

The Legend Lives On from The Chippewa: The Effect of Popular Music on Knowledge of Historical Events

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Abstract

This paper uses Google Trends data to examine the link between music and cultural memory of historical events by cross referencing search patterns for the songs to search patterns for the historical event. This paper presents several factors that could contribute to a song being more or less effective at disseminating a historical message effectively and explores a more general audience than previous research in similar fields.

Introduction

In June of 1970, David Crosby, Stephen Stills, Graham Nash and Neil Young released a live recording of their song "Ohio". The song was in reaction to, and in protest of, the National Guard shootings at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio on May fourth of the same year. The massacre that day left four students dead and many more injured after the Ohio National Guard had been called to assist Kent State Police handle a largely peaceful protest movement consisting of students enrolled at Kent State University after an unknown actor burned down an ROTC building on campus. The song was an immediate success, finding striking popularity in the countercultural movements during the 1960s. In more recent years, the song is still extraordinarily popular, being named the 395th greatest song of all time by Rolling Stone Magazine in 2010. With the song being inextricably linked to the events of May fourth, 1970, it is no surprise that many listeners associate the two ideas as one. It is important to understand how frequent this manner of connection is between a song's audience and their perceived connection of the song to the historical event that inspired the song itself in order to understand how music influences cultural memory and understanding.

The aim of this research is to examine the thread that becomes apparent when music and sociology intertwine. When music is an overwhelmingly popular medium of culture and expression that is consumed in every culture and nation in the world, the understanding of the effects of music on the listener can have far reaching implications in understanding how information is obtained, processed, and stored in mental pathways. In an ever more digital age, it is also important to understand how the use of digital focused tools may provide a more complete understanding of wide scale social phenomena. This research will address both of these matters and ultimately will hope to identify what exactly the link is between music audience and awareness of a historical event referenced in the music.

The use of music as cultural expression has existed since the dawn of man. Music has evolved over time with the rest of our culture as a human race. As social dynamics became more complex, and communication became easier to disseminate, song became a popular way to create and spread a cultural message. Because music is a popular form of self expression, it is also inherently reactive and tied to current events in the culture that it is being produced in. When a major event causes a reaction in the music writer, their music will reflect that reaction in some way, whether explicit or not. For example, *My Chemical Romance* singer Gerard Way was

inspired to create the band after witnessing the September Eleventh Attacks against the World Trade Center buildings. In the wake of the same tragedy, rock artist Bruce Springsteen wrote his album *The Rising* as a way to attempt to heal the broken nation. While it is clear that the major cultural events have an impact on the artist, it remains less clear if the impact is as concrete on the listener. In order to understand these patterns, it is also necessary to understand the existing body of literature around the cultural effect of songs and music as a whole.

Starting with music as a force for cultural and political change. Previous research has examined the use of music in movements like the Civil Rights movement, a white power movement and corresponding counter movements in Sweden, and Chinese cultural politics like the Reform Era and the protests in response to Covid policies. (Chen, 2023; Eyeran, 2002; Sakakeeny 2024). These studies have all emphasized the ability for popular culture, and more specifically music to spread across a wide range of demographics. With this in mind, the effects of the media as a disseminator of political information can be seen as proof of the idea that music functions in such a capacity so as to unite many different peoples under one message.

Music is not just a method of diffusion, but also cohesion and legacy, in this capacity music also functions as has been further studied by several researchers, for example Michael Longrie suggests that literature is a “sister narrative” to that of American history (1997). From film to books to drama and even music, the cultural ripples of literature and fiction develop the fabric of contemporary society, as well as how we remember it. Furthermore, a litany of studies have suggested that music is a strong force in determining cultural memory, and in evoking a preferred response in the listener, such as imagery or emotional appeals to action (Bennet and Janssen, 2015; Spivack et al., 2019; Buzarovski, n.d.; Rehfeldt et al., 2021) Additionally several studies demonstrate that music can be used to pass on these cultural responses through intergenerational traditions, like those present in Judaism. (Shelemay, 2006). However, it is also important to note that certain studies have found that the songs that presented the greatest cultural impact and memory were generally ones that were produced recently, presenting a “Cultural Horizon” in which populations can become less aware of older songs, which limits the cultural impact that they can have (Spivack et al., 2018; Longrie 1997). Ultimately, music demonstrates great potential to carry the legacy of certain historical events through cultures because of its pervasive nature, as well as the tendency of humans to remember and think about rhythms and melodies in a way that is unique to music.

