

## Who's Afraid of Rap: Differential Reactions to Music Lyrics<sup>1</sup>

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This research examines the recent public outcry against violent rap songs. It was hypothesized that rap music receives more negative criticism than do other types of music, regardless of the actual content of the lyrics. Participants read a violent lyrical passage and were led to believe that it was either a rap song or a country song. They then responded to how offensive and dangerous they thought the song was. The results support the hypothesis. When a violent lyrical passage was represented as a rap song, reactions to the lyrics were significantly more negative. Age, whether or not the participants had children, and the participants' music tastes and buying habits were all significantly related to whether or not this biased judgment occurred. The findings are briefly discussed in terms of various models of racism and stereotyping.

In 1992, Ice T and his band Body Count released an album that contained the song "Cop Killer." The song tells of a young man's plot to kill police officers. The song caused a great deal of public outcry (Leland, 1992; Neely, 1992). Politicians from Vice President Dan Quayle to Jesse Jackson publicly condemned the song. Police departments across the nation threatened to sue and to sell off all stock invested in the recording label, Time Warner. Stadium and concert-hall owners broke contracts and canceled Body Count shows. Record executives received bomb threats and death threats (Leland, 1992; Light, 1993). After several weeks of such pressure, the artist pulled the album off record shelves and removed the song from the album.

This is just one example of the recent debate raging over the violent content of rap lyrics.<sup>3</sup> Ever since so-called "gangsta rap" came to the public's attention, concerns over the content of the lyrics, particularly the glamorization of violence,

<sup>1</sup>These data were presented at the 1997 Midwestern Psychological Conference. I would like to thank Mark Rabens, Sally Rabens, and Kim Rabens for their help with data collection.

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<sup>3</sup>Although "Cop Killer" was at the center of the controversy over rap music, "Cop Killer" is not a rap song. The song, and the Body Count album, are actually heavy metal. Ice T (Light, 1993) attributes the misunderstanding to racial stereotypes. The general public tends to assume that Black artists will stick to "Black" types of music (e.g., rap, soul, funk). Black artists are not "supposed" to form heavy-metal bands.

have increased. Parents are concerned about the effects such lyrics might have on their children. Police and civic leaders are concerned about the potential for rap music to increase violent crimes in the schools and city streets. Objections to rap music cross party lines, with anti-rap sentiments coming from both conservative and liberal politicians (Douglas, 1995; Dunham, 1995; Holland, 1994). Media attention and public objection show little sign of fading as long as this music remains popular. The recent murders within the rap music world (Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.) have received national coverage and have led to continued concerns about this controversial music genre (Farley, 1997).

Recently, academics have joined the debate over the value and impact of rap music. Psychologists have begun to explore the negative impact that violent rap lyrics can have on listeners. Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto (1995) have documented that exposure to violent rap videos leads to a greater acceptance of violence and lowered academic aspirations among young African Americans. Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, and Reed (1995) have found similar results when examining whether rap music can lead to greater acceptance of violence in dating situations. Others have investigated the association between rap music and "adolescent turmoil" (Took & Weiss, 1994), and the effects of violent rap music on the mood of participants (Ballard & Coates, 1995).

Others have pointed out that rap music may also have some positive influences (Krohn & Suazo, 1995). It has been argued that rap serves as a voice of protest for those left out of the "American dream" (McLaren, 1995), and that it can raise consciousness on certain social issues (Armoudian, 1994). Rap may be a useful tool to empower young African Americans and to serve as an agent for positive change (Collison, 1990; McDonnell, 1992). Some have suggested that the growing popularity of rap music is one of the few effective means of drawing the attention of middle-class and affluent America to the plight and rage of the inner cities (Cummins, 1992; Jackson, 1992). However, the media and general public have largely ignored any positive influences of rap music and have focused solely on the violent content of some rap and on the negative and harmful influences these lyrics may have. More specifically, the press has focused primarily on rap music being harmful to society and being responsible for increased rates of murder and violent crime (Binder, 1993).

Although violent themes are common across many genres of music, the political and social debates seem to focus on certain types of music such as rap. For example, Noe's (1995) analysis of rap music and country music shows that the two forms of music share many common themes. Armstrong (1993) even argues that rap and country are very similar in how they depict the causes, consequences, and culpability of violent crime and criminals. However, politicians rarely raise concerns about violent country music, and little if any research has looked at the potential negative effects of violent country lyrics. This suggests that it is not simply the content of the music that draws public concern. Rather,

some types of music attract more attention and more negative reaction than do other types.

