

# Frequency of Queer Language in American Popular Music

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## ABSTRACT

This research was based on exploring group-specific communication within the United States' LGBTQ+ community—this was specified to language, then further specified to inter-community slang. The subject of popular music was chosen because it is influenced by language and widely known, and music was related to communication by choosing to analyze song lyrics. Music from the year 1970 (subsequently using slang identified as from the 1960s) was chosen because of the sexual revolution and increasing protests carried out by LGBTQ+ people during this time, and the year 2020 (using slang from the 2010s), as this is the cap year of the most recent decade. To analyze both quantitatively and qualitatively, methods included statistical tests of frequency and categorization of associated emotional terms. Two 2-sample z-tests were performed: the number of queer slang terms used in lyrics (against the number of queer slang terms *not* used in lyrics) between 1970 and 2020 were tested, and the number of words within lyrics that could also be identified as queer slang terms (against the number of words within lyrics that could *not* also be identified as queer slang terms) between 1970 and 2020 were tested. The lyric lines within which queer slang terms were identified were analyzed using the emotions from Dr. Gloria Willcox's Feelings Wheel, categorized into the sections angry, bad, disgusted, fearful, happy, sad, or surprised. It was concluded that no true difference could be identified in the frequency and influence between American popular music from the years 1970 or 2020.

## Introduction

Queer language in music is both a personal passion and presents a wider opportunity for analysis that has not yet been appropriately explored. The LGBTQ+ community is a one-of-a-kind group, whose impact on popular culture is undeniable, but not valued in a comparable manner. The most modern and most widely accepted names to describe the discussed community are *LGBTQ+* and *queer*, which will be used henceforth. Concentrating on well-known music is conducive both for analysis purposes and to ensure a modern approach to my research. The implication of this research would include a better understanding of the queer influences within popular culture and music, and a greater appreciation of the societal contributions of the queer community.

My identified gap in knowledge is centered on lyrics, a significant musical component within the music industry, and the impact of music as a whole. Unlike music genres, styles, influences or inspirations, and instrument choices, lyrics have been neglected in examination. A study from the University of California Irvine analyzed over 30,000 songs from the late 20th century and early 21st century from the top charts to determine why they were so successful. The analyzed musical features included timbre, tonality, danceability, voice, gender of the artist, mood, genre, and rhythm (Interiano, 2018). Lyrics were not included in the University of California Irvine study's data collection.

Lauren Kehrer from the Department of Music at the College of William and Mary analyzed the usage of queer language and language originating in Ballroom culture (a scene formed by queer drag performers of color in the 1980s that revolved around beauty and dance competitions) in Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (Kehrer,

2019). However, Kehrer's main focus was the possible appropriation of queer culture within the singer's music and public image. This paper identified queer slang terms, such as "I slay" and "boy, bye" in the "lyrical and visual language" of the album (Kehrer, 2019). These phrases are commonly used by the queer community and therefore represent the interpersonal connections forged within this community. Kehrer recognized this, but their goal was to identify and account for Beyoncé's inspirations drawn from queer culture, as Kehrer's analysis of queer language is limited beyond the above quoted slang. As a whole, there exists a limited amount of information concerning word choice, importance and impressions of language, and frequency of wording. Much less research has been conducted about the intersection of wording and queer expression in music.

