

# Leadership lessons through a lyrical lens

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this manuscript is to explore an assignment given to students in an online gender and leadership graduate course as a tool to help them think critically about how music influences perceptions of gender roles in both society and leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The assignment directs students to review the current Billboard “Hot 100” chart, which lists the top 100 songs in the United States each week based on sales and streams. Students are prompted to identify a song with gendered themes and discuss how the song portrays women and/or men, what gender stereotypes the song supports or refutes, and whether the messaging is positive or negative in nature. Finally, the students discuss ways that the message in the song could influence the listener’s opinion about gender stereotypes and what effect that could have on gendered leadership issues.

**Findings** – Students use this assignment as an opportunity to apply the course material that relates to the importance of gender representation and the influence of media on gender issues in leadership.

**Originality/value** – Recommendations are provided to inspire creative ideas for leadership educators who seek to prepare students to understand organizational challenges related to gender issues in leadership.

**Keywords** Gender stereotypes, Social identity theory, Gender and leadership, Leadership pedagogy, Teaching and learning of leadership

**Paper type** Teaching tools

## Introduction

Music is an important part of local, regional and national societies. Gender roles are also an important aspect of cultural norms and thoughts and opinions on those norms are frequently expressed through music (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The sounds of popular music and methods listeners use to consume music have evolved over the last several decades and so have the perceptions and expectations of gender roles in society and organizations (Zhu & Chang, 2019).

As leadership educators, we are tasked with creating assignments that will encourage critical thinking about issues and public perceptions that change over time. In this paper, readers are introduced to a discussion activity intended to encourage this type of critical thinking from students as they make connections between gendered themes in music and gendered issues in leadership. In a graduate level Gender & Leadership course included in the curriculum for both a Master of Science in Leadership and a Graduate Certificate in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace, students were prompted to critically analyze song lyrics with gendered messaging from a song currently listed on Billboard’s Hot 100 list. The asynchronous, online discussion allowed students to take time to evaluate lyrics, think through their (sometimes ambiguous or mysterious) gendered messages and engage in a healthy mix of agreement and respectful disagreement about the positive and negative nature of those messages and their effects on gendered issues in leadership.



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## Background

### *Gender issues in leadership*

Many academic leadership programs address “diversity issues” as part of the curriculum. Some programs dedicate classes to examining organizational diversity as a whole, while others offer classes that more narrowly focus on issues affecting specific subgroups of diverse populations. In the Gender & Leadership course that hosts the practice discussed in this paper, students are exposed to research that covers a variety of gendered issues in leadership.

Students in the course identify and explore the barriers to leadership roles that women experience in the workplace today. For example, researchers have shown that employees perceive critical feedback from female leaders disproportionately more negatively than critical feedback from male leaders (Abel, 2019). Additionally, researchers have illuminated female tendencies to under-rate themselves on self-evaluations, while males tend to over-rate their performance (Mayo, 2016). We review literature on hiring and promotion practices, and students learn that women are often less likely to be promoted because they demonstrate less confidence than men when interviewing for leadership positions, even when they are more competent than the male candidates (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019; Exley & Kessler, 2019; Helgesen, 2020). Women also face disproportionately more challenges and responsibilities as parents and care givers to other family members than male employees, which lessens the time they have available for work-related leadership development activities (Calarco, Anderson, Meanwell, & Knopf, 2020; Frear, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggstad, & Walker, 2018; Grandey, Gabriel, & King, 2020; Kramer, 2020; Krivkovich, Starikova, Robinson, Valentino, & Yee, 2020; Vesoulis, 2020). In conjunction with outdated stereotypes of women as housewives and secretaries, these issues have contributed to underrepresentation of females in leadership positions in organizations today.