Even when attracting negative reactions, not all types of music draw the same types of criticism. For example, both rap and heavy-metal music have been criticized for their negative influences. Like rap music, exposure to violent heavy-metal or rock music has been associated with an increased acceptance of violence and antisocial behavior (Hansen & Hansen, 1990; St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991), and liking this music is associated with rebellious personality types (Bleich, Zillmann, & Weaver, 1991; Robinson, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1996). However, there is evidence that the concerns aroused by heavy-metal music are substantially different from those aroused by rap music. Binder (1993) analyzed and compared media reactions to violent rap music and violent heavy-metal music. Her analysis shows that concerns about rap music focus on how it provokes listeners to commit violent crimes and to endanger society. On the other hand, violent heavy-metal music draws concerns that the music will harm the listeners by driving them to use drugs or to commit suicide. The difference is subtle but important; the focus is on the safety of the listener or on the listener's potential victims. Binder contends that the difference is due to the fact that rap fans are seen as young, urban Black males, while heavy-metal fans are seen as young, suburban White males. The general public, while concerned that the suburban, White heavy-metal fan may throw away a promising future is unconcerned about the rap fan except that the rap fan may perpetrate a violent crime or may harm someone else. It seems, then, that while some forms of music (e.g., country music) draw almost no criticism and others (e.g., heavy-metal music) draw concerns about the well-being of the listeners, rap music draws a unique and particularly harsh kind of negative public reaction.

One reason that rap music, in particular, receives negative reactions may be that it is seen as a predominantly Black form of music. As such, judgments may be influenced by preexisting attitudes and stereotypes. There is ample research in social psychology to suggest that preexisting attitudes and stereotypes can have enormous effects on how new information is perceived. This has been a dominant theme, from early work on person perception (e.g., Kelley, 1950) to recent work in social cognition (e.g., Herr, 1986), and of course it is the central notion in the definition and study of prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1979). Rap music, because of its association with African American culture, is judged through the tainted lens of a Black stereotype which includes such traits as violence, hostility, and aggression (Brigham, 1971; Devine, 1989). Several studies (Duncan, 1976; Sager & Schofield, 1980) have demonstrated that the same behavior is much more likely to be characterized as violent if the perpetrator is Black rather than White. Devine (1989) has demonstrated that simply priming the "Black" stereotype can lead people to interpret ambiguous scenarios as more aggressive. As Greenwald and Banaji (1995) point out, these processes can happen at an automatic level,

without awareness. These findings certainly suggest that the lyrics of rap music are judged more harshly because rap is music associated with Black artists or Black culture. Rap lyrics may be rated as more hostile or aggressive or dangerous because of negative culturally held stereotypes.

Theories of "subtle racism" (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) or "aversive racism" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) also lead to the prediction that rap music will be judged more harshly because of its association with African American artists and audiences. Judging rap lyrics fits into the framework hypothesized by Gaertner and Dovidio (1977, 1986) as a situation likely to result in racially biased judgments. These authors predict that biased judgments will occur when (a) norms for responses are ambiguous or conflicting, and (b) negative responses can be justified in nonracial terms. Clearly, the present situation fits both these features. Public norms can support both neutral and negative opinions about music lyrics. It seems reasonable to feel that violent lyrics are bad or harmful, but it is also reasonable to feel that music will not seriously impact listeners or that freedom of expression is an important right in America. Also, negative reactions to rap lyrics can easily be justified on nonracial terms; participants are objecting only to the senseless violence advocated in the song. According to this framework, the rating of music lyrics is a situation ripe for the demonstration of aversive racism.

Both the cognitive and motivated biases suggest that the root of negative reactions to rap music may lie not in the lyrics themselves but with rap music's association with African American artists and audiences. This may help to explain why rap music seems to evoke a particular type of harsh public criticism (Binder, 1993) as opposed to, for example, country music. Country music, being a primarily White form of music, would not elicit the same negative reactions. There is already evidence for this type of bias in reactions to rap lyrics (i.e., lyrics being judged more negatively because they are rap). Fried (1996) has demonstrated that the same lyrical passage is rated as significantly more negative when it is identified as a rap song as compared to when the lyrics are identified as either country or folk. Fried also demonstrates that when the lyrics are identified with a Black artist, the lyrics are rated more negatively than when they are identified with a White artist.

