



“We’ll Put Our Hands Up, and They’ll Still Shoot”  
A Qualitative Examination of Police Brutality,  
Retaliation, and Self-Defense in Political Rap

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Thiago Tavares. (2012, March 9). *Tupac graffiti Rio de Janeiro.*

Abstract

*American political rap music has long been criticized as “threatening” due to its depictions of violence against police officers. In the years since the murder of Michael Brown by law enforcement in 2014, research has started to change its focus to police brutality and its effects on society, and more specifically, its impact on Black communities (Klatskin, 2018). There is limited prior research on why political rappers address this prominent issue with violent lyrics. Still, several sources have found evidence to suggest deeper meanings behind the lyrics. The current study was conducted to address gaps in prior research by qualitatively examining patterns and trends in political rap lyrics about police brutality since the genre’s uprising. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, political rap songs with mentions of police brutality (n=14) by Black male artists were examined further to explore the justifications for violence against police officers. This study examines themes of police brutality in political rap music, identifying recurring critiques of law enforcement, expressions of retaliation, and depictions of violence as self-defense. The findings suggest that political rap serves as a medium for marginalized voices to protest systemic racism and highlight the perceived threat of Black identity to law enforcement.*

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Introduction

Although the rights to freedom of speech and protections from government censorship are said to be granted to every American, when powerful institutions like law enforcement are the subjects of scrutiny, such rights become murky and convoluted. This notion is considerably more apparent when what is viewed by many as unconventional or even threatening methods are used to critique an institution, and when the individuals using these methods belong to a marginalized group. This is the case of rap music, a vastly influential part of Black cultural expression, and more recently, an increasingly popular avenue for political commentary and protest. Typically referred to as political or socially conscious rap, this subgenre of rap music, with artists such as Body Count and KRS-One, among others, addresses social issues often affecting minority communities (Aldridge & Carlin, 1993).

One recurring, and perhaps the most evident, element of political rap is its depictions of violence,

in particular against police officers. Law enforcement and a portion of the general public are alarmed by this despite prior examinations of lyrics finding evidence to show that violence is used as metaphorical and emotional expressions in response to racial injustice (Aldridge & Carlin, 1993; Klatskin, 2018; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Mozie, 2022; Rose, 1991; Stapleton, 1998). These songs that illuminate law enforcement as an oppressive institution started gaining traction in the 80s, or a time when what Rose (1991) refers to as the “fundamentally antagonistic relationship” between police officers and Black youth was elevated. Lyle and Esmail (2016) found that from 2015 to 2016 alone, 175 Black males were murdered by law enforcement, and they represented 40 percent of the victims of police brutality. In recent years, the disproportionate murders of Black Americans by police have prevailed, and there has been an increase in visibility of the issue due to recent social movements (Lyle & Esmail, 2016). However, there is a severe issue of police officers underreporting these incidents, and therefore, the prevalence of police brutality cannot be fully measured (Lyle & Esmail, 2016). Hip-hop and rap music have historically been used in African American culture to raise awareness of racial issues and promote social justice, also fostering a sense of unity among communities (Stapleton, 1998). Rap music being utilized as a voice for victims of police brutality and Black communities is consistent with this idea. However, as previously noted, not everyone shares this same perspective on the music’s content.

Steinmetz and Henderson (2012) explained that much of the general public feels that political rap is “anti-police,” “violent,” and encourages “deviant behavior.” This view extends to the criminal justice system and more specifically, the court system, which has started accepting rap lyrics as evidence in criminal proceedings (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Here, the question of whether this is a violation of the First Amendment or not arises. While some believe that political rap music is dangerous for society and law enforcement, previous research on the lyrics of rap songs indicates that the true intent of these artists is to promote change and unity, much like past rappers (Brooks et al., 2020; Kubrin, 2005; Mozie, 2022; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012).

The study of rap music and lyrics is an underdeveloped area in criminological research, with gaps including a focus primarily on mainstream artists rather than independent ones and limited qualitative analyses. There is also limited analysis of the trends in political rap over several years. The current study utilized content analysis to examine lyrics in both older and recent songs for deeper meaning relevant to police brutality. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used; the researcher sought new justifications for violence against police officers while also examining prior research to see if existing themes were present in these songs. The findings suggest that there are ongoing trends in songs, which show how this music illuminates the largely ignored narrative of victims of racial bias and police brutality. Therefore, the findings of this study have important implications for criminological research and the tense relationship between law enforcement and society, which are elaborated on further in the discussion section of this paper.

### ***Rap Music, Identity, and Politics***

Rap music, which emerged in America in roughly the 1970s, has become a major part of American popular culture and entertainment in recent years (McDonnell, 1992). The musical genre has roots in both African rhythms and American disco culture, and has historically served as a means of expression for Black Americans (Shusterman, 1991). A key part of this expression is identity, which includes Black pride, African traditions, hip-hop, and dancing (Shusterman, 1991). Lyrics, which are a major component of rap music, serve as a prominent source of Black expression. Over time, as racial discrimination was perpetuated in what is alleged to be an equal country, rap music, and subsequently its lyrics, opened a new gateway for both artists and fans to communicate their indignation.

In the 1980s, political or socially conscious rap appeared as a form of music that heavily reflected the pressing socio-political matters and began to be produced by hip-hop groups like N.W.A. and Public Enemy (Rose, 1991). Political songs and artists have been known to spread awareness about, and even protest, prominent issues in minority communities such as poverty, gang violence, limited law enforcement support, drugs, and the lack of a political voice for Black Americans (Stapleton, 1998). Prior research has focused on the blunt and sometimes harsh language used in this type of rap music and has also found this element to be successful in engaging both Black youth and adults in the fight against social injustice and racist institutions (Rose, 1991). Recently, artists have made music that targets a specific form of oppression known as police brutality, but this type of violence and the protests against it are far from new.