Students are also exposed to more positive research on this topic to highlight improvements that have been made for women in leadership in recent decades. They review studies that identify women as outperforming men in various crisis leadership situations (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020; Zenger & Folkman, 2020). They analyze the actions of female government leaders who outperformed their male peers as they leveraged skills in “family systems thinking” to achieve desirable outcomes regarding COVID-19 responses (Brown, 2021; Cutruzzula, 2020). Research also supports the argument that companies earn more money when females are represented in executive leadership roles (Krivkovich *et al.*, 2020). We also review work that highlights recent improvements in female representation in C-suite executive positions, which increased from 17 to 21% between 2015 and 2020 (Ward, 2020). While women still have much to overcome in the quest for equality in leadership roles, students are encouraged to recognize patterns of improvement and systems that are working to help support women as they rise up through the ranks in organizations.

As they learn about gendered differences in leadership styles and how the perceptions of those differences have changed over time, students read work by Porter, Gerhardt, Fields, and Bugenhagen (2019) to learn how different generations view gender-related stereotypes and how millennials are uniquely poised to obliterate gender-related stereotypes for leaders in the near future. These researchers attributed millennials’ progressive mindsets to this generation’s increased female representation in leadership skill-development activities, organized sports and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) activities that were mostly available for boys in previous generations. Additionally, they highlight the benefits of millennials valuing relationship-building and open communication in the office. The students review a balanced mix of research on past and current gendered issues in leadership, ways those issues are being addressed now and ways they could/should be addressed moving forward.

*Social implications of gendered themes in music*

Music is diverse in sound, message and intent. While some music is intended to soothe the listener, some is intended to evoke emotion. Studies show that music can have both positive and negative effects on listeners. Songs with non-violent lyrics can make listeners feel more relaxed and uplift their mood, while songs with violent lyrics can lead to increased aggressive behavior, especially in men (Hyatt, Berke, Miller, & Zeichner, 2017). Researchers have evaluated gendered themes in music in myriad ways. For example, Bogt, Engels, Bogers, and Kloosterman (2010) conducted a study with teenagers and found that for both girls and boys, preferences for hip-hop and hard-house music were positively associated with outdated gender stereotypes. Preference for classical music was negatively associated with outdated gender stereotypes. Sociological researchers investigated themes in rap music lyrics that portrayed both men and women as sexually aggressive and examined the implications for both genders being viewed by listeners as either misogynistic or empowered, depending on their perspective (Herd, 2015).

Messages in music have evolved over time. DeWall, Pond, Campbell, and Twenge (2011) reported that their analyses of pop songs from 1980–2007 revealed an increase over time in the use of certain words related to self-focus and antisocial behavior, and a decrease in words related to focus on others, social interactions and positive emotion. Still other studies revealed that over time (from 1959–2010) references to love and romantic relationships in song lyrics became less common, while references to sexual behavior and lust-in-the-absence-of-love became more common (Hall, West, & Hill, 2012; Madanikia & Bartholomew, 2014; Smiler, Shewmaker, & Hearon, 2017). Following a comprehensive analysis of song lyrics, Avery, Ward, Moss, and Üsküp (2017) concluded that representations of men as hypermasculine and of women as hyperfeminine sexual objects increased between 1990 and 2010, and these observations were most frequently identified in rap/hip-hop music. Similarly, Rasmussen and Densley (2017) analyzed the lyrics of popular country songs in the same time period. They found that songs released in the latter decade were less likely to portray women in traditional family roles, more likely to refer to a woman's appearance, more likely to mention women wearing tight or revealing clothing and more likely to refer to women using slang words than songs in the first two decades included in the study. These changes in lyrics over time were recorded mostly in songs sung by male artists.

Sanyoura and Xu (2020) studied lyrics of popular love songs by solo artists and concluded that male and female vocalists have become significantly more similar in their lyrical expressions of love between 1960 and 2009. Whereas large gaps used to exist in lyrics between men and women using “giving words” (hear, let, make) and “receiving words” (need, feel, hold and want) to express love, as time goes on (and as more females have entered the music industry as songwriters), those differences have begun to disappear. Similarly, Kreyer (2015) found that male and female solo pop artists delivered very similar messaging on gender roles in their song lyrics.