## Queer Language

What consists of queer-aligned language? To determine this, the term *queer* must first be defined. According to the Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness, a book covering the subject of queer music study from over thirty contributing experts (edited by Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, from the University of Virginia and the University of Salford, respectively), *queer* was first recorded as a synonym to "unusual" or "peculiar" in the English-speaking world. In the early 20th century, it transformed into a derogatory term to describe outcasts of society, and eventually morphed into a slur for those with same-sex romantic or sexual desires (Maus & Whiteley, 2018). *Queer* was adopted in the 1990s as a reclaimed insult to demonstrate refusal towards injustice and homophobia. It was meant to unite the LGBTQ+ community in order to encourage its members to "[temporarily] forget [their] individual differences" to "face the insidious common enemy," meaning the cisheteronormative—the belief that being heterosexual and cisgender is the default or norm—standards American society endorsed (Maus et al., 2018). This unity demonstrates the possibility for queer influence on societal expectations, as well as societal creations, such as popular music. William Grimes of the New York Times describes the usage of *queer* by quoting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, explaining that it can be interpreted through a connection to queer theory through understanding "different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them" (Grimes, 2009). The term *queer* has a lengthy and meaningful usage history, in terms of both etymology and within the LGBTQ+ community.

In the 2014 Psychology of Sexualities Review, queer language is described by Paul Baker from York University as an "anti-language," meaning a language claimed by a marginalized group. It is a vernacular used within a specific community, and often unknown to those outside such a community. According to Julia Stanley in *Homosexual Slang*, the vocabulary of queer slang "is used solely for the purposes of communication within the subculture" (1970).

## Historical Influence

My research topic is based on how queer creations in the music industry have influenced wider society and future popular music. To continue, it is necessary to have an understanding of renowned artists, their works, and the ripples they have caused in the waves of popular music. Among these artists is Little Richard, a Black queer artist of the 1950s who is known for his song "Tutti Frutti" (Saunders, 2020). The song was forcibly edited for wider audiences during its popularity; however, the original lyrics contain references to sexual acts often associated with the queer community. Despite Richard's homosexuality and non-conformity to heterosexual standards of his time, he is regarded as a model of the rock and roll scene, and elements of his music and performance, his penchant for "oral sound effects" and gibberish, have been covered and adopted by old and new artists such as Elvis Presley and Gwen Stefani (O'Dell, 2009). His impact on popular music after his time is indisputable, and it is very likely that Little Richard is not the only figure or factor that has been a catalyst for such change. Language is a powerful tool, and it can be harnessed through lyrics and music to be a factor

of influence. An identified gap in research is determining how measures of impact can be concentrated on the lyrics of songs and identifying the correlation between queer language and influence on popular music.

Famous pop songs from the years 1970 and 2020 are the basis of my research, and have helped identify changes in queer language across several decades and the turn of the century. The year 1970 was chosen because it is situated in the second half of the twentieth century, follows the incredibly influential Stonewall Riot of 1969, and was a decade during the height of the gay liberation movement from around the 1960s to 1980s in the United States. The year 2020 was chosen to effectively determine the change in frequency of queer language, comparing music from the past. Additionally, the last 10 to 15 years have been subject to much controversy surrounding the rights and education of queer people and students in the United States (reflecting both positive and negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community). This establishes two periods of time significant to queer history, and it was most effective to study these periods to find changes in music, culture, and societal thinking.

## Ethnomusicology

My research also recognizes the study of ethnomusicology, defined by Christian Spencer-Espinoza of the Center of Arts and Humanities of Chile's Mayor University as the study of sound, and how the past and future of our world and society can be interpreted and understood through observed changes in sound. Sound, including music and noise, "implies social aspects," through the avenues of creation and participation, discourse, and interactions with audiences or communities (Spencer-Espinoza, 2022). This proves a powerful relationship between society and music, and particularly how all people and elements involved contribute to music's changes and social impact. Spencer-Espinoza quotes sociologist Tia DeNora and defines music as not only something to be consumed, but also a "social measur[ement]" of daily life (2022). This provides context for the importance of my research question. The impact of music is significant and an integral part of the culture of not just a specific community such as the LGBTQ+ community, but of an entire country or generation. The topics of study and defined terms outlined have contributed to the research question: how has the frequency of queer language in American pop music changed across the decades?

