Pop Music as a Reflection of Shifts in Societal Views Towards Sex

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Sociology 150: The Changing American Family
Introduction

Over the course of recent American history, there has been a significant shift in the public’s view of sex. Through the first centuries of our country, sex was viewed as a reproductive act, not to be considered pleasurable, especially by the woman. Sex was strictly prohibited outside of marriage. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1875) illustrates the stigma attached to extra-marital sex. The character of Hester Prynne immediately became an outcast from her society upon their discovery that she had had sex outside of marriage. Eventually, over time, through the early 1900’s, there was a joining of love, sex, and marriage. However, although unmarried sex has occurred throughout history, with affairs being described through the ages and prostitution being “the world’s oldest profession,” it has only been since the 1960’s that sex without love has attained a greater level of social acceptance for women.

The act of sex has become for pleasure, rather than simply a procreative activity. Many factors have contributed to this uprising of recreational sex. Factors such as a later age of first marriage, cohabitation, and the onset of the birth control pill have played crucial roles in this alteration of societal views towards sex. The freer attitude towards sex has manifested itself especially in the youth and young adult population. Many believe that the vast commercialization of sex in the last half of the 20th century has promoted this attitudinal change. As young men and women pursue higher education and careers, thus delaying marriage, they become more likely to be interested in sex outside of wedlock. Although careers, delayed marriage, and contraceptive safety from pregnancy make casual sex possible, I will argue that these changes additionally have helped to bring about a cultural change in views towards sex. Sex outside of marriage
appears to be an adaptation to the change in the life situation of men and women brought about by these changes.

One indicator of the social norms of the time is popular culture as captured in music and movies. For example, during times of war, there are surges of patriotism in both cultural mediums. By looking at titles and lyrics of the most popular songs, one can track patterns in societal mores of the time. Using the most popular music of each decade as an indicator, this paper will examine the changes in society’s attitudes towards sex and its reflections in music from the 1950s through the 1990s.

In this paper, I support the claim that a variety of factors, including careers, delayed marriage, and the prevalence of contraception, have influenced the lifestyle and choices made by women. The change in women’s behavior moved sex out of the pathway towards marriage as it became an increasingly recreational activity, thus normalizing sex before marriage. Although many politicians and social activists insist that pop culture and its messages have been the causal factors of this normalization of sex, I disagree. While I will not discuss the validity of these arguments, my paper will show that, as seen through the lyrics of popular songs, pop culture simply reflects the values and behaviors of the time period. As sex outside of wedlock became more acceptable and normalized, mentions of sexual behaviors in popular song lyrics increased, while mentions of romantic love showed a decreasing trend.

The Sexual Revolution
Andrew Cherlin’s (2002) discussion of sexuality indicates that there have been substantial increases of casual sex through time, especially among young, unmarried people. He explains that,

As the idea of sex for personal pleasure spread through the twentieth century, the rationale for restricting sex to married couples weakened. Through the 1950s, moralists were successful in limiting sexual intercourse to engaged or married persons, especially among middle-class women. But beginning in the late 1960s, sexual activity prior to marriage rose to unprecedented levels.

(Cherlin 213-214)

A large part of this shift is due to the shifts in attitudes of women. Cherlin refers to the fact that, although there is minimal data in historical records, he suggests that through the 1950s, the majority of American women only had sexual intercourse after they were engaged to be married. Women were viewed as “guardians of virtue,” in this case meaning abstinence until marriage. Through time, though, this view of women’s sexual nature as different from men’s has eroded.

Among women who entered adulthood in the 1960s, just 46 percent reported only one partner by age 30; and 18 percent reported five or more. The proportion reporting only one partner by age 30 fell further to 36 percent among women who entered adulthood in the 1970s, whereas the proportion reporting five or more rose to 22 percent.

(Cherlin 214)

The increase in sexual behavior among women outside of wedlock has been substantial and noticeable over the last 50 years.

Clearly, the power of marriage to control sex among women has deteriorated. Unmarried women of all ages, from teenagers to older women, have increasingly engaged in sex. Since the percentage of unmarried women is highest among young women, this paper will focus on them. Several factors have contributed to the weakening of marriage as a controller of sex for women. These include the delaying of the age of first marriage,
the increase in contraceptives and their availability, and in cohabitation. As the risk of pregnancy has been reduced and society’s views about sex outside of marriage have been liberalized, the unmarried have shifted from abstaining to actively engaging in sex.

The age at first marriage underwent a phenomenal increase in the last half of the twentieth century. Graph 1 shows the estimated median age of first marriage by gender from 1950 to 2000 based on figures from the Current Population Survey. These data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau’s publication of median age of first marriage from 1890 to 2000. We see that, between 1950 and 2000, the median age of first marriage for men increased by four years, and that the median age of first marriage for women increased by five years. Clearly, then, this increase in age of first marriage allows young adults to have more time as singles, and to be sexually active before marriage.

……Insert Graph 1 here……

The increase in age of first marriage may have been brought on in part by what is known as the “marriage squeeze.” Glick describes the “marriage squeeze” as “a situation created by the baby boom. Girls born during the rapid increase in the birth rate at mid-century eventually faced a shortage of men in the appropriate age range for them to marry” (Glick 865). Age of marriage has long been normatively defined for males as well as females. When the baby boom women came of age for marriage, the norm was that grooms should be two to three years older than their brides. Unfortunately for women, the shortage of eligible men placed the women in a marriage squeeze. Because there were not always enough men the preferred age for women, many would continue with their education and go on to pursue careers. Many of these baby boom women went
into the labor force and, through work, developed a work-based identity independent of marriage. These baby boom women were quite unlike the generation of women before them who had married at a younger age and whose identities were centered around marriage and the home. Thus, two effects of the baby boom were to reduce the difference between unmarried men and women while increasing the difference between married and unmarried young women.