*Implications of gendered themes in music for organizational leadership*

Implicit leadership theory is a cognitive theory of leadership focused on the ways people craft individual cognitive impressions of the world and use those perceptions to shape their behaviors and interpret the events of their lives. The theory explains that individuals maintain and are heavily influenced by implicit expectations and assumptions about the personal characteristics, traits and qualities of leaders (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982). These individual cognitive structures are thought to help people process the characteristics of leaders and make inferences about probable behaviors and outcomes (Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, & Hansbrough, 2020). Leaders who fit the characteristics of and implicit leadership theory held by a follower tend to be received more positively and hold more influence than those who

exhibit characteristics that are unexpected (DuBrin, 2023). Across cultures, this theory has proven to hold implications for women in leadership roles, as they are generally viewed through a lens of different expectations than male leaders. Followers in general have reported holding implicit expectations that male leaders will be more agentic and task-oriented and female leaders will be more communal, considerate and person-oriented. Violations of these expectations (even for leaders who are otherwise producing successful outcomes) can lead to follower dissatisfaction and negative performance reviews (Sczesny, 2005).

Leadership is often defined as an influence process. Kelman (1958) developed a framework known as Social Influence Theory to outline how individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are influenced by three primary processes of influence, which include compliance, identification and internalization. Compliance occurs when a participant willingly accepts the social influence in order to gain a reward or avoid a negative consequence. Identification (also known as conforming) occurs when a person changes their behavior in order to maintain or establish a relationship with a person or group. Internalization occurs when individuals adopt a new behavior because they realize it is consistent with their values. Applying the theory to organizational leadership, studies have consistently found that men are often more influential than women in the workplace and that women can increase their ability to influence others by displaying traits like communality and warmth (Carli, 2002; Carli & Eagly, 1999; Eagly & Woods, 1982). Simply stated, overcoming gender stereotypes in the workplace allows female leaders to hold greater influence over their followers.

Social identity theory purports that individuals learn what behaviors are expected (including norms for gender roles) from their avenues of socialization. As young people, our own behaviors are shaped as we observe family and caregivers, peers at school or other social institutions and in messages delivered to us through music and other media (Turner & Reynolds, 2010). While some songs are “gender neutral”, there are some that contain gender-positive messages, and many others reinforce harmful gender-based stereotypes. As reported in Avery *et al.* (2017):

Cultivation theory (Gerbner *et al.*, 1994) is premised on the assumption that highly stylized, stereotyped, and repetitive images portrayed in the mainstream media construct a particular portrait of reality, and increased exposure to these images facilitates the development of personal beliefs that reflect this socially/commercially constructed portrait. Therefore, frequent media exposure is believed to lead consumers to gradually come to accept the portrayals and images as models of realistic, acceptable, and expected behavior.

This theory underpins the notion that song lyrics can reinforce and exacerbate negative gender stereotypes that are sometimes modeled for individuals from a young age.

Erikson (1950) is often credited with coining much of the common language and some theories still popular today regarding stages of identity development. He labeled adolescence (roughly age 12–18) as the prime time period for children to seek out and develop their identity, core beliefs, values and sense of morality. Children in this stage are also learning social norms that will shape their relationships and opportunities for employment. As they become more independent, they begin to develop a sense of self and their role in society. Encouraging students to acknowledge the influence that music can have in shaping, reinforcing, or counterbalancing our behaviors and social norms can help them understand its importance in influencing issues in organizations.

As leadership educators, we frequently remind students that organizations are a collection of individuals, and as such, individual identities, behaviors and beliefs matter. Educating leaders about the different ways their employees, peers and supervisors may have come to hold or perpetuate their own social beliefs about gender roles can help them better understand the gendered issues that still exist today and (hopefully) encourage them to feel more comfortable and empowered to act toward resolving these issues.

### Description of the practice

In the 30-h Master of Science in Leadership program at a regional, public university in the southeastern region of the United States of America, a Gender & Leadership course was added to the list of available elective courses in the Fall 2021 term. The course is also required for students pursuing the 9-h Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace graduate certificate program, which was also introduced in fall 2021. Both of these programs are offered in a fully online format, and both serve a demographically diverse group of students. Students vary in their professional backgrounds, as some are seasoned leaders in their professions, and some are pursuing a graduate credential as full-time students immediately following completion of an undergraduate program.