Additionally, the existing body of research identifies a theoretical potential for music not only to be a strong carrier of historical sentiment, but also allows for history to be augmented to fit a narrative of the songwriter (Botstein 2000). This is distinct from the rest of the literature in that the song is not only a carrier of the cultural impact of an event, but also potentially the genesis of it in certain circumstances. This possibility creates new potential for extremely popular music to alternate what portions of history are considered important in the culture that listens to it. For example, Lin Manuel Miranda’s hit musical *Hamilton* reoriented the traditional view of America’s Founding Fathers to include more traditionally overlooked contributors, specifically the titular Alexander Hamilton. Certainly, the potential for songs to be the catalyst for new historical viewpoints and understandings situates them as heavily influencing a certain population.

Gap

Despite previous research into the social impact of music on certain communities, there remains a significant gap in the literature in considering the impact of music on a more general community (Gilbert 2008; Bryant 2005; Shelemay 2006). Furthermore, while many other studies have used Google Trends as a method for studies in the infodemiological field, studying epidemics and medicine related topics, there remains a scarcity in cross application of the method into sociological research, which is further explored in this study (Saposnik & Huber 2020; Mavragani et al. 2018; Rovetta 2024; Mavragani & Ochoa 2019).

This study aims to address these gaps by cross applying the use of Google Trends Data into sociology and musicology, demonstrating a new format of gathering data when assessing social trends. These gaps in current literature led the researcher to ask the question: to what extent does music transfer messages about historical events to a general audience? The researcher hypothesizes that music about historical events effectively spreads awareness about historical events that should be reflected in Google search data.

Methods

The goal of this experiment is to determine whether or not there is a demonstrable correlation between song plays and historical knowledge, which is best found by examining empirical statistics of song interest over time and interest in the historical event over time amongst a broad demographic, this is a form of content analysis. In order to determine these figures over a large demographic and over a large time frame this paper uses Google Trends, a tool that provides users with the total number of google search results for a given topic in a given region over time. This methodology was identified because of previous research in the field of infodemiology that has been explored as a methodological process in the medical field (Saposnik & Huber 2020; Mavragani et al. 2018; Rovetta 2024; Mavragani & Ochoa 2019).

Song Choice

This research revolves around music and songs and so there must be a methodology for determining which songs to use in the study. To accomplish an unbiased series of songs the researcher took a list of songs written about historical events from an open source database and used Generative AI to categorize the database into a table with three relevant pieces of information: the song title, artist, and historical event. This song list contained 635 unique songs, each indexed in alphabetical order. These songs were chosen as the database for two reasons; first, the use of a database separate from the researcher removed bias that the researcher may have had regarding genre or artist of the music. Second, the open source nature of the project suggests some awareness of song amongst the general population, which is important when studying the effects of cultural spread amongst that particular population.

In order to further reduce the dataset to a manageable number of songs, each song was assigned a value from 1 to 635 based on their place in alphabetical order. The numbers were then entered into a random number generator which generated a set of 50 random numbers on

the domain [1,635] the numbers were then corresponded back to their respective song and the selected songs were put through a codebook to demonstrate that they satisfied certain criteria. Specifically, in order to be considered in the study, a song had to be tied to a specific historical moment as opposed to a time period. For example, an acceptable song could be a reference to a battle or a certain crime, but could not be referencing a war or time period in order to minimize external influences. The song also had to be about a singular event, unlike songs such as “We Didn't Start the Fire”, by Billy Joel, which chronicles several events in history. If a song failed the codebook it was then excluded from the study selection process and a new random number was generated in place of the original. This was done to ensure that the study could continue without the song selection being the reason for bad data. Once 50 songs were selected that demonstrated adequate adherence to the codebook the generation process stopped and the researcher isolated those 50 items into a separate table to be studied.

Google Trends as a Tool for Big Data Sets

The reason that this Google Trends was chosen over other data collection options, such as surveys and quasi-experimental research, is threefold. First, the wider demographics that can be examined through broader tools like Google Trends provide a unique benefit to sociological research (Saposnik & Huber 2020). The scope of the study presents serious limitations when the goal of the research is to determine the dispersion of information throughout a given population. For example, a given study may have different results when the popular genre of music in that region is different from the region that the study was originally conducted in. The broad scope of Google Trends data solves this issue, while this study will take a more broad approach toward the tool, certain geographical regions can be isolated for, which will allow further research to be conducted on specific demographics within the existing data set that was used by this research.