As an adaptation to the changing life situation of young women, a whole new step in the path towards marriage was added, cohabitation. Cohabitation has become a popular alternative living arrangement to marriage. Cohabitation is defined as a situation in which two unmarried adults who have a sexual relationship live together. Glick (1988) says that,

Signs of an upcoming wave of cohabitation among unmarried couples in Northern Europe and the United States appeared during the 1960s. This was a period when established norms of various kinds, including those relating to marriage, were being questioned. The statistics on unmarried couples of opposite sex collected by the Census Bureau referred to two unrelated adults. There were 50,000 in 1950, 400,000 in 1960, 500,000 in 1970, nearly a million in 1977, and 2.2 million in 1986... By 1986, over 6% of all unmarried adults in the United States were cohabiting... Four percent of all couples (married plus unmarried) living together were not married to each other.

(Glick 866-67)

Cohabitation clearly gained prominence in the 1970s, when “unmarried, middle-class young adults began to live together openly, a previously unheard-of arrangement except among the poor. Rates of cohabitation rose so high that more than half of young adults in the 1990s are likely to live with a partner before marrying” (Cherlin 214), and, in most cases, not with the person whom one will eventually marry. Cohabitation, then, has led to the option of not marrying at an early age while still being able to live with a partner. Cohabitation, then, provides men and women with the opportunity to have a
sexual relationship outside of marriage, without the commitment of marriage.

Cohabitation has become an institution, and is much more widely accepted even now than in the 1970s or 1980s.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the differences in sex prior to marriage among adolescents and older women began to decrease. Graph 2 (Cherlin 218) shows that the percentage of adolescent girls (ages 15 to 19) that had sex dramatically increased between 1971 and 1995. These data suggest that with the lifting of the need to be married to have sex, unmarried women increasingly took sexual cues from men and began to look upon sex as recreational.

……Insert Graph 2 here ……

Various contraceptive techniques have been used since the ancient times. However, “the modern movement for birth control began in Great Britain, where the writings of Thomas Robert Malthus stirred interest in the problem of overpopulation” (Birth Control: History of the Birth Control Movement 1). Though earlier birth control clinics were founded internationally, the first U.S. birth control clinic was opened in 1916 in Brooklyn, New York by Margaret Sanger. It was closed by the police and Sanger received a 30-day jail sentence. Sanger later helped to organize the National Birth Control League in 1917, which later became the American Birth Control League, followed by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and finally, in 1961, the Planned Parenthood-World Population. “Throughout the 1940s and 50s, birth control advocates were engaged in numerous legal suits. In 1965, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the one remaining state law (in Connecticut) prohibiting the use of contraceptives” (Birth Control: History of the Birth Control Movement 1). Clearly, as birth control
became legalized, it was bound to become a more popular option. Also, its legalization shows that both the need and market for birth control methods were increasing in the society.

The birth control pill was introduced to the public in the early 1960s. Back in 1950, Sanger had combined forces with Katharine McCormick, and together they commissioned a contraceptive that could be swallowed. “Within a decade after commissioning that minute technology, it was physically produced, field-tested for effectiveness and safety, and approved by the government. Thereafter, it changed how human beings behave” (Asbell 5). One of the most important effects was to shift contraception from men to women. Prior to 1960, the most commonly used method of birth control was the condom. The condom was commercialized as a way for men to enjoy sex as a recreational activity. Those men who did have sex outside of marriage for recreational purposes used condoms as a security measure because they knew that sex was still linked to marriage for women, and they did not want a “shot gun” wedding.

Improvements in birth control technology, especially the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960, have “allowed individuals to separate sex-as-pleasure from sex-as-reproduction” (Cherlin 216). The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 followed by the legalization of abortion in 1973 helped to reduce the possible implications of sex outside of marriage. They reduce the risk of unintended pregnancies and births, two factors that previously had caused many people to abstain from sex. Because these risks were reduced, sex could be seen as a pleasurable, recreational activity, rather than as a procreative activity.
The Pill’s introduction allowed women to control contraception. At first, during the early 1960’s, women were slow to change their views about sex. However, from 1965 to 1975, there was a drastic change in the female’s orientation towards sex. In addition to their delay of marriage and increase in personal identity developed through attaining a higher education and careers, they were also part of a revolution in birth control. Prior to the Pill, only mechanical methods of birth control, such as condoms, the most commonly used method of birth control prior to 1960, or diaphragms, were used. The Pill provided a reliable chemical way of controlling conception, shifting the responsibility of birth control from males to females. Because females were in charge of their own birth control, they were more likely to have sex and to be more comfortable in having sex outside of wedlock, because the Pill significantly reduced risk of pregnancy.

These factors, then, all contributed to a sexual revolution. The Pill allowed women to have sex freely without the risk of pregnancy, not just those who were married as had been the case with the condom. Even the women who had previously been classified as “good girls” could have sex with few or no repercussions. Usage of the Pill gave women contraceptive control, and thus gave rise to a new view of women’s sexuality. Women shifted their view of sex from a procreative view to a recreative view. They, like men, could receive pleasure from sex without the fear of becoming pregnant.

An article by Margaret Drabble written in 1967 sums up these views on the sexual revolution of the 1960’s. She begins by saying:

It is no longer possible to deny that we face the certainty of a sexual revolution, and that this revolution, which much affects the institutions of marriage and parenthood, is caused largely by the development of contraceptive techniques. Until very recently the reliability of all known methods was highly questionable, and the act of sex was still an act of which the consequences could be
unimaginably significant. Some of those consequences can now be prevented with complete certainty: and the method of prevention will become increasingly widespread. It is useless to suggest that this cannot affect the morality of sexual relationships, for morality is inseparably connected with the notion of responsibility, and an act which cannot have the consequence of conception, of producing a new helpless life, cannot be irresponsible in the same sense as an act which risks such an event.