### ***Police Brutality Trend and Violence in Rap***

Police brutality is commonly used to reference the excessive use of force and overall abuse of power by U.S. law enforcement. Though police brutality is a present issue, there is evidence to show that it has been occurring for at least several decades now. American political rap, which began to be produced in the 1980s and 1990s, often addressed police brutality, as seen in songs by Public Enemy, N.W.A., 2Pac, and the Main Source, among other popular artists (Brooks et al., 2020). Following a surge of unlawful police killings in the 2000s, including the murders of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, George Floyd, and many others, political rap has yet again become a prominent form of activism against modern racial injustices that seem to mirror the past (Durán & Shroulote, 2021).

However, rap, like other genres of music, is not without its flaws in the eyes of political figures and the general public (Fried, 1999). Rap music often includes such themes as encouragement of violence, sex, and misogyny, and critics of rap argue that these unorthodox portrayals are damaging to the impressionable American youth (Aldridge & Carlin, 1993). Furthermore, some Americans criticize rap lyrics for the blatant mockery of and even contempt for American social institutions and the criminal justice system (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). Despite this, Shusterman (1991) found distinctions between the intent of commercialized rap, or rap that is produced for its entertainment value and

revenue, and political rap music, which typically aims to acknowledge injustices in a conventional society. Thus, it becomes reasonable that those distinctions can also be extended to the portrayals of violence in rap music.

Prior research also suggests a difference in the violent imagery in what is known as “gangsta rap,” or a popular subgenre of rap music that commonly depicts a criminal lifestyle where violence is said to be portrayed as a means of survival and frustration with social inequities (Kubrin, 2005). Violence in political rap is largely conveyed through lyrics, and it has been argued by researchers that such graphic messages are used to bring light to and advocate against the graphic yet true reality of racial injustices in America, and not to instigate real violence (Aldridge & Carlin, 1993). Recent research has continued to foster this idea. Hunnicutt and Andrews (2009) specifically discuss the depictions of homicide in rap music, claiming that although this imagery has seemed to significantly contribute to the public’s fear of African Americans and criminal behavior, the actual intent of the imagery could be to mobilize people to fight and resist against racist social conventions. Despite these scholarly interpretations of the nature of political rap, politicians and the public continue to be largely unaware of any deeper meaning in rap music and maintain the notion that its lyrics are offensive and threatening, which could be attributed to the overrepresentation of violent political rap and social efforts in the news media (Fried, 1999; Mozie, 2022).

### ***Media, Public Perceptions of Rap Music, and The Criminal Justice System***

Media, whether it is news media, social media, or another type of media, is where many, if not most, Americans get their information on current events and ideas in the nation and other parts of the world. Media is produced by reporters, creators, politicians, and others with their own biases and agendas, and the true nature of their agendas is sometimes veiled from the mainstream public. Previous research has provided evidence that the media have been particularly influential in negatively framing rap music, consequently making the public stigmatize the genre (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that media portrayals of social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, have also heavily influenced public perceptions. As more recent rap songs address these social movements, they too are scrutinized by the public as a form of racial protest (Reid & Craig, 2021).

In particular, the news media have been said to highlight only the most sensational aspects of protest, to frame peaceful social movements led by racial minorities as threatening and violent movements led by white Americans as non-threatening, and to promote their disapproval of social protests to support state interests (Reid & Craig, 2021). Knowledge of this damaging relationship between the media and social protests, including political rap songs, is important in understanding why the music is so deeply condemned by the general public, regardless of any positive messages it may contain. This relationship has similarly created a negative relationship between racial protests and law enforcement, as law enforcement tends to police protests based on how the news media

portrays them (Reid & Craig, 2021). The policing of social movements and political rap music has created legal ramifications for rappers, which is argued to pose an even greater threat to the civil rights of minority artists (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012).

Steinmetz and Henderson (2012) claimed that, as a result of the disproportionate level of interactions between the hip-hop community, including rap artists and their fans, and law enforcement, this community is also given more firsthand experiences with the corrections system and judicial process. This suggests that both commercial and political rappers may face potential legal consequences for using lyricism and other musical components as a form of expression. In fact, rappers have faced legal repercussions in the past, and an example of this is the case of Torrence Hatch, or Lil Boosie, who was tried for the murder of Terry Boyd after depicting murder in his songs "Bodybag" and "187" (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Similarly, in 1988, the FBI targeted the socially conscious rap group N.W.A. for their song "Fuck tha Police" by trying to end their distribution and enlisting law enforcement to disrupt their concerts (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Local police and politicians took similar action against the group Body Count after the release of their political protest song, "Cop Killer," in 1992 (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Both songs include fictional narratives of violence against the police that are commonly deemed as threatening and harmful to listeners, when in reality, the lyrics of the songs show responses to police brutality. Today, in the wake of mass social protests like the aforementioned Black Lives Matter movement, political rappers and political rap songs prevail, but their prevalence in the American mainstream has been primarily replaced by gangsta rap or rap about street credibility through violence and sex, which, according to Kubrin and Nielson (2014), is to appeal to white rap fans and youth. Despite this censorship, it is likely that as more acts of police brutality and unfairness in the criminal justice system continue to occur and be broadcast, more rappers will use their musical creativity to address these issues and, over time, reach a larger audience, at the risk of legal responses and even punishment.