The second problem that is solved by this methodology is that of confirmation bias. If the study were to adopt a methodology that required explicit interaction between the researcher and the population that is being studied, the data may be altered by the nature of the researcher prompting a response to given stimuli, which would likely overestimate public knowledge of the songs and events that this research is examining. Google Trends solves this issue because the researcher can conduct research without any direct contact with the population being studied and the population remaining anonymous, which allows for natural behavior of the population so as not to affect the results of the data collected (Mavragani & Ochoa 2019).

Thirdly, the use of Google Trends allows the researcher to examine public behavior over time. This is in contrast to methodologies like surveys, which study public behavior up until a given point in time, with little discrimination of when the results occurred. For example, if a given historical event were being studied, the fiftieth anniversary of that event might bring more attention to the event and thus would concentrate the time of interest into a short span of time. Google Trends accounts for this and displays the search density over time, thus data collected in the study would be able to account for this. In comparison, a survey would merely detect that participants had at some point been made aware of the historical event, and would not discriminate easily between when that exposure had taken place. This also is beneficial for correlational research because two search results being compared with each other can be

compared at a given point in time, as opposed to general knowledge of both. This aids in determining correlation because the researcher is able to examine the similarity of the graph searches in order to better determine correlation (Mavragani et al 2018).

Once the songs were selected and the tool was chosen the only remaining step was to determine the correlation between the song and the event. To do this the researcher opened a google trends window and inserted the topic for the song name, and then added a new search term and inserted the topic for the historical event. This ensured that the data was measured the same by the Google Trends algorithm. Given a graph of both the search history of the event and the song itself, the researcher then normalized the graphs and examined the local extrema of both of the graphs to determine if the two had similar search patterns. For this study the magnitude of searches was not taken into account because the goal of the research is to prove that there is some impact of the historical event being looked up on the song being looked up, or vice versa. This method is sufficient because the graph already rationalizes the results on a scale of relative searches, effectively normalizing the data before the final graph is output.

Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved by an IRB and does not use any human participants or any data that could be traced back to a specific person, for this reason the researcher finds no important ethical considerations in this research.

Results

From the 50 selected songs (Table 1) the analysis returned 50 individual graphs demonstrating the searches for a given song and a given historical event from 2004 to 2026. These graphs were then analysed for similar graph shape, such as local extrema. An example of a graph that has a correlation is shown in Figure 1, an example of one that is not correlated is shown in Figure 2. Of the graphs surveyed, only 3 of the songs (The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald, by Gordon Lightfoot; The Battle of New Orleans, by Johnny Horton; and The Rising of the Moon, by The Dubliners) had relatively similar curves between historical event and song popularity, the other 47 had no demonstrable visual correlation.

Table 1

List of Songs

Song Name	Artist	Historical Event / Subject
Aberfan	Dulahan	1966 coal mine disaster in South Wales
A Great Day for Freedom	Pink Floyd	Aftermath of the Berlin Wall's fall
Ballad of the Alamo	Marty Robbins	Siege of the Alamo (1836)
Ballad of Tim Evans	Ewan MacColl	1949 Timothy Evans trial
Bastille Day	Rush	Storming of the Bastille (1789)
The Battle of Hampton	Titus Andronicus	Civil War naval battle: Monitor vs.

Roads		Merrimack
Chris Watts	SKYND	Watts familicide (2018)
Cold Harbor	The Outlaws	Battle of Cold Harbor (1864)
Columbine	SKYND	Columbine Massacre (1999)
Dallas 1PM	Saxon	Assassination of JFK
Flight 19	B.A. Robertson	Disappearance of Flight 19 (1945)
Heaven's Gate	SKYND	1997 Heaven's Gate cult mass death
Hurricane	Lin-Manuel Miranda	Hamilton's decision to publish Reynolds Pamphlet
John Wayne Gacy	SKYND	Serial killer John Wayne Gacy
Katherine Knight	SKYND	2001 murder case in Australia
Let Him Dangle	Elvis Costello	1952 hanging of Derek Bentley
Lindy Comes to Town	Al Stewart	Lindbergh's arrival in Paris
Little Mary Phagan	Rosa Lee Carson	1913 murder of Mary Phagan
Marshal Dear	Savages	Field Marshal Rommel
Mein Teil	Rammstein	2001 cannibalism case of Armin Meiwes
Murder Most Foul	Bob Dylan	Assassination of President John F. Kennedy (1963)
The Nobodies	Marilyn Manson	Columbine Massacre & media blame
Nothing to Gein	Mudvayne	Serial killer Ed Gein
On Battleship Hill	PJ Harvey	Gallipoli campaign (1915)
One Last Time	Lin-Manuel Miranda	Washington declines third presidential term
Out of the Woods	Public Image Ltd.	Black soldier at the Battle of Chancellorsville (1863)
Playing Columbine	Team Death	Columbine High School Massacre
Pompeii	Bastille	79 AD eruption of Mt. Vesuvius
Primo Victoria	Sabaton	WWII Normandy landings
Pulmonary Archery	Alexisonfire	1977 blizzards in Ontario & New York
The Rat War	Chumbawamba	Hamburg rat plague of 1892
Rosemary's Baby	Fantômas	Manson murders / Polanski era context

