Original Article

Evolution of Popular Music: Analyzing Two Decades of Shifts in the Billboard Top 10 (2003–23)

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Abstract - The landscape of popular music has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, reflecting broader cultural and societal shifts. While previous studies have explored the evolution of music, the distinct differences between 2003 and 2023—marked by the rise of social media and digital streaming—warrant a focused examination of these two periods. This study aims to analyze the shifts in the Billboard Top 10 charts between 2003 and 2023, examining changes in artist ethnicity, age, type, song duration, tempo, genre, and vocal pitch. Employing a quantitative approach, the study collects data from publicly available sources, including Spotify and music classification platforms, and utilizes visualizations to illustrate key trends. The findings reveal a marked increase in ethnic diversity and a wider age range among artists, indicating a more inclusive representation in popular music. The decline of bands in favor of solo artists aligns with changes in music consumption patterns driven by digital platforms. At the same time, shorter song durations and varied tempos reflect audience preferences shaped by streaming algorithms. Additionally, the fluidity of genre boundaries and the prominence of higher-pitched vocals suggest evolving aesthetic preferences in contemporary music. These results carry significant implications for the music industry, emphasizing the need for record labels and producers to adapt their strategies in response to shifting demographics and consumption habits. By acknowledging these trends, the industry can better support diverse voices and redefine what constitutes mainstream music in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Keywords - Billboard Top 10, Music trends, Popular music, Streaming Algorithms, Song characteristics.

1. Introduction

Music is a dynamic art form that continuously evolves, reflecting its time's cultural, social, and technological contexts. Music morphs across eras, genres, and geographies to mirror changing societal values, listener preferences, and music production and distribution advancements. The reasons behind these shifts are multifaceted. Listeners' tastes and preferences are shaped by numerous factors such as age, demographics, cultural trends, and exposure to global influences. For instance, the rise of digital streaming platforms has democratized music access, influencing what people listen to and how they discover new artists and genres. This shift has been amplified by the internet, where social media algorithms and viral content can rapidly propel certain songs or artists to global fame, a phenomenon not possible in the pre-digital era. At the same time, artists and producers are influenced by the sociocultural, economic, political, and technological environments they find themselves in. The music of the 1960s, for example, was shaped by political movements and the countercultural revolution. In comparison, the 1980s saw a surge in electronic music driven by technological advancements in synthesizers and drum machines. In the 2000s, digital software and production tools revolutionized music-making, allowing artists to experiment with new sounds and genres. Today, the proliferation of digital tools and platforms like social media, YouTube, and Spotify shapes not only the creation but also the distribution and promotion of music. As a result, music remains in a state of perpetual evolution, adapting to both the changing motivations of creators and consumers' shifting tastes. These platforms encourage cross-genre collaborations, leading to new hybrid genres and expanding the musical landscape. Various studies have sought to analyze the evolution of music over time, exploring both qualitative and quantitative changes in musical styles, themes, and production techniques. For example, a study conducted analyzing the harmonic and timbral evolution of Western popular music from 1955 to 2010 revealed a trend toward homogenization in terms of chord progressions and timbral diversity.[1] Similarly, another researcher conducted a large-scale analysis of Billboard Hot 100 songs from 1960 to 2010 to understand musical evolution and genre formation patterns, identifying three significant revolutions in popular music corresponding to the rise of rock, hip-hop, and electronic music.[2] These studies highlight how musical characteristics such as harmony, melody, and rhythm have shifted in response to cultural and technological changes.

More recently, research has examined the role of streaming services in shaping music trends, noting the rise of shorter, more repetitive songs designed to cater to streaming algorithms and listener habits that favor instant gratification and high replayability. While these studies provide valuable insights into the transformation of music over the decades, they often focus on broad patterns and miss the nuanced aspects that could better capture how contemporary music contrasts with past decades. Despite the wealth of research on the evolution of music, there remains a gap in understanding how specific characteristics—such as artist demographics, song duration, tempo, genre, and pitch—have evolved in recent years, particularly when comparing specific eras. Existing literature often overlooks a direct, comparative analysis of distinct time periods in popular music and how these shifts reflect broader cultural and societal changes. For instance, while there is extensive research on the rise of hip-hop or the impact of digital platforms, there is limited exploration of how these broader changes translate into specific musical characteristics and artist profiles within defined periods. Understanding how music and musical tastes have evolved is crucial for several reasons.