### ***The Present Study***

The main objective of the current study is to present the results of a qualitative content analysis conducted on political or socially conscious rap music and to explore links to police brutality found within the songs. The researcher also explores how violence against police officers is justified in this genre of music. Furthermore, this study was designed to contribute to the limited criminological research that has sought to systematically examine the deeper meaning of political rap music, as well as to further expand our understanding of political rap lyrics through qualitative analysis, as suggested by Mozie (2022). This study also aims to address a specific gap in research on independent artists, as opposed to focusing solely on those signed with major record labels. As such, the research question for the current study is as follows: *In what ways is violence against police officers justified in political rap songs by Black male artists?*

## Methodology

**Sample**

To examine potential links to police brutality and the mentions of violence against police officers found in political rap lyrics, I initially identified a larger pool of potential songs (50) for analysis than the final sample. These songs were identified in prior research (Aldridge & Carlin, 2009; Brooks et al., 2020; Klatskin, 2018; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Rose, 1991; Schneider, 2011), as well as on websites such as Reddit and Ranker.com, where users listed songs related to this topic. Songs were included from these websites if multiple users were recommending the song. This initial pool included songs that ranged in popularity and commercial value, offering multiple perspectives on police brutality. Next, the pool of potential songs was further limited to include only those that had a substantial reference to police brutality—defined as having at least a stanza or verse that focused on police brutality (39).

I used purposive sampling to create the final sample (n=14) to explore trends regarding political rap and links to police brutality in songs produced between 1992, the year of the emergence of American political rap, and 2020 (Klatskin, 2018). This final sample is comprised of two groups—seven songs were produced before and during the year 2014, when Michael Brown was murdered by law enforcement, and seven songs were produced and released after his death. Michael Brown’s murder was used as a reference point because it served as a turning point for protests against law enforcement in America and thus a turning point for both dialogue around and criminological research on police brutality (Klatskin, 2018). Songs were selected until I reached saturation (when no new information or insights emerged from data collection and analysis). Table 1, below, shows the final sample of songs included in the analysis.

**Table 1 – Final Sample of Songs (n=14)**

Song Title	Artist(s)	Album	Year Produced
Cop Killer	Body Count	Body Count	1992
Holler If Ya Hear Me	2Pac	Strictly 4 My N.*.*.*. Z	1993
Sound of da Police	KRS-1	Return of the Boom Bap	1993
Fuck Tha Police	NWA	Straight Outta Compton	1988
The Proud	Talib Kweli	Quality	2002
Don’t Die	Killer Mike	R.A.P. Music	2012
Don’t Shoot	The Game	N/A (Single)	2014
Blacklist	Damian Lillard	N/A (Single)	2016
Police Get Away Wit’ Murder	YG	Still Brazy	2016
Cops Shot the Kid	Nas ft. Kanye West	NASIR	2018
The Bigger Picture	Lil Baby	My Turn	2020
Front Lines	Conway the Machine	From King to a God	2020
No More Pain	Icwear Vezzo	N/A (Single)	2020
Lockdown	Anderson .Paak	Lockdown	2020

### **Analytical Strategy**

To analyze the final sample of songs, qualitative content analysis was employed as the analytical strategy. Content analysis is used to explore hidden messages within different types of popular culture or media, which, in this case, is rap music (Kort-Butler, 2016). The goal of this analysis is to further the cultural understanding of a particular phenomenon for future criminological research and policy (Kort-Butler, 2016). Content analysis involves systematically coding a media source for deeper messages, and in qualitative analysis, this means examining and recording codes or patterns with meaning in an open-ended manner (Kort-Butler, 2016). The process for this study, in particular, included coding each song and its lyrics for elements relevant to the research question, “*How is violence against police officers justified in political rap songs by Black male artists?*” The unit for analysis was each line of each song in the sample.

I analyzed existing themes identified in prior research while searching for additional themes in the sample. This was done in the current sample to determine whether the findings aligned with previous research, thereby reinforcing the current understanding of the police brutality phenomenon (Kort-Butler, 2016). I analyzed the data while being cognizant of existing themes from prior content analyses (Brooks et al., 2020; Kubrin, 2005; Mozie, 2022; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012), retaliation, critiques, and negative emotions, while coding the data for any unique conceptual ideas (emerging themes). The existing themes are defined in detail in Table 2, below.

**Table 2 – Existing Themes** (Combined and derived from Brooks et al. (2020), Kubrin (2005), Mozie (2022), and Steinmetz & Henderson (2012))

Existing Theme	Definition
<i>Retaliation</i>	Rappers promote or express their desire to take action against law enforcement as a result of the continuous police brutality experienced by Black Americans. This theme included mentions of “getting even” with police officers for harming friends and family and threats of violence towards police officers.
<i>Critiques of law enforcement and the criminal justice system</i>	Rappers voice their disagreement with the unequal treatment and violent force used by law enforcement and the court system against Black citizens and other minority groups. Expressions of this theme included listing hypocritical actions of police officers and criminal justice officials, lamenting on the lack of accountability for police brutality, and rappers and other influential figures getting censored or silenced.
<i>Negative emotions as a result of racism</i>	Rappers express feelings of unfairness, powerlessness, sadness, and anger at the murders and brutalization of Black people by law enforcement. Expressions of this theme included anger at discrimination and hatred and vulgarity towards police officers.

In the current study, I also identified two emerging themes, which are violence as a form of self-defense and survival, and 'Black identity threatens police officers. To resolve any ambiguity in the coding of themes, I reassessed the codes for each theme and interpreted the language used in relation to the codes. In total, the lyrics of the songs were reviewed three times to identify existing themes and additional codes, which were then combined by similarity of concept and used to finalize the themes.