Saints	Lowell George	1927 New Orleans Great Mississippi Flood
Sea Wolves	Sabaton	WWII German Wolfpack submarines
The Secret Speech	Al Stewart	Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech"
Sink the Bismarck	Johnny Horton	Sinking of German battleship Bismarck (1941)
The Ballad of Ira Hayes	Johnny Cash	Fate of Pima Native American WWII hero Ira Hayes
The Battle of New Orleans	Johnny Horton	Battle of New Orleans (1815)
The Final Cut	Pink Floyd	Falklands War (1982)
The Great Leap Forward	Billy Bragg	Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958–62)
The Motorcade Sped On	Cop Shoot Cop	Assassination of JFK (1963)
The Rising of the Moon	The Dubliners	1798 Irish rebellion
The Saints Are Coming	U2 + Green Day	Hurricane Katrina (2005)
The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald	Gordon Lightfoot	Sinking of SS Edmund Fitzgerald (1975)
Violets Are Blue	SKYND	Luka Magnotta murder, 2012
Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)	The Staple Singers	Integration of Little Rock Central High School, 1957
Wiener Blut	Rammstein	Josef Fritzl case, Austria, 2009
Zombie	The Cranberries	1993 IRA bombing in Warrington, Cheshire, Great Britain
1913 Massacre	Woody Guthrie	1913 Calumet, MI, Christmas party tragedy, 72 killed

Figure 1

The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, Gordon Lightfoot

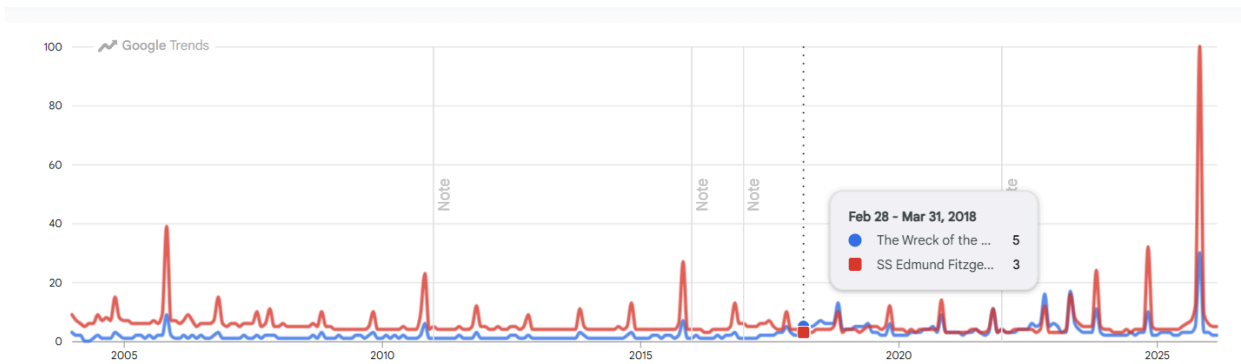
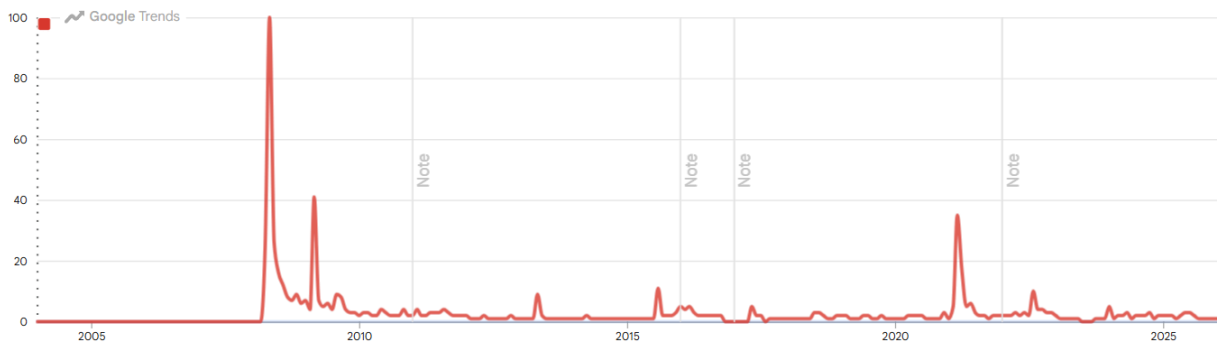


