

The Correlation Between Music Festival Genres and Female Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT

Music festivals are communal events for people of all different backgrounds to gather and listen to music performances. Music festivals occur on small and large scales all across the world. While they can certainly be considered exciting and memorable events for some, others leave with traumatizing memories from being victims of sexual violence on festival grounds. Female sexual assault, while not always reported, runs rampant on festival grounds. Using a qualitative quantitative correlational research method, this study aims to answer the question: what is the correlation between music festival genres and female sexual assault? 4 music festivals - Coachella, Stagecoach, Rolling Loud, and Rock Fest - were examined to determine the number of female sexual assaults that occurred there between 2015 to 2019, and the demeaning language conveyed through the song lyrics. Coachella and Rock Fest showed a positive correlation between the number of female sexual assaults and the music festival genres, while Rolling Loud and Stagecoach showed a negative correlation. Music festivals are certainly not safe havens, however, society can work towards crafting safety measures that allow women to feel more reassured at these events. This study works to reaffirm the correlation between music festival genres and female sexual assault and also paves the way for new connections to be established regarding the lack of correlation between the two factors. This negative correlation suggests there may be other environmental factors contributing to female sexual assault, not just the genre of a music festival.

Introduction

Woodstock '99 changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of music-goers across America. While in attendance or listening to one relay horror stories from the event, Woodstock '99 made a historical impact. Along with the blazing sun beating down on your neck, the electric crowds, and alcohol/drug-ridden bodies swaying with the music, the festival also inhabited 4 reported rapes and numerous sexual assaults. At the festival, reporter Alona Wartofsky from the Washington Post "... saw someone push this girl into the mosh pit, a very skinny girl, maybe 90 to 100 pounds. Then a couple of the guys started taking her clothes off – not so much her top but her bottom. They pulled her pants down and they were violating her, and they were passing her back and forth. There were five guys that were raping this girl and having sex with her," (1999).

Each year, more than 32 million people attend music festivals in America. As found by Times Magazine, in 21st-century America more people are inclined to spend their hard-earned income on a lifetime experience, rather than material goods (Gajanan, 2019). One of these so-called "lifetime experiences" are music festivals. But how can women remotely enjoy themselves at these events, if they are worried about their personal safety? Music festivals are hubs for men and women of varying ages to enjoy their electric environment. It gives individuals the opportunity to meet new people with similar interests and create long-lasting connections.

Regardless of this, music festivals perpetuate an extremely unsafe environment for women. While environmental factors such as crowd size, camping grounds women are staying at, and proximity to neighbors have been investigated as a link to why women's sexual assaults occur at music festivals, certain factors have not been looked at. Hence, I investigated the correlation between music festival genres and female sexual assault.

Literature Review

When the phrase “music festival” is spoken, a picturesque image may be painted in one’s mind. Gleaming faces with rosy, sunburned cheeks from standing in the sun all day. Groups of girls walk hand in hand, careful not to lose each other in the sea of energetic people. Young men horsing around in the crowd, spraying each other with plastic water bottles for quick relief from the scorching sun. Booming music, cranked up so loud the crowd seems to vibrate in one’s direct line of vision. However, another image can also be pictured, one less whimsical and exciting. Alcohol and drug-ridden bodies throwing up and passing out on the side of a green, pop-up tent. Tired, aching feet, longing for a place to sit and rest. The harassment of women, vicious treatment of their bodies, and lack of respect for their humanity.

Music festivals are “events consisting of a large variety of bands and musical artists performing shows, on numerous stages, over a period of days to a large audience, usually targeting young people,” (Rudolph, 2016). Music festivals continue to grow in popularity, with new, popular artists coming to fruition and “these kinds of experiences becoming a key feature of cultural life in America,” (Gajanan, 2019). Every year there are around 800 music festivals that occur in America, of all different genres and themes (Shaikh). While these music festivals “are often the highlight of summertime, they are also spaces...for sexual assault,” (Hoover et al., 2021).

Sexual assault, as defined by Judith Linden, is “a crime of violence, often motivated by aggression and rage, with the assailant using sexual contact as a weapon for power and control,” (1999). Many times, sexual assault, amongst other factors, is fostered by sexualization: “a person...that is made into a thing for others’ sexual use,” (Zubriggen et al., 2007).

In 2022, Kara C. Hoover and her fellow scholars conducted an online survey sent to festival-goers to understand men's and women's safety concerns. They found that “females had more concerns about personal safety and males had negative attitudes about surveillance and security.” Their findings also indicated that “females do not feel as safe as males...[and] think about their safety and their actions and sources of harm and protection, while males enjoy the privilege of feeling safe,” (Hoover et al., 2022). These males tend to have a negative response to security personnel being present, especially when females are around.

