and tone of each song are quite different.\(^2\) *Girls* is clearly written as a celebration of women’s lives and *Years* focuses on one man’s life. *Girls*, a crossover from the country music genre, has an upbeat, high energy style. It is described as a “rocking empowerment anthem” (Waddell, 2003, p. 32) that “caught on as one of those songs that will be an

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\(^2\)The lyrics for both songs are included in an appendix at the end of this article.
anthem for the [country] format” (Whitmire, 2003, p. 45). *Years* has a much slower beat than *Girls*; its lyrics and tone are described as “bittersweet” (Cidoni, 2004, n.p.) and “meditative” (Morse, 2004, p. D12). Before delving further into the differences in the songs, we describe both songs and their accompanying videos, as well as the artists who perform them.3

### This One’s for the Girls

Martina McBride, four time Country Music Association “Female Vocalist of the Year” (most recently in 2004), began enjoying crossover success from country to popular music charts in the late 1990s (Pietroluongo, Patel, & Jessen, 2004). Her seventh album, *Martina*, has achieved enormous crossover success, due in part to “This One’s for the Girls.” Throughout her career, McBride has recorded songs that raise awareness of domestic violence and child abuse; her name is “synonymous with efforts to end domestic violence” (“Increase in Calls,” 2004, n.p.). Her “female anthems” have encouraged the devotion of her female fans (Whitmire, 2003, p. 45).

*Girls* is undoubtedly female focused: “This one’s for the girls.” McBride specifically addresses three ages of women in *Girls*: 13, 25, and 42. In each of its three verses, *Girls* addresses issues that are assumed to be pressing and offers encouragement. To 13-year-olds, McBride acknowledges life can be so “rough” and “mean;” she encourages these girls to “hold on to your innocence” and “stand your ground.” McBride also sings to 25-year-olds, whom she imagines are living in a “little apartment” and are “wondering where your life is going to go.” McBride suggests that 42-year-olds are “tossing pennies into the Fountain of Youth;” she reassures them that “every laugh, laugh line on your face made you who you are today.”

Each verse builds to the chorus in which McBride sings to women of all ages. The first line of the chorus and the title of song, “This one’s for the girls,” suggests a toast to the girls of all ages with a variety of situations. McBride celebrates women “all around the world” who have “ever had a broken heart,” “wished upon a shooting star,” “love[d] without holding back,” and “dream[ed] with everything they have.” She tells them that they are “beautiful the way they are.”

The video is equally upbeat and equally centered on women. The video is shot in several studio sets; each sparsely decorated set is painted in bright colors,

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3“This One’s For the Girls” was written by songwriters Chris Lindsey, Hillary Lindsey and Aimee Mayo. The video for *Girls* was directed and produced by Robert Deaton and George Flanigen of Deaton Flanigen Productions. John Ondrasik wrote and performed “100 Years.” The video was directed by Trey Fanjoy and produced by Nina Grossman, both for video production house FM Rocks. The authorship of each song and its accompanying video complicates any particular attributions we could make about the sex of the authors: *Girls* was written by one man and two women, recorded by a woman and the video was directed and produced by men. *Years* was written and recorded by a man and directed and produced by women.
mostly reds and blues, giving an open and modern feeling. McBride wears fashionable clothing in black and bright colors, as do other characters in the video. McBride sings facing the camera. As she sings about each of the aforementioned ages, the camera cuts to a woman or women assumed to be about that age. The camera returns more and more to these characters, who sing along with McBride as the chorus repeats. The young girls sing in a group on a bed or a sofa; the women in their twenties and forties sing and dance. As the video progresses, the characters, once in separate sets, join together and stand or sit arm in arm and sing along with McBride. After McBride sings “we’re all the same from 1 to 99” in the bridge, two elderly women join the cast and at one point, one plays an electric guitar. Although several men appear in the video, they are never an important focus. In a few scenes of the video, men celebrate women by joining in the refrain of “This one’s for the girls.”