First, music is a powerful cultural artifact that reflects and shapes social norms, values, and identities. By examining changes in popular music over the past two decades, we can gain insights into broader societal shifts, including changes in generational preferences, technological advancements' impact on music consumption, and evolving trends in diversity and representation within the music industry. For instance, analyzing the changing demographics of artists dominating the charts could provide insights into progress in diversity and inclusion in the music industry. Additionally, such an analysis could provide valuable data for artists, producers, and marketers to understand current trends and predict future music direction.

Insights from this study could inform how record labels and artists approach marketing, genre experimentation, and audience engagement in a highly digital and globalized music ecosystem. This study aims to compare the Billboard Top 10 songs of 2003 and 2023 by analyzing the artist's age, ethnicity, type, song duration, tempo, genre, and pitch. This comparison seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how popular music and tastes have evolved over the past two decades, reflecting shifts in cultural, social, and technological contexts. Insights from this study can shed light on the music industry's past trends and potential future directions in an era shaped by digital consumption, globalization, and cross-cultural influences.

2. Methodology
2.1. Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to analyze the evolution of popular music in the US for the past two decades, as seen through the US Billboard Top 10 Charts in 2003 and 2023. The study's objective is to understand how popular artists and popular music have shifted for this period.

The following are the specific objectives of the study:
- To explore changes in the ethnic composition of popular artists in the past two decades.
- To document changes in the age of popular artists in the past two decades.
- To explore shifts in band culture in the past two decades.
- To understand the impact of short-form content on the duration of popular songs in the past two decades.
- To identify changes in popular music's tempo, genre and pitch in the past two decades.

2.2. Research Design

This study adopts a longitudinal research design, focusing on the evolution of popular music in the US by analyzing trends in the Billboard Top 10 charts over a 20-year period from 2003 to 2023. The Billboard Top 10 is widely recognized as a key indicator of popular music, offering a reliable reflection of mainstream musical trends. This chart was chosen due to its long-standing reputation and the comprehensive methodology Billboard uses to rank songs, which includes a combination of streaming data, sales, and radio airplay. The 2003 to 2023 time period was selected to capture significant shifts in the music industry, particularly in response to changes in technology, streaming platforms, and the rise of social media. This time frame also allows for examining cultural shifts that have influenced both the artists and the music they produce.

For the analysis, various graphs and visualizations were utilized to clearly present the findings across different variables. These visual aids allow for a more intuitive understanding of the changes in music characteristics and artist demographics over the two decades. The analysis is exploratory in nature, documenting trends and patterns in popular music, such as changes in artist composition, song duration, and musical attributes like tempo, genre, and pitch.

2.3. Variable and Data Collection

The study examines seven key variables to explore the evolution of popular music and artists. These variables were carefully chosen to reflect shifts in both the artists themselves and the musical content.
1. Artist Ethnicity: The ethnic composition of the artists was recorded to identify trends in representation over time. Each artist's ethnicity was categorized based on publicly available information, such as biographical details from trusted sources like IMDb and Wikipedia.
2. Artist Age: The age of each artist when their song appeared in the Billboard Top 10 was documented to analyze shifts in age demographics among popular artists. This information was readily available through websites such as IMDb and Wikipedia, from which it was collected.

3. Artist Type: This variable classifies whether the act was a solo artist, a band, or a collaboration. The data on artist type were collected from the official Billboard website, with further categorization based on the researcher's judgment, supported by additional information from Wikipedia. This classification helps explore trends in the popularity of solo artists compared to bands and collaborations.

4. Song Duration: The length of each song was measured in minutes and seconds to document changes in song duration over time, particularly in response to the rise of short-form content platforms. Data on song duration were collected from Spotify.

5. Song Tempo: The tempo of each song was measured in Beats Per Minute (BPM) to examine whether popular songs have become faster or slower over time. Data related to BPM were sourced from the music platform Tunebat.