This lack of security women feel is highlighted through the treatment of women at varying music festivals. In Victoria Herrera’s piece, “Bracelets, Boots and Babes,” Herrera covers the topic of female misconduct which is prevalent at numerous types of music festivals, such as Coachella and Lollapalooza. She investigates the culture perpetuated at these festivals and notes that there is a “sexually charged environment,” specifically regarding males. Herrera argues that “contemporary music festivals have been notorious hubs for sexualized violence,” towards women. The “complex gender dynamics at play on music festival grounds, promote male supremacy and devalue women to the point of sexual assault,” (Herrera, 2018.)

Gina Arnold’s book *Half a Million Strong* draws a similar conclusion to Herrera's. Arnold looks at the stereotypes and history of large music festivals, and from her analysis interprets the culture of environments such as this. Evidence shows that there are “rapes reported at numerous concerts and festivals, including Outside Lands, Stagecoach, [and] Made in America.” The author argues that festivals are a place where freedom and liberation are fostered, but women are held back from feeling comfortable because of the male gaze.

Varying factors make up a sexually charged environment at music festivals. Karen Williams and Duncan Murray examine how sexual assault cases, specifically those that occurred at music festivals, are treated. Both scholars argue that “victims who dress in more revealing attire face issues about victim blame, with their culpability questioned.” Attire varies based on the music festival, with certain events “encouraging women to dress in a way that is consistent with the atmosphere of the event,” (Williams et al., 2022.) Ed Edmonds and his fellow scholars have a similar view, which is displayed in their research paper *Attitudes concerning crimes related to clothing worn by female victims*. In their study, male and female college students were shown two slides with a female wearing scandalous or non-scandalous clothing. The students noted that the female wearing more revealing clothing was more likely to be raped, while the one wearing more conservative clothes was less likely to be responsible for her attack. “The

relationship between sexy clothing and rape supports the assumption that...women who choose to be sexually attractive as being suitable objects for male aggression,” (Edmonds et al., 1986.) As clothing style varies based on festivals, those festivals in which women wear more promiscuous clothes tend to foster a more sexually charged and aggressive environment.

While “loud music, food, alcohol, drugs, thousands of people surrounding you, and the ability to freely express yourself in public,” (Rudolph, 2016) as well as the revealing clothing women are wearing can play a role in the sexual assault of women, there are other factors accountable for fostering a sexually charged environment. While the music festival genre and lyrics of the songs as environmental factors have not been examined so far, there have been other environmental factors looked at. Phillips Wadds and his fellow scholars looked at the “camping sites, large crowds, low lighting, and a normalization of close physical proximity and contact...serve to facilitate opportunities for sexual violence.”

Sexual assault is a fervent issue at music festivals across the globe, two of these countries being Australia and Nigeria. Phillip Wadds and his fellow scholars examine the ways “in which situational, environment and gendered dynamics shape these transgressive experiences” at varying Australian music festivals. At every music festival “sexual violence and harassment...are born from the unbridled escapism and rule-breaking. Festivals produce a liminal quality and feelings of being away from normal life...enabling different norms and identities to emerge’ and greeting space for different rituals...such as practices around dress and drug use.” Wadds emphasizes that “sites reinforcing normative power and gender relations...through the pervasive occurrence of sexual violence and harassment...serve to facilitate opportunities for sexual violence.” Wadds conducted interviews with women over the age of 18, who had experienced or witnessed an incident of sexual violence at a music festival. Wadds then used this information to see how participants would like to address the issue of sexual violence at these festivals. Because women feel they “are unable to fully immerse themselves within the festival environment...alert and ‘on guard’” individuals can take such actions including: “remaining hypervigilant and protective of other women, not taking or limiting the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, changing how [women] dress, and avoiding crowded areas such as the mosh pit,” (Wadds, 2021.)

Related, in Nigeria, Richard Aborisade investigates the hideous sexual assault problem at Nigerian music events. His study “confronts the prevailing culture of silence that trails sexual victimization in Nigeria to explore the scale of the problem of sexual violence at open-air music festivals.” Aborisade conducted interviews involving 47 female attendees of music festivals who all experienced different forms of sexual violence. His “findings revealed [that there is a] high severity of sexual assault, low reportage, and strong influence of rape myth acceptance.” Many women, due to varying environmental factors, can be taken advantage of and sexually assaulted at these festivals, many times without any recognition.

Based on prior research, it is evident that there is, in fact, some form of female sexual assault prevalent on festival grounds. A statistics sheet from the Center for Crime and Justice Policy by Miliakeala Heen and Joel Lieberman gives a broad overview of the problems and solutions to sexual assaults at music festivals. The scholars argue that “sexual violence occurs each year at music festivals across the United States. Half the U.S. population goes to live music events each year, with 33% going to concerts and 18% going to festivals... likely, hundreds of thousands are sexually harassed and assaulted at music events every year.” Heen and Lieberman surveyed women in the United States who had all been to a music festival. “Amongst survey respondents, ninety-two percent of female fans reported experiencing harassment at a music festival. Sixty-two received unsolicited comments about their body, fifty-five were groped, and three percent had been sexually assaulted or raped,” (Heen et al., 2018).