## Methods

My research began by selecting and cataloging the most popular songs of the years I had selected, 1970 and 2020. I did this by selecting the top 25 Billboard songs from the years mentioned. For the top 2020 songs, I referenced the Top 40 Weekly and the Wikipedia article *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2020*; for the top 1970 songs, I referenced Rate Your Music and the Wikipedia article *Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 1970*. I created lists of these songs' lyrics using Genius, a lyric collection website (see Appendix A). I then consolidated terms associated with the queer community (see queer language) from the years of, the few years before (maximum of 6), and the few years after (maximum of 3) 1970 and 2020 to create anthologies of words that I looked for within the songs compiled. These collections of slang will be referred to as "slang from the 1960s" and "slang from the 2010s" (see Appendix B). These guidelines about the publishing year of my referenced sources were developed to ensure that the information about colloquial language I compiled and cited was as up-to-date and accurate as possible. It was necessary to acknowledge that a source from a later year may describe information from earlier years, as it is not always possible to accurately describe facts or happenings during the time in which they are occurring. Table 1 is an example row from both decades' word bank (included also in the appendix).

**Table 1.** Queer slang word bank

Slang Term	Definition
1960s: “Dish”	“Engage in malicious gossip.” ( <i>Homosexual Slang</i> , 56)
2010s: “Fierce”	“Exceptionally stylish or impressive.” ( <i>The Drag Dictionary</i> , 38)

I took into account the linguistic meanings, and emotional context between the two years’ lists of words in order to address my research question. I determined if and how the influence of queer language has changed over time by examining the frequency of queer slang terms found in each Billboard top songs list.

The vast majority of identified terms from the song lyrics classified as slang terms do not share the same meaning as they do within the queer community from either century—specifically 0% from the 1960s and 0.01960784314% from the 2010s. In other words, the meaning interpreted from the songs is not equivalent to the meaning understood within the queer community. Because of this, the following descriptions of analysis were carried out on terms or phrases alike in spelling or grammar, although not meaning. For example, while the phrases “coming out” and “come out” were not used in the context of someone “revealing their queer sexuality or non-cis gender identity” (Mathys, 2020), they were found in three top 2020 songs used in the context of something being revealed, the state of an object, and to be “shown clearly” (Dictionary.com).

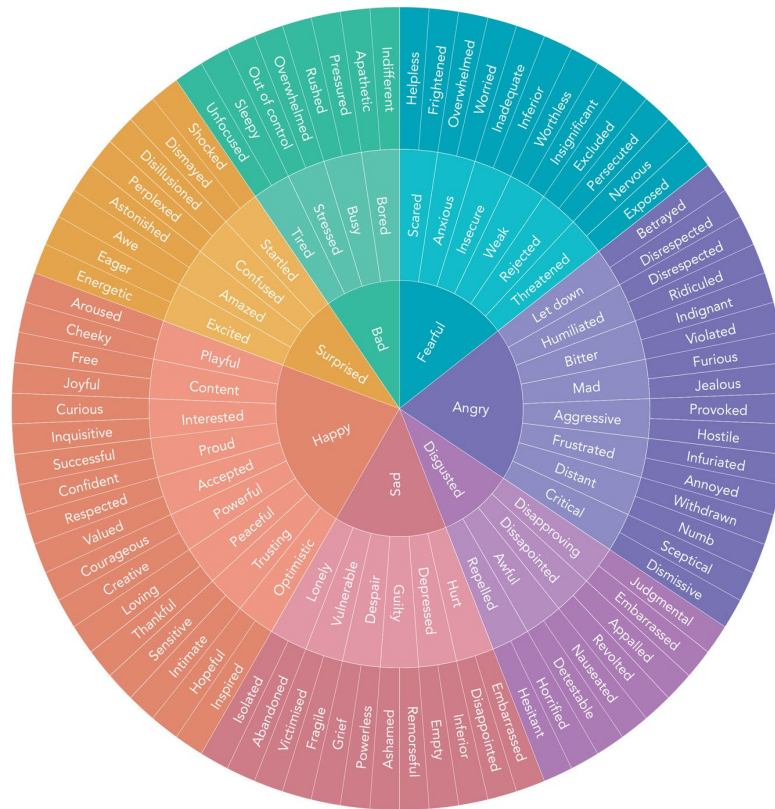
In addition to considering the recurrence of terms, I also analyzed the context and connotation of the language used, questioning whether words are used in an angry, bad, disgusted, fearful, happy, sad, or surprised emotional context. For all queer-associated terms identified in both years’ songs lists, I examined the lyrics surrounding the term, specifically the lines before and/or above the term required to understand the sentence. An example follows utilizing a section of Whitney Houston’s *I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)*, the term “heat” used for analysis:

Oh, I wanna dance with somebody

I wanna feel the heat with somebody (Genius)

The line “Oh, I wanna dance with somebody” would be included within context analysis as the line previous to the lyric containing “heat” and as a line that assists in comprehension of the song section. These lines would be the lyrics used for analysis, to determine the connotation of the identified queer-associated word within the song.

The rubric I used to determine connotation employs the Feelings Wheel, a color-coded wheel of broadly defined feelings leading into specific emotions, used most commonly within psychological professions. I chose three terms from the Feelings Wheel to explain the emotional content of each lyric line(s). Although designed first by Robert Plutchik, the Feelings Wheel has been updated many times during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, most notably by Dr. Gloria Willcox (Zeng, 2022; Calm, 2023). An updated version designed by the application Calm and reviewed by Clinical Psychologist Dr. Chris Mosunic was used in my research and is included below as figure 1. This wheel is useful due to its ability to identify otherwise-hidden emotions or affects present within songs, which has improved my ability to effectively determine lyrics’ significance and the subjective nature of connotation.



**Figure 1.** The Feelings Wheel.

The vocabulary that is classified as queer language, the vocabulary I searched for within my lists of top 25 Billboard songs, has been collected from various sources, including dictionaries and glossaries. I chose to compile vernacular from sources published during the years leading up to (maximum of eight to ten years prior), the year of, and a few years after (maximum of five years later) 1970 and 2020. I chose to slightly broaden the time frame of sources and include sources from a few years following the chosen years to ensure the largest possible selection of terms, as such sources likely include information from several years prior to their publication. This method has also been chosen because of the lack of historical language compilations specific to the queer community; it was necessary to broaden the time frame for data collection as much as possible to ensure adequate material could be gathered. The language anthologies used for slang of the 1960s to 1975 are *Homosexual Slang* by Julia Stanley (1970) and *Dick Leitsch's Guide to Seventies Gay Slang* by David Kortava (2018). Those used for slang of the 2010s to 2023 are *The Queer Lingo Dictionary* by Quinn Mathys (2020), *The Drag Dictionary* by Alba de Zanet and Roberto Garcia (2021), the *LGBTQ Resource Center Glossary* of the University of California, Davis (2023), *What's the Word? A [sic] LGBTQ Slang Glossary* by Grindr's editorial team (2023). Glossaries are more present in later slang anthologies, for as inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community has become more normalized in the 21st century, popular language has shifted from slang formed in secrecy or solely within specific groups to more widespread scientific and psychological definitions shared with the rest of society.

The information collected from my research was organized according to whether or not queer language is found within my groups of data. Grouping by year, my selected songs were divided into subgroups of how many instances of queer language influence were found in the songs' lyrics. Those without any identified linguistic influence were excluded from further analysis and grouped together.



To best organize the information about the identified queer slang terms, I developed a table for the top songs in both 1970 and 2020, including the terms plausibly associated with queer slang, the song and artist(s) of the song in which the terms were found, the frequency of the terms' use, the line of lyrics where the terms were found, and the three Feelings Wheel labels that best describe the terms' lyrics (See Appendix C). This table adheres to the following example, Table 2 (Genius).