The call for leaders to develop cultural competence around gender issues in the workplace supports the importance of academic leadership programs providing opportunities for students to hone their awareness of these issues and develop skills to help resolve them. This can be accomplished in many ways – even in programs that do not specifically offer a course that narrowly focuses on gender issues in leadership. This paper examines the way one instructor has made an effort to offer a creative assignment that will help students think critically about how music influences perceptions of gender roles in society and leadership, in one specific Gender and Leadership course.

The first module of the course provided a playlist for students to review as they reflect on the power of representation in music. Songs on the playlist are overtly gender-themed and include such hits as: “The Man” by Taylor Swift (2020), “Female” by Keith Urban (2017), “Run the World” by Beyoncé (2011), “Man I Feel Like A Woman” by Shania Twain (1997), “Just a Girl” by No Doubt (1995), “Take It Like a Man” by Michelle Wright (1992), “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton (1980) and “I’m Every Woman” by Chaka Khan (1978). Before reviewing the playlist, students read the following prompt:

While most songs are not quite as overt in their gendered themes as those below, consider a mental walk through the messaging presented in these songs over the past few decades as you browse the playlist. Think through the following questions: Has the messaging in these songs changed over time? Whether you believe that messaging has evolved or not, what does that say about gender roles and inequities in our society? How do those roles and inequities affect leadership roles in the workplace today?

Student instructions for the asynchronous discussion assignment were as follows:

Billboard’s “Hot 100” chart lists the top 100 songs in the United States each week, based on sales and streams. Follow this link to view the current list: <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100>. After reviewing the list (and Googling the lyrics, probably), identify a song with gendered themes. How does the song portray women and/or men? What gender stereotypes does the song support or refute? Is the message positive or negative in nature? How do you think this message might influence the listener’s opinion about gender stereotypes, and what effect might that have on gendered leadership issues? Be specific in your descriptions, and share a link to a YouTube video to the song if possible.

Students were graded for their active participation in the discussion based on a rubric provided in the course module. Each week, an asynchronous discussion was open for 7 days and students could earn up to 25 points for their participation. Up to ten points were awarded for an insightful, well-crafted response to the question, up to five points were awarded for an insightful, well-crafted response to one or more classmates’ posts, five points were awarded for posting in the discussion on at least two different days during the week and up to five points were awarded for reading many posts from classmates.

While the efficacy of online discussion boards varies based on many factors, they remain prevalent as a tool to develop critical thinking skills in online courses (Champion & Gunnlaugson, 2018; Jenkins, 2016; Woods & Bliss, 2016). In this exercise, students were asked

to participate in the discussion boards as a way to encourage them to think critically about how the lyrics for the song they selected related to the course content on gendered leadership issues. The participation requirements and grading system also ensured that students read each other's reflections and therefore were exposed to many instances of these connections. Support for this pedagogical method was outlined by one researcher who stated "by facilitating reflection, connection, and application between leadership theories and the varied contexts occurring in daily life, students are given opportunities to develop skills and competencies needed to think critically and solve problems in innovative ways" (Dunn, 2021, p. 48). Additionally, McCarron and Yamanaka (2022) synthesized promising practices in online leadership education that help instructors address cognitive, social, teaching and learner presence. These researchers purported that students "must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 49). As outlined by the researchers, one way instructors can urge the development of this critical consciousness is to "build and sustain their awareness of systemic social issues as well as their capacity to assess root cause, think critically, and challenge dominant lenses" (p. 49).