Regardless of music festivals providing security for the safety of performers and attendees, these events display settings that may lead to sexual assaults. Heen and Lieberman suggest that “a variety of solutions for reducing sexual offenses at music concerts and festivals have been proposed. These include: promoting an explicit anti-harassment policy, increasing bystander intervention, creating a centralized place for help and reporting, increasing surveillance via technology, and managing alcohol intake.” With the rise in the #MeToo movement, “venues and concert

promoters may feel increased pressure to implement effective techniques for sexual assault prevention,” which can bolster the number of sexual assault solutions at global music events.

Research Question

Throughout conducting my initial research, I recognized that there was limited research conducted on female sexual assaults at American music festivals. Furthermore, there is a lack of research bridging female sexual assaults with the genre of music festivals. While there are studies done investigating the correlation between separate environmental factors such as lighting and crowd size concerning female sexual assaults at music festivals, there was no correlation on the topic I wanted to delve into. This gap led me to my research question: What is the correlation between music festival genres and female sexual assault?

Hypothesis

In developing my research design, I crafted a hypothesis for my eventual findings. I predicted that the music festival with the highest number of sexual assaults would also be the music festival with the most sexualizing lyrics towards females.

Methodology

To conduct my research, I recognized that I would need to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, I decided to conduct my research through a convergent design mixed method study: QUAL+QUAN. QUAL+QUAN research allows the researcher to put equal weight on both qualitative and quantitative data in their study. This method of research relates to my research question because it enables me to find quantitative research - the number of sexual assaults at each of the music festivals I studied - and my qualitative research - analyzing the lyrics from songs sung at the selected music festivals.

Music Festival Background

To compare and contrast my research, I examined sexual assaults and song lyrics from 4 different music festivals - Coachella, Stagecoach, Rolling Loud, and Rockfest. Looking at 4 separate music festivals would allow me to have a comprehensive understanding of whether the genre of music played at a music festival correlates with the number of female sexual assaults.

First, I examined Coachella, which originally started, in October 1999, as a rock festival. Since then, Coachella has been held at the Empire Polo Club in Indio California, and, according to Business Times, in the past decade has “leaned increasingly into pop.” In her thesis paper, “Ethnography of Coachella”, Vanessa Pham conducted ethnographic research to give insight into how and why Coachella fans continuously perform within certain norms at the event. She argues that “Coachella [has become] a place where we can drink and do drug(s) with strangers, where we can wear anything or nothing, and where we can rub shoulders with celebrities...” (2015). Coachella is a place for self-expression, for influencers to gain fame, and for young people to have their rise to fame. It is an unforgettable 3-day event for some, but sexual assault continues to run rampant on festival grounds.

The following festival I examined was Stagecoach. Stagecoach is known as Coachella’s “sister” music festival, as they are held in the same month and location each year. Coupled with Coachella, the music festivals are a six-day event - one festival pop, the other country. Stagecoach is also held at the Empire Polo Club and is a country festival.

Rolling Loud, which began in February of 2015 is an internationally acclaimed festival held in various countries across the world. For the sake of my study, I am focusing specifically on Rolling Loud in Miami, held at Soho Studios. The genre of Rolling Loud is generally considered to be around rap.

The final music festival included in my research is Rock Fest, which began in 1994 located in Cadott, Wisconsin. The festival, as hinted at in the name, has been a rock festival for the past 30 years, and each year continues to remain unchanged in its genre.

Quantitative Process

The first step of my research process was compiling quantitative data. I studied the years 2015 through 2019. I attempted to find the number of reported female sexual assaults through scouring online forums, newspapers, and a variety of social media outlets (TikTok and Instagram). Once I gathered the numbers of sexual assaults from each festival, I went back to my research and isolated the number of sexual assaults that occurred from each year, per festival. When researching, all of my quantitative data on sexual assaults for Coachella and Stagecoach were combined between the two festivals. This is because, as previously mentioned, the festivals are “sister” festivals and occur within a week of each other so police departments typically report data from either festival as one number.

Qualitative Process

To perform the qualitative part of my research, I conducted a content analysis of songs from each music festival, to find which festival genre has the most demeaning and sexualizing song lyrics. Because my data was collected between 2015 to 2019, I began by finding the music setlist from each year of the different festivals. For each year of a music festival, I chose 9 random songs in the tracklist to analyze. Therefore, for each festival, I analyzed the lyrics of 45 total songs. Then, I looked at the lines of a given song and determined the words or phrases in the song that hinted at the sexualization of women and female mistreatment. After combing through the lyrics in each of the songs, I accounted for the repetition of phrases and words that I flagged and totaled up the number of sexualized comments in each song. There I was able to determine the festival that contained the most vile lyrics.