100 Years

Five for Fighting is a misleading name for this one-man band. Singer-songwriter John Ondrasik gained national popularity with the 2000 release of his first album, America Town. The album’s most successful song, “Superman,” began receiving airplay in the summer of 2001 but became a national anthem after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Harmon, 2002). Described as a “fragile piano ballad,” the song suggested the vulnerability of heroes and was quickly connected to the emergency workers who cleared the wreckage of the fallen World Trade Center (Morse, 2004, p. D12). Ondrasik was nominated for a Grammy and performed at the Madison Square Garden concert fundraiser for September 11 victims (Harmon, 2002). This solidified Ondrasik’s status as a sensitive and contemplative voice for men.

Unlike Girls, Years is less a celebration of a man’s life than a complex and contemplative look at the changes in one man’s life beginning at age 15. Ondrasik sings reflectively to the man at this age, referring to him as “hey, 15.” He then refers to this man at different ages. In the first two verses, the man ages from 15 to 45. At 15, he is “dreaming;” by 22 he is with a woman and they are “on fire;” at 33 he is a “they, with a kid on the way;” and at 45 he is “heading into a crisis, chasing the years of my life.” In the song’s bridge, he ages to a “wise” 67 and the “sun is getting high.” In the final verse, the man is 99 and is “dying for just another moment.”

The song’s chorus reveals that the song’s main character is singing to his 15-year-old self, describing to him the changes he will experience. He sings with encouragement, “15 there’s still time for you, time to buy and time to choose. Hey 15, there’s never a wish better than this.” At his youngest age, 15, and his oldest age, 99, the character is “counting the ways to where you are,” a further indication that he is reflecting on where he has been and where he will go.
Though the sounds of the piano are prominent in the song, they become louder and are joined by other instruments as the song builds in intensity and tempo at the chorus.

The video for *Years*, which stayed on VH1’s Top Twenty Countdown for 18 weeks, is equally contemplative (Picture Vision, 2004). It is set outdoors on a flat piece of land surrounded by distant mountains. The sun is rising and the ground is bare and dusty; the only objects on the set are a grand piano and a large, old tree. The lack of vegetation and lack of leaves on the tree suggests it is winter. A teenage boy, presumably the aforementioned “15,” plays the piano, a major focus of the video, as it begins. The camera moves 360 degrees around him while he performs, capturing the scenic views behind him. As the open top of the piano obscures the camera’s sight of the boy, the player becomes Ondrasik. As the song progresses and he sings about different ages, the man at the piano changes to represent men of corresponding ages. Men of various ages, including Ondrasik, stand at the bottom of a tree, the second major focus of the video, looking up at its branches at different moments. At several points, a young man climbs the tree and eventually embraces and kisses a woman. The characters are all dressed in muted earth tones.

At the song’s bridge, when the man is 67, “15” falls out of the tree, and a number of previously unseen characters of different genders, ages and races stand, one at a time under the tree, perhaps suggesting the universality of the story Ondrasik sings. As the song builds in intensity, these characters take their turns at the piano as the camera circles it; each plays with more intensity than the previous characters to match the song’s build in intensity. The video closes as “15” is back at the piano; the sun is setting and the camera cuts from the piano to the tree where Ondrasik stands with an elderly man, presumably 100 years old.

**Contrasting Ideological Messages**

The descriptions of the two songs and videos present a number of surface level differences, such as *Girls* is celebratory and upbeat while *100 Years* contemplative and mellow. While of some interest, it is the deeper ideological messages in these texts which construct very different images of women and men that are the focus of our analysis.

*Staying the Same versus Maturing.* Perhaps the most significant difference between the songs is the way in which both represent development. *Girls* presents an image of women as never changing, never growing up or maturing. *Years* presents an image of a man who increases in maturity throughout his life.

In *Girls*, there is no denying that the women age; the visual images include females from young pre-adolescent girls to elderly women. Despite this, the lyrics in *Girls* present women as not changing or maturing. One of the most
striking ways this is reinforced is when the third verse begins with “This is for all you girls about 42.” Although the use of “girls” is somewhat excusable as a colloquialism or as part of artistic license, it clearly would be offensive to call men “boys” at age 42, and many women are offended by the time they are young adults if they are referred to as girls. Girls’ lyrics fail to recognize a maturing process.