6. Song Genre: Each song was categorized into its primary genre (e.g., pop, hip-hop, rock) to explore shifts in genre dominance within the Billboard Top 10. The genre data were obtained from Sonoteller.ai, a platform that categorizes music based on shared characteristics like style and cultural influence.

7. Song Pitch: Vocal pitch, a fundamental element of melody and harmony, was analyzed to capture changes in popular music's perceived highness or lowness of sounds. Songs were categorized as either low/mid-pitch or mid/high pitch. Data on song pitch were collected from Sonoteller.ai.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1. Artist Ethnicity

Fig. 1 Distribution of Songs based on Artist Ethnicity

The Billboard Top 10 charts analysis reveals a notable shift in ethnic diversity among artists from 2003 to 2023. In 2003, the charts predominantly featured American and African American artists, with 50% of the Top 10 composed of African American artists, 40% American artists, and 10% Jamaican artists. In contrast, the 2023 charts showcase a more diverse range of ethnicities. This shift highlights a broader representation of ethnic backgrounds in mainstream music. The increased ethnic diversity observed in the Billboard Top 10 charts from 2003 to 2023 can be attributed to several key factors. First, the rise of digital platforms and streaming services has dramatically expanded the reach of international music. Platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube have made it easier for artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds to gain global recognition, thereby influencing mainstream music charts.[3] Additionally, there has been a noticeable increase in cross-cultural collaborations in the music industry. Artists from different backgrounds increasingly work together, blending various musical styles and creating new, hybrid sounds that resonate with a broader audience. This trend not only introduces diverse influences into mainstream music but also amplifies the visibility of artists from various ethnic backgrounds. Audience preferences have also evolved, with listeners demonstrating greater openness to various musical styles and cultural influences. This shift in consumer tastes has led to a more inclusive representation on the charts as music from different ethnic backgrounds gains popularity. Furthermore, the music industry has become more focused on