Figure 2

Wiener Blut, Rammstein



The three songs that do correlate with their events have several aspects in common with each other which explain their uniqueness among the data set. First, the songs covered obscure topics. Each of the three songs were covering topics that are not major US or world historical events. Second, the songs were relatively popular, with all of the songs having over 5 million plays on Spotify, a digital music streaming platform. Thirdly, the songs are all narrative based songs, which contrasts to songs that merely reference the event. Finally, all three songs were adapted from older melodies, which provided a sense of familiarity in the ears of listeners. These factors all likely created the ideal conditions for these songs to be tied to the historical events that they chronicle.

These findings contradict the researcher's initial ideas that most songs would show a relatively similar graph shape when compared to their corresponding event. The findings indicate that, in fact, public memory is not largely influenced by songs and popular music, unless under very specific conditions, which will be discussed further in the discussion section. Ultimately, the results of this study fail to reject the null hypothesis that popular music has a significant effect on cultural knowledge of the historical event that the song covers.

Discussion

The use of music as a vehicle by which to distribute information, studies have examined the impact of music in the Swedish white power movement, the Civil Rights Music, as well as Syrian Jewish History, Chinese Revolutionary History and on Holocaust Survivors (Gilbert 2008; Bryant 2005; Shelemay 2006; Eyerman 2002). These studies all came back with positive correlations and concluded that music does have a strong influence on disseminating messages, thus contrasting with the results of this study.

To reconcile the findings of this study with the existing body of literature, it is vital to identify what factors may have contributed to the discrepancies. First, existing literature focused on a singular population. For example, Shirley Gilbert specifically examined holocaust survivors, drawing on music to evoke memories of the shared experiences (2008). This study instead looked across a large population, specifically across the entire United States, which contains several different subcultures with radically different lived experiences, making cultural coherency significantly harder. For example, the search results for *The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald* by Gordon Lightfoot are concentrated in the midwestern region of the United States, particularly around Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, where the accident happened. This cultural diversity likely impacted the effectiveness of the study.

The next major key difference is in examining the type of music that was surveyed. With the single exception of the Swedish White Power Music studied by Ron Eyerman, the rest of the music studied had a specific connection to the audience that it impacted (2002). Civil Rights activists used folk songs from their enslaved ancestors, the Syrian Jews used hymns about their faith, and the yiddish songs studied by Gilbert were in direct connection to the Jewish population he was studying (2008). In contrast, this study used diverse songs and studied their impacts on a diverse population, which creates a significant disconnect between the song and the audience, impacting the effectiveness of the message.

Thirdly, the other literature either studies music tied to a certain time period, or music tied to a cultural ritual or celebration. In Eyerman's research the music was tied to Civil Rights Era music, or contemporary Swedish pop music (2002). In the other works, the music is tied to specific cultural rituals or groups, and its relevance is perpetuated through intentional use of the music in religious ceremonies, or by governments or movements in propaganda and messaging campaigns (Chen 2023; Strauss 2024; Shelemay 2026; Bryant 2005; Gilbert 2008). This study instead examined a broad range of popular music from a large time period, and even songs of varying style and popularity. These factors diminish the cultural memory of the song as found in the research done by Spivack, who found that cultural awareness of music decreased significantly over time (2019). Fundamentally, this study was an attempt to generalize the finding of the existing literature and to determine if the found patterns were replicable on a larger scale.