Limitations

Before discussing my findings, it is important to highlight the limitations of my research study. First, my study does not fully account for other environmental factors that may contribute to sexual assaults at music festivals. Music festivals often contain alcohol and drugs, influencing individuals' decision-making abilities. Additionally, factors highlighted in Philip Wadds' research on Australian music festivals, such as camping conditions, crowded spaces, dim lighting, and proximity to neighbors, could play significant roles. Another limitation lies in the challenge of obtaining comprehensive sexual assault statistics. As Katie Pelland, lead forensic nurse and program coordinator for Coachella's Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (SAFE), pointed out, "3 out of 4 rapes typically go unreported" (Damien et al., 2019), making it difficult to capture every instance of sexual assault. My final limitation was my bias weighing into my qualitative data. Although the songs I selected were randomly chosen from each tracklist, I selected which words and phrases I believed had a sexualized meaning.

Quantitative Findings

I examined the sexual assault numbers from Coachella and Stagecoach first. The internet, especially regarding social media platforms, filters a lot of the words and phrases about sexual assault and rape, so I was not able to collect any

of my data from those resources. Newspapers were my main source of statistics, specifically because they contained interviews with female Coachella attendants and police department statistics. Specifically, the information from 2015 to 2017 was sourced from the Desert Sun newspaper, which covers news from Coachella Valley and surrounding areas in Southern California. Continuing into 2018, I gathered information from the Desert Sun newspaper, and Vera Papisova, Wellness Features Editor for Teen Vogue. She interviewed 54 women at Coachella, all of whom shared experiences of sexual harassment. Regarding sexual assaults that occurred at the two music festivals in 2019, I also collected my information from the Desert Sun. This information is summarized below in Figure 1.

After searching online forums, social media outlets, and newspaper articles, I concluded that there were no sexual assaults that occurred at Rolling Loud between 2015 to 2019. This trend continues with Rock Fest, as there were also no reported sexual assaults. This data is concluded in Figures 2 and 3.

In sum of my quantitative research, 122 sexual assaults occurred at Coachella and Stagecoach, but none at Rolling Loud or Rock Fest. The comparison of the total number of sexual assaults is summarized in Figure 4.