The learning objective for this assignment was for students to relate gendered themes in popular music to the course concepts on gendered issues in the workplace. Connecting these concepts allowed students an opportunity to consciously hone their awareness of the messaging in media that influences identity development, social norms, and both the perpetuation and modern shifting of gender stereotypes. An increased awareness of the factors that influence and perpetuate gender bias (in themselves and others as leaders) is a critical first step to breaking down barriers created by inequality in organizational settings. As students analyzed the lyrics they selected for songs with negative gendered themes, they made connections to the course content on women exhibiting traditionally male qualities to succeed as leaders, organizations promoting a culture of exclusion, gendered issues in communication and promoting well-being, men and women being held to different standards and perpetuating the gender wage gap. Students who analyzed songs with positive gendered themes made connections to the course content on promoting a culture of inclusion and allyship and encouraging healthy standards for communication and well-being.

### **Discussion of outcomes/results**

In fall 2021, the Gender & Leadership course was offered online as an elective for the master of science in leadership program, and as a core course for the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace graduate certificate. This was the first time this course was offered from the department and 21 students were enrolled. In fall 2022, the course was offered again, with an enrollment of 15 students.

The instructor was delighted to note that students embraced the assignment and participated enthusiastically. In both the fall 2021 and fall 2022 sections of the course, this discussion question received more responses than any of the six other weekly discussion questions. In fall 2021, all 21 students enrolled participated, and they provided an average of 6.2 responses to their peers, while the average number of responses to peers was 4.3 on the other six discussion questions. In fall 2022, all 15 students enrolled participated, and they provided an average of 4.4 responses to their peers, while the average number of responses to peers was 2.5 on the other six discussion questions. The instructor was heartened to see such active participation amongst students responding to one another, especially considering that students could earn full credit with just one response to a peer.

Students analyzed songs from several genres, including pop, hip-hop and country. Looking at the responses in aggregate, slightly more than half of the songs that students selected were identified as representing negative messages about gender roles and/or

stereotypes. The other half of songs was nearly evenly split between representing positive messages and mixed messages (containing both positive and negative messages within the same song). Students analyzed a healthy mix of songs by both male and female artists as well as mixed-gender duets and bands, and a few songs from non-gender-conforming artists.

Several interesting themes in student responses emerged throughout the discussion as students analyzed lyrics of individual songs and related them to gendered leadership issues. The instructor was pleased with both the quality and quantity of the students' responses. Students provided in-depth responses that critically analyzed many sections of the lyrics throughout a song and/or were able to identify multiple themes within the same song. As mentioned, more than half of the songs analyzed were determined to represent negative messages regarding gender issues. Below, some of these themes (women must exhibit traditionally male qualities to succeed as leaders, promoting a culture of exclusion and gendered issues in communication and promoting well-being) are summarized in [Table 1](#). These themes were identified and aggregated by the instructor and are summarized from the students' original discussion posts.

Additional negative themes represented in the lyrics analyzed by students include accepting (or even celebrating) that notion that women are held to different standards than

Themes/messages identified in song lyrics	Connection to gendered leadership issue(s)
<p><i>Women must exhibit traditionally male qualities to succeed as leaders</i> Women are encouraged to let their male partners make decisions for them</p>	<p>Many women feel pressured (or are coached) to sound more like men in meetings, to dress more like men (skirted suits in dark colors) and to overlook off-color jokes in attempts to fit in better with the guys and become accepted as a leader (<a href="#">Helgesen, 2020</a>); Encouraging this practice feeds ambivalent sexism (<a href="#">Grubbs, n.d.</a>)</p>
<p>Women must put on metaphorical armor to show how strong she is and wait until she is alone to cry. Keep emotions inside to be perceived as invincible and unstoppable</p>	<p>Women must keep their feelings and emotions to themselves and pretend to be cutthroat in order to be seen as a leader to her male counterparts (<a href="#">Dzubinski, Diehl, &amp; Taylor, 2019</a>)</p>
<p><i>Promoting a culture of exclusion</i> Ideas that are offensive to the LGBTQ + community (fetishizing lesbianism; portraying lesbianism as reactionary to rejection by a man).</p>	<p>These types of messages can reinforce and exacerbate alienation and discrimination based on sexual orientation and promotes a culture of exclusion rather than inclusion (<a href="#">Tulshyan, 2022</a>)</p>
<p><i>Gendered issues in communication and promoting well-being</i> Men should not show emotion and are encouraged to deal with their problems with alcohol; Normalizing men being "tough" Women are depicted as jealous or obsessive in relationships</p>	<p>Men are not encouraged to find ways to effectively communicate with women; Ignoring mental health issues Women are stereotyped as emotional creatures; Much of our media today portrays women in relationships as "crazy," likening their behavior when mistreated to genuine mental health issues (<a href="#">Hu, 2016</a>)</p>
<p>A complete desensitization to sexism, misogyny and vulgarity, sometimes exacerbated by the artist's easily accessible social media platforms. In those spaces, people often feel they can post what they want and dare anyone to challenge their opinion/voice</p>	<p>Personal and organizational communication has changed, and this affects gendered leadership issues</p>
<p><b>Table 1.</b> Negative messages</p>	<p><b>Source(s):</b> Created by author</p>