### ***Positionality Statement***

As a white, female college student, it is impossible for me to fully understand the plight of Black, male rappers who are grappling with the serious issues of racism and police brutality. It is equally inconceivable that I could fully understand the experiences of those whom they mention in their communities and other minority groups who struggle with the same discrimination. My experiences have been vastly different from those mentioned by the rappers in their songs, but I tried to be open, insightful, and critical in my analysis. With that being said, it is important to note that my interpretation may vary from those of other researchers with varying backgrounds.

### Results

Research shows that on the other side of the political rap fanbase are strong opponents of the musical genre, including politicians, law enforcement personnel, music executives, and a large portion of the general public (Fried, 1999). This has been primarily attributed to the violent nature of rap music and political or socially conscious rap in particular, as some find the depictions of violence in this genre to be offensive, threatening, and dangerous for the minds of young and impressionable youth (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012; Tanner et al., 2009). On the contrary, there have been arguments that political rap is used as a means of expression or as a form of social protest, and its violence is not meant to be taken literally (Stapleton, 1998). In the present study, I conducted a closer examination of references to violence related to police brutality and highlighted the justifications for these, which is the focus of this study. The following themes were identified from prior literature (Brooks et al., 2020; Kubrin, 2005; Mozie, 2022; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012): (1) "Critiques of Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System"; (2) "Negative Emotions as a Result of Racism"; and (3) "Retaliation". Additionally, the following emerging themes were also identified: (4) "Violence as a Form of Self-Defense" and (5) "Black Identity Threatens Cops."

### ***"Critiques of Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System"***

Mozie (2022) conducted a quantitative content analysis of rap music and police brutality, finding that critiques of law enforcement and the criminal justice system were an overarching message

in their sample of songs. This was also identified in the current sample of political rap songs. More specifically, the two main points of focus for the rappers' critiques were law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Similar to Mozie's (2022) findings, the researcher found that the rappers in a majority of the songs expressed their anger with the repeated use of excessive force and the murder of Black citizens by law enforcement, as well as the unfair and discriminatory treatment by the legal system. For example, in the 1993 song *Sound of da Police*, rapper KRS-One is explicit in his critiques of the actions and mindset of police officers while voicing hypocrisy:

*First show a little respect, change your behavior  
 Change your attitude, change your plan  
 There could never really be justice on stolen land  
 Are you really for peace and equality?  
 Or when my car is hooked up, you know you wanna follow me  
 Your laws are minimal  
 'Cause you won't even think about lookin' at the real criminal  
 This has got to cease  
 'Cause we be gettin' hyped to the sound of da police*

The concept of the unfair and unequal treatment of Black Americans by law enforcement is also recurrent in the sample with other songs explicitly addressing the issue. The inference that can be drawn is that these critiques have been recurrent for almost two decades with minimal if any change. A later example of this occurs in rapper Talib Kweli's 2002 song *The Proud*:

*A drunken police officer mows down an entire family in Brooklyn  
 The judge lets him go with no bail  
 It reminds us, of just how worthless our lives are to the justice system  
 I struggle, to explain the situation to my son, it's hard*

Here Talib addresses an instance of police brutality, but he more specifically addresses the legal system's tolerance of violence when it is law enforcement who utilizes it against minorities. Talib goes on to say, in reference to law enforcement, "They be gettin tips from snitches and rival crews / Doin them favors so they workin for the drug dealers too." In this line, Talib is highlighting the criminal behaviors that police officers tend to get away with while the criminal justice system punishes minorities for the same behaviors. In the 2016 song, *Police Get Away Wit' Murder*, the rapper YG similarly addresses the criminal justice system's continuous failure to punish law enforcement for the same crimes that, when committed by a Black civilian, are viewed as heinous and oftentimes result in long sentences:

*The truth motherf\*\*ker, hear the truth motherf\*\*ker  
 I've really got a story, this ain't a spoof motherf\*\*cker  
 We'll put our hands up and they'll still shoot motherf\*\*ker*

*And post on trial for one to two motherf\*\*ker  
They give us years for guns and we can buy em off the shelf  
But you'll get life in the coffin if you don't protect yourself*

### ***“Black Identity Threatens Cops”***

The second theme, the idea that Black identity or culture is a threat to police officers, was present in the majority of songs. The rappers show a scenario or describe a real event where a Black person was doing routine or ordinary things, or even dressed a certain way, and was discriminated against for it. They also express this sense of futility because they feel that law enforcement will abuse its power against Black people, even if they are not involved in a crime, and there is no evidence to suggest it. Black people are being policed not only by their presumed criminality as a result of bias ingrained in many officers, but also by the way they look, the vehicles they may drive, their hobbies, and more. Violent encounters with the police are thus perceived as inevitable, and these songs illustrate the frustration and helplessness that come with that perception. One example of this is in the 2014 song *Don't Shoot* by The Game, where rapper Jayceon Taylor says that a Black person doing something as simple as driving poses a threat to police officers simply because they are Black:

*Tired of the okie-dokie, lying you Pinocchio  
Driving while black, tell me, where am I supposed to go?  
Gun shots hit the car, now I got the holy ghost  
If excessive force was a drug, then they overdosed  
Got us tryna protest, it's a slow process  
Heard it's a lot of rotten eggs in the crow's nest*

Rapper YG also speaks about his identity as a Black male being threatening to law enforcement in *Police Get Away Wit' Murder* (2016):

*Gotta watch how I walk and wear my outfit  
White tan brown black white tan brown black  
We only a couple shades darker how we outfit  
Black males in a hoodie that's a target to them  
They say he oversized and choked him out  
That was harming to them*