diversity and representation, with increased advocacy for equitable opportunities for artists from underrepresented backgrounds. This cultural shift has contributed to a more balanced representation of ethnicities in mainstream music. As a result, the Billboard charts now reflect a richer and more varied array of musical talent, illustrating a broader trend towards inclusivity and global integration in the music industry.
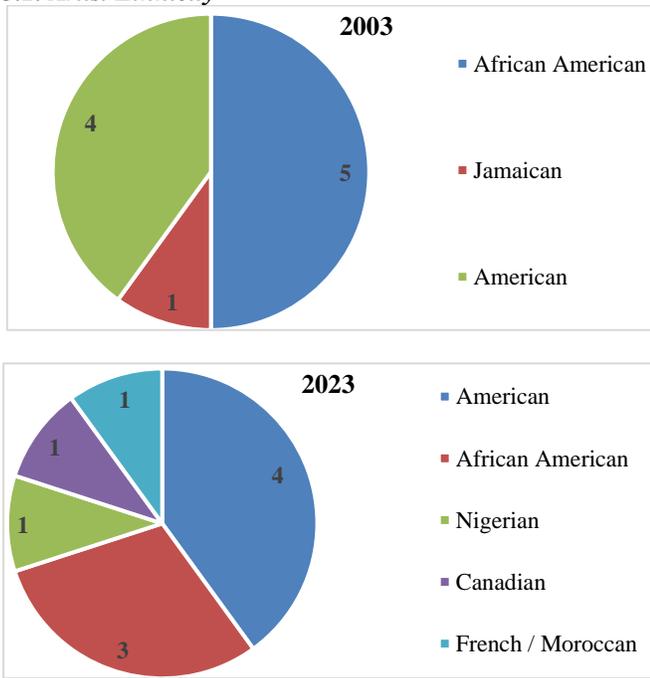
3.2. Artist Age
The demographic distribution of artists in the Billboard Top 10 has experienced a notable shift from 2003 to 2023. In 2003, the age range of artists featured in the Top 10 was relatively narrow, predominantly spanning from 22 to 36 years. Six out of the ten artists were in their 20s, highlighting a strong preference for younger performers during that period. The remaining four artists were in their 30s, suggesting that while youthful talent was prominent, there was still a significant representation of more experienced artists. By 2023, the age range of artists in the Billboard Top 10 had expanded dramatically, now including ages from 21 to 54 years. This significant increase in the age range reflects several underlying changes in the music industry. Furthermore, the changing age profile of Billboard Top 10 artists also mirrors the evolving demographics of the music audience. As the audience has become more diverse in age, their musical preferences have broadened, accommodating artists from a wider range of age groups.
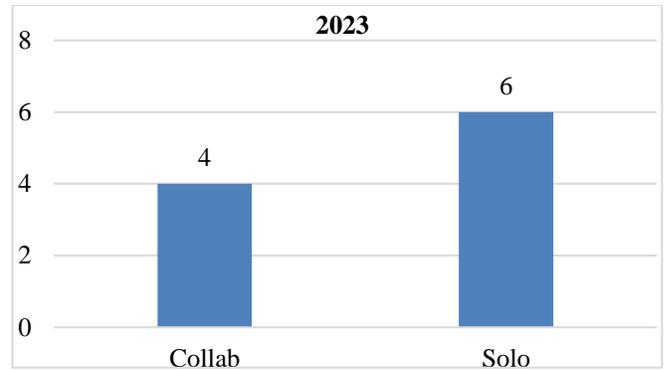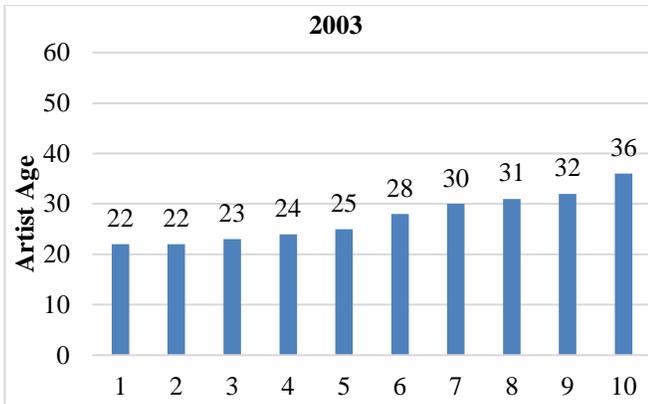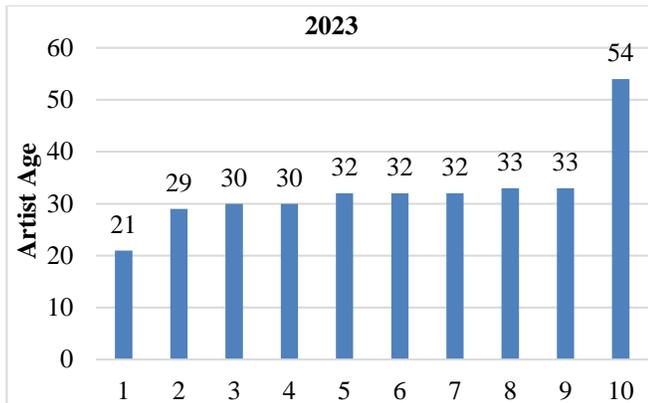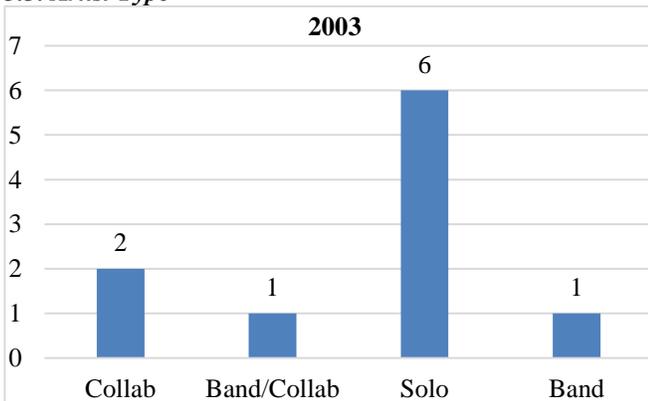
2003

2023

Fig. 2 Distribution of Songs based on Artist Age

The presence of artists in their 40s and 50s in the Top 10 suggests that listeners are increasingly receptive to music from older performers, reflecting a shift towards a more inclusive and varied music consumption pattern. Additionally, the expanded age range of artists may indicate a longer career span for musicians. Advances in music production, marketing, and fan engagement strategies have contributed to longer-lasting careers, allowing artists to remain relevant and successful well into their 40s and beyond. This shift towards extended career trajectories is a testament to the evolving landscape of the music industry, where longevity and sustained success are increasingly achievable.