The refrain particularly reinforces the lack of increasing maturity with “we’re all the same inside from 1 to 99.” That sameness focuses on dreaming, giving themselves away, and being disappointed in love. These are apparently the unchanging concerns of women. There is no mention of family, responsibilities, and certainly not of careers. The focus “from 1 to 99” is romance and finding a partner even though this often results in failure. The lyrics suggest women remain like girls, focused on dreams of romance their entire lives. The images in the video have “girls” of all ages singing and dancing for the camera, all the same regardless of their age.

Years presents a quite different picture of the male protagonist. In addition to the visual aging of the main character evident in the video, the lyrics reflect a life that increases in responsibility and maturity over time. He is focused on romance in his 20s; in his 30s “you’re on your way,” and he becomes “a they, a kid on the way, a family on my mind.” In his 40s, he faces crises, and then “suddenly you’re wise” by age 67. What is presented is “Everyman’s life from carefree youth through the heat of the 20s, transitional 30s, and eventual drain as the years into old age take their toll” (Taylor, 2003, p. 36). Unlike the unchanging women in Girls, the man in Years matures, assumes responsibilities, becomes wise, and strives for more even at 99.

The light and sky in the video change as the video progresses, implying the progression of time. The image of the tree similarly suggests growth and maturation. Trees are symbols of strength and wisdom, having survived many changes and witnessed many events. The tree serves as an anchor for the video’s character as his life changes, and it is under the branches of the tree that Ondrasik meets himself at 100 at the end of the video.

Overall, the two songs present markedly different characterizations of women and men. Girls presents women as maintaining the same limited dreams, hopes, and behaviors throughout their lives. They hope for romance, give themselves away, and frequently are disappointed regardless of their age. They never mature or take on new responsibilities. Years presents men as growing and maturing throughout their lives. They begin their lives with desire for

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4We acknowledge, however, that “Third Wave” feminists have reappropriated the term “girl” in interesting and important ways, especially through the terms “grrrl” and “girl power” (See Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Carlip, 1995; Garrison, 2000; Wood, 2007). We are not convinced, however, that McBride’s use of the term is an example of this reappropriation.
romance, but do not stagnate. Instead, they move on to career and family concerns and achieve wisdom.

**Passive versus Active.** Another striking difference between the two songs is how passive or active the major characters in the videos are. The two songs reinforce gendered notions of women as more passive and submissive and men as active and as decision makers.

In *Girls* the passive and submissive message repeats itself throughout the lyrics. At 13, girls are encouraged to simply “hold on to your innocence. Stand your ground.” They are encouraged to maintain where they are, not to move ahead or accomplish something. At 25 girls sit in their apartments “Living on dreams and Spaghetti-o’s, wondering where your life is gonna go.” This presents an image of women so consumed by dreams that they lack the time, interest or ability to cook for themselves; instead they wait for something to happen to them. There is no implication of being in control of their lives and no expectation of building a better life, just the hope that one might happen to them. Phrases in the refrain also are not active. Girls have their hearts broken, wish on shooting stars, and dream with everything they have. They do not act to make things happen. The refrain contains one active phrase; the song is for girls “Who love without holding back.” The one action that girls appear able to take is giving themselves away, a rather traditional view of submitting to a lover, partner, child, or family member. And the refrain reminds them that this often leads to having their hearts broken. Women look back on what has happened to them, not forward to possibilities. They do not create opportunities.

The visual images in McBride’s video are also rather passive and submissive. The women are indoors in private, secluded, virtually empty spaces. The women representing different ages dance in separate sets, never moving outside of a small area. As a group, they bounce in place on a bed or couch. Although it can be argued that these indoor spaces are representations of the pleasures of femininity and community (bedrooms and dance floors), the women never move out of these spaces, nor do they do anything in them that would suggest a break from stereotypical conventions of music videos. The video presents women in limited spaces, accepting, even enjoying their confinement.