Here, YG explains that something as harmless as his clothing style and the way he walks is viewed as threatening by law enforcement. This can be perceived as an attack on certain aspects of Black and African American culture because police officers appear to be concerned solely with the attire and overall image of Black Americans. This is likely the result of a larger social bias, as many people will judge minority groups by their appearances and make unwarranted assumptions or generalizations

about their character. The lyrics of the 2020 song *Front Lines* by Conway the Machine allow for a closer look at some of these harmful assumptions by police officers:

*Just 'cause he from the ghetto, that don't mean he sellin' crack  
He drivin' home from work, you pull him over 'cause he black  
Think he gangbangin' 'cause he got dreads and a few tats  
He reach for his ID, you think he reachin' for a strap  
He get out, put his hands up, and he still gettin' clapped  
But if he try to run, you just gon' shoot him in his back*

Conway the Machine explains that the community that a Black person comes from can also determine the way that police officers perceive them. He also reiterates the idea that appearance is threatening. White people have tattoos and walk around on the street with them, but if a cop sees a Black person with tattoos paired with dreads, they feel anxious and act in response to that anxiety. What is also emphasized is the idea that a Black person can be just driving home and minding their business and be unfairly singled out by law enforcement for it simply because of the color of their skin.

Rapper Icewear Vezzo takes this theme a step further in his 2020 song *No More Pain*, saying that even financial status is irrelevant when it comes to the unequal treatment of Black citizens and that being Black outweighs judgments based on poverty or richness:

*Love and hate, friend or foe, that shit all the same  
Some people come, some people go, this sh\*t all a game  
Black is black, rich or poor, they treat us all the same  
No standing still, gotta fight, that's just part of change*

In that same vein, several of the rappers identify the education and knowledge of Black people as a threat to cops. Education is highly valued in America and is considered a major stepping stone to success. However, these rappers argue that when it is a Black American pursuing success or knowledge, police officers become on edge, perhaps because they are scared that they will be a voice for injustices and fight for social power. Lil Baby talks about this in his 2020 song *The Bigger Picture*:

*Knowledge is power, I swear I'm a witness, I know that I'm gifted  
I won't go too deep 'cause I'm scared they'll get me  
Ain't scared to admit it, some shit I can't mention  
It's people who can, well, here's the chance  
I won't take the stand, but I'll take a stand for what I believe*

### **“Negative Emotions as a Result of Racism”**

The police brutality and racism that Black communities are faced with, paired with the knowledge that their cultural identity itself is threatening to cops, naturally produces tension and

negative emotions like helplessness, fear, and rage in political rappers (Brooks et al., 2020; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). This is an existing theme noted by prior researchers who conducted similar content analyses of rap music and experiences with police brutality (Brooks et al., 2020; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). This theme was also found in the current study. The first example of this theme is in 2Pac's 1993 song *Holler If Ya Hear Me*:

*I make rhyme pay, others make crime pay  
 Whatever it takes to live and stand  
 'Cause nobody else'll give a damn  
 So we live like caged beasts  
 Waitin' for the day to let the rage free  
 Still me 'til they kill me  
 I love it when they fear me*

In these lyrics, 2Pac explains that the racist treatment by law enforcement and the legal system has fueled rage in him that he wishes to be free, likely because it has been building up for so long due to the persistence of racial injustice. A crucial part of understanding this negative emotion is first understanding that there is context for the rapper's anger. It did not materialize from thin air; this emotion was provoked. A common assumption about rap music is that it is unnecessarily violent and thus damaging, but in this sample of songs that target police brutality, violent or intense emotions have meaning behind them, which is shown in the lyrics. In his 2016 song *Blacklist*, rapper Dame D.O.L.L.A. communicates his feelings of helplessness against police officers who use excessive force when no real crime has occurred:

*We just strivin' for equality, acknowledge me  
 Don't just kill me for chillin' when in my property  
 Got some shit on my mind and I'm feelin' helpless  
 'Cause we need help from people who ain't dealt with  
 The kinda sh\*t we experience, how we felt*

In *The Bigger Picture* by Lil Baby, the rapper explains how the mere arrival of police officers scares him because of how common police brutality and a lack of protection for Black citizens has become:

*I see blue lights, I get scared and start runnin'  
 That shit be crazy, they 'posed to protect us  
 Throw us in handcuffs and arrest us  
 While they go home at night, that shit messed up  
 Knowing we needed help, they neglect us  
 Wondering who gon' make them respect us*

### ***“Violence as a Form of Retaliation”***

It is important to note that certain aspects of the previous theme, such as feelings of rage, bleed over into the next theme of retaliation. However, there are distinctions between the two, as retaliation is more goal-oriented than rage. Retaliation was defined by Brooks and colleagues (2020) as a “backward-looking approach,” or the justification of violence because it is being inflicted on someone who has deliberately harmed others. In conducting their content analysis on rap music, with some themes regarding police brutality, they found that rappers express their desire for retaliation because they are tired of the abuse by police officers and want retribution for their communities (Brooks et al., 2020). Retaliation is a prominent theme throughout the sample, and a similar rationale underlies violent retaliation. Perhaps the most straightforward example of retaliation in the sample is in the 1992 song *Cop Killer* by Body Count:

*I'm a cop killer, better you than me  
Cop killer, fuck police brutality  
Cop killer, I know your family's grieving (fuck 'em)  
Cop killer, but tonight we get even, haha*

In this stanza, rapper Ice-T acknowledges the grief of a police officer’s family in their absence but diminishes it in favor of ‘getting even’ because the officer had been a participant in police brutality. Similarly, 2Pac is equally transparent in the lyrics of *Holler If Ya Hear Me* where he depicts a scene of him exacting revenge on a police officer despite someday wanting peace:

*And the punk police can't fade me and maybe  
We can have peace someday, G  
But right now I got my mind set up  
Lookin' down the barrel of my nine, get up  
'Cause it's time to make the payback fat*