3.3. Artist Type

2003

2023

Fig. 3 Distribution of Songs based on Artist Type

The composition of solo artists and bands in the Billboard Top 10 has undergone a dramatic transformation from 2003 to 2023. In 2003, bands still held a notable presence on the charts, with two bands securing spots in the Top 10. This presence of bands indicates that the band culture remained influential during this period, contributing significantly to the popular music landscape. However, solo artists dominated the charts, occupying six of the ten positions, which points to a clear preference for individual performers at the time. Additionally, the emergence of a few collaborations suggested an increasing trend toward artist partnerships, indicating a gradual shift in the industry towards more collaborative efforts. In stark contrast, by 2023, the Billboard Top 10 saw a complete absence of bands. This shift highlights a significant change in the music industry's dynamics over the two decades. The disappearance of bands from the Top 10 reflects a broader trend towards solo performances and individual artistry. Several factors contribute to this shift. The rise of digital platforms and social media has allowed solo artists to build and engage with their fan bases more effectively, reducing the reliance on bands as a vehicle for achieving chart success. Furthermore, the changing preferences of the audience, who may now favor the personal connection and direct engagement offered by solo artists, likely play a role in this trend. The shift away from bands also underscores the evolving nature of music production and promotion. Solo artists have adapted to the new industry landscape by leveraging digital tools for music distribution and fan interaction, which may have contributed to their increased visibility and success on the charts.[4] The complete absence of bands in the Top 10 by 2023 signifies a transformative period in the music industry, where individual talent and solo careers have become the predominant force in shaping popular music.

3.4. Song Duration

The average duration of songs in the Billboard Top 10 has shown a notable decrease from 2003 to 2023. In 2003, the average song length in the Top 10 was 3 minutes and 54 seconds. This longer average duration reflects a period when songs often featured more elaborate structures and extended instrumental sections, typical of the era's musical style. By 2023, the average duration of songs in the Billboard Top 10 had decreased to 3 minutes and 24 seconds. This reduction in

song length indicates a significant shift in musical trends over the two decades. Several factors contribute to this change. One major factor is the evolving consumption habits of listeners. With the rise of digital streaming platforms, there has been an increased emphasis on shorter, more immediate content that fits the fast-paced nature of modern media consumption.[5,6,7] Shorter songs are often more suited to playlists and streaming algorithms, which prioritize brevity and catchiness to maintain listener engagement.[8,9] Another contributing factor is the changing structure of popular music. Contemporary music trends favor concise, impactful tracks that quickly capture the listener's attention.

This trend is reflected in the decreased average song length as artists adapt their music to align with current preferences for shorter, more platform-friendly formats. Additionally, the shift towards shorter song durations may also be influenced by the success of genres and styles that emphasize brevity. For example, genres like pop and electronic dance music often feature shorter tracks that focus on delivering high energy and memorable hooks, aligning with the current preferences of mainstream audiences.

