

## **'Thank God He Made Me This Way': Masculinity Archetypes in 2010s Country Music**



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### **Abstract**

This article utilises Connell's multiple masculinity theory to explore how 2010s country music has reproduced the 'bro-country' masculine archetype, analysing the lyrics of 'Bait A Hook' by Justin Moore, 'Huntin', Fishin', And Lovin' Every Day' by Luke Bryan, and 'Drunk Girl' by Chris Janson. By analysing these popular country songs, I illustrate how country music presents a traditional form of masculinity that emphasises nostalgia, physical competency, and traditional gender roles for both men and women. The 2010s were a particularly significant era in country music, marking the beginning of the bro-country era and informing the parameters of this article. While women and queer country artists have become increasingly visible in the country landscape, 21st-century country music has largely reproduced bro-country masculinity, highlighting the overwhelming nostalgia country music creates for traditional hegemonic masculinity, and the role this genre plays in perpetuating associated gender norms.

### **Keywords**

*Masculinity, country, music, nostalgia, hegemonic masculinity*

### **Introduction**

While country music has existed for centuries, it has experienced massive growth in popularity, particularly in the 2010s. Consistently, the country genre is one of the most listened to in the United States and attracts an equal number of female and male listeners (Rasmussen and Densely, 2016, p. 188). In 2015, country music was the most listened-to genre among

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those aged 18-49 in the United States, accounting for 15% of all radio listening (Rasmussen and Densely, 2016, p. 188). However, country music is a genre that is hard to define. Its roots stem from a diverse collection of cultures and musical backgrounds, combining European and African influences to create a sound that primarily represents working-class communities of the folk South (Malone, 2008, p. 48). In its early days, in the late 1800s, musicians from Southern working-class backgrounds, including railroad workers, coal miners, and cowboys, drew on their dialects and experiences to produce performances reflective of their backgrounds (Malone, 2008, p. 49).

Country music has seen a transformation in content entering the 21st century. While 20th-century country music contained themes of the once 'belittled hillbilly redneck twang' and appealed to those who identified with these descriptors, it has since shifted to images of 'gator hunters, moon shiners, and down-home country cooking' while generating a fan base that is majority well-educated and spanning every corner of the United States (Reynolds, 2014, p. 68). This significant shift highlights how, from the 2010s, country music has promoted the nostalgic elements of 'traditional country living'. While past country performers sang of the hardships and experiences of a rural Southern background, today's country artists long for these rural days, yet live an economic lifestyle quite different from that of their country music forefathers. Today's country music focuses on an imagined and idealised understanding of a rural Southern life while fantasising about what it means to be a true Southern man. It is an 'orchestrated past' where times were simple and gender roles were clearly defined, 'a time that never was' (Reynolds, 2014, p. 70).

Connell defines masculinity not as a state of being, but rather as a position within gender relations, where men practice their gender in relation to others (Connell, 2020, p. 137). In another sense, masculinity is a set of practices that establish social dominance, inherently creating a gendered hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy, Connell argues, is hegemonic masculinity, 'the culture dynamic to which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life' (p. 139). In modern American society, hegemonic masculinity is defined as being dominant, heterosexual, and physically acceptable according to gendered stereotypes. Other masculinity subtypes, such as gay masculinity, are valued less in society because they are deemed non-hegemonic. Men can only establish a hegemonic masculinity through the 'correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power,' highlighting the social power gained when performing masculinity 'correctly' (Connell, 2020, p. 139). Through this framework, Connell asserts that masculinity is a plural performance that relies on the current social understandings, cultural practices, and historical contexts in which a particular masculinity is being performed, creating a multiplicity of masculinities. Therefore, men perform masculinity in diverse and unique ways based on their situated social understandings and cultural contexts.