Coachella/Stagecoach Sexual Assault Statistics

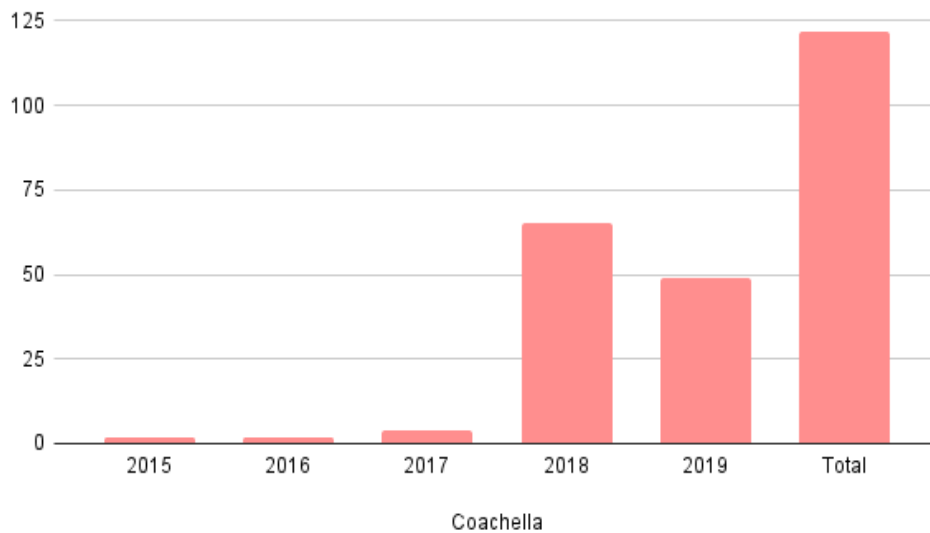


Figure 1. Coachella and Stagecoach Total Number of Female Sexual Assaults

Rolling Loud Sexual Assault Statistics

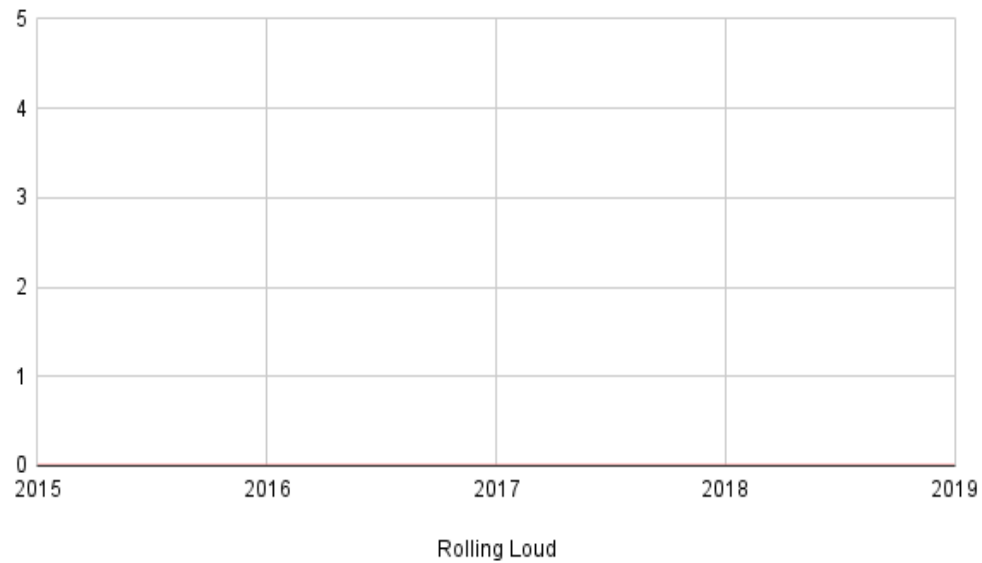


Figure 2. Rolling Loud Total Number of Female Sexual Assaults

Rock Fest Sexual Assault Statistics

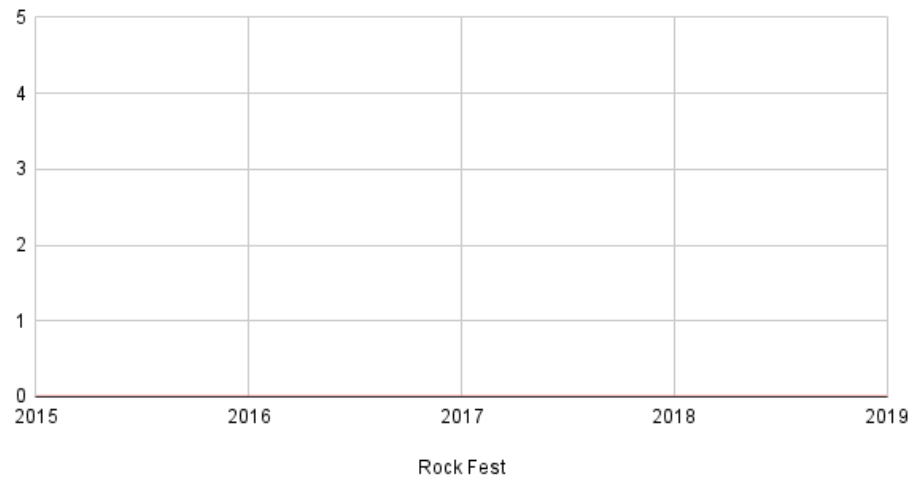


Figure 3. Rock Fest Total Number of Female Sexual Assaults

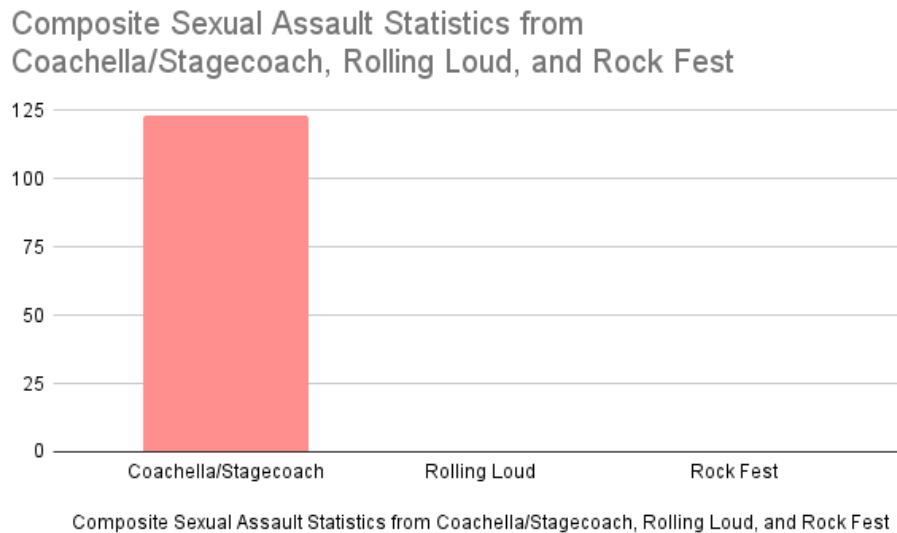


Figure 4. Total Number of Female Sexual Assaults from Coachella/Stagecoach, Rolling Loud, and Rock Fest

Qualitative Data

Throughout my qualitative research process, I analyzed the lyrics from 180 songs. As it would be extremely difficult to include every single word and phrase I pulled from all of the songs I analyzed, I included examples of lyrics I deemed sexualizing and demeaning towards women which can be found in Figure 5. Specifically, phrases that were marked as sexualizing were lyrics that related to physically and emotionally mistreating women, discussing their bodies in a sexualized manner, and using derogatory words regarding females. Although the number of sexual assaults from Coachella and Stagecoach was compiled together, the songs were different from each festival, so I analyzed the song lyrics from the two festivals separately.