The present study seeks to replicate and extend these findings by examining how age, gender, parental status (whether or not they have children), musical preferences, and musical buying habits are related to the reactions to the music lyrics. To do so, this study will deliberately use a participant pool more diverse than that used in typical psychology experiments. Given the theoretical frameworks described previously, it seems reasonable that some demographic groups would be more prone to this bias than would others. For certain groups, one of the two conflicting responses may be stronger and more likely to guide judgment. For people who have children, concerns about the influence the violent lyrics

have on young listeners may be key, while these are less central to nonparents. Younger people, people who are regular music buyers, or people who listen to certain types of music may be more familiar with controversial lyrics and be less threatened by them. They might also place concerns about freedom of expression over concerns of crime and safety. The same might not be true for older people, or people less familiar with this type of music.

There is another reason for focusing on demographics and using a diverse participant pool. This research is primarily interested in the responses of people older than college age. Previous research on both the effects of music lyrics and the characteristics of those preferring certain types of music has focused on participants college age or younger (e.g., Ballard & Coates, 1995; Johnson, Adams, et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995). However, little is known about the attitudes and reactions of the rest of the population: people over college age. Although these may not be the fans of rap music, people over 21 are the ones most likely to drive the debate about violent lyrics. They are the politically active and powerful, the newsmakers and news consumers, and they tend to be the ones who worry about the welfare of the country. It is therefore essential to understand how reactions of these people may be influenced by factors such as musical genres.

## Method

### *Participants and Experimenters*

One hundred forty-six people, varying in age from 20 to 84, were polled at random in public places in a midsized Southwestern city. Sixty-eight participants were men; 78 were women. Although participants were not directly asked to identify their ethnicity,<sup>4</sup> experimenters were asked to note the race of the participants. All participants appeared to be either White or Hispanic. There were no Black participants. There were three different experimenters (2 females and 1 male) who each worked alone. Experimenters were in their mid-20s to early 30s. All three were White.

### *Overview*

All participants read the same lyrics; some were led to believe that it was a rap song and others that it was a country song. Participants then answered several opinion questions on the lyrics and provided demographic information.

<sup>4</sup>Race was not included in the demographic-variables list primarily because it was feared that this would act as a priming mechanism and might in some way confound the independent variable. The experimenter's judgment of subject's ethnicity was not analyzed because of problems in judging ethnic groups (particularly Hispanics vs. Whites) based on physical appearance.

*Stimulus Material*

To remove any effects due to actual rap lyrics, and to strengthen the argument that the public outcry can be prompted by the mere label “rap,” no actual rap lyrics were used. Instead, the first verse of an American folk song once recorded by the Kingston Trio was slightly modified and used. This song, “Bad Man’s Blunder,” is similar to “Cop Killer” in many ways.<sup>5</sup> Both songs tell the tale of a young man who intentionally shoots and kills a police officer. In neither song does the young man express any remorse for his crime. This lyrical passage is identical to the one used by Fried (1996), who pretested the passage before use. This pretest showed that this passage was actually rated as more offensive than “Cop Killer.” In addition, responses to the pretest indicated that participants did not identify it as a folk song and that the song could be passed off as either country music or rap music.

There were two different experimental packets; each packet was two pages long. Page 1 contained a brief explanation of the study, a lyrical passage (the verse of “Bad Man’s Blunder” described previously), and an identification of the artist and type of music. The instructions asked participants to read the lyrical passage and to answer some questions. Participants were specifically told to consider only this individual song when answering the questions. Page 1 was identical in both conditions, with the exception of the information about the type of music. In both conditions, the artist was identified as D. J. Jones. These two conditions varied in whether the song was identified as country or rap.

Page 2 of the packets contained the dependent measures and was identical in all conditions. Participants responded to a series of statements including “I object to these lyrics”; “I find these lyrics offensive”; “This song promotes violence, riots, and civil unrest”; “This song may be dangerous or harmful to society”; “Something should be done to warn consumers about (or otherwise regulate) this song”; “There should be mandatory warning labels”; and “They should ban such songs entirely.” All responses were on 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Participants were also asked to report their gender, age, whether they have children, what kind of music they listen to, and the number of albums (or CDs or tapes) they have bought in the last 6 months.