This does not imply that sexual relations that don't risk conception are unrelated to personal responsibility and morality; clearly there is still room, in the most technically sterile relationship, for treachery and loyalty, generosity and abuse. But the fear of pregnancy, which has haunted women throughout history - and pregnancy, as we forget nowadays, used to mean a very real confrontation with death - is now a dispensable fear: a woman need no longer dread pain, or years of motherhood, or even, on the crudest level, discovery, as the result of her sexual activities. Nor, on a higher level, need she fear the guilt of bringing into the world a child for which she may not be able to provide. She is free now, as never before. As Simone de Beauvoir put it - for a woman, liberty begins in the womb.

This freedom is evidently connected to that other major revolution of our society, the emancipation for women. It is the final clause in the contract, the clinching argument.

Education, freedom to work, equal pay and social equality did not mean much when they could be negated by the arrival of one small unintended baby.”

(Drabble 1-2)

Drabble feels that the onset of a chemical form of birth control used by women was the gateway to a sexual revolution. She notes that women can participate freely in a man’s world, without the risks of pregnancy that once detained her.

Over the past thirty years, the Pill has been swallowed as a daily routine by more humans than perhaps any other prescribed medication in the world. Its takers have counted in the scores of millions, and they have now downed the Pill by the hundreds of billions. Yet its eager consumers are, in general, quite well. Most take it neither to cure an illness nor to guard against one. The Pill has been called ‘the first medicine ever destined for a purely social, rather than therapeutic purpose.’

(Asbell 3)

To examine the increase in birth control usage over time, one can look at the Statistical Abstract of the United States from different years. The Statistical Abstract
only presents data collected on contraception use from certain years. The years from which the Statistical Abstract presents data are 1965, 1970, 1973, 1976, 1982, 1990, and 1995. The analyses of these data are difficult, because different years use different measures, collected in a different manner. Some years did not combine races, whereas others did. The first three years only examined married women, whereas later years examined both married and unmarried women.

In order to examine trends, I chose to break the data into two different time groups: 1965 to 1973 and 1982 to 1995. As already noted, prior to 1973 only married women’s usage of contraceptives was examined, whereas, beginning in 1982, the researchers collected data from both married and unmarried women. This change in the population surveyed causes inconsistencies within the data sets, in that married women are likely to differ from the unmarried women. Thus, I have examined the two groupings separately, allowing me to observe trends within each time period. In order to reflect the youth and young adult culture that would be most affected by the marriage squeeze, cohabitation, and single hood, I focused on the data and trends of women between the ages of 15 and 24, also in part because of the available data noted above.

The first trend I looked at was in the percent of married women (ages 15-24) using any type of contraception during the first time series. As seen in Graph 3 (Percentage of Married Women Age15-24 Using Contraception), there was a definite increase in both the white and black group of married women in percentage using contraception between 1965 and 1973. Later, too, in the 1982-1995 range, we see this trend of percentage using contraception continuing to increase among all never married
women. (See Graph 4, Percentage of Never Married Women, Age15-44 Using Contraception).

......Insert Graph 3 and Graph 4 here......

The second trend that I examined was the percentage of married women between the ages of 15 and 24 using the Pill as their contraceptive between 1965 and 1973 (See Graph 5, Percentage of Married Women (15-24) using The Pill as contraception). Clearly, in this age group, the usage of The Pill peaked in 1970. By examining both the history of the pill, as well as the raw data on the increase in usage of the Pill during this time, suggests the hypothesis that the increase in sex may be attributed to the creation and usage of the Pill. Clearly, these young women, albeit married, are showing an increase in the usage of the Pill. Within their marriages, the data suggests that women, using controlled contraceptives, were experimenting more with their sexuality and with the physical pleasures of sex, without the risk of pregnancy.

......Insert Graph 5 here......

However, Graph 6, Percentage of Women Age15-24 Using the Pill as Contraception between 1982 and 1995 indicates that Pill usage for all women essentially leveled off through the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, as we have seen in Graph 4 on the percentage of never married women using contraception, use of birth control measures continued to rise from 1982 to 1995. Since usage of the Pill leveled off, surely another type of contraceptive has taken its place to raise the level of usage that Graph 3 above shows.

......Insert Graph 6 here......
In order to examine what birth control measure took the place of the Pill, I looked at percentages of women who used condoms as their contraceptive method. I first examined women between 15 and 24 using condoms in the 1982-1995 time frame. These data are shown in Graph 7, Percentage of Women Age 15-24 Using Condom as Contraception. The graph shows that, among young people, there was a definite increase in the amount of condom usage. The increase prior to 1990 may be attributed to the increase of casual sex between males and females, but after 1990, the fear of AIDS also reached the heterosexual population, and this fear is likely to have sustained the earlier role of condom use. Graph 8, Percent of Women Age 15-44 Using Condom as Contraception, shows the percent of all women studied using condoms as contraception between 1982 and 1995, as does Graph 9, Percent Never Married Age 15-44 Using Condom as contraception. Together, these data clearly show the substantial increase in condom usage among the female population between 1982 and 1995.

......Insert Graph 7, Graph 8, and Graph 9 here......

We see, then that condom usage increases in the 1982-1995 time frame, while usage of the Pill stabilized. Through the first two decades of the Pill’s existence, usage of the Pill consistently increased. Using the Pill, then, appears to be the trigger for the increase of sex in general during the 1960s and 70s. However, as time passed, with the onset of the 1980s, even more casual sex became prevalent, and did so at a time that the AIDS epidemic emerged. This coincidence, then, led to the increased usage of condoms. Of all of the birth control measures, condoms require the least amount of future planning and preparation. It does not require a prescription like birth control pills, and does not require any type of fitting like a diaphragm. The Pill requires steady usage and a decision
ahead of time, whereas a male’s use of a condom can allow the couple to have sex on the spur of the moment, and to do so without fear of AIDS or other STDs.

Clearly, usage of contraceptives is an indicator of sexual activity. The data presented above show that, no matter what the method of contraception, usage has indeed increased over time, and especially among young people. My data supports Cherlin’s observation that, “the greatest increase in adolescent sexual activity occurred in the 1970s and 1980s” (Cherlin 219). Cherlin asserts that the amount of adolescent sexual activity decreased during the 1990s, partially due to AIDS education (Cherlin 219). Inversely, adolescent contraceptive use increased through the 1990s, as shown in Graph 10, based on data collected from the National Center for Health Statistics Family Planning Objectives.