Country music constructs a type of hegemonic masculinity that resonates with country listeners, first termed 'bro-country' in the work of Rasmussen and Densely (2016). As these scholars argue, bro-country masculinity is defined by a nostalgia for truth and tradition, a manufactured version of place, and an aversion to modern lifestyles, as developed through 2010s country music (p. 198). The masculine ideals represented in this music support conservative, traditional, and white heterosexual ideologies that are harmonious with the dominant culture of the Southern United States. While some country fans see bro-country as in opposition to current modern masculinity, in actuality, it upholds contemporary hegemonic masculinity, 'embracing a traditional-yet-stylized country identity in opposition to the urbane "metrosexual"' (Pruitt, 2019, p.2). Country musicians perform bro-country masculinity by presenting a forward-facing working-class appearance. Men in this genre wear boots, flannel shirts, and cowboy hats, using these products to embody a 'down-home' country boy (Pruitt, 2019, p. 2). These men may also present themselves as blue-collar through agrarian recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, and boating. As such, regardless of the economic situation of the musicians or listeners, men can buy into and consume a 'regular-guy' country aesthetic through their appearance and hobbies.

Typically, the bro-country man's relationship with women also relies on traditional gender norms. Within the music of this genre, women are seen as 'dependent' and 'submissive,' while men protect and provide for their female partners (Rasmussen and Densely, 2016, p. 198). The lyrics also detail heterosexual desire for women, emphasising women's physical appearance and bodies in songs. Some bro-country musicians can be viewed as even veering towards paternal dynamics with women, with men being presented as knowing better than their female counterparts. As, in tandem with movements for women's equality and destabilising gender norms, representations of masculine ideals have evolved in popular culture (Messner, 1993, p. 725), bro-country masculinity exploits nostalgia for an idealised rural Southern lifestyle, where men work outside, are the heads of households, and can live out an agrarian lifestyle very different from their reality. By listening to or creating country music, men can inhabit a quasi-reality where buying boots and driving a pickup truck is a means of asserting dominance, while these lyrics also help them commiserate with other men.

Through the lens of multiple masculinity theory (Connell, 2020), this article explores how contemporary country music reproduces the bro-country masculine archetype (Rasmussen and Densely, 2016) by analysing popular country songs, 'Bait A Hook' by Justin Moore, 'Huntin', Fishin', And Lovin' Every Day' by Luke Bryan, and 'Drunk Girl' by Chris Janson, released in the 2010s. These artists have enjoyed enormous success through these works, with Luke Bryan's 'Huntin', Fishin' and Lovin' Everyday' gaining over 225 million listens on Spotify as of 2025, and its subsequent music video attracting over 292 million viewers. Justin Moore's 'Bait a Hook' has garnered 64 million Spotify listens and 61 million views on its subsequent

music video, while Chris Janson's 'Drunk Girl' has garnered over 85 million Spotify streams and has accumulated 15 million views on its music video. These songs, recorded and performed by famous male country musicians, represent the ethos of bro-country music, reproducing dominant masculine tropes. As the analysis of these songs illustrates, country music presents a traditional form of masculinity that emphasises nostalgia, physical action, and traditional gender roles for both men and women.

### **Aversion to Modernity**

The bro-country man resists modernity, emphasising a mythologised version of traditional American life. As the 2010s saw the rapid development of progressive movements like the #MeToo Movement, the legalisation of gay marriage, and the rise of Black Lives Matter, bro-country music manufactured a version of traditional living throughout its lyrics that acted in antithesis to these experiences. For example, in 'Bait a Hook' (2011), Moore sings about a girl who has begun dating a modern, white-collar professional:

I heard you had to drive him home after two umbrella drinks  
I heard he's got a Prius 'cause he's into being green  
My buddy said he saw y'all eating that sushi stuff (Moore, 2011).