There are two recurrent images in the video, however, that complicate our suggestion that all of the women in McBride’s video are passive. The first image appears as a shadowy figure playing the electric guitar in a darkened room in the third shot of the video before McBride begins to sing. As McBride sings to “girls about 25,” we see the figure again, this time in brighter light. Dressed in punk rock style, this woman differs from the others in the video; she never truly faces the camera and even though she at times sings along with the song’s lyrics, she scowls and swings her guitar to suggest that she is producing the sounds that we hear in the music. Though she may be one of the most active women in the video,
she remains enclosed alone in a single studio set throughout the video; and her appearance and aggressive yet aloof stance make her more of an anomaly than an integral part of the visual narrative.

The second image appears when McBride sings to “girls about 13.” Interspersed in the video at this point are shots of two pre-adolescent girls dressed in soccer uniforms standing arm-in-arm holding a soccer ball in a closed set. They smile first at each other and then the camera. When shown as brief clips throughout the remainder of the video, they dance arm-in-arm facing the camera while smiling and singing the lyrics of the song. While the soccer image suggests that these girls are active, their uniforms and ball read more like props—they have virtually no relevance to what the girls do in the video and thus fail to represent true activity.

Together, the textual and visual images of women in *Girls* are overwhelmingly those of confined women with limited movement, content in their position. Of course, many of the song’s messages are positive by themselves. We believe it is important to encourage women to stay true to themselves, to dream of possibilities, and to reflect on what has happened to them. These are very positive messages in many contexts. However, what is missing is any acknowledgement of women’s abilities to shape their world in an active manner as an alternative to the passive and submissive roles stereotypically taught to them and reinforced by this song and video.

*Years* presents a very different image of men as active and as decision makers. Although he does some dreaming at age 15, the song’s protagonist is “counting the ways to where you are.” This suggests he is planning and making choices. By 22, he is with a woman and “we’re on fire making our way back from Mars.” He has already done something. At 33, he is “on his way.” Even when he is 99, he is “dying for just another moment.” There’s a sense that even at 99 he can do more. The refrain reinforces that while the protagonist dreams and hopes, he also makes decisions; he is not passively waiting for something to happen. He “has time to buy and time to lose.” Some choices turn out positively and others do not, but he takes control and “there’s never a wish better than this”—the ability to actively make choices—“when you only have a hundred years to live.”

The visual images strongly reinforce that the man is active. Rather than confined in a studio, the video’s characters perform in a wide open space. Ondrasik walks around in an open space, sometimes singing, sometimes looking pensively at the horizon. Each character in the video plays the piano. As each man approaches the tree, he sees something he wants, including a woman, and then climbs toward his goal and eventually reaches her. Although he does fall as he climbs, this is late in his 100 years, and even then he gets back up and appears ready to try again.

The representation of the protagonist in *Years* is one of an active individual, making choices, climbing throughout his life. However, on closer analysis, two
problems are apparent. First, there is little emphasis on relationships in this man’s world. The lyrics mention a woman and family, but relationships are not his focus; he is rarely pictured with someone. Second, the man never appears to be content with his position and achievements. He seems driven to climb the tree even after he falls. He wants to try again even at 99 because he must keep striving for the top. These characterizations are consistent with traditional images of males as independent and driven to climb to reach higher status rather than contentment.

Overall, *Girls* presents women as largely passive and submissive. Women wait for things to happen to them, give themselves away, and experience disappointments along the way. They have little or no control over their lives. *Years* presents men as dreaming about opportunities, but also as making choices, and trying to accomplish many things. However, they have limited relationships and fail to be content with their achievements even at age 99. Together the two songs and their videos reinforce traditional passive and active roles for women and men.

**Collectivistic versus Individualistic.** A frequently identified characteristic of culture is an individual versus a collective value (e.g., Hofstede, 1997). In the United States women are viewed as more collectivistic; in contrast men are characterized as more individualistic. In both the text and the video, *Girls* and *Years* reinforce these gendered roles.