men and the gender wage gap. Some of these connections to gendered leadership issues are summarized below in [Table 2](#).

Fortunately, lyrics for some songs were found to represent positive messages. Some of these connections to gendered leadership issues are summarized below in [Table 3](#).

There were also a few more general observations noted by students. Several recognized that the music videos often did not “match” the song, which they interpreted as sending mixed messages from the artist. Some songs that represented positive messages about female empowerment had music videos depicting scantily-clad women behaving as objects that seemingly exist for the pleasure of the male characters in the video. Students connected this to leadership behaviors by comparing the artist to organizational leaders that do not live out the values or mission stated by their organization with their actions. They noted that when a person listens to music, they are not influenced by clothing, gender, culture, body language, etc., but these visual images are highly influential when watching a video. Often a song is written by the artist but the video is the vision of the director and the two can be misaligned. Some students related this phenomenon to experiences at work dealing with mixed messages in how they are “supposed” to behave. As employees, they may be instructed to exhibit a

Themes/messages identified in song lyrics	Connection to gendered leadership issue(s)
<p><i>Men and women are held to different standards</i>                      Society should expect men to have one-night stands to avoid vulnerability and/or getting hurt by a “real” relationship; Portrayal of men as unfaithful partners as a norm that women should accept; Women should be criticized for lewd behaviors, while the same behavior should be tolerated from men                      If a woman does not stay in ideal physical shape, her significant other will pay for her to have plastic surgery so she can meet his standard                      A male praises his female partner for being “low-maintenance”, inferring that most women are high-maintenance</p>	<p>A “boys will be boys” excuse can help men justify treating women poorly; This reinforces the phenomenon that men are not judged as harshly (in the public eye) for “bad behavior” while women are often vilified when they do the same things; Leaders hold women to higher standards at work (<a href="#">Abel, 2019</a>)                      Tearing down female self-confidence and promoting male over-confidence (<a href="#">Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019</a>; <a href="#">Exley &amp; Kessler, 2019</a>)                      When we praise a woman at work by calling her “well-spoken” or “professionally dressed”, etc., it can actually be a back-handed compliment that exacerbates stereotypes (<a href="#">Sezer, Prinsloo, Brooks, &amp; Norton, 2019</a>)</p>
Instructing men to “act like a man” or for women to be “ladylike”	There are aspects of navigating leadership spaces that men simply do not have to think about due to male privilege ( <a href="#">Schwiter, Nentwich, &amp; Keller, 2021</a> )
Reinforcing stereotypical gender roles in the home	The American Time Use Survey shows that women perform about twice as much home maintenance and care work at home as men, even if a woman also works outside the home ( <a href="#">Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021</a> )
<p><i>Perpetuating the gender wage gap</i>                      Women are accepted as back-up dancers in male music videos and criticized when they are the “star” doing the same                      Portraying women as “gold diggers”</p>	<p>Women are often still viewed as best placed in supporting roles, not leadership roles (<a href="#">Singh, Nadim, &amp; Ezzedeen, 2012</a>; <a href="#">Sharen &amp; McGowan, 2019</a>)                      Seeing men as the primary wage earners reinforces the gender wage gap as “normal”                      Inequitable promotions are often due to inequitable ways of spending time. Women are left to carry the family while men are free to work longer hours and put more into their work and earning money (<a href="#">Correll, Benard, &amp; Paik, 2007</a>; <a href="#">Grandey et al., 2020</a>; <a href="#">Ko, Kotrba, &amp; Roebuck, 2015</a>)</p>
Men should be most concerned about financial success and not successful relationships	