**Table 2.** Data organization

Terms plausibly associated with queer slang	Song, artist(s)	Frequency of use	Song line	Context, using Feelings Wheel
"Throw shade"	<i>Intentions</i> , Justin Bieber & Quavo	1	"Can't nobody throw shade on your name in these streets"	Proud, respectful, powerful

In order to mathematically conclude if there is any difference in the frequency of usage of queer slang terms between popular music of the identified time periods, two statistical tests were performed using the two-sample z-test. The first z-test measured the number of queer slang terms (excluding repetitions) included in each time period's top songs' lyrics, drawing from the available queer terms from the time period's queer language word bank (see appendix). The second test measured the number of words that match queer slang terms (including repetitions), drawing from each time period's top songs' lyrics. The first test was conducted with this data: a null hypothesis where  $p_1 = p_2$ , an alternate hypothesis where  $p_1 < p_2$ ,  $p_1$  referencing the number of queer slang terms from the 1960s queer language word bank,  $p_2$ : referencing the number of queer slang terms from the 2010s queer language word bank,  $X_1$ : 12,  $X_2$ : 34,  $n_1$ : 97, and  $n_2$ : 214. The second test was conducted with this data: a null hypothesis where  $p_1 = p_2$ , an alternate hypothesis of  $p_1 < p_2$ ,  $p_1$ : referencing the frequency of queer slang terms from the 1960s,  $p_2$ : referencing the frequency of queer slang terms from the 2010s,  $X_1$ : 57,  $X_2$ : 102,  $N_1$ : 7217,  $N_2$ : 10498.

Examining the lyrics of songs from 1970 and 2020 and the contextual terms that are most relevant to such lyrics allowed me to determine both the frequency of queer slang in modern popular music and queer slang's influence on this music.

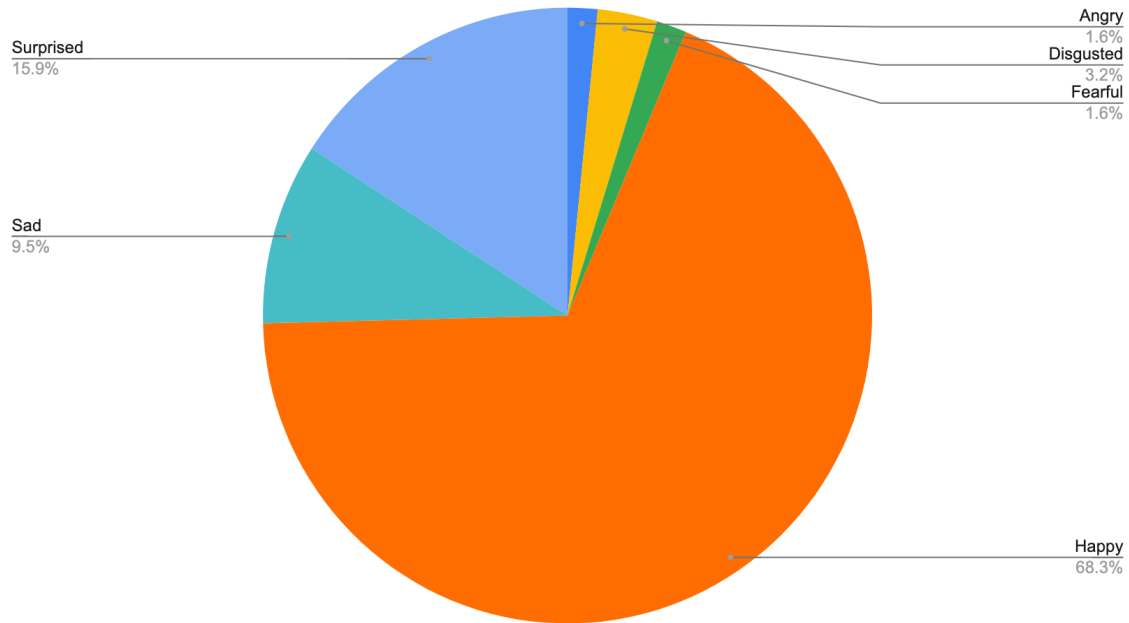
Issues that have risen during my research are the aforementioned lack of language compilations available for reference, as well as how difficult they are to access if they are available online. It is possible for bias regarding the true significance of words and if and how a term may be classified as associated with the queer community to be present.