Coachella, while it was not the music festival with the highest number of sexualizing lyrics, did contain a large number of phrases. This data is summarized in Figure 6. The song with the most counts of sexualized phrases was “Or Nah” by The Weeknd, played at Coachella 2018, in which I counted 15 lyrics that spoke to the mistreatment/sexualization of women.

Stagecoach, while it is Coachella’s “sister” festival, had the fewest instances of sexualized lyrics. This information can be found in Figure 7. The song with the most counts of sexualized lyrics was Keith Anderson’s song, “Pickup Truck,” where there were 2 lines that correlated with poor treatment of women.

Next is Rolling Loud, the festival with the highest number of lyrics that were related to the mistreatment of women. Future’s song, “Lay Up,” played at Rolling Loud 2016, had 24 counts of lyrics that spoke to the sexualization of women.

Finally, Rock Fest had the second lowest count of sexualized lyrics. Marilyn Manson’s song, “Angel With the Scabbed Wings,” had 4 phrases, the highest number of sexualized lyrics for any song at Rock Fest. The data for Rolling Loud and Rock Fest can be found in Figures 8 and 9. Figure 10 shows the total number of sexualized lyrics from each festival in comparison with one another.

Figure 5. Sexualizing Song Lyric Examples

| Music Festival | Artist | Song | Song Lyrics |
|----------------|--------|------|-------------|
|----------------|--------|------|-------------|

| | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--|
| Coachella 2016 | Guns N' Roses | It's So Easy | "Turn around, I got a use for you / Besides you ain't got nothin' better to do." |
| Stagecoach 2015 | Keith Anderson | Pickup Truck | "A wench on the grill." |
| Rolling Loud 2016 | Future | Thought It Was A Drought | "Hit that girl while I'm choking her out." |
| Rock Fest 2016 | Marilyn Manson | Disposable Teens | "Rebel from the waist down." |