A recurring dimension of this theme is the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and the retaliation fueled by negative emotions outweighs that acknowledgment. This is also present in *Don’t Shoot* by The Game when the rapper apologizes to his mother for his future violent actions:

*How do you preach peace to a family that just lost they own?  
My brodie Game just banged my line like ‘We gotta do something’  
All that marching and that peace ain't gonna fucking do nothing  
Fuck it, my moms, sorry, I'm ready to rage  
The police done let the animals out of the cage, oh lord it's  
Time to take a stand and save our future*

However, in this song, a new idea emerges. The Game describes a time after attempts at peaceful protesting that were unsuccessful or a time when hope for a peaceful resolution to police brutality

has completely ceased and now the rapper views violence as the alternative. This idea is presented in Icewear Vezzo's *No More Pain*:

*Time to take the power back  
That's why it's robbin' season  
Try to do the peaceful way  
Martin Luther King it  
But then I had a talk with  
Malcolm, it was all a dream, uh*

Some of the rappers in the sample do not mention peace in their songs. For example, Ice Cube from the group N.W.A. is especially explicit in his violent retaliation:

*Ice Cube will swarm  
On any motherfucker in a blue uniform  
Just 'cause I'm from the CPT, punk police are afraid of me  
A young n\*\*\*a on a warpath  
And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath  
Of cops, dyin' in L.A.*

### **“Violence as a Form of Self-Defense”**

Like the previous two themes, it is important to note again that there may be similarities between violence as a form of retaliation and self-defense, as both themes involve causing harm to police officers, and both types of violent action are a product of precursory violence. However, these themes are nonetheless distinguishable because of the motivation underlying the messages in the lyrics. The theme of self-defense emerged in the current study because it stood out from other forms of violence. Self-defense is typically regarded as instinctual and necessary for survival. Retaliation can be just as sudden as self-defense, but retaliation, as Brooks and colleagues (2020) explained, is passionate, oftentimes planned, or discussed, like in the lyrics of these songs, and the focus of it is typically revenge over defense. The first example of this theme is in *Sound of da Police* by KRS-One:

*After 400 years, I've got no choices  
The police them have a likkle gun  
So when I'm on the streets, I walk around with a bigger one (woop-woop)  
I hear it all day  
Just so they can run the light and be upon their way*

Here, KRS-One goes as far as saying that he has no choice but to carry around a weapon in case he has to use it to defend himself against police officers. There is no mention of retaliation, only a means of survival. In *F\*ck Tha Police*, an example of self-defense can be found in addition to the

retaliation theme:

*They have the authority to kill a minority  
 Fuck that shit, 'cause I ain't the one  
 For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun  
 To be beatin' on, and thrown in jail  
 We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell*

In this depiction, Ice Cube hypothetically chooses to be violent because a police officer is using excessive force on him first. Similarly, in the 2012 song *Don't Die* by rapper Killer Mike, a scene where the rapper must defend himself and his baby against the police is described with a reference to a man who once got into a shootout with police officers:

*I woke up this morning to a cop with a gun  
 Who told me that he looking for a n\*\*\*a on the run  
 I thought for a second and I screwed my face  
 And asked the dirty pig 'Why the fuck you in my place?'  
 He said 'Chill or we kill, this is a warning'  
 Then I told him 'fuck you, Where is the warrant?'  
 Then they got to punchin' and kickin' and macin'  
 Then the whole situation went Larry Davis  
 Thinking 'bout my lady and thinking 'bout my baby  
 Thinking 'these two motherfucking pigs going crazy'*

#### Discussion

At the heart of this genre of music is African American culture as well as their struggle for equality in a country encompassed by white nationalism. Political or socially conscious rap is a medium for artists to express not only their own experiences with social injustice but also those of others. There are fans of this music all over the world, but it is clear from the lyrics of many of the songs that the artists aim to be a voice for their communities and others who face similar forms of discrimination. The findings of this study and past research suggest that the violence against police officers found in political rap lyrics may be justified as exaggerated and fictional representations of self-defense, retaliation, and as critiques of law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012).

The above themes are rooted in fear and distrust for the police that date back to the enslavement of African Americans, where policing first emerged in the form of slave patrols (Du Bois, 2012; Vitale, 2017). In this period, police were used as an instrument of white supremacy, and the surveillance,

violence, and control over Black bodies were central to maintaining the racial caste system of slavery (Du Bois, 2012). Although policing took on new forms throughout the next century after the abolition of slavery, many of its original discriminatory principles remain intact, and Black people continue to fear the police from childhood and instill this fear in the next generations because of this (Graham et al., 2020). KRS-One directly acknowledges this idea in the song *Sound of da Police*, where the rapper makes convincing comparisons between slave patrols and modern policing:

*You need a little clarity? Check the similarity  
 The overseer rode around the plantation  
 The officer is off, patrollin' all the nation  
 The overseer could stop you, 'what you're doin'?'  
 The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuin'  
 The overseer had the right to get ill  
 And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill  
 The officer has the right to arrest  
 And if you fight back they put a hole in your chest (woop)*

Today, the supposed goal of policing is to protect and serve all Americans, and yet research has shown that there is a large percentage of Black people who fear the police because of past mistreatment (Pickett et al., 2022). Thus, having an awareness of the historical relationship between Black people and law enforcement gives crucial insight into the tension between their communities and police officers today. As stated before, the negative feelings evoked by police officers are not part of a new problem in society, but a part of the ongoing violation of the rights of Black citizens and other minority groups. Black people are disproportionately targets of excessive force, and there are immense disparities in the sentencing of white people and other races in comparison to Black people (Omori & Petersen, 2020; Pickett et al., 2022). This is present in various sectors of the criminal justice system. For example, Omori and Petersen (2020) explain that immense legal discretion and the biased decisions of court actors systematically impose harsher sentencing on racial minorities and that there are significant inequalities between the legal punishment of Whites, Black Latinos, and Black non-Latinos, with the differences in convictions being as high as 7-13 percentage points (Omori, & Petersen, 2020). Additionally, from 1980 to 2018, the number of Black deaths due to police violence is estimated to be 9,540, with 5,670 of these deaths being underreported by government or official data sources (Sharara et al., 2021). These calculations tell of the current experiences that Black Americans have with police officers. This research shows that the fear and other negative emotions that Black communities have regarding law enforcement are well-founded, and also that the criminal justice system may be trying to minimize incidents of police brutality.