## Data Analysis

The previously described data tables organizing the identified queer slang terms were vastly different between years. The table of song information from the top songs of 1970 contained 12 rows (such as the sample row above), whilst the table about the top songs of 2020 contained 34 rows. Concerning the frequency of slang terms, 57 separate instances of queer slang terms from the 1960s were found within the lyrics of the top songs of 1970, whilst 102 separate instances of queer slang terms from the 2010s were found within the lyrics of the top songs of 2020. Despite this, given the sample sizes and difference in amount of resources references for each time period, no true difference was found between periods, a determination explained below. Additionally,

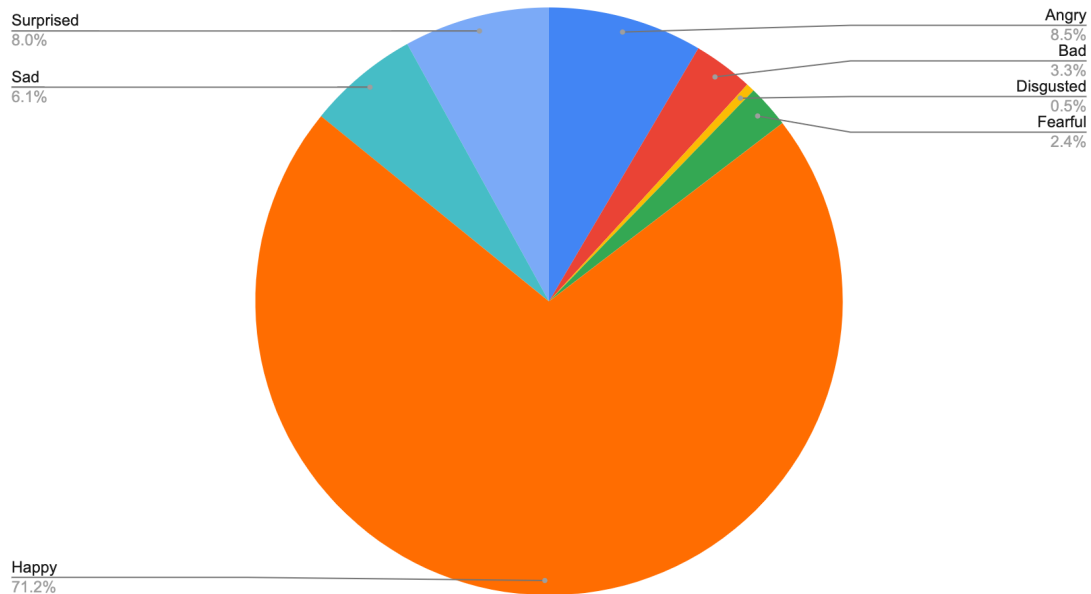
no exact slang terms from the 1960s or the 2010s were found in the top songs for either year, that is, no terms identified in lyrics were found to have been interpreted by their writers as the definitions of the word banks. Several terms are similar, but all have different meanings.

Using my data organization tables, the following charts were constructed to compare the emotional terms, derived from the Feelings Wheel, used to describe the context of lyrics from respective years' top songs containing queer slang terms from respective time periods.



**Figure 2.** Emotion Distribution of Feelings Wheel Terms, Describing Top Songs from 1970.

Percentage of words in the Angry category: 1.6%, Bad: 0%, Disgusted: 3.2%, Fearful: 1.6%, Happy: 68.3%, Sad: 9.5%, Surprised: 15.9%. The emotional category of Happy words is the clear majority for this decade as well, meaning that the majority of top songs from 2020 also leaned towards positive feelings, and the queer slang terms identified within those songs leaned towards a positive context.



