Today's Divide in Country Music: Is It Justified?

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Abstract

The definition of the country music genre is a highly debated topic in the current country music world. What is considered 'real' country music and what is not? Many argue that a majority of the music that is released under the country genre today is not truly country music because it strays from the traditional country sound and style. This leads to the big question of what truly is the difference between traditional country music and newer country music, or if there even is a difference at all. This project is going to analyze these questions to come upon a solution.

To answer all of these questions, I will use the Spotify API to analyze various country songs from each of the two categories to see if there really is a significant difference and to see if there is a reason why many argue that today's popular country is not actually country.

Methodology

In my project, I analyzed two separate playlists divided by traditional country artists and newer, popular country artists. The first playlist is made up of what many consider to be traditional country music. This playlist is composed of artists such as George Strait, Jimmy Buffet, Glen Campbell, Johnny Cash, and Chris Stapleton. I then created another playlist based on what is considered to be the new country music of today. This playlist is composed of artists such as Kane Brown, Sam Hunt, Dylan Scott, Kelsea Ballerini, and Thomas Rhett. Each of these playlists were made by taking a few of the most popular songs from each artist based on the number of plays listed on Spotify.

I used the Spotify API to download these playlists and compare the two via pre-determined metrics given by Spotify. In Spotify's database, each song is given a rating in its acousticness, danceability, duration, energy, instrumentalness, key, liveness, loudness, mode, speechiness, tempo, time signature, and valence. After extracting this data for each song, I used Google Collab and the Spotipy package to average the ratings for all of the songs in each category and then compare them across the two playlists.

Results

After importing the data we can run some preliminary analyses. For all of the measurements calculated, there is a category for 'New Country,' 'Traditional Country' (this is referred to as "trad" in the data), and an average over all of the songs in the dataset. First, we took the average of each metric over all of the songs in each category in addition to the average of all of the songs. This is depicted in Figure 1. (See references for an explanation of each metric.)
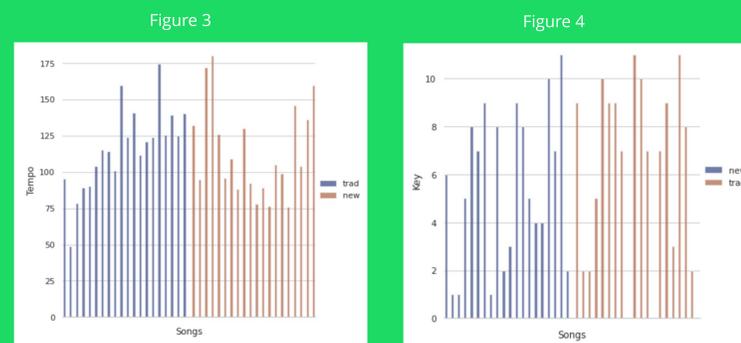
Figure 1

|	both	new	trad
acousticness	0.24147	0.15043	0.33251
danceability	0.62260	0.61330	0.63190
duration_ms	202798.37500	193862.05000	211734.70000
energy	0.65337	0.71675	0.59000
instrumentalness	0.00089	0.00000	0.00178
key	5.80000	5.55000	6.05000
liveness	0.16642	0.12841	0.20443
loudness	-7.62260	-5.69820	-9.54700
mode	0.87500	0.85000	0.90000
speechiness	0.03909	0.04532	0.03286
tempo	115.27528	114.46090	116.08965
time_signature	3.97500	4.00000	3.95000
valence	0.61073	0.56525	0.65620

In Figure 1, we see the differences between each of the song categories. All metrics with the exception of key, loudness, time signature, and duration take on values between 0 and 1. For each of these metrics, higher the value, the more likely it is that the certain metric describes the data. For example, when looking at the 'acousticness' metric, traditional country songs are given a value of 0.33251 and the new country songs are given an acousticness of 0.15043. In this case, the dataset shows that traditional country songs are more acoustic than the new country songs. Then, we can plot the metrics that range from 0 to 1 to visualize the data. See Figure 2 below.
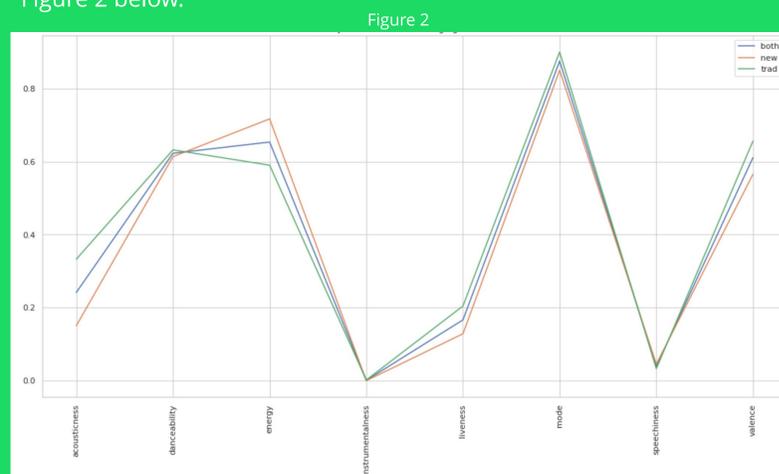
Figure 2