The results of this study and the subsequent interpretation of the results are of great importance for criminological research because not only do the public and law enforcement perceptions of this music affect the relationships between law enforcement and Black communities, but also because rap

music has recently become scrutinized by the legal system and even used as evidence in criminal trials despite the American right to freedom of speech (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). As mentioned previously, *Cop Killer* by Body Count was censored due to politicians, music executives, the public, and especially legal and law enforcement officials all misinterpreting the intent of the song, which potentially had a message that society could have benefited mainly from as we see police brutality continue today (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Its lyrics were perceived as a genuine threat and thus as dangerous, even though they were about a fictional story that was likely metaphorical, like the other songs in the sample (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014).

However, law enforcement is not the only one responsible for the misinterpretation of rap songs. Also mentioned in the literature review, the misinterpretation of political rap music can be attributed mainly to biased news sources and writers (Reid & Craig, 2021). Reid and Craig (2021) found that racial issues are more likely to be presented as a threat to society because mainstream news sources are heavily controlled by white people with the intent of maintaining their version of social order. Finally, White Americans largely perceive this music to be threatening, and this can be attributed to racial crime stereotypes that were developed in the 1600s, conservative political affiliation and pro-police ideology, and being dismissive or purposefully ignorant of slavery and discrimination because it does not directly affect white people (Drakulich et al., 2023). This is becoming increasingly problematic because these misguided and oftentimes baseless perceptions are perpetuating the negative connotations associated with political rap music, which has had positive effects like peaceful political expression and social protest, unity between Black communities and other races, and being a voice for the victims of police brutality and their families (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008). To expand the social understanding of this genre of music and allow its messages to benefit society, there needs to be more research on police brutality and the deeper meaning in rap songs that discuss this growing issue.

This study also has key takeaways for the future of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. An important finding in this study is that rap music, widely recognized as a form of artistic expression, is perceived as threatening by law enforcement and the criminal justice system due to its violent lyrics. This response is particularly concerning given evidence that such lyrics often reflect real experiences of excessive police force against Black Americans (Mozie, 2022). From the perspective that these songs serve as protest or metaphorical commentary on police brutality, it is paradoxical that Black rappers face scrutiny and punishment for fictional violence, while accountability for corrupt officers remains limited. In light of this revelation, it is necessary that American policing undergoes extensive reform, beginning with the recognition and acceptance of its role in systematically oppressing and murdering Black people. Not only is this triangulated in quantitative studies, but it is also in the firsthand accounts of Black citizens and rappers who have witnessed and experienced it. Once this is acknowledged, police officers and the criminal justice system need to be cognizant of the idea that “violent” political rap songs, like those in the present sample, are a peaceful response in comparison to egregious acts of police brutality. Rap lyrics use violent imagery as a method of venting frustration, promoting unity, and encouraging the pursuit of social justice. Thus, it is recommended

that police officers, legal officials, and all other opponents of rap music search for this deeper meaning in it and other forms of social commentary before making harmful inferences about its intent.

#### Limitations and Future Research

Qualitative research and findings are not without limitations. The focus of qualitative research is to unveil a deeper narrative about a particular phenomenon, which means that the analytical process is time-consuming, and the sample must be limited to a feasible number (Kort-Butler, 2016). This means that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population from which the sample was drawn, which, in this case, is all political rap songs that mention police brutality (Kort-Butler, 2016). I cannot rationally extrapolate justifications for violence like retaliation and self-defense to all rap songs about police brutality, but I pieced together a narrative of social injustice from my sample and the work of prior researchers. To extend the current study, a mixed-methods research design could be used. Following the content analysis, a survey could be implemented to gauge listeners' perceptions of political rap messages, which could affirm the current study's results.

Another area of improvement in this study would be its external validity. As the sole researcher in this study, I was unable to test the reliability of my findings. To rectify this, I could solicit the help of researchers with different positionalities from myself to see if their results mirror or differ from mine in future iterations, similar to the process of a member check. Additionally, future researchers conducting content analyses on this topic should strongly consider either collaborating with a research partner to identify any similarities in findings or having researchers with different backgrounds review their study. An additional limitation of this study was that the sample consisted solely of songs by Black male rappers, thereby excluding the equally important perspectives of female rappers. This is especially significant following the cases of Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and Sonia Massey, who were all victims of police violence and racial profiling. Future research should also focus on political rap by female rappers, as new themes and ideas crucial to a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon may emerge.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study support the argument that there needs to be a much larger research focus on rap music and other means of artistic expression to have a fuller understanding of all those involved and affected by police brutality. The perceptions of Black individuals and communities who have been victimized by law enforcement are crucial to developing a strategy to eradicate police brutality, as victims have had firsthand experiences with it and therefore knowledge of the change that is needed to improve the safety of all Americans. Loosely labeling political rap as