3.5. Song Tempo

The comparison of song tempos (measured in Beats Per Minute, BPM) between the top 10 Billboard chart songs from 2003 and 2023 shows a noticeable shift in tempo preferences. In 2003, the tempos ranged from 81 BPM to 148 BPM, with the majority of songs clustered between 90 and 110 BPM. In 2023, the tempos ranged from 67 BPM to a much higher 204 BPM, with a broader spread and an overall higher variation in tempos. While 2003 had a slightly more moderate tempo range, 2023 includes more extreme values on the slower end (67 BPM) and the faster end (204 BPM), indicating greater tempo diversity. The shift in tempos between 2003 and 2023 suggests changing trends in popular music. In 2003, songs tended to have more moderate tempos, with most tracks ranging between 90 and 110 BPM, which aligns with the pop and R&B trends prevalent during that time. These tempos reflect a steady, danceable rhythm common in mainstream music during the early 2000s.
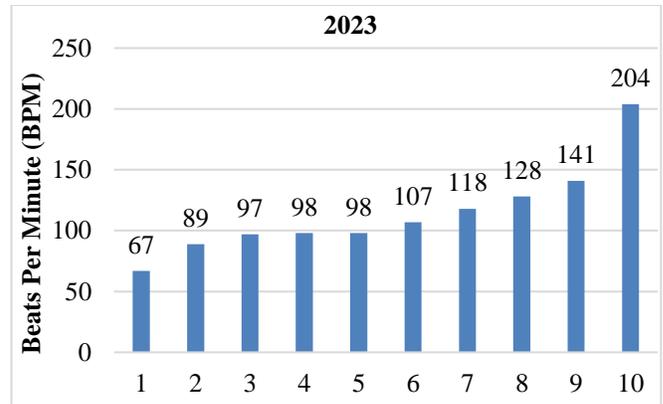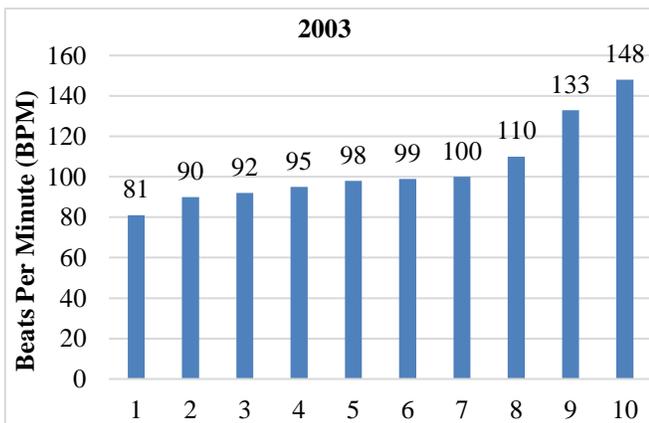
Fig. 4 Distribution of Songs based on Tempo (BPM)

In contrast, by 2023, there will be a noticeable increase in the tempo spectrum's lower and upper bounds. Including both slower tracks (67 BPM) and significantly faster ones (204 BPM) suggests that modern popular music embraces a wider variety of rhythmic styles. This could be due to the influence of various genres, such as Electronic Dance Music (EDM), trap, and hyperpop, which have gained significant popularity. Faster tempos, like the 204 BPM track, are likely driven by high-energy, electronic-influenced music. In comparison, slower tempos may reflect the rise of more introspective or laid-back genres like lo-fi and contemporary R&B. The diversity in tempo in 2023 could also reflect the impact of digital platforms like TikTok, where song segments with different tempos may trend based on viral moments or dance challenges. This broader range of BPMs allows for more creative flexibility in the way songs are produced and consumed in the digital age. Overall, the results suggest that while the core elements of tempo in popular music have remained somewhat consistent, there has been an expansion in the range of what is considered mainstream, with a noticeable shift towards more diversity in tempo across the charts in 2023.

3.6. Song Genre

The analysis of song genres in the Billboard Top 10 from 2003 to 2023 reveals significant shifts in both audience preferences and industry trends. In 2003, the genre distribution was quite balanced, with Rock, R&B, and Hip-Hop each comprising 30% of the Top 10. Pop and Dancehall were less dominant, each accounting for 10%. This spread indicates that the early 2000s music landscape was diverse, with Rock bands like 3 Doors Down and Matchbox Twenty in their prime and Hip-Hop/R&B artists strongly represented in the charts. At this time, no single genre overwhelmingly dominated, and listeners' tastes were distributed across multiple genres. By 2023, however, this balance had shifted dramatically. Pop music had surged to become the most dominant genre, representing 50% of the Top 10. The rise of Pop reflects the genre's ability to appeal to a wide audience, offering what can be described as "easier," more accessible sounds that suit the mainstream market and align with the