Lastly, the type of ideas and messages that were contained in the other pieces of literature were distinct from the type of messages in this study in that the messages in other studies were more general and ideas based, rather than event based. For example, the white power and Civil Rights movement referenced in Eyerman's paper were based on themes of white supremacy and equality respectively (2002). In Bryant's research, the songs were about the Chinese Revolution, which was a broad historical movement, in contrast to a specific event, for example a certain battle or attack.

Limitations

The researcher made all attempts to remove limitations on this study but still finds several areas in which the research encountered limitations. First, Google Trends only contained data beginning in 2004, which created a significant barrier to the results that could be obtained. For songs released before 2004, like *Sink the Bismark* by Johnny Horton, reached maximum popularity before Google Trends data began. This created a significant limitation to the study because the researcher could not find data from the time period where the song had maximized relevancy, where the correlation may have been stronger provided the validity of Spivack's study (2019).

Secondly, the researcher used a secondary source in order to determine the set of songs that would be chosen from. This secondary source was intentionally open source to maximize the diversity of contributing sources for the songs. While this allowed the researcher to have an unbiased data set to choose from, it also loosened the criteria of what a song being about a historical event meant. If the song was submitted to the list, it was accepted as a reference to a historical event. This led to songs such as "The Man Who Sold the World", by David Bowie being admitted into the pool, despite never referencing any historical event. This limitation was minor and largely did not affect the results.

Third, there are several opportunities for confounding variables to be present. Anniversaries of certain events, other songs or pieces of media about the event, new information regarding the song's topic or commemorative events being put on could all influence popularity of the event. Conversely, social media trends, covers of songs by major artists, use of songs in major media, and many other factors could artificially inflate the popularity of the song. These variables could significantly limit or invalidate large portions of data, leaving this as the major limitation on the data.

Additionally, this study is used to establish correlational relationships between two different concepts, but does not truly establish causation. The researcher chose not to establish causation because of the significant challenges of confounding variables and the methodological ambiguity in determining the motives for searching for a certain term. This limitation was mitigated largely by the fact that the study failed to find significant correlation between the variables tested, and ultimately ruling out causation as well, which resolves the limitation of failing to determine causality.

Finally, the Google Trends User Interface provided certain challenges and methodological limitations, most noticeably in the way that the search terms were categorized. The researcher used a "Topic" when possible, which corrects for similar searches and minor spelling and grammatical errors to provide a complete picture of actual search interest in the song and the historical event. However, in certain cases, like that of "Heavens Gate", by SKYND, the search term did not have an associated topic and thus the researcher could only account for exact searches of the same term that was entered. In these cases, the researcher used the formula "[song name] [artist]", in order to minimize the ambiguity of the results. Ultimately, this still skewed certain pieces of data and provided a strong limitation to the results of this study.

Future Directions

This study leaves several directions for future research into similar fields of study. The researcher will further establish three branches on which future researchers could build off of. The first branch is refining population; in a future study that controls for geographic location or cultural background, a study could examine the effect of popular music on a more homogenized population without the cultural diversity present in this study.

The second branch is using a more individualized methodology with a smaller data set. The use of Google Trends for this study was specifically chosen to cover a large data set of people with a smaller number of individual songs. A further study could examine trends on a smaller sample size with a different methodological tool, such as surveys or interviews that could examine responses on a more nuanced and individual level than this study could capture.

The third and final branch of study that could be taken from here is a study with a more selective method for choosing songs. This study chose a wide range of songs in order to establish a broad base of songs in order to remove bias from the researcher's personal taste and also to expand the data pool of the study. A future study could isolate the selected songs to cater further to a desired study objective, for example selecting songs about a certain event, or with a certain number of streams on digital music platforms.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this research found no significant correlation between interest in songs and interest in the historical events that they reference. The researcher concluded that there were several aspects of the study that separated these results from the existing literature, which generally contends that music can carry ideological and historical messages (Gilbert 2008; Bryant 2005; Shelemay 2006; Eyerman 2002; Chen 2023). The researcher finds that this study fills two gaps: first, it fills the gap left in the literature that there is little research examining the cultural effects of music on a broad population. Second, this research cross-applies a methodology primarily used in the medical field in order to attempt to open up new possibilities of research in the future. The significance of this research is twofold: first, the researcher establishes certain criteria under which a song is suitable to carry information, which should be confirmed with further research. Second, this study affirms the validity of using Google Trends to evaluate social trends over time in a new field of research. Finally, this study identifies and opens up new avenues for research and discussion that the researcher feels could be helpful in contributing to future scientific literature.

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