We see then, that there has been a vast increase of sexual activity among young people since the 1950s. The change in attitudes towards sex that have lead to this increase can be attributed to many factors such as increase in marriage age, increase in cohabitation, more teens being sexually active, and increased use of birth control by women. All of these factors are interrelated, and are crucial in examining the shifts in attitudes towards casual sex.

From Marriage to Pleasure: Cultural Adaptation to the Sexual Revolution

We have seen that sexual activity has greatly increased youths and young adults over the second half of the twentieth century. There has been a clear emergence of a
definition of sex as a physical act as pleasurable, completely separated from love, intimacy, and marriage. Along with the increase in sexual activity, there was a substantial increase in the commercialization of sex through the last fifty years. As sex became more commercialized, its market increased and women began to focus on the quality of “sex appeal” to attract and even seduce men. These changes in attitudes towards sex, as well as in the commercialization of sex, are reflected in youth and young adult culture, as seen through movies, television, magazines, and music. Thus, one medium for looking at youth and young adult culture is through its songs. Song hits enable one to codify themes of youth culture.

Because song hits are a way to examine youth culture, the lyrics of these songs are likely to be indicators of societal views during a given time period. In order to get a sample of representative popular hits from each decade since the 1950s, I examined the 15 most popular songs in America for each decade based on the *Billboard* Top 40 rankings. In order to determine the top 15 songs of each decade, I used Joel Whitburn’s *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits.*\(^\text{1}\) The book not only lists all of the number one songs for every year since 1955, but it also lists the top 25 singles of each decade. Top singles are chosen based on the number of weeks they hold the number one spot in *Billboard’s* weekly ratings. The greater the number of weeks that the song holds the number one

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\(^\text{1}\) The first issue of *Billboard* came out in January of 1955, using four different charts to report the top Pop singles. Beginning in 1958, *Billboard* began to feature the Hot 100 Chart. “It was *Billboard’s* first chart to fully integrate the hottest-selling and most-played Pop singles. Ever since, the Hot 100 has stood the test of time as the premiere monitor of the most popular songs in America each week” (Whitburn, 12). During the first four decades of the Hot 100 list, “an essential qualification for a song’s placement on the chart was its commercial availability in America as a single. The record industry’s practice of releasing singles commercially declined in the 1990s. More and more radio hits were ineligible to chart on the Hot 100 since they were never released as singles” (Whitburn, 12). Because of this, other charts became important in the weekly rankings of songs, and in 1998, *Billboard* debuted a “completely revised Hot 100 that included, for the first time, songs that were not commercially available in America as singles” (Whitburn, 13).
spot, the higher it ranks on the list of top songs for the decade. The weekly number one status is determined by a combination of factors of the most radio-play and the most-sold in that given week, based on reports of the best-selling records from record stores, as well as data of the most-played songs on radio station play lists. These songs represent the biggest-selling and most-played hits on pop radio from each decade.

I chose to draw my sample from the Top 40 hits because the audience of this type of music is generally youth or young adults. One study shows that Top 40 radio stations have mass appeal, but that the core listeners fall into the 12 to 34 age range (Taylor 2). Another article cites estimates that mainstream Top 40 radio stations reach approximately 50 million listeners a year (Graybow 1). An AccuRatings National Format Trends study showed that Top 40 music was the number one choice of teens and 18-24 year olds. This AccuRatings data are based on interviews with 39,980 radio listeners in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Detroit, Dallas, and Boston (Stark 1).²

To trace the impact of the increase of sex among youth and young adults on cultural views of sex, especially those who are unmarried, I will examine changes between 1955 and 1999 in the lyrics of the top 15 songs of each decade. I started by content analyzing the lyrics of each of the 15 songs in each decade. I classified each song’s lyrics by counting a pre-determined set of themes. The themes were as follows: direct mentions of love, references to “true love,” love at first sight, other references to love, faithfulness, future together with a loved one, marriage (as a celebration of love), desire to share company with a loved one, willingness to make sacrifices/ make the other

² Additionally, Boehlert explains that many radio stations choose to play Top 40, because the audience of young listeners represent an advertising friendly demographic (Boehlert 2). Clearly, then, if advertisers are targeting the same young audience as listens to the Top 40, these advertisements are likely to manifest the prominent commercialization of sex as is commonly seen in youth culture.
person happy, mention of person that is on the singer’s mind because of love, mention of 
broken-heartedness/ loss of love, mentions of innocent physical touching or innocent 
physical description, mention of desire for physical proximity to subject, mention of lust 
or seduction, direct mention of sexual stimuli (anything considered erotic or a “turn on”), 
reference to sex or sexual behaviors but with loved one, reference to sex or sexual 
behaviors with random person, and repercussions of sex. After categorizing each song, I 
counted the number of songs in each decade fitting each criterion. By looking at the 
trends in number of songs fitting a theme, one can see many of the same patterns we have 
seen emerging through my examination in terms of the increase of sexual behaviors of 
the unmarried and the increase in cohabitation.

What has happened to the theme of love in song lyrics is shown in Graph 11. One 
can see that specific direct mentions of love stayed relatively constant over time.
Through all five decades, singers profess their love through their song lyrics. An 
example from the 1950’s is “Don’t Be Cruel,” by Elvis Presley, in which he says, “I 
really love you baby, cross my heart.” Again, in the 1960’s, the Monkees’ song “I’m A 
Believer” says that the singer has “Not a trace / of doubt in my mind / I’m in love / I’m a 
believer, I couldn’t leave her if I tried.”