Now that we have looked at all metrics that are comparable on the same plot in Figure 2, we can look to the other metrics that take on other values, tempo, key, loudness, and time signature. In Figures 3 and 4 we can see the comparison of the tempo and key metrics, respectively.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Here, we see that both the tempo and key seem to be similar across the two categories. This is validated by the values of each metric in Figure 1. In Figure 1, the numeric averages show that these metrics are similar in this dataset. We can also look at the duration and the loudness in each category to visualize the data. See this in Figures 5 and 6, respectively, below.
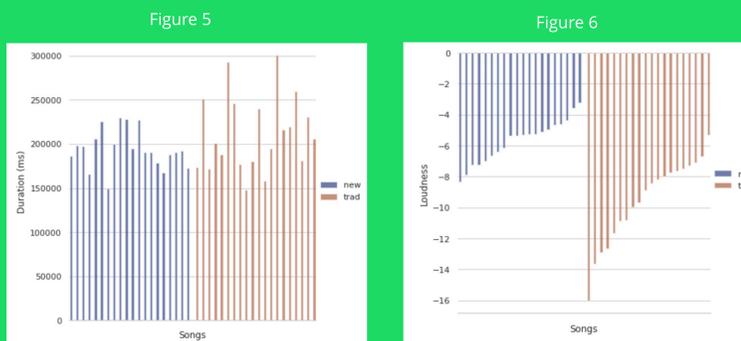
Figure 5

Figure 6

In Figure 5, we see that the durations between the new and traditional country are similar, however the traditional country songs tend to be longer in duration. We must also take into account the the duration time is in milliseconds. In Figure 6, we analyze the difference in loudness in each category. All values of loudness are shown as negative. For this metric, the closer to zero the value is, the louder it is. Thus in this plot, we see there is a clear tendency for the new country music to be louder as all the values are "less negative" than the songs in the traditional country category. In looking at all of the figures combined, there seems to be noticeable differences in the acousticness, energy, liveness, and loudness.

It is important to note that there seems to be variation within the categories especially when we analyze each metric individually. This could be due to the nature the playlists were made. This could also be explained due to the current trends of today's music.

Discussion

As we see in the graphs to the left, there are a few significant differences between traditional country and newer country. In the various statistics given to us, we find that the metrics that are significantly different between the two categories are acousticness, energy, liveness, valence, and loudness. As music trends change throughout time, the respective metrics will naturally follow that shift. The change between the traditional and new style of country is consistent with the current trends. Today's music tends to be very loud and upbeat while traditional country tends to be more laid back and slow. In this dataset, we cannot say if the difference is due to the natural progression of country music or if it's due to the societal norms to stay relevant. In order to make such a conclusion, we need to analyze more data.

With that being said, there is not enough evidence to show if new country music and the traditional country music are truly different. However, the main difference would present itself in the way one defines country music. If the listener likes country songs so that they can listen to a raw acoustic melody, then they would most likely prefer to listen to traditional country music. The opposite also applies towards new country music lovers.

If I had more time to explore this question, I would use a much larger dataset composed of more artists and in addition to analyzing other genres. I would do this so that I can compare across genres while also ruling out signs of chance within that dataset.

Acknowledgements/Resources

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Explanation of Each Metric:
https://developer.spotify.com/documentation/web-api/reference/#/operations/get-audio-analysis

Examples of Plots to Use:
https://www.kaggle.com/ludovicocuoghi/spotify-top-100-streamed-songs-analysis

Analysis of the History of Country Music:
https://shibbolethsp.jstor.org/start?entityID=https%3A%2F%2Fsso.kenyon.edu%2Fidp%2Fshibboleth&dest=https://www.jstor.org/stable/25652231&site=jstor