



The Music Industry's Best-Kept Secret? A Gender Creativity Gap



By Noah Askin , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Female solo artists are more likely to put out more creative songs than their male counterparts. The key question is why. Gender inequality and representation in the industry may hold the answer.

Do the Muses see gender? Historically, these archetypal feminine figures of inspiration were known for igniting the spark of genius within male creative artists. In reality, however, genuinely inspired work in creative fields may more often come from women – or so some of my current research^[1] on creativity in the music industry suggests.

It isn't a matter of chromosomes. **Study** after **study** has failed to find any innate difference in creative potential between men and women. Rather, any comparison between male and female output in the creative arts has to be grounded in social context. Like **most other glamour industries**, music has a **serious problem with gender inequality**: To wit, women make up

less than one quarter of the artists in the industry, and comprise but a tiny fraction of producers and label executives. Our study finds that the complex effects of underrepresentation may help explain women's creativity advantage, and why it hasn't improved women's relative standing in the industry.

Measuring creativity

My prior research into [what makes a hit song](#) revealed that achieving an optimal degree of (sonic) differentiation from the rest of the pop charts is likely to lead to greater chart success. The idea is to stand out, but not so much that a song will alienate lots of listeners. The quest for novelty within highly formalised genres, then, is a major aspect of both creative and professional success in popular music.

To draw connections between the creativity of individual songs and the gender composition of their makers, we used a unique dataset comprising more than 250,000 songs composed and performed by 15,000 unique solo artists. The songs were all released between 1955 and 2000 – before the full-blown fusion of music and the internet lowered the barrier to entry for music distribution. We wanted our results to purely reflect the working culture of music labels at their uncontested height in the industry's pre-digital heyday.

With the help of music intelligence firm The Echo Nest, whose **data-driven solutions** parent company Spotify uses to construct playlists, we analysed song novelty based on the acoustic attributes and features of each song. The Echo Nest employs natural language processing and machine learning to develop unique “audio fingerprints”, so that pieces of music can be identified and compared according to a set of aural, emotional and technical criteria.

We also used song credit information from crowdsourced database [MusicBrainz](#) to determine how many women and men worked on the writing, production and performance of each song.

Creativity and the others around you (or not around you)

At first glance, our overall results appear quite simple. In line with past research on creativity, we find no baseline relationship between the novelty of the songs in our sample and the gender identity of the artists involved. Men and women appear to be equally capable in terms of creativity.

But when we controlled for genre and, importantly, the gender composition of artists' genres, the picture changed. Our methods were guided by an awareness that women in music work in a different context than men do: By a kind of gender-slanted gravitational pull, the music industry drives women into certain genres (e.g. pop) and collaborative networks. The genres with comparatively higher proportions of female artists (e.g. pop, disco, gospel) tend to be those that have less sonic novelty on average, while those with lower female representation (e.g. jazz, classical) tend to have greater sonic novelty. As genres dictate a lot about how an artist can sound, such sorting suggests that female artists are more limited in what they can produce. A fair comparison, then, would control for the normative restrictions enforced by these gendered enclaves.

Once we did so, female artists came out ahead creatively. The results are not dramatic – everyone is still operating within the bounds of what music can be released by labels – but they are consistent in showing more creative output by female artists.

Interestingly, we found some evidence that men associated with female-gendered genres experienced the deepest creative decline of all. Conversely, men who collaborated with women (a surprisingly small proportion of the total) experienced a boost in originality – yet more evidence for the [creative benefits of diversity](#).

Putting it all together, my co-authors and I suggest the following: Contact with female musicians gives male artists a creative boost but being associated with female artists hampers creative output. We intentionally use the passive voice for the latter because the results suggest that the effects are strongest for male artists in “female” genres. While women in these genres are hemmed in creatively by the genre restrictions, their male genre-mates struggle even more to achieve optimal novelty within their confines.

Will the industry learn?

While men and women possess similar innate creativity, women who manage to clear the higher bar set for them by a biased industry will tend to be significantly stronger than the men.

Or, to let rapper [Megan Thee Stallion](#) tell it, “Women have to be the best and then some. A man can get on a track and literally make two noises and be the G.O.A.T. [greatest of all time] When you listen to a girl rap, she have

to have all the bars, all the flows, be melodic, she have to look good. They expect so much of us, and I mean, I like to work, so I'll do it.”

Women like Megan Thee Stallion have been proving themselves for generations in the music industry, yet only very recently do the powers that be appear to have [possibly caught on](#). But the issue cannot be new to them: [Outside observers](#) and [insiders](#) alike have been sounding the alarm for years. If nothing else, you would think business considerations would motivate change. We hope our research offers further support for (and incentive to) change. The dynamics within the industry stifle women’s talents in practically mandated mediocrity. Then, the relative stultification of the “female” genres is seen as proof that women can’t cut it creatively. Consequently, gender inequality continues, regardless of intentions.

Our research implies that movements for change in organisations should consider all the ways in which context – especially the gender representation of a context – influences outcomes, which in turn can “justify” standard industry practices that encode and reinforce inequality under the guise of neutrality.

[Noah Askin](#) is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the programme director of the [Product Management Executive Programme](#), one of INSEAD’s Executive Education programmes.

Don’t miss our latest content. Download the free [INSEAD Knowledge app](#) today.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

[1] Research in progress with co-authors Sharon Koppman of the Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine, Michael Mauskopf of Columbia Business School and Brian Uzzi of Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/music-industrys-best-kept-secret-gender-creativity-gap>

About the author(s)

Noah Askin is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the programme director of the **Product Management Executive Programme**, one of INSEAD's Executive Education programmes.

About the series

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States and protests in over 60 countries, global attention to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) has experienced a long-overdue resurgence. As the need for more inclusive forms of leadership and culture becomes apparent, we focus here on the informed perspectives of INSEAD experts focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections. These thought leaders -- both faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice -- inform understanding of how to develop DEI and address identified DEI development needs.

Download the free Knowledge App