……Insert Graph 11 here……

Messages in song lyrics about love were less consistent in the 1970s than in the 
1950s and 1960s. For example, Debby Boone’s 1977 hit, “You Light Up My Life,” 
explains that “You light up my life / you give me hope to carry on / you light up my days 
and fill my nights with song / rollin’ at sea, adrift on the water / could it be finally I’m 
turnin’ for home? / Finally a chance to say ‘Hey, I love you’ / Never again to be all
alone.” Yet, in 1976, “Silly Love Songs,” by Wings that made the top of the chart has a contrary view of love. It begins by saying, “You’d think that people would have had enough of silly love songs / I look around me and I see it isn’t so / Some people wanna fill the world with silly love songs / And what’s wrong with that? / I’d like to know / ‘Cause here I go again / I love you, I love you / I love you, I love you.” Obviously, this song is a proclamation of love. The singer wishes to know why the concept of love in songs is no longer prevalent, and disagrees with the assumed disappearance. This song is rather prophetic, for, beginning in the 1970s, songs with mentions of true love and love at first sight initially decrease, and then completely drop out of song lyrics. Beginning in the 1970s, there were zero mentions of true love, and beginning in the 1980s there were zero mentions of love at first sight. This disappearance of mentions of love, especially as a director of heterosexual relations, makes it evident that views of love as a pathway leading to marriage had changed.

The 1990s introduced a new perspective on love that replaced its earlier relationship to marriage. Promises now made in love songs lost their romantic features. No longer were the singers focusing on true love or love at first sight, instead they were more about the things that the couple can give each other and a willingness to build a lasting relationship. This change is seen in All-4-One’s song “I Swear,” in which the chorus laments: “I swear by the moon and the stars in the sky / I’ll be there / I swear like a shadow that’s by your side / I’ll be there / For better or worse, till death do us part / I’ll love you with every beat of my heart / and I swear.” Later in the song, the singer states, “I’ll give you every thing I can / I’ll build your dreams with these two hands / We’ll hang
some memories on the walls.” These lyrics clearly show the change in attitudes towards love among young people in the 1990s.

Thus, even though there have continued to be declarations of love, the references and meaning of love changed from the 1950s through the 1990. Along with this change in the mention and views of love, many of the songs that became popular focused more on themes of sex and lust as sheer individual pleasure, as we will see in later charts. Considering these trends together, the data will show that through time, songs increasingly combine themes of love and sex. Instead, the data to be presented below will reflect this uncoupling of sex from love and marriage, and the emergence of a “new” female perspective on sex as pleasure

……Insert Graph 12 here……

Graph 12 shows the number of songs with reference to marriage. One can see that mention of marriage decreases through time. Although the reference to marriage decreases, descriptions of intimate, loving, sexual relations continue, suggesting that marriage is no longer thought to be essential to experience this kind of intimacy. It is important to note, however, that the mention of marriage in song lyrics across all decades is relatively low. This lesser attention to marriage suggests that marriage as a sentiment may not have been as prevalent in popular culture in the last half of the twentieth century as other features of heterosexual relations. Yet, all mentions of marriage for all time periods, the 1950s was certainly the decade in which marriage was most prevalent in popular songs. Elvis Presley’s “Don’t Be Cruel” suggests that “Let’s walk up to the preacher / And let us say I do,” and Perez “Prez” Prado’s “Cherry Pink and Apple
Blossom White tells the story of two young lovers who meet under a cherry tree next to an apple tree, saying “And there that boy once met his bride to be.”

Beginning with the 1960s, there is a shift in the portrayal of marriage. Songs mention being married or other factors involving weddings, but not specifically marriage as a new status. In Jimmy Gilmer and The Fireballs’ “Sugar Shack,” a young man has a physical desire for a girl who works at the sugar shack. At the end of the song, he says that, “Now that sugar shack queen is a’married to me.” Again, in the 1970s, the only song with a mention of marriage is “Alone Again (Naturally),” by Gilbert O’Sullivan. This song doesn’t describe marriage from a view of a desire to marry because of love. Rather, it is the occasion of being stood up on the singer’s wedding day, a day of disappointment. In the 1980s, there is no mention whatsoever of marriage in any of the song lyrics. Finally, in the 1990s, there is no direct mention of marriage, but “I Swear,” by All-4-One, as quoted above, uses words that are often used in the ceremony of matrimony (“for better or worse, till death do us part”). By using this phrase, the lyrics connote the commitment of marriage more than a status of being married. However, there is also a distinct possibility that there is not a marriage in the future of this young couple, and that they are just committing to love and to support each other. This kind of commitment could be the case in a situation of cohabitation.

......Insert Graph 13 here......

The desire for companionship as an emotional relationship, without regard to marriage begins to appear in the lyrics in the 1960s, and continues in the 1970s. Graph 13 shows the number of songs with mentions of a desire to share company with a loved one. Desire to share company was defined as a desire to share emotionally in the life of
another individual. Through time, there was a definite increase in songs reflecting the desire to share company with a loved one. One possibility for this is that, with the increase in time spent as a single individual, people’s expectations of relationships have risen. Both men and women have grown to seek more psychological satisfaction, desiring a close, intimate emotional relationship with their significant others. Beginning with the 1950s, songs such as Elvis Presley’s “Teddy Bear” make requests such as “Baby let me be your lovin’ Teddy Bear / Put a chain around my neck and lead me anywhere / Oh let me be (oh let him be) / Your teddy bear.” Obviously, the singer wants to spend time with his loved one, but he is not as focused on the emotional connection between them as singers in decades to come.

The theme of companionship is more explicit in song lyrics of the 1960s and 1970s. The Theme from “A Summer Place,” a 1960s hit by Percy Faith talks about two individuals who enjoy sharing in each other’s company. Lyrics include, “And the sweet secret of / A summer place / Is that it’s anywhere / When two people share / All their hopes / All their dreams / All their love.” The lyrics of “I’ll Be There,” by the Jackson Five, a 1970s hit, exemplify this desire for emotional support and comfort. “Let me fill your heart with joy and laughter / Togetherness, well that’s all I’m after / Whenever you need me, I’ll be there (I’ll be there) / I’ll be there to protect you (yeah, baby) with an unselfish love I respect you / Just call my name and I’ll be there (I’ll be there).” Clearly, the singer’s goal is to make the subject of the song happy. He has an obvious love and respect for her, and wants to provide her with comfort and his support.

