

Listeners control the dial in genre-crossing music

January 18 2023, by Sarah Magnus-Sharpe



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New Cornell research shows how the rise of consumers' influence changed the tune of contemporary country music and led to the creation of more songs that span multiple genres.

Yuan Shi, assistant professor in the Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration, in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, traces the shift to changes in Billboard magazine's chart rankings.

"When Billboard charts gave more weight to consumer voice and reflected the market more accurately, they actually changed the market," said Shi, author of "A Change of Tune: The Democratization of Market Mediation and Crossover Production in the U.S. Commercial Music Industry," which published Dec. 14 in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

"The consumption-driven ranking rewarded crossover products because consumers are more open to crossover music than radio stations are," Shi said.

For decades, radio stations had the power to make or break artists by determining which—and how frequently—songs were played. Billboard magazine's chart rankings reflected this power, listing top songs based on radio play. However, in 2012, Billboard changed its formula for many music genres to take into account consumption, such as digital downloads, when calculating which songs top the charts.

Country music was one of the genres affected. After the Billboard change, traditional gatekeepers in the country music market—[radio stations](#)—lost power, while consumers gained it. This democratization led directly to the success and growth of crossover music: songs that meshed country with elements from other genres, such as pop, hip-hop and rock.

While country crossover artists existed long before this change—think Shania Twain and Garth Brooks— Billboard's chart updates resulted in a dramatic uptick in this trend.

Using machine learning algorithms to analyze the sonic features of tens

of thousands of [song](#) recordings, Shi discovered that the new chart inspired artists and their record labels to strategically broaden their audiences by targeting the most lucrative genres. This quickly led to the dominating success of Taylor Swift, Maren Morris, Lil Nas X, Walker Hayes and many other artists whose sound and style depart from traditional country. Rising consumer power altered not just how success is defined in this market, but also which products are now offered.

Shi's research suggests businesses use caution in the face of new technologies that elevate consumers' voices. For businesses that create experience goods—such as movies, [music](#), food and lodging—creating crossover products could lead to future growth, while preserving traditional boundaries might ensure the survival of existing products. Navigating [market](#) boundaries demands tough choices that will determine what all of us see, hear, eat and experience in the years to come.

"It is clear that in many corners of our society, there is a growing divide between traditional gatekeepers and general consumers," Shi said. "As new technologies and platforms dilute gatekeepers' influence and empower consumers, it is more important than ever to appreciate the difference between the two."

More information: Yuan Shi, A Change of Tune: The Democratization of Market Mediation and Crossover Production in the U.S. Commercial Music Industry, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00018392221143779](https://doi.org/10.1177/00018392221143779)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Listeners control the dial in genre-crossing music (2023, January 18) retrieved 4 May

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-dial-genre-crossing-music.html>

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