**Figure 3.** Emotion Distribution of Feelings Wheel Terms, Describing Top Songs from 2020.

Percentage of words in the Angry category: 8.5%, Bad: 3.3%, Disgusted: 0.5%, Fearful: 2.4%, Happy: 71.2%, Sad: 6.1%, Surprised: 8.0%. The emotional category of Happy words is the clear majority, meaning that the majority of top songs from 1970 leaned towards positive feelings, and the queer slang terms identified within those songs leaned towards a positive context.

In addition to the categorical data described, quantitative statistical analysis of queer terms used in lyrics was executed by performing two 2-Sample Z-Tests for proportions. To reiterate, one z-test measured the number of queer slang terms (excluding repetitions) included in each time period's top songs' lyrics, drawing from the available queer terms from the time period's queer language word bank; the other measured the number of words that match queer slang terms (including repetitions), drawing from each time period's top songs' lyrics.

The first Z-Test concluded that the number of queer slang terms found in popular music from 1970 was approximately equal to those found in music from 2020. The numerical conclusions indicated  $z = -0.8092979644$ ,  $p = 0.2091718884$ ,  $\hat{p}_1 = 0.1237113402$ ,  $\hat{p}_2 = 0.1588785047$ , and  $\hat{p} = 0.1479099678$ . Because the alpha level used was 0.05, the null hypothesis was not rejected, and it was concluded that the proportion of queer slang in popular music has not drastically changed in the span of fifty years. Given the relatively low available sample size of queer slang words, particularly from the 1960s, there is a possibility that this result occurred by chance, illustrated by the similar percentages of  $\hat{p}_1$  and  $\hat{p}_2$ .

The second Z-Test concluded that the number of words that are queer slang terms found in popular music from 1970 was approximately equal to those found in music from 2020. The numerical conclusions indicated that  $z = -1.260703316$ ,  $p = 0.103707945$ ,  $\hat{p}_1: 0.0078980186$ ,  $\hat{p}_2: 0.0097161364$ ,  $\hat{p}: 0.0089754445$ . Because the alpha level used was 0.05, the null hypothesis was not rejected, and it was concluded that the frequency of queer slang terms in popular music has not drastically changed in the span of fifty years. It is also likely that this test was impacted by the relatively low available sample size of queer slang words, illustrated by the similar percentages of  $\hat{p}_1$  and  $\hat{p}_2$ .

Although no difference between time periods was identified, it remains impactful to analyze any details or contrasts between both sets of data. For example, only two terms (including the terms' verb and/or noun counterparts) are present in both time periods' data tables: "straight" and "come out." Within the top songs from



2020, “straight” is included a total of 4 times in *Roxanne* by Arizona Zervas, *Everything I Wanted* by Billie Eilish, and *Ballin’* by Mustard and Roddy Ricch; within the top songs from 1970, “straighten” is included once in *Everything Is Beautiful* by Ray Stevens. Within the top songs from 2020, “come out” is included a total of ten times in *Don’t Start Now* by Dua Lipa and “coming out” is included in *Say So* by Doja Cat and *WAP* by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion; within the top songs from 1970, “come out” is included once in *Candida* by Dawn & Tony Orlando. It is significant that both terms have well-known meanings within the queer community, and that their usage and meanings have remained relatively constant over time.