Companionship and sharing, as a theme, picks up in the 1980s, increasing in number of mentions over the 1970s, but not quite reaching the level of mentions as in the
1960s, but the connotation of the theme differed from that of the 1960s. In the 1960s companionship was linked to enduring relationships (e.g., marriage) but by the 1980s sharing was less socially embedded such as in marriage and more personal. This new connotation is evident in hits such as “Endless Love” by Diana Ross and Lionel Richie. They say, “I want to share / All my love with you / No one else will do.” This pair clearly wants to share in each other’s company, giving each other emotional support and love.

The theme of companionship and sharing reaches its highest level in the 1990s. It adds an increased emphasis on the personal, psychological meaning of being attached to another as if it is an anchor of one’s identity. The emphasis on strong psychological attachment is depicted in the lyrics of “One Sweet Day,” by Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men demonstrates the feelings of loss after the death of a loved one. “Darling, I never showed you / Assumed you’d always be there / I took your presence for granted / But I always cared / And I miss the love we shared,” and then later in song “And I know eventually we’ll be together / One sweet day.” The singer’s sense of loss over a close, personal and emotional relationship is evident. The relationship provided emotional gratification and security. By showing the assumption that the partner would always be there, we see the desire in couples for a long-lasting commitment. This, then, shows that, among people who are cohabiting (or even those who are married), emotional commitment has become a very important part of the relationship by the 1990s.

In my discussion of the sexual revolution, I have argued that women began to view sex as a recreational activity as cohabitation and prevalence of sex increased.
Graph 14, the Number of Songs with Mentions of Physical Aspects of Desire (in terms of desire of physical proximity and lust/ seduction) and Graph 15, the Number of Songs with Mentions of Sexual Stimuli or Behaviors with Random People give data in support of my hypothesis. We see that in the 1950s, there were no songs in the top 15 with any mention of lust or seduction. Songs about physical proximity only had very innocent references to physical proximity, such as in “Don’t Be Cruel,” when he expresses his desire for her physical proximity by saying, “If you can’t come around / At least please telephone.”

…….Insert Graph 14 and Graph 15 here……

During the 1960s, “It’s Now or Never” illustrates the beginning of the shift from love as the cultural theme to physical needs. Elvis Presley still mentions love in his song, but says that his physical desires can’t wait, singing, “It’s now or never / Come hold me tight / Kiss me my darling / Be mine tonight / Tomorrow will be too late / It’s now or never / My love won’t wait.” In the 1960s, as well, we see the emergence of lust in songs such as Sugar Shack. The singer says, “There’s this cute little girlie, she’s a’workin’ there / A black leotard and her feet are bare / I’m gonna drink a lotta coffee, spend a little cash / Make that girl love me when I put on some trash.” However, although he is lusting after the “cute little girlie,” it is an innocent lust, with no outright sexual intentions (at least until after they have married later in the song).

In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when there were no mentions of either sexual stimuli or of sex or sexual behaviors with a random person, attention to sexuality increased in the next three decades. All of the measures in Graph 15 show a marked increase through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Interestingly, reference to sex or sexual
behaviors, however, was consistently higher than reference to sexual stimuli. Clearly, views toward sex were changing.

By the 1970s when the baby boom women came of age, the sexual revolution moved into full swing, allowing people to think more freely about their sexuality and their sexual needs and desires. The 1970s show a huge increase of the mention of desire of physical proximity, lust, and casual sex (see Graphs 14 and 15). Rod Stewart’s “Tonight’s the Night” is very illustrative of the increase of lust and sexual activity. Although Rod Stewart’s “Tonight’s the Night” is, indeed, not about a random sex partner, its suggestive lyrics are indicative of many of the characteristics of the onset of the sexual revolution and increase of sex during the 1970s. He says, “Kick off your shoes, and sit right down, / Loosen up that pretty French gown / Let me pour ya a good long drink / Ooh, baby don’t you hesitate, ‘cause / Tonight’s the night / It’s gonna be alright / ‘cause I love you girl / Ain’t nobody gonna stop us now. / C’mon my angel, my heart’s on fire / Don’t deny your man’s desire / You’d be a fool to stop this tide / Spread your wings and let me come inside.” This song clearly makes references to sexual stimuli, as well as very blatant references to the act of intercourse. Although the singer mentions his love for the girl, the actions and thoughts described in the song can only be described as lust for her and his desire for physical gratification and pleasure. Because of his mentions of love for this girl, however, this song was not included in the random partner graph.

Additionally, in the 1970’s, The Knack’s song “My Sharona” expresses a man’s distinct lust for a younger girl. He says, “Never gonna stop, give it up, such a dirty mind / I always get it up for the touch of the younger kind.” The man willingly admits that he gets an erection when thinking about younger women, specifically Sharona.
Each measure of recreational views towards sex peaked in the 1980s, the decade in which casual sex was the most common, consistent with the increased condom usage among women (as shown above). The decade of the 1980s was prior to the widespread fear of AIDS among heterosexual populations. Women came of age sexually. We see some of the most blatant sexual references during this time period sung by women. For example, Olivia Newton John’s “Physical” has extremely sexually suggestive lyrics as well as mentions of sexual stimuli. She says, “I’m saying all the things that I know you’ll like, makin’ good conversation / I gotta handle you just right, you know what I mean / I took you to an intimate restaurant, then to a suggestive movie / There’s nothin’ left to talk about, unless it’s horizontally / Let’s get physical, physical, I want get physical, let’s get into physical / Let me hear your body talk, your body talk, let me hear your body talk.” It is of particular note that the singer is a woman, showing that in the 1980s, women, too, desired casual sex. She doesn’t even want to bother having a relationship with love. To her, the personal gratification is just about the sex that she will have with this man. As previously discussed, she is lustful, and thus highly available for sex.