*Girls* presents women as collectivistic in various ways. The refrain repeats throughout the song “This one’s for the girls.” In the bridge, McBride tells listeners that women are “all the same inside from 1 to 99.” Reinforcing the lyrical message, the video frequently shows groups of women enjoying each other’s company, whether singing and dancing together or jumping on beds and having pillow fights. The overall message is that women collectively experience and live their lives. Women are dependent on each other. Further, all women share these collective values.

*Years* presents a much different image. Throughout the song the first person pronoun is used. With few exceptions, whether the singer is reflecting on age 15 or 99, he experiences life individually. The video reinforces this individual experience. Throughout the video, a single individual plays the piano in a wide open expanse devoid of other people. The protagonist walks alone as he sings and ponders his life, except for when he embraces a woman or interacts with an older man, presumably an older version of himself. The overall message is that he is an island unto himself, the rugged individual who carries on though 100 years independent of others. The image of the tree in the video suggests this as well, as it stands solemnly and singly in an empty field. So although *Years* presents a more self-reflective and sensitive image than stereotypical image of men, it reinforces the solitary, rugged individualism that prevents relationships and intimacy.
Certainly there are advantages to valuing both collectivism and individualism. Nothing in either song or video suggests a superiority of one value over the other. However, the songs reinforce the traditional female and male roles concerning these values. *Girls* emphasizes the collective (female) and dependent nature of experience, but largely disregards the individual experience; *Years* emphasizes the individual (male) and independent experience with little relationship to others.

**Object of Gaze versus Facial Focus.** Another difference between the two songs concerns the focus on physical appearance. Again, *Girls* presents women as concerned about beauty and appearances. The absence of such a focus on physical appearance is apparent in *Years.* *Girls* includes an emphasis on physical appearance. *Girls* suggests that women at 42 are concerned about laugh lines on their faces, and yet the song reassures them that those lines make them who they are. The refrain repeats “You’re beautiful the way you are.” McBride considers this a positive message; she says, “I love the fact that I can say to everybody out there that they’re beautiful the way they are, because that’s something everyone needs to hear especially with all of the media images out there of what we’re supposed to look like” (Whitmire, 2003, p. 45). Certainly this is a positive message, but McBride suggests that women ought not to be concerned about physical beauty while simultaneously suggesting women’s worth lies in their beauty. The video especially reinforces this confusing message.

Visually, McBride is on display. She is conventionally attractive, and her make-up and clothing accentuate this in a sensual, sexy manner, although these are mild by some standards in the music industry. Before she even begins singing, she flirts with and gazes into the camera and dances suggestively. Viewers are invited to gaze on her physical beauty and enjoy the performances by her and the cast of beautiful female characters in the video.

In the end, “you’re beautiful the way you are” as an empowering message seems to ring hollow. In the video, McBride and the other women become objects to watch, objects to emulate, and symbols of the women to whom McBride apparently sings. The women in the video, like McBride, are almost exclusively White and conventionally attractive, even when they are older. While McBride certainly means her words to offer a message of hope for women unhappy in their current situations, a more empowering refrain might be, “you’re valuable, important, responsible, intelligent, or talented the way you are.” Instead of these messages, by focusing on beauty, the lyrics and video present women as beautiful when they are young, White, and thin and performing for the pleasure of others; this is the very message McBride claims to be combating.

In contrast to *Girls,* *Years* seems completely devoid of any focus on physical appearance. None of the lyrics mention physical appearance or beauty. Instead, the focus is on the experience of living. Ondrask infrequently looks directly at the camera when it focuses on him, and primarily sings introspectively. His clothes are
unremarkable. The other men in the video are equally ordinary in appearance. The montage of quick images of men and women of different ages, sizes, and colors suggests appearance has little, if any, influence on the song’s message, despite the video’s primary focus on White men who approximate Ondrasik at various ages. Although Ondrasik and the others in his video would be considered conventionally attractive, *Years* suggests that the measure of a man is the choices he makes in life and the maturity level he achieves, not his physical appearance or attractiveness.