*Procedure*

Experimenters located themselves in public areas such as malls, coffeehouses, and so forth. Potential participants were identified as anyone who was

<sup>5</sup>There are undoubtedly many differences in these songs. Perhaps the most interesting, because it goes against popular conceptions, is that the antagonist in “Cop Killer” has a certain amount of justification for the murder (i.e., police brutality), while the antagonist in “Blind Man’s Blunder” gives no justification other than that he was feeling mean.

alone and looked to be older than 20. Experimenters were instructed to try to get a broad range of ages, and to poll both men and women. Participants were approached by the experimenter and were asked if they would complete a short survey on attitudes about music. Less than 15% of the people who were approached declined to participate.<sup>6</sup> Once a subject agreed to participate, the experimenter handed him or her one of the experimental packets. The packets were in random order in a large envelope so that the experimenters were blind to condition until this point. The packets were self-explanatory, so there was usually no interaction between the participant and experimenter while the participant completed the questionnaire. After the participant completed the questionnaire, he or she was debriefed and thanked.

## Results

### *Attitude Scale*

All seven attitude questions were combined into a single scale measure of participants' attitudes toward the lyrics. The items are simply averaged together, with no item given any more weight than the others. The final measure is also on a 9-point scale, with higher numbers indicating more negative attitudes toward the music lyrics. Reliability testing on the combined measure scale shows a Cronbach's alpha level of .96.

Overall, there was a significant effect for how the lyrics are identified. Subjects' reactions to the lyrics identified as rap ( $M = 5.79$ ) were significantly more negative than reactions toward the same lyrics identified as country ( $M = 4.02$ ),  $t(144) = 4.34, p < .001$ . This replicates the findings of Fried (1996) and suggests that the type of music has a significant effect on how participants react to the lyrics. The primary effects of interest are the interactions between condition and demographic variables, as well as contrasts within levels of the demographic variables. It is in the interactions and the contrasts within demographic groups where the differential or biased reactions can be seen. Simple main effects for the demographic variables would not indicate a bias in reactions. Instead, these main effects simply show that certain people react more or less negatively to violent music lyrics in general. For example, the effect of interest is not whether parents rate any violent lyrics more negatively, but whether they show a significant difference between how they rate lyrics identified as rap music versus country music. To test the effects of the demographic variables, each demographic variable (i.e., age, gender, parental status, musical preferences, or musical buying habits) was analyzed as an independent variable along with experimental

<sup>6</sup>The packets were in English. Therefore, any participants who did not speak English were automatically excluded.

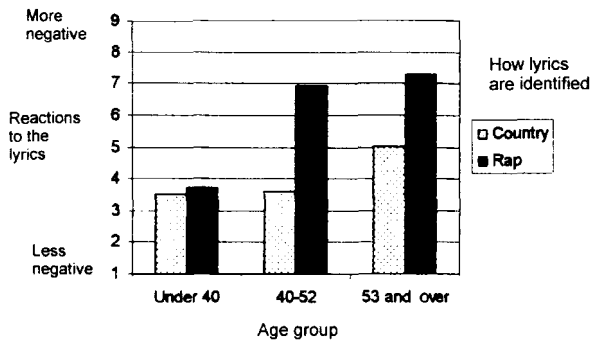


Figure 1. Reactions to violent song lyrics as a function of participants' age and whether the lyrics were identified as country music or rap music.

condition (rap or country) in a two-way ANOVA. The dependent variable was always the scale described. If a significant interaction was detected, individual *t* tests were performed. Because the addition of the demographic variables resulted in unequal cell sizes, all ANOVAs were conducted as unbalanced designs.

*Gender*

Analyzed as a 2 × 2 (Experimental Condition × Gender) ANOVA, there was no gender-by-condition interaction or main effect for gender. Both men (country *M* = 3.70, rap *M* = 5.73), *t*(65) = 3.56, *p* < .01, and women (country *M* = 4.31, rap *M* = 5.86), *t*(76) = 2.66, *p* < .01, rated the lyrics more negatively when they were identified as rap. Gender was not used as a variable in any other analyses.