Again, in “I Love Rock ‘N’ Roll,” by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, we see a woman’s lust causing her desire for casual sex. She sings, “He smiled, so I got up and asked for his name / ‘That doesn’t matter,’ he said, ‘cause it’s all the same.’ / I said, ‘Can I take you home where we can be alone?’ / And next we were moving on / And he was with me, yeah me.” In this case, the man’s name does not even matter. The only important consideration in choosing her sexual partner is physical attraction. She does not care about any kind of mental connection with this man with whom she is about to
have casual sex. Male singers are equally lustful in song in the 1980s. For example, “Centerfold,” by The J. Geils Band demonstrates considerable lust. After discovering that a girl he once knew poses as the centerfold in a pornographic magazine, the singer states, “I’ll see you when your clothes are on / Take your car, Yes we will / We’ll take your car and drive it / We’ll take it to a motel room / and take ‘em off in private.” He is lusting after this girl he knows, desiring to physically have sex with her.

In the 1990s, there was a slight decrease in the mention of lust and desire of physical proximity, but the number of songs with these physical desire mentions was still significantly higher than in the 1950s and 1960s. One song that discusses seduction is “Macarena (bayside boys mix)” by Los Del Rio. The first line of the song is, “I am not trying to seduce you,” but then, later, when singing about the boys dancing with her, the singer, a female, says, “they all want me / they can’t have me / so they all come and dance along with me / Move with me / Chant with me / and if you’re good I’ll take you home with me.” Again, we see lust eventuating in sex. Although sex is not directly mentioned in the song, it is implied by the notion of the singer taking someone home with her. Another song during the 1990s that illustrates themes of lust is “Dreamlover,” by Mariah Carey. She says, “Dreamlover come rescue me / Take me up take me down / Take me anywhere you want to baby now / I need you so desperately.” The phrase “take me” implies her lust and desire for this “dreamlover” to have sex with her. Again, she mentions physical proximity when saying she desires, “Someone to comfort and hold me / through the long lonely nights / till the dawn.” This physical proximity, too, is related to sex. In general, many of the themes of lust, seduction, and physical proximity often are directed toward the mention or desire of sex in these songs.
In the 1990s, we see the first blatant reference to sex in a song title. Boyz II Men’s “I’ll Make Love to you” discusses the many sexual stimuli that the singer will use to please his woman. The themes of this song revolve around physically pleasing this woman, both through sexually suggestive stimuli, as well as through the act of sexual intercourse. He says, “Close your eyes, make a wish / And blow out the candlelight / For tonight is just your night / We’re gonna celebrate all through the night / Pour the wine, light the fire / Girl your wish is my command / I submit to your demands / I’ll do anything, girl you need only ask / I’ll make love to you / Like you want me to / And I’ll hold you tight / Baby all through the night / I’ll make love to you / When you want me to / And I will not let go / Till you tell me to.” Later in the song, the singer refers to the sex and physical pleasure that he is going to give to the woman as “the love of your life.”

Clearly, this song indicates that there has been a significant shift in views of the relation of love and sex over time. During the 1950s, “the love of your life” would have undoubtedly been a loving, companionate partner, not an act of physical gratification. The lyrics of this song truly shows the separation of love and sex over time.

Another song during the 1990s, Janet Jackson’s “That’s The Way Love Goes”, also shows this separation between love and sex. Although there is love mentioned in the title and in the lyrics of the song, the song, in reality, is about sex. The singer asserts that “I’m gonna make you crazy / I’ll give you the time of your life / I’m gonna take you places / You’ve never been before and / You’ll be happy that you came,” and then later she concludes by saying, “Don’t mind if I light candles / I like to watch us play and / Baby I’ve got on what you like / Come closer baby closer / Reach out and feel my body / I’m gonna give you all my love / Oh sugar, don’t you hurry / You’ve got me here all
night / Just close your eyes and hold on tight / Oh baby, don’t stop, don’t stop / Go
deeper baby deeper / You feel so good I’m gonna cry / Oh, I’m gonna take you there /
That’s the way love goes.” Obviously, this song is about physical pleasure and the
physical gratification of sex. At the conclusion of the song, she wants to bring her
partner to an orgasm, the pinnacle of pleasurable sensations. Despite the fact that this
song uses the word love in its title and lyrics, it is wholly about physical gratification and
lust, and not about love.

In summary, my examination of lyrics in popular songs shows sharp changes in
the messages about love, marriage, and sex. In the 1950s, love and marriage were the
topics of popular songs as if heralding the culturally defined pathway to the status of
marriage. The 1960s continued the theme of love and marriage featured in the 1950s, but
shifted the emphasis on marriage to companionship, a feature not mentioned in the 1950s.
Unlike love, which is an individual state, companionship pertains to a relationship
between a woman and a man. In adding the theme of companionship, the 1960s songs
may well have normalized the companionate marriage, which, according to Cherlin
(2002), had its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s.

The 1970s was a revolutionary decade for marriage and the culture of courtship.
While sexuality, lust, and casual sex were not mentioned in the lyrics of the preceding
two decades, the 1970s brought them into popular songs. The data suggests that these
topics had displaced marriage, and, to a lesser extent, love in the youth culture. As the
baby boom generation came of age in the 1970s, women’s lives changed. They delayed
marriage as a result of “the marriage squeeze” and entered adulthood via careers rather
than marriage, as in the 1950s. The pathway to marriage was changing, and popular
songs featured the change. From the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century, popular
songs changed to emphasize topics that were taboo a decade earlier—lust, physical
proximity, other sexual stimuli, and even sex with random persons. These new features,
especially sex with random persons, depicts the separation of sex from love and marriage,
resulting in the liberalizing of sex as a recreational pursuit for women, as it had long been
for men. Women, as well as men, sang about sexual desire. In the last three decades of
the twentieth century, cultural norms, as indicated by popular song lyrics, show that
women had become increasingly like men in their sexual behavior. Love, as well as
companionship, continued to be mentioned in the popular songs throughout the century,
but they were not attached to marriage as they had been earlier. Rather, they were sung
about as qualities one might expect to find in sexual relationships, such as cohabitation or
even affairs.