Overall, the two songs present remarkably different images of women and men. *Girls* presents attractive women as the object of gaze. Although McBride asserts that the song frees women by broadening the definition of beautiful, the focus is still on physical appearances rather than on accomplishments. *Years* is devoid of a focus on physical appearance and instead focuses on a lifetime of introspection and striving to achieve.

**CONCLUSION**

The two songs, “This One’s for the Girls” and “100 Years,” present images of women and men experiencing life over the course of a century. Their concurrent hit status on both the *Billboard* and *Radio and Records* Adult Contemporary charts throughout the summer of 2004, rather than on the Rock or Alternative charts, suggests that each presented a message of life that adults in the 25–54 age range found compelling and relevant. Unfortunately, the messages in the lyrics and videos do not provide women and men with a range of empowering roles or new images of gender. Perhaps this consistency with dominant ideology helps explain the songs’ popularity.

Although this study focused on only two songs, the gendered messages are not unique to them on the AC chart. Other AC hits by these same artists repeat similar themes. For example, “Superman,” Five for Fighting’s other major hit, memorializes the solitary hero and in McBride’s other 2004 AC hit, “In My Daughter’s Eyes,” a woman is rescued and gains identity through her daughter, not her own worth. Other country music cross-over artists reinforce similar stereotypes. For example, in LeAnn Rimes’ hit, “I Need You,” a woman’s only reason to live is for her man, and in Keith Urban’s “You’ll Think of Me,” the central character defiantly moves on alone not needing anyone. Female AC fixtures, such as Whitney Houston (“I Wanna Dance with Somebody”) and Celine Dion (“Have You Ever Been in Love”), point out how women gain identity by loving someone, despite frequent failures in love, and Christina Aguilera (“Beautiful”), like McBride, tells women to use their own definition of beauty to define their worth, while reinforcing beauty as the important measure. Male AC artists like Phil Collins (“Can’t Turn Back the Years”) and Train (“Cab”) reinforce images of men as solitary individuals. So although the themes in *Girls* and *Years* may not dominate the AC chart, they appear regularly in this format.
Many feminist scholars have suggested that women and girls need more positive images of themselves in the mass media to be able to change their own self-perceptions (Shields, 2003). We recognize that McBride’s *Girls* was most likely conceived with this purpose in mind. On one level, *Girls* is consistent with efforts to empower women. The video’s portrayal of seemingly supportive female relationships in conventional feminine spaces suggests the importance of female camaraderie. Also, accepting one’s own appearance rather than striving to obtain an ideal beauty is a positive message. However, redefining beauty in this way still places a focus on physical appearance. Similarly, *Girls* suggests that the focus of women’s lives should be giving oneself to others, which frequently causes pain. *Girls* unfortunately does not offer a scenario in which women overcome what is causing them pain; in essence, the song celebrates women’s powerlessness to change their current situations. A more empowering message might focus more directly on the intelligence, talent, strength, and ability of women that enables them to enact a life of their own choosing.

*Years*, with its quiet, reflective protagonist, presents an alternative to stereotypical images of men as aggressive and violent. Interestingly, Smith and Boyson (2002) found in their study of videos on MTV, BET, and VH1 that only 15% of videos in a given week contain acts of physical aggression. Despite this, academic scholarship, as noted in our literature review, has focused on violence as the predominant characteristic of masculinity. We suggest that future research examine the full range of characteristics that comprise representations of masculinity in music videos and popular culture in general as we have tried to do here.

*Years* offers messages that claim to represent an ordinary man, including self-reliance, growth, and accomplishment. In the process, it also presents a narrow, unrepresentative picture of the many options for men’s lives. Not all men choose to marry, partner with women, have children, and/or strive for and achieve conventional success and wisdom. Why should a man continue to strive rather than be content even after 100 years? Relationships and satisfaction could be presented as important choices and options for men. Media images certainly have the power to set unrealistic expectations for men as well as women, as Ondrasik readily demonstrates (Faludi, 1999).