demands of digital streaming platforms. In contrast, rock, once a strong presence in 2003, had almost entirely disappeared from the Top 10 by 2023, marking a pronounced decline in its mainstream appeal. This decline might reflect changes in music production and consumption, where radio-friendly Pop is increasingly favored for streaming and audiences have shifted towards genres that offer immediate, digestible content. Interestingly, R&B and Country music each made up 20% of the 2023 Top 10, suggesting that while some traditional genres like rock have faded, others have experienced a resurgence. The rise of Country, in particular, can be attributed to artists like Morgan Wallen and Luke Combs, who have successfully crossed over into the Pop market by incorporating pop and rock elements into their music. This hybridization of genres, where Country borrows from Pop and R&B intersects with Hip-Hop, highlights how genre lines have blurred over the years. These shifts illustrate how audiences today are more open to genre fusion, making it easier for artists to reach a wider fanbase. The decline of Hip-Hop in the Top 10 from its 30% share in 2003 is also notable, though it is important to recognize that the boundaries between Hip-Hop and R&B have become increasingly fluid. Many contemporary artists work across both genres, making it difficult to categorize songs strictly as Hip-Hop or R&B. This blurring of genre distinctions reflects a broader trend in the music industry, where hybrid genres and experimental sounds have become more common.
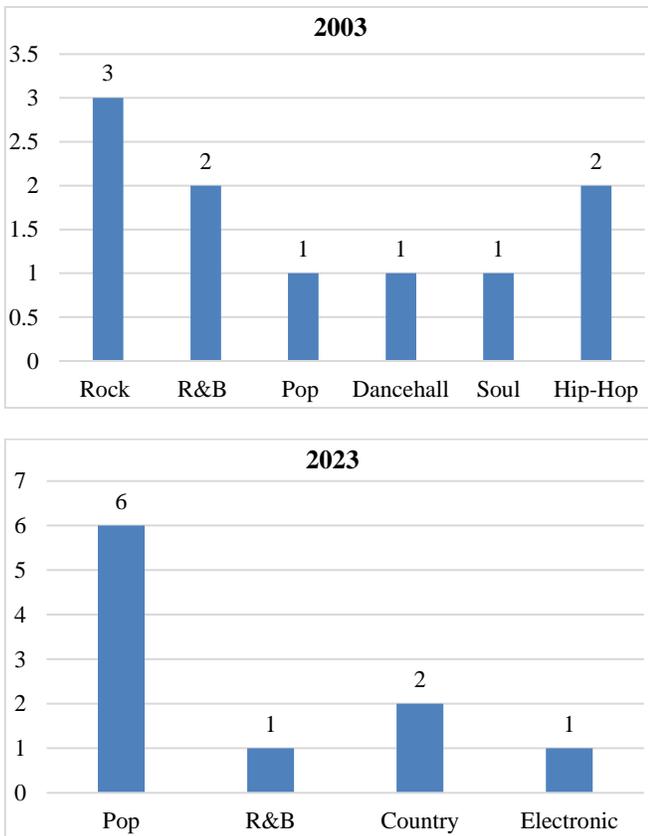