Moore's lyrics sing of a man's disgust for another man's urban presentation of masculinity. 'Two umbrella drinks' and 'being green' render this character less masculine, as they are associated with either femininity or liberalism, both of which are unwelcome in bro-country music. These lyrics position modern masculinity in opposition to bro-country, as they are both competing for the same woman. Moore's narrative presents his opponent as creating the 'degradation of those basic American values by some type of urban Other' (Reynolds, 2014, p.72). The lyrics also underscore racial tensions, with the singer, a white rural man, conflicting with an 'urban other'. In such a context, 'urban' is often conflated with people of colour and implies racialised stereotypes of what it means to be an 'urban' man, as illustrated in the singer's disdain for 'that sushi stuff' (Haymes, 1995, p. 4). Bryan's 'Huntin', Fishin', and Lovin' Everyday' (2015) echoes similar themes of rejection of urban modernity:

If I could make a nickel off a turning 'em bass  
Never worry about the price of gas  
I'd be wheelin' and dealin' and sittin' there reelin' 'em in (Bryan, 2015).

As these lyrics convey, while Bryan wishes he could participate in traditional masculine activities like fishing, modern worries, such as gas prices, seem to get in his way. This implies that contemporary economic and social contexts challenge conventional notions of country masculinity, which often involve such traditional outdoor activities. In this way, modern activities are

set in conflict with the bro-country man's nostalgic desires, creating tension between these two lifestyles. Bro-country men yearn for the experiences of their forefathers, including activities like hunting, working the land, and living simply. This is a more 'natural state' for men to exist in, while economic and societal modernity acts as the direct contradiction and opposition to these experiences. The more that modernity diminishes their abilities to perform pre-modern tasks, the more that bro-country men long for these exact experiences.

## **Relations to Women**

Bro-country masculinity uses men's relationship with women to reinforce gender stereotypes and prove their heterosexual masculinity to audiences. Country music often emphasises a traditional, chivalrous relationship with women, but this can quickly veer into a patronising and demeaning dynamic. This is illustrated in the music released by Chris Janson during the emergence of the #MeToo movement in the 2010s, in which women began publicly disclosing experiences of sexual assault and harassment, sparking global conversations around gender-based violence (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 1). Janson's response to the outpouring of sexual assault allegations amongst Nashville's music scene was his 2017 song 'Drunk Girl'. In the song, he calls on men to be men instead of boys, singing:

Leave her keys on the counter, your number by the phone  
Pick up her life she threw on the floor  
Leave the hall lights on, walk out and lock the door  
That's how she knows the difference between a boy and a man  
Take a drunk girl home (Janson, 2017).

Even while Janson set out with intentions of denying 'toxic' aspects of hegemonic masculinity like rape culture, he reaffirms traditional ideas of bro-country by creating a saviour out of a man who simply resists sexually assaulting a woman. The disparaging lyric 'pick up her life she threw on the floor' exposes Janson's honest opinions of women, and his belief that being drunk makes the woman in the song tarnished, disheveled, and careless. In this way, bro-country plays into traditional hero fantasies for men, which is perhaps unsurprising for music 'produced by, and thought to be catering to, the traditional White heterosexual male' (Rasmussen and Densley, 2016, p. 191). Similarly, in Moore's (2011) song, 'Bait a Hook,' the narrator knows more than his female counterpart, even regarding her true desires and needs. Moore suggests that she will regret her decision to be with the urbanite:

Nah, you're the one that's gonna be sorry  
When you're headin' to get tofu  
And he has a flat tire in his foreign car  
And don't know how to change it  
And you'll get your new Gucci shoes wet

And you're mad and irritated (Moore, 2011).

In Moore's song, he also demeans the female character, implying that she needs a 'real man' to help her realise the error of her ways. As the lyrics suggest, the woman will soon discover her mistake, recognising a traditional country man as the preferable partner. In the context of the song, the characters fulfill traditional heterosexual relationship dynamics. The woman is unable to change the tire, being preoccupied with her physical appearance, such as her shoes, and needs her competent male partner to assist her. In these lyrics, the woman is depicted as emotional and uptight, conventional stereotypes of a female partner. Meanwhile, changing her tire, being a practical, physical activity, is depicted as an essential skill for men and one that only they can provide. The song reaffirms both the male singer's and the male listeners' role as a provider for their female counterparts and their identity as a male partner, while conditioning their expectations of women's roles and temperament in relationships.