The differences in the portrayals of men’s and women’s lives in the lyrics and videos of *Girls* and *Years* are not particularly surprising given the industry in which they were constructed. What these portrayals suggest is that despite the progression in our understanding of the restrictive notions of femininity and masculinity, traditional images continue to resonate in our most popular media. Although we cannot speculate on the ways in which audiences use the information contained in each song and video, the songs’ radio airplay and album sales suggest that the gendered notions in both songs and videos have had ample opportunity to reinforce stereotypical ideas about men and women.
Faludi (1999) criticizes women in power in the media for frequently committing the same transgressions as their male predecessors by repeating the same demeaning images and stereotypes of women. Our analysis suggests that *Girls* is culpable in this regard. However, by comparing *Girls* and *Years*, our analysis adds to this critique by emphasizing that the media perpetuates constraining and stereotypical images of men as well, thus limiting their opportunities to define their lives in alternative ways. Our analysis suggests that popular music is shaped by the traditional social, political, and cultural values of gender and reshapes them (Hawkins, 2002). The music industry may be in a paradoxical situation concerning this. To maintain economic vitality, it must present lyrics and visual images that resonate with mainstream mass audiences. In presenting such images, they may reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, thus constraining their ability to creatively present alternative perspectives of men and women. For popular music to reshape the gendered roles in our society, it must provide more alternative images of those roles.

The comparison of two popular songs provides a starting point for further research. We hope that further work will examine the contemporary popular music industry and the ways in which it is both influenced by and a great influence on gender differences. The ways in which audiences understand and respond to the ideas and images that the music industry produces are also important areas of study. Future work should examine the messages produced in and by popular music texts. In our work, we found the comparison of two similar texts particularly useful. Read alone, “This One’s for the Girls” seems empowering; read against “100 Years,” it is disappointing. Together, both songs provided a unique opportunity to examine mainstream music and comparable evaluations of men’s and women’s lives.

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APPENDIX

“This One’s for the Girls”
Martina McBride

This one’s for all you girls about thirteen
High school can be so rough, can be so mean
Hold onto, on to your innocence
Stand your ground when everyone’s giving in
This one’s for the girls

This is for all you girls about twenty-five
In a little apartment, just trying to get by
Living on, on dreams and spagheetti-o’s
Wondering where you life is gonna go
Chorus:
This one’s for the girls
Who’ve ever had a broken heart
Who’ve wished upon a shooting star
You’re beautiful the way you are
This one’s for the girls
Who love without holding back
Who dream with everything they have
All around the world
This one’s for the girls

This is for all you girls about forty-two
Tossing pennies into the fountain of Youth
Every laugh, laugh line on your face
Made you who you are today
This one’s for the girls
Who’ve ever had a broken heart
Who’ve wished upon a shooting star
You’re beautiful the way you are
This one’s for the girls
Who love without holding back
Who dream with everything they have
All around the world
This one’s for the girls

Yeah, we’re all the same inside (same inside)
From 1 to 99
Repeat Chorus

“100 Years”
Five for Fighting

I’m 15 for a moment
Caught in between 10 and 20
And I’m just dreaming
Counting the ways to where you are
I’m 22 for a moment
She feels better than ever
And we’re on fire
Making our way back from Mars

Chorus:
15 there’s still time for you
Time to buy and time to lose
15, there’s never a wish better than this
When you only got 100 years to live

I’m 33 for a moment
Still the man, but you see I’m a they
A kid on the way
A family on my mind
I’m 45 for a moment
The sea is high
And I’m heading into a crisis
Chasing the years of my life

15 there’s still time for you
Time to buy, Time to lose yourself
Within a morning star
15 I’m all right with you
15, there’s never a wish better than this
When you only got 100 years to live

Half time goes by
Suddenly you’re wise
Another blink of an eye
67 is gone
The sun is getting high
We’re moving on . . .

I’m 99 for a moment
Dying for just another moment
And I’m just dreaming
Counting the way to where you are
15 there’s still time for you
22 I feel her too
33 you’re on your way
Every day’s a new day . . .

Repeat Chorus