Source(s): Created by author

**Table 2.**  
Additional negative messages

Themes/messages identified in song lyrics	Connection to gendered leadership issue(s)
<p><i>Promoting a culture of inclusion and allyship</i>            One group should not be able to tell another how to express themselves            Music groups with mixed-gender members may present a stronger message about female empowerment            Be yourself and be confident about it. Artists may be viewed as more supportive to the LBGTQ + community when the singer identifies as a member of that community            Women should support one another and help each other succeed instead of viewing one another as rivals</p>	<p>Promoting a spirit of inclusion            Reinforcing need for male allyship in the workplace (Moser &amp; Branscombe, 2021)            Celebrating unique/individual strengths to promote inclusion (Tulshyan, 2022); Men tend to be over-confident and women under-confident (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019)            “The male-dominated workplace sets women up to compete due to increased scrutiny and a scarcity of top leadership positions for women” (Marcus, 2016). The more aware women are of this propensity for rivalry and competition, the more we can actually work to change these behaviors; Women evaluate and judge other women more harshly than men (Abel, 2019); Women undervalue themselves and their contributions to the work environment while men overvalue their contributions (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019; Mayo, 2016)            Women add value to the workplace and organizational outcomes, as routinely proven in the “business case” for gender diversity (Krivkovich et al., 2020; Woods, 2022)            Women deserve to be represented in leadership roles in the workplace (Lyness &amp; Grotto, 2018; Tulshyan, 2022; Ward, 2020)            At work, women often suffer negative professional consequences for motherhood, while men are rewarded for fatherhood (Correll et al., 2007; Frear et al., 2018; Grandey et al., 2020)</p>
<p>Portraying women with confidence and promoting a gender-balanced environment where men benefit from a woman’s presence            Women should be proud of the strides they have made in society and as leaders            Women’s ability to have children is unique and should be celebrated</p>	<p>Men who are more sensitive and in touch with their feelings will be better bosses and friends to women (Wellford, 2017)            Providing access to mental health services is an increasingly popular organizational commitment to employees</p>
<p><i>Encouraging healthy standards for communication and well-being</i>            Portrays how powerful it is for a male to be accepting, open-minded, empathetic, emotionally intelligent, nurturing and supportive            People in dangerous situations should ask for help</p>	
<p><b>Table 3.</b>            Positive messages</p>	<p><b>Source(s):</b> Created by author</p>

certain behavior, but then in reality that behavior may not be supported or encouraged. This can lead to a stressful state of confusion.

Additionally, more students expressed that they believed lyrics that reinforce negative gender stereotypes could influence leadership behaviors than those that reinforce positive messages. As an example, one student said the following about a song with a positive message, “Despite bucking traditional gender stereotypes, I have doubts that these lyrics will influence much wider thinking about gender roles in society. Representation does matter, though, and I think some men and young boys could identify with the story and be influenced to create a stronger bond with similar people in their lives.” Students made many comments about songs with negative messages having a negative impact on male attitudes toward women, outdated gender roles, female empowerment, male-female working relationships and trust/vulnerability.

Students also noted that oftentimes we all sing along to songs without thinking about their lyrics or meaning, just because they are catchy. They expressed concern with a parallel action

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- that we can perpetuate negative gender stereotypes by engaging in behaviors because they are common, not because we “believe in” them. While they did not necessarily agree that positive messages passed on would improve societal views or actions in the workplace, many did express that (even passively) promoting music with negative messages could be harmful to the progress made toward equitable practices in leadership.