My compiled word banks of queer slang are also telling resources. It is evident through comparing my collected vocabulary that over time, language has shifted from a focus on effective secretive communication to defining and explaining the complexities of the queer community, including gender identities, sexual orientations, and queer experiences. Because of socio-political progress, queerness in mainstream culture is more widely accepted in the 21st century. A greater association with intersectionality and connections to other minority groups are far more prevalent in the queer slang of the current century. The inclusion of words such as “oppression,” “intersectionality,” “-phobia(s),” and “-normativity” in the 2010s word bank is also notable, and is likely associated with the increase in queer resistance and activism beginning in the 1990s (Maus et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

Music is a gateway to popular culture, connected to those who make it, listen to it, and the language used to create it. Popular music is influenced by many factors, and the LGBTQ+ community is an undervalued contributor to this influence. Additionally, lyrics are underutilized as a music analysis resource. Everything from a song’s mood, rhythm, and danceability to an artist’s voice, and gender have been analyzed—all but a song’s lyrics. This gap, along with fields of study such as ethnomusicology, the study of sound and its interaction with society, and the definitions of the term *queer* over decades have contributed to my research.

I took into account that the term *queer* stems from the LGBTQ+ community’s resistance against cisheteronormative society, and that queer-specific slang is described as an anti-language, harnessed for usage by a marginalized group. Queer artists’ influence on popular music have also inspired my research question, for many have gone unacknowledged for their contributions to the music industry and modern artists’ work. This information has led me to research how the frequency of queer language in music has changed over decades. To determine a change over time, I chose the years 1970 and 2020 on which to focus my research and effectively compare the late 20th and early 21st centuries. My research grappled with how language and its meanings, connotations, and origins have evolved, bridging a gap that has not been appropriately addressed.

This gap, the lack of studies addressing the musical and cultural factor of lyrics, is not a widely researched topic. Simply by conducting a research project about the frequency of a certain type of vocabulary in the lyrics of a wider community’s popular culture, I have added to the scholarly conversation concerning this identified gap. My initial search for appropriate resources to reference and build off was fruitless regarding research on which to base my own process. The studies and articles I found incorporating queer slang mainly consisted of word banks or anthologies, which contributed to the construction of my own specific word banks, however they lacked the analytical element that I intended to address in my own research. I addressed my gap by adding this analytical research to my field, discovering information about the frequency of queer language in two time periods within American popular musical culture.

It was determined that no identifiable difference exists in the frequency or influence of queer slang terms of the 1960s and 2010s between popular music from 1970 and 2020, respectively. This determination includes my conclusion regarding the lack of an extreme difference in distribution of emotional contextual terms describing lyrics as well as my conclusion that there is no true difference in frequency or influence of queer language on popular music in my identified span of 50 years.

As discussed, many of the terms identified within lyrics are similar to those within the word banks, however all have different meanings. This likely means that although they are significant as a resource and avenue of study, lyrics are not as telling about the language habits of minority groups as expected. It is also possible that confounding factors exist, and limitations on effectiveness were present during my research. For example, I was unable to compile the entirety of a manner of speaking into one resource, particularly considering the general lack of information and lack of access to information regarding this field in the late 20th century. I was unable to access *The Queen's Vernacular* by Bruce Rodgers and *Fantabulosa* by Paul Baker, two resources that would have likely greatly contributed to my word bank of queer slang terms from the 1960s. Due to this, I conducted my research with low, unequal sample sizes of queer slang terms. Additionally, the subjectivity of the emotional categories of the Feelings Wheel used to determine contextual information is prevalent. Though subjectivity is unavoidable within my methods and research process, it likely affected my research in ways that would ideally be avoided.

The lack of a difference in the frequency of queer slang terms assists in disproving many of the modern conservative claims about a malicious rise in queerness within the United States, particularly among young people and the younger generations. My conclusions also reinforce the importance of acknowledging queer artists and culture in the wider environment of present-day social culture.

My findings could influence future research including conducting research about how the meanings of the terms I have found have shifted during a time period or between notable points in recent history. Other interesting research topics could include studying how certain language fades away over time, and how new slang is created. Subsequent research could reference my compiled slang anthologies to conduct their own research on shifting language. Given the results of my research, future investigation could focus on how slang terms come into existence, and the connections between a term's meaning in colloquial language and standard language. It would build onto my own research to determine stronger connections between words' meanings and how that affects their usage.

## Acknowledgments

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