Coachella Lyrics Analyzation

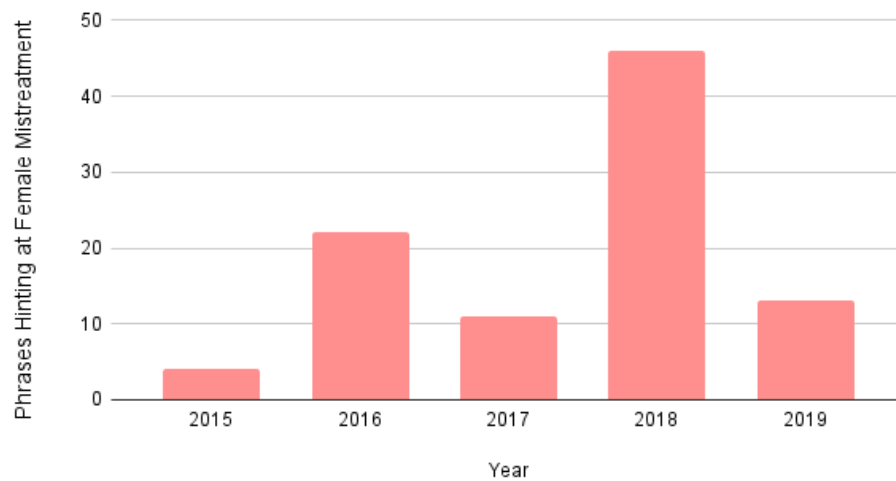


Figure 6. Coachella Song Lyric Analyzation

Stagecoach Lyric Analyzation

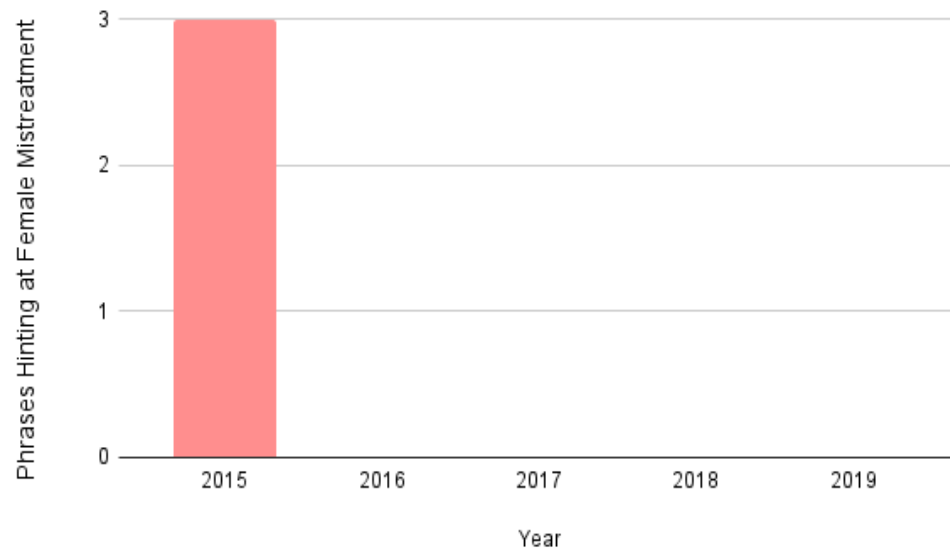


Figure 7. Stagecoach Song Lyrics Analyzation

Rolling Loud Lyric Analyzation

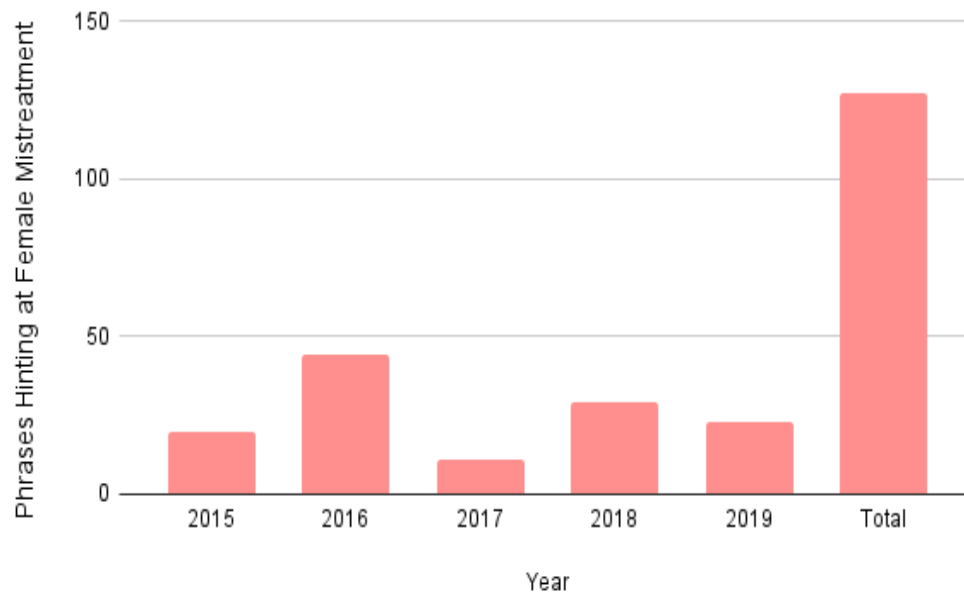


Figure 8. Rolling Loud Song Lyrics Analyzation

Rock Fest Lyrics Analysis

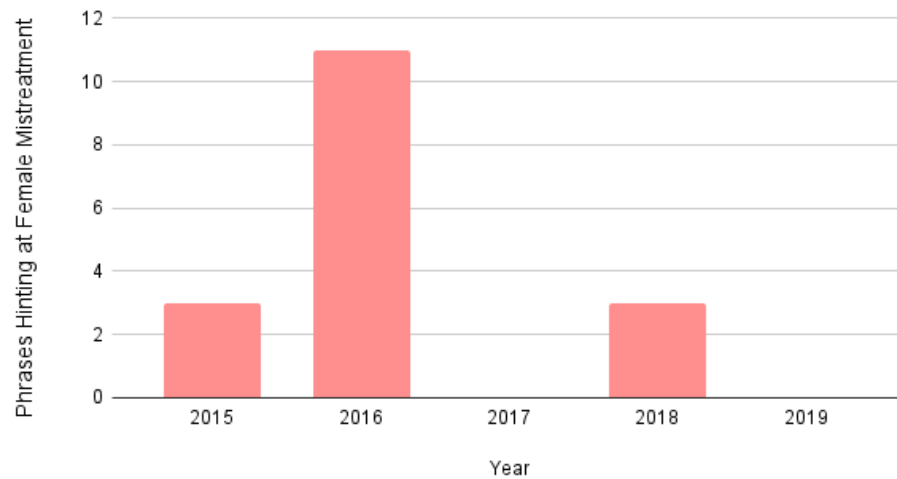


Figure 9. Rock Fest Song Lyrics Analysis

Total Festival Lyric Analysis

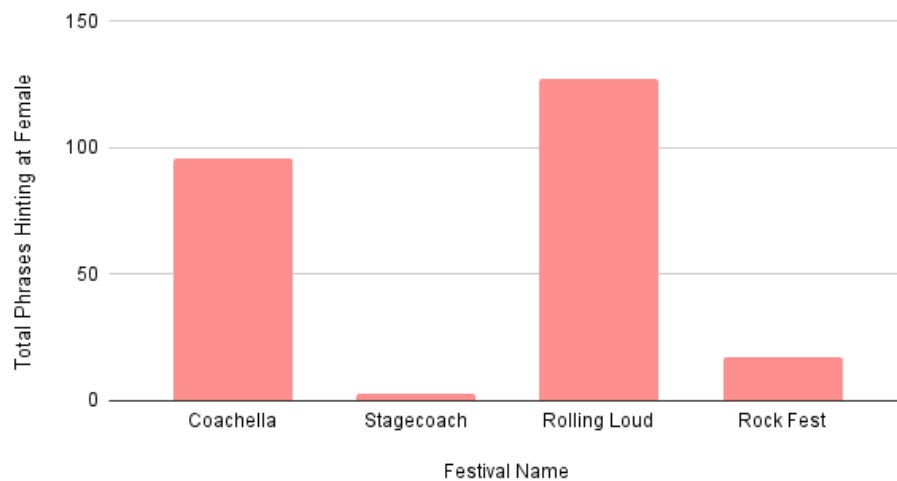


Figure 10. Composite Total of Sexualizing Lyrics from Coachella, Stagecoach, Rolling Loud, and Rock Fest

Discussion of Results

In synthesizing my research, I found that the music festival with the highest number of sexual assaults does not essentially correlate to the music festival with the most sexualizing song lyrics. Rolling Loud, despite having the highest number of sexualized lyrics, reported zero sexual assault cases. On the other hand, Stagecoach, which had the highest number of sexual assault cases, featured the lowest number of sexualizing song lyrics. However, there were instances where my hypothesis aligned with the data. Coachella, for example, had both the highest number of sexual assaults and one of the highest numbers of offensive lyrics. Similarly, Rock Fest, with the lowest number of sexual assaults,

also had one of the lowest numbers of offensive lyrics, supporting my hypothesis. As mentioned in my introduction, sexual assaults are extremely prevalent at music festivals, dating back decades. Although not all the data matched my hypothesis perfectly in my research project, it provided new insights into potential reasons for the prevalence of sexual assaults at certain music festivals. Particularly, the discrepancy in my data from Stagecoach and Rolling Loud highlights the importance of safety measures implemented at music festivals.

Ever since Rolling Loud was created in 2015, one of their core policies has been safety at their festival. To ensure a safe music festival environment, Rolling Loud uses EvenTech Systems. EvenTech provides detection of not only drugs or weapons on concertgoers, but also provides the security department with real-time video and picture logging as well as incident reporting, so attendees can feel safe at all times. Despite Rolling Loud having extremely vile language used in their songs, there have been no reported rapes or sexual assaults there since the music festival was established. Because of their safety measures, festival goers can feel safe and