“dangerous” and “violent” can be very harmful because it serves as a popular source of political expression, and it is often the most viable medium for the voice of victims of police brutality and community members. Furthermore, the criminalization of aggressive, confrontational lyrics in court can be viewed as intrusive and constricting, especially as American society moves towards greater acceptance of social dissent. Kubrin and Nielson (2014) explain the consequences of this effectively:

Of course, these suggestions matter little if we redefine rap music as something other than an art form whose primary purpose is to entertain. The movement to put rap on trial does just this, effectively denying rap’s status as art, and potentially silencing a genre that, in many cases, continues to offer important social and political commentary. Yet Public Enemy’s rallying cry, ‘fight the power,’ may be instructive, once again. A critical part of this fight involves educating the public that rap music is far more than a series of autobiographical confessions or ‘a bunch of n\*\*\*\*s reading out of their diaries.’ (p. 204)

There is a tendency in society to gloss over deep-seated racial issues and instead focus on what biased news sources claim to be dangerous uprisings (Reid & Craig, 2021). As Drakulich and colleagues (2023) explain, when a social problem involves a minority group like Black and African Americans, White people tend to shift blame to the victimized minorities as opposed to recognizing the harmfulness of institutions and their role in facilitating the perpetuation of racism and discriminatory treatment.

In research, it is widely considered best practice, and more simply, common sense, to not make conclusions about phenomena without first dutifully exploring all its facets. Opinions of the general public are not regulated in this way, and it would be insensible to assume that all opposers of political rap music and its violent messages about police brutality have thoroughly explored the context of these messages. Policy, however, relies on research and its outcomes. Hence, there needs to be a greater focus on qualitative research and the attitudes of those who will be affected by the policy. Which, in this case, are rappers who face criminal consequences for their words. Again, this is an entirely other massive issue on its own, but I nonetheless urge legal officials to reevaluate their judgments under the lens of freedom of speech. Creating consequences for what may be contentious artistic expression that is not explicitly dangerous and is likely fictional, according to research, is a very slippery slope, which we should be hesitant to accept.

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#### Appendix A – Potential Songs for Final Sample

Year	Song Title	Artist(s)	Substantial Reference to Police Brutality
1970	<i>The Revolution Will Not Be Televised</i>	Gil Scott-Heron	No
1988	<i>Fuck Tha Police</i>	NWA	Yes
1988	<i>Children's Story</i>	Slick Rick	Yes
1990	<i>Endangered Species</i>	Chuck D and Ice Cube	Yes
1990	<i>Illegal Search</i>	LL Cool J	Yes
1991	<i>Just a Friendly Game of Baseball</i>	Main Source	Yes
1991	<i>Pig</i>	Cypress Hill	Yes
1991	<i>I Don't Give a Fuck</i>	2Pac	Yes
1991	<i>Trapped</i>	2Pac	Yes

1992	<i>Cop Killer</i>	Body Count	Yes
1992	<i>Killing in the Name</i>	Rage Against the Machine	Yes
1992	<i>Who Got the Camera?</i>	Ice Cube	Yes
1993	<i>Sound of da Police</i>	KRS-1	Yes
1993	<i>Holler If Ya Hear Me</i>	2Pac	Yes
1994	<i>Claimin' I'm a Criminal</i>	Brand Nubian	Yes
1998	<i>Changes</i>	2Pac ft. Talent	Yes
1999	<i>Mathematics</i>	Mos Def	No
2000	<i>Police State</i>	dead prez	Yes
2000	<i>Cop Shot</i>	dead prez	Yes
2002	<i>The Proud</i>	Talib Kweli	Yes
2011	<i>Mr Officer</i>	Ka	Yes
2012	<i>Don't Die</i>	Killer Mike	Yes
2012	<i>Good Kid</i>	Kendrick Lamar	Yes
2014	<i>Be Free</i>	J. Cole	No
2014	<i>Don't Shoot</i>	The Game	Yes
2015	<i>The Blacker the Berry</i>	Kendrick Lamar	No
2016	<i>Black America Again</i>	Common	No
2016	<i>Police Get Away Wit Murder</i>	YG	Yes
2017	<i>No Lives Matter</i>	Body Count	No
2017	<i>Nothin New</i>	21 Savage	No
2017	<i>We the Ones</i>	Organized Noize	No
2018	<i>Cops Shot the Kid</i>	Nas ft. Kanye West	Yes
2018	<i>This is America</i>	Childish Gambino	No
2020	<i>The Bigger Picture</i>	Lil Baby	Yes
2020	<i>Hella Fuckin' Trauma</i>	Juicy J	Yes
2020	<i>Blacklist</i>	Damian Lillard	Yes
2020	<i>ROCKSTAR (BLM Remix)</i>	DaBaby ft. Roddy Ricch	Yes
2020	<i>Bootlicker</i>	Mr. Muthafuckin' eXquire	Yes
2020	<i>Point the Finger</i>	Body Count	Yes
2020	<i>ACAB</i>	ZillaKami ft. Nascar Aloe	Yes
2020	<i>I Can't Breathe</i>	Sticky Fingaz ft. Samuel L. Jackson, Talib Kweli, Mad Lion, KRS-1, Brother J	Yes
2020	<i>Pig Feet</i>	Denzel Curry and Terrace Martin	Yes
2020	<i>They Don't</i>	Nasty C and T.I.	No
2020	<i>I Am George Floyd</i>	Lil B	Yes
2020	<i>Black Lives Matter</i>	Dax	Yes
2020	<i>Front Lines</i>	Conway the Machine	Yes
2020	<i>Lockdown</i>	Anderson .Paak	Yes
2020	<i>No More Pain</i>	Icewear Vezzo	Yes
2021	<i>The People</i>	Harry Fraud and Jim Jones	Yes