*Age*

To analyze the effects of age, participants were put into one of three age groups (under 40, 40 to 52, or over 52), based on a tertiary split of the distribution. A 2 × 3 (Experimental Condition × Age Group) ANOVA reveals a significant age-by-condition interaction, *F*(2, 139) = 6.84, *p* < .01. As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, participants in the older two age groups (40 to 52 and over 52) both showed a significant bias (a significant difference in their reactions to the lyrics depending on how the lyrics were labeled). Specifically, participants age 40 and over rated identical lyrics more negatively when they thought that the lyrics were rap music rather than country music. Participants in the younger third of the sample (under 40) did not show any significant difference in how they rated the lyrics.



Table 1

*Bias in Reactions to Music Lyrics as a Function of Demographic Variables*

		Experimental condition		<i>t</i>
		Country	Rap	
Age				
Under 40	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.50 (2.41)	3.71 (2.66)	0.30, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	24	28	
40-52	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.61 (2.27)	6.92 (1.85)	5.58**
	<i>n</i>	24	25	
53 and over	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.04 (1.82)	7.29 (1.34)	4.69**
	<i>n</i>	24	20	
Parental status				
No children	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.70 (2.41)	4.38 (2.93)	1.07, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	22	28	
Children	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.13 (2.25)	6.67 (2.03)	6.18**
	<i>n</i>	50	45	
Buying habits				
Nonbuyers	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.37 (2.05)	7.22 (1.59)	3.33**
	<i>n</i>	26	21	
Light buyers	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.45 (2.06)	6.94 (1.45)	7.00**
	<i>n</i>	28	27	
Heavy buyers	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.02 (2.05)	3.35 (2.69)	0.97, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	19	25	

\*\* $p < .005$ .

The remaining demographic variables (parental status, musical preferences, and musical buying habits) were not independent of age. Correlations between these demographic variables and age ranged from  $-.52$  (number of albums bought) to  $.38$  (whether they had children). Because there was a main effect of age on attitudes toward the lyrics, the effects of age were controlled by entering age as a covariant in all remaining analyses. (*Note.* The means reported in Table 1 are the unadjusted means.)

*Parental Status*

Whether or not participants reported being parents influenced reactions, even after controlling for age. There was a significant parental-status-by-

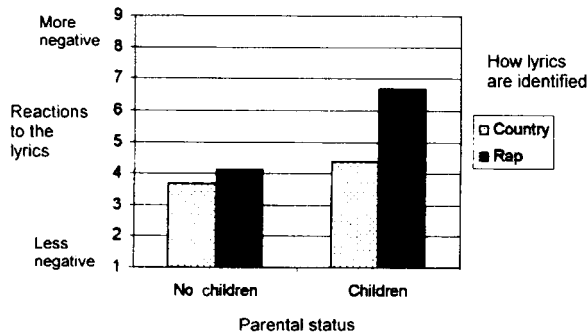


Figure 2. Reactions to violent song lyrics as a function of participants' parental status (whether or not they had children) and whether the lyrics were identified as country music or rap music.

experimental-condition interaction,  $F(1, 140) = 4.06, p < .05$ . As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, participants who are parents showed a significant difference in how they reacted to the lyrics, reacting more negatively to those lyrics identified as rap music than to those labeled country music. Participants who are not parents did not show any significant difference in how they reacted to the lyrics.

#### *Musical Buying Habits*

Participants reported how many albums (or CDs or tapes) they had purchased for themselves in the last 6 months. As with age, a tertiary split was done on the distribution of responses. Forty-six participants (non-buyers) bought no albums. Fifty-four participants (light buyers) bought 1 to 3 albums. Forty-six participants (heavy buyers) bought 4 or more albums. There was a significant Buying Habit  $\times$  Experimental Condition interaction,  $F(2, 138) = 6.46, p < .01$ . As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 3, both nonbuyers and light buyers rated the rap lyrics significantly more negatively than the country lyrics. Heavy buyers did not show significant differences in how they reacted to the lyrics.

#### *Musical Preferences*

The final variable of interest is musical preferences. In this free-response item, participants were asked to identify the type of music they prefer. From the free-response data, judges came up with the following eight categories (listed in alphabetical order): (a) classical/instrumental, (b) country, (c) easy listening, (d) heavy metal or alternative rock, (e) jazz/blues, (f) oldies rock (including '50s,

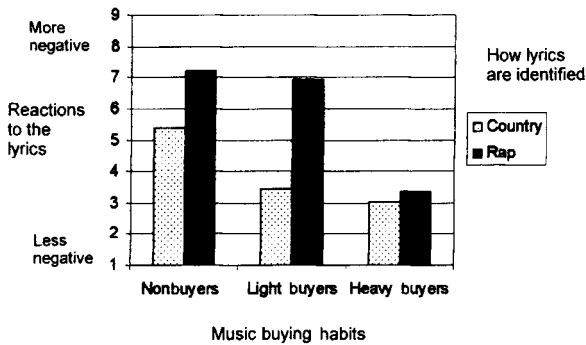


Figure 3. Reactions to violent song lyrics as a function of participants' music buying habits and whether the lyrics were identified as country music or rap music.