comfortable in their surroundings. However, Coachella and Stagecoach did not implement a safety campaign until 2019, when the Every One campaign was established which attempts to prevent sexual, physical, and verbal assault at the music festivals. Trained ambassadors were dispatched on festival grounds to offer assistance to victims of assault. While this has only recently been implemented, it is a step in the right direction towards providing females with proper physical protection at festivals. In the future, other festivals with high sexual violence rates could implement ideas such as “promoting an explicit anti-harassment policy, increasing bystander intervention, and increasing surveillance via technology,” (Heen et al., 2018) say Ms. Heen and Mr. Lieberman at the Center for Crime and Justice Policy.

In the end, my hypothesis - that the music festival with the most amount of sexual assaults would correlate with the music festival with the most sexualizing lyrics - was partially disproven. While Rolling Loud and Stagecoach disproved my hypothesis, Coachella and Rock Fest proved my hypothesis to be true.

Implications and Future Directions

This research project can help raise awareness surrounding female sexual harassment and sexualization present at music festivals and popular events around the globe. Despite Coachella's, for example, the anti-assault policy being implemented 20 years after the music festival began, assaults and harassment at Coachella have been around for decades before the Every One campaign was implemented. Sexual assaults occur around the world, each day, and with my research, I hope to bring even broader recognition to this issue and help identify possible ways to aid in the protection of women and their safety in the future. Most sexual assaults are not reported, however, this does not mean that they do not exist in society today.

To pave the way for future research, my study could allow for other environmental factors to be investigated. While my research correlated the number of female sexual assaults with the genre of music festivals, lyrics of songs are only one environmental factor that can contribute to female sexual assaults. The type of comparative correlational research I conducted could allow for other correlational studies to take place in the future, perhaps investigating the relationship between female sexual assaults and crowd size or weather conditions. The possibilities are endless.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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