### Reflections of the practitioner

In Fall 2021 and 2022, students gave feedback to the instructor via student course evaluations completed toward the end of the term. Evaluations were positive overall, and many students indicated that they enjoyed having individual choices available to them within each assignment. I plan to continue to monitor student participation levels and feedback received since this is still a fairly new course and assignment. Within their discussion responses, students recognized that music is an art form – and therefore subjective and personal - and they acknowledged that people can and will interpret the lyrics in different ways.

I was quite pleased to see how the students were able to equate some of the lyrics to gendered leadership issues. The connections between societal stereotypes and issues in leadership seemed to become more tangible to many students. Several expressed concern that a song they frequently listen to in their car or at home (often with their children!) actually represented quite negative messages about gender roles or stereotypes. For some, their passive consumption of those songs was recognized as a passive reinforcement of the negative message. Since this course and exercise is offered in a graduate program, many of the students already have families of their own and enjoy learning about how current generations are changing the narrative for gendered leadership issues. Some of them expressed their gratitude for calling their attention to the meaning behind many of these popular songs and expressed a desire to be more mindful of what they put on their playlists and what their children added to theirs. Students working full-time also shared some real-world examples of how a stereotype reinforced in a song had been witnessed in action in their workplace. For example, one student analyzed the lyrics of a hip-hop song, which she summarized as “attractive women do not need to work; they just need to rely on their successful man”. She shared, “I have actually had an employer mention to me that I did not need to get a supervisory role like the person the position was given to because I have a husband and we have a two income household (as opposed to that of a single person).”

As leadership educators, we have an opportunity to respond to current events in various ways via our curriculum. By encouraging our students to look at (and listen to) their surroundings, we can help them make connections between gendered themes in music and media and gendered issues in leadership. We can show them the influence that music has on perceptions of men and women through a creative assignment. As current and future organizational leaders, understanding these connections can help students recognize how gendered issues in the workplace are often reinforced passively by the media. As they become leaders equipped to stand up for equity in various challenging situations, this awareness can help them realize the pervasiveness of some of these negative messages. This knowledge could help them lead conversations about those issues in the right direction with empathy for all parties. Rather than passively listening to the songs that play on the car radio, in the grocery store, or in the waiting room, students who engaged in this exercise are more equipped to take a moment to find the leadership lessons available specifically through a lyrical lens.

### Recommendations

Anecdotally, students seem to enjoy this assignment. The opportunity to select a popular song (from the genre of their choice) allows the students to enjoy a bit of autonomy and freedom in their course work.

Additional future applications of this concept could be accomplished in many ways other than analyzing a Top 100 song. Instructors could task students with identifying and analyzing gendered themes in other media such as television shows, movies, books, plays, musicals and YouTube videos/channels (music-related or otherwise). It could be particularly interesting to ask students to analyze the themes present in different eras or intended for different audiences. For example, the gender roles and themes portrayed in *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Brady Bunch* would likely contrast sharply with those portrayed in *Friends* or *Modern Family*. Additionally, gender roles portrayed in cartoons and other shows intended for an audience of young children may or may not contrast with those portrayed in programming intended for adults. As previously noted, mainstream media content significantly impacts social identity and students can benefit from deconstructing the elements of the content they consume as they form (or evolve) their understanding of gendered issues in leadership.

The practice in this paper describes how the assignment was implemented in an online course. However, this could be carried out in a face-to-face course as a discussion activity. Students could each take turns presenting a song to the class (individually or in a group) and then discuss the gendered themes that emerge and how they view them based on their own experiences. Instructors can guide students to express how they see these issues connecting with (well-researched) gendered leadership issues that manifest in organizations. Alternatively, instructors could expand the assignment and ask students to write a follow-up paper after the discussion to analyze the connections made by the class between gendered themes in song lyrics and gendered issues in leadership. This would allow students to further explore the ways media passively reinforces or refutes gender stereotypes and help them recognize ways their own implicit biases (and those of organizational leaders) are perpetuated.

Learning to identify and address gender issues in leadership can help students prepare to take on real-world challenges as they rise through the ranks in their careers. Exercising their skills in critical thinking about the way these issues are created and reinforced is an impactful way to prepare them for those challenges.

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