Fig. 5 Distribution of Songs based on genre

3.7. Song Pitch

The research reveals a shift in vocal pitch preferences in popular music from 2003 to 2023. In the early 21st century, lower/mid-pitched vocals and traditional pop singing styles were predominant in the Billboard Top 10, with six out of ten songs in 2003 falling into the lower/mid-pitch category. These deeper vocal tones were more reflective of the musical trends of the time, particularly in genres like Rock, R&B, and Hip-Hop, characterized by more grounded and somber tones. By 2023, this landscape had shifted, with higher-pitched, more relaxed singing styles gaining popularity.[10] Only three songs in the 2023 Billboard Top 10 were categorized as low/mid-pitch, while the majority—seven songs—were mid/high pitch. This shift can be attributed to the growing dominance of trap, hip-hop, and indie pop genres, which often favor brighter, more energetic vocals. The rise of these genres and the popularity of Pop and Electronic music have contributed to the broader use of higher pitches in mainstream music.
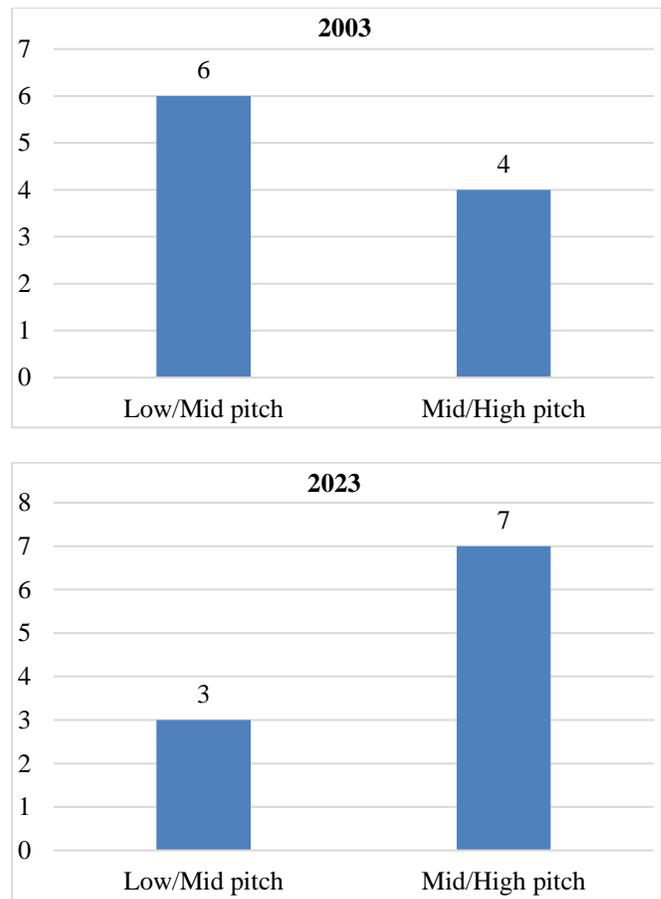

Fig. 6 Distribution of Songs based on pitch

Several factors explain this transformation in vocal styles. First, the rise of streaming services has diversified listener preferences, leading to greater demand for genres that emphasize energetic, expressive, and often higher-pitched vocals. As streaming platforms shape music consumption, shorter, more immediate content is preferred, which aligns

with the upbeat, catchy nature of mid/high-pitch songs. Second, advancements in music production technology have allowed artists to experiment more freely with vocal ranges and pitch modulation. This flexibility has encouraged musicians to explore new sonic landscapes and reach wider audiences through innovative vocal techniques. Lastly, a cultural shift has occurred in how music is consumed and appreciated. While lower-pitched, conversational tones were once favored for their somber and introspective qualities, contemporary audiences are drawn to more dynamic, versatile vocals that resonate with themes of honesty and reflection. This movement away from the joyful, polished pop vocals of the early 2000s reflects broader societal trends towards authenticity and emotional depth in music.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze shifts in the Billboard Top 10 charts between 2003 and 2023, focusing on artist demographics, song characteristics, and musical trends. The findings reveal significant changes in popular music that have broader implications for the industry, artist representation, and audience engagement. The increased ethnic diversity and wider age range among artists indicate that popular music is becoming more inclusive, reflecting a globalized audience. This evolution challenges traditional norms of "mainstream" artists, pushing music labels to embrace a broader spectrum of voices and cultural perspectives. The decline of bands and the rise of solo artists mirror changes in music consumption and marketing driven by digital platforms that emphasize personal branding. This shift could lead to more ad-hoc collaborations rather than long-term band identities, signaling a future where fluid artist partnerships dominate the charts. Shorter song durations and varied tempos reflect the impact of digital streaming and shorter attention spans. As listeners gravitate towards instantly engaging tracks, artists and producers may continue to innovate song structures to align with algorithm-driven consumption patterns. The blending of genres, especially the fusion of Pop, Hip-Hop, R&B, and Country, suggests that genre boundaries are dissolving. This trend presents opportunities for artists to reach broader audiences but also calls for re-evaluating how success is defined across different musical categories. The prominence of higher-pitched vocals reflects evolving aesthetic preferences, likely influenced by vocal processing technologies. This trend raises questions about the balance between technology-driven changes and authentic vocal performance, shaping future music production. Despite these insights, the study is limited by its focus on the Billboard Top 10, excluding global music trends and factors like lyrical content or social media influence. Future research could expand on these areas, offering a more comprehensive view of popular music's evolution.

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