Conclusion

My argument in this paper is that the relation of sex to love and marriage changed
in response to the change in the lives of never-married women. These transformations
brought about a sex revolution that, as it gained legitimacy, was institutionalized as a new
culture of mating. My examination of the trends in song lyrics appears to affirm my
hypothesis. The 1970s seem to have been the pivotal decade in initiating a new culture of
mating, centered mainly around sex. The following two decades gained acceptance of
the new sexual view. Women enjoyed sex, and often wanted only sex, not marriage. To
examine the concurrence of the change in women’s lives to the change in the song lyrics,
I have overlaid Graph 1, the Median Age of First Marriage of Men and Women, onto my graphs of the mentions of marriage, love, companionship, physical desire, and sex with random people in song lyrics.

……Insert Graph 16 and Graph 17 here……

The traditional pathway of love to marriage and marriage to sex is signified in lyrics mentioning love in popular songs, and in the direct mention of marriage. Love was mentioned in lyrics through all periods, with songs in the 1990s including the same level of mention as in the 1950s. However, the type love in the songs was not the same. In the 1950s and 1960s, true love and love at first sight characterized love. Graph 16 shows that in the 1970s, when references to true love disappeared, and love at first sight fell from its high of the 1960s, the age of first marriage began to rise for many men and women. This increase in age of first marriage shows the change that was taking place in women’s lives. The song lyrics of the 1970s show that mating began to be adapted to the changes by recognizing women’s physical desire, even to the extent of sex with random persons.

Companionship, which was the most sung about feature of mating in the 1960s, continued in the 1970s, and even increased in the 1990s to its highest level of any decade. The companionship sung about in the 1970s through 1990s, however, was not the same as in the 1960s. The 1970s individualized the emotion of companionship to make it a desire that an individual woman or man wanted, whereas the earlier companionship was expected from a relationship. Thus, companionship had been detached from its traditional pathway of love to marriage and then to sex. Now, companionship was
expected of a sexual relationship, in contrast to a marital relationship. This new view of companionship, which declined in popular songs from the 1960s to the 1970s, increased again in the 1980s, and grew to its highest level in the 1990s. This growth pattern appears to reflect the growing acceptance of cohabitation. Cohabiting couples expect more than sex. They expect personal gratification from sharing one’s company.

……Insert Graph 18, Graph 19, and Graph 20 here……

The new recreational view of sex and its relation to the changes in women’s lives as brought about by the sexual revolution is evident in lyrics featuring physical desire and sex with a random person. Graph 19 and Graph 20 relate the changing life situation of women to their sexuality. They clearly show that, as the median age of first marriage began to increase in the 1970s, and accelerated in the 1980s, the new sexual view was in full swing. Female singers were proclaiming their sexual desires in popular songs. Note that this is the time when the increase in age of first marriage among the never married sharply increased. The mentions of sexual desire dropped a bit in the 1990s, but not to the extent to endanger the sexual expectation. What we see is that, with the increasing age of first marriage, sexuality had been detached from marriage. The 1980s attached sex to the expectation of companionship (see Graph 18), and the expectation became a part of the new sexuality. I believe that this concern for companionship is mainly a cultural adaptation to cohabitation. Thus, in conclusion, I do not think that popular songs have corrupted our young people nearly so much as the songs have merely reflected the changes in their lifestyles.
Works Cited and Works Used


U.S. Census Bureau. [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html#history](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html#history). Marital Status Table 2.


Graph 1. Estimated Median Age of First Marriage by Sex.

*From Cherlin, p.218
Graph 3. Percentage of Married Women (15-24) using Contraception.
Graph 4. Percentage of Never Married Women (15-44) Using Contraception.
Graph 5. Percentage of Married Women (15-24) using the Pill as contraception.
Graph 6. Percentage of Women (15-24) using the Pill as Contraception.
Graph 7. Percent of Women (15-24) using condom as contraception.
Graph 8. Percent of Women (15-44) using condom as contraceptive.
Graph 9. Percent Never Married (15-44) using condom as contraception.
Graph 10. Percent of Females who used contraception in recent intercourse (In School, 15-17 years).
Graph 11. Number of Songs with Specific Themes of Love in Song Lyrics.

- Direct Mentions of Love
- References to "true love"
- Mentions of love at first sight
Graph 12. Number of Songs with Reference to Marriage.

Decade


Number of Songs
**Graph 13.** Number of Songs with Mentions of Desire to Share Company with Loved One.
Graph 14. Number of Songs with Mentions of Aspects of Physical Desire.

- **Mention of desire of physical proximity**
- **Mention of lust or seduction**

Decade
- 1955-1959
- 1960-1969
- 1970-1979
- 1980-1989
- 1990-1999

Number of Songs with Mentions
Graph 15. Number of Songs with Mentions of Sexual Stimuli or Behaviors with Random People.
Graph 16. Estimated Median Age of First Marriage and Mentions of Love in Songs.
Graph 17. Estimated Median Age of First Marriage and Number of Songs with Reference to Marriage.
Graph 18. Estimated Median Age of First Marriage and Number of Songs with Mentions of Desire to Share Company with Loved One.

Decade

Mentions of Desire to Share Company with Loved One

Men

Women
Graph 19. Estimated Median Age of First Marriage and Number of Songs with Mentions of Aspects of Physical Desire

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- Blue line: Mention of desire of physical proximity
- Pink line: Mention of lust or seduction
- Blue bar: Men
- Pink bar: Women
Graph 20. Number of Songs with Mentions of Sexual Stimuli or Behaviors with Random People.

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Direct mention of sexual stimuli
Reference to sex or sexual behaviors with random person
Men
Women