'60s, and '70s rock), (g) religious, and (h) Top 40. Raters then placed the responses into one of the eight categories. The interrater agreement was .92. In some cases, approximately 5% of the time, the responses did not fit into a category (e.g., polka) or conflicted (e.g., religious heavy metal). In these cases, the responses were not analyzed. As with the other demographic variables, musical preferences were initially entered with experimental condition in an ANOVA. There was a significant musical preference-by-experimental-condition interaction,  $F(7, 127) = 2.55, p < .05$ . As can be seen in Table 2, individual contrasts indicate that participants who reported preferring country, easy listening, religious, or classical music all showed significant differences in how they evaluated the song lyrics, reacting more negatively to those lyrics identified as rap music than to those labeled country music. Participants who reported listening to Top 40, jazz/blues, oldies rock, or heavy-metal/alternative rock did not show any significant differences in how they rated the lyrics. It is important to note that classifying participants into categories of musical preference left some cells with very few participants and hence low power for analysis. In both the jazz and the oldies conditions, there is more than a full point difference in the means of the country and rap conditions. These differences may have been significant with more participants. Interestingly, only listeners of heavy-metal/alternative music rated the lyrics more negatively if identified as country, and even then the difference was small and not significant.

### Discussion

This study strongly supports the hypothesis that information regarding the type of music significantly influences reactions to lyrics. Different types of music seem to be rated on different scales or on different criteria. The same lyrical

Table 2

*Bias in Reactions to Music Lyrics as a Function of Musical Preferences*

		Experimental condition		<i>t</i>
		Country	Rap	
Classical/ instrumental	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.39 (1.60)	7.75 (0.83)	3.34*
	<i>n</i>	11	8	
Country	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.36 (2.28)	6.48 (1.49)	4.70**
	<i>n</i>	19	17	
Easy listening	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.79 (0.71)	7.62 (0.98)	4.30*
	<i>n</i>	5	8	
Jazz/blues	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.17 (1.78)	5.21 (3.21)	1.42, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	9	10	
Heavy metal/ alternative	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.80 (0.73)	1.46 (0.64)	0.58, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	5	8	
Oldies rock	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.86 (2.19)	5.84 (2.04)	1.41, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	7	7	
Religious	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.16 (2.35)	8.31 (0.74)	3.12*
	<i>n</i>	8	6	
Top 40 rock	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.81 (2.72)	3.90 (2.39)	0.56, <i>ns</i>
	<i>n</i>	11	9	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .005$ .

passage that is acceptable as a country song is dangerous and offensive when identified as a rap song. Looking at the demographic variables, it seems that certain groups are more susceptible to this kind of differential judgment or bias. Age, parental status, musical buying habits, and musical preferences were all significantly related to whether or not biased reactions existed. Again, negative attitudes toward violent lyrics do not represent a bias if both country and rap lyrics are judged equally negatively. Bias is only said to exist when the mere label of "rap" leads to more negative reactions toward a lyrical passage.

As argued in the introduction, these findings can be explained in terms of theories of racial bias. Specifically, rap lyrics may be rated as more offensive because the term "rap" primes the negative culturally held stereotype of urban Blacks. There is an ever-growing body of research that the biases that result from cognitively activating stereotypes are both powerful and subtle. In one of the groundbreaking experiments in this area, Devine (1989) shows that when

stereotypes are primed, even subconsciously, these stereotypes affect the judgments of others. Interestingly, these same theoretical constructs may also account for the relative lack of concern these lyrics raised when identified as a country music song. Banaji, Harding, and Rothman (1993) have demonstrated that if a stereotype characteristic is primed, individuals who belong to the stereotyped group are judged more severely on this characteristic. In terms of the present research, if a characteristic (violence against police officers) that is associated with a group (urban Blacks) is primed, members of that group (e.g., a rap artist or the “hero” of a rap song) should be rated as even more violent. Conversely, Banaji et al.’s findings suggest that priming can have a sort of boomerang effect. After a prime, if a judgment is made about a member of an out-group (country music singers or figures), judgments will be pushed in the opposite direction—less violent.