### **Exhibiting 'Country Competence'**

Finally, bro-country men establish masculinity through exhibiting 'country competence'. Country competence is the ability to perform traditionally rural activities, 'practical knowledge' of the outdoors, and 'their embodied outdoorsmanship' (Desmond, 2006, p. 284). Outdoorsmanship is associated with traditional masculinity, distinguishes bro-country men from their urban counterparts, and signals an agrarian background, whether or not that is a genuine component of their identity. Rather than emphasising actual competence, bro-country music focuses on exhibiting activities or physical attributes associated with country competence. In Moore's (2011) song, 'Bait a Hook,' he mocks the 'white-collar man' by ridiculing his inability to be a 'country' man:

He can't even bait a hook  
He can't even skin a buck  
He don't know who Jack Daniels is  
Ain't ever drove a truck (Moore, 2011).

Moore implements activities such as hunting, fishing, whiskey drinking, and truck driving as signifiers of bro-country masculinity. Men who are unable to perform these activities may often be considered less masculine, as their perceived incompetence in outdoor activities represents a departure from the traditional expressions of 'rural masculinity' that 'symbolically represent real men' (Sachs, 2006, p. x). In contrast, the characterisation of the 'real' man presented in bro-country music 'indicates a strong allegiance to the agrarian way of life' that is now emblematically depicted by 'pickup trucks and, ironically, activities that hasten the destruction of that down-home environment, such as four-wheeling and mud-bogging' (Reynolds, 2014, p. 72). Whether or not a man actually understands the land celebrated in this music, bro-country allows men to buy into and commodify activities that

reinforce their rural masculine identity. Similarly, in Bryan's (2015) song, 'Huntin', Fishin', and Lovin' Everyday,' he sings of 'country boys' prayers, which centre and express gratitude for their country competency:

Huntin', fishin', and lovin' every day  
That's the prayer this country boy prays  
Thank God He made me this way  
Huntin', fishin' and lovin' every day (Bryan, 2015).

Through these lyrics, Bryan establishes his 'country competence' through activities such as hunting and fishing, and implies a sense of inherent masculinity through the claim that God 'made him this way'. Through drawing 'God' into his lyrics, Bryan suggests that practising country competence is an inherent and preordained nature of men. This essentialist construction of 'country-boy' masculinity presents a fixed embodiment of gender that, rather than being one of multiple masculinities constructed and performed through a particular cultural context (Connell, 2020), is naturally occurring and superior. While it is unlikely that Bryan and his audience engage in 'huntin', fishin' and lovin'' each day, and their skill in outdoor activities may or may not be genuine, these signifiers of country competence act as a way of exhibiting masculinity in a culture that idealises bro-country hegemonic masculinity. Regardless of their actual performance, listeners can engage in country competence through its lyrics, and metaphorically perform these skills through song.

## **Conclusion**

Country music has become one of the most popular genres in music over the last few decades. As such, it has the mechanisms to influence many people, as seen through the ideals and gender stereotypes it has historically promoted. As the genre evolves, it is essential to acknowledge and challenge the harmful masculine ideas that have been perpetuated through its lyrics and performances, particularly those celebrated through 'bro country'. In recent years, the country music scene has begun shifting away from these previously unrelenting stereotypes to welcome new faces and voices into the community. While bro-country is still a prevalent aspect of the genre, recent country music has encompassed diverse perspectives on masculinity and subverted the traditional, conservative elements of 'country boy' music. For instance, queer musician Chappel Roan's recent single 'The Giver,' draws on musical elements typical of country folk, but features a lesbian relationship in the lyrics. Female country musician Kacey Musgraves, the 2019 Grammy winner for Album of the Year, vocally supports leftist movements and the LGBTQIA+ community, both through song and activism. Moreover, Tyler Childers, a man in a heterosexual marriage, released a music video for his 2023 song 'In Your Love' that features a gay couple, garnering 13 million views on YouTube. These are essential shifts within the country genre, highlighting both its expanding audience and the industry's ability to adapt to the times and challenge

traditional masculine stereotypes in response to, and contributing to, cultural transformation.

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