It is also possible that these findings are driven by a process not directly related to race or racial stereotypes—familiarity. Decades of research have shown that we react more positively toward things with which we are familiar (Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). At a very specific level, no one was familiar with the song used in the present study because it was not a real country or rap song. However, it is arguable that the groups that showed significant bias are also those groups less likely to be familiar with rap music in general. Older audiences or light music buyers may simply be less familiar with rap (a new form of music) than with country (an older form of music). The musical preferences associated with the negative reactions toward rap are those that seem most dissimilar to rap (e.g., country, classical, religious). Several aspects of the findings suggest that it is not a simple case of familiarity. Consider the parental status variable, however. Because none of the participants reported being fans of rap, and because the median age of the participants was late 40s, it is arguable that those most likely to be familiar with rap might be parents, whose children are more likely to be rap listeners. If familiarity were driving the results, parents might show less negative reactions to rap music. Contrary to this reasoning, parents were more likely to display this differential bias than nonparents. Also, had the negative reactions to the lyrics been driven solely by unfamiliarity, country music should have suffered. Again, this is not something that can be directly tested, but there is some evidence available. For example, one might suspect that jazz fans or classical music listeners would be less familiar with country music. Neither of these groups rated the violent country music lyrics particularly negatively. Therefore, processes of familiarity seem to go only so far in being able to explain the present study.

It is possible (perhaps likely) that all of these processes, including stereotype priming, aversive racism, and familiarity, play into the reactions. Certainly all of them seem to fit the present data at some level, and none of them can be ruled out completely. However, this does not detract from the more specific hypothesis or

conclusions drawn from this paper. Factors other than the lyrics themselves affect reactions to music lyrics. Simply identifying lyrics as rap can cause otherwise neutral lyrics to be perceived as offensive and even dangerous. Given this, it seems that some of the public uproar about the offensiveness or appropriateness of rap lyrics may be unjust or unfair. Had these songs or lyrics come from another musical genre, such as country music, they would not have received such severe reactions. Politicians and policymakers need to be aware that their reactions, and the reactions of their constituents, may be far from objective. Negative reactions might be driven by processes of unfamiliarity or by consciously or unconsciously tapping into racial biases. Even something that seems as clearly objectionable as cop-killing songs can be greatly affected by these processes. It seems likely that these processes also play a part in reactions to other forms of media, from the perceived acceptability of television shows and movies to funding decisions for visual or performing arts.

Obviously, the demographic variables studied here are not the only potential variables that influence reactions toward music lyrics. The variables used in the study were chosen primarily because of their face validity. Further study may examine such variables as political affiliation, religion, or economic status. There are also other factors surrounding the type-of-music variable that would be interesting to research further. Variables such as the intended audience are interesting. Music aimed at teenagers may engender more negative reactions than music aimed at an older audience. The same may be true for music aimed at urban audiences as opposed to suburban or rural audiences.

The results of this study have important methodological implications for similar research. Notice how diverse the subject sample needed to be to get at these effects. Clearly this was a convenience sample, but it was still more diverse than the typical sample drawn from psychology-class subject pools. In the present study, simplistically put, the significant differences existed primarily among people who were over 40, parents, and those who listened to more sedate forms of music. Certainly this is far from the profile of the typical college student used in much psychological research. Had the present study been conducted with a pool of Introductory Psychology students, there probably would have been no significant differences. It is only with the diverse subject pool that these differences were seen. This suggests that when looking at issues of race in particular, and value judgments in general, the reactions of the more general public differ significantly from the reactions of convenient student-body populations. As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is often the reactions of older adults that have the largest impact in the "real world." Studies conducted only with college students may have some serious validity problems and may be missing important effects.

Finally, there are major limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from these experiments. First, these studies do not in any way address the overall content of rap music, or country music for that matter. I am not attempting to make

the claim that rap lyrics as a whole are “no worse” than other lyrics. Second, these studies in no way address what effects violent lyrics may have on young listeners, either by promoting violence or by numbing listeners to the atrocities of violence. The study presented here only points out that when judgments are made about the acceptability of lyrics, people tend to show biased judgment—rating rap as more negative than country music, even when the lyrics are identical.

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