

The Core of Rap: Violence

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Reading and Writing for the College Bound 3rd Hour

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Abstract

In this document I will identify and analyze the stereotype that rap music is centered around violence. This stereotype began once gangsta rap music started to gain popularity, most of that popularity pioneered by the notorious rap group, N.W.A.. I took part in extensive research on the web, reading posts from blogs, to previous studies on rap music. In addition I did my own experimentation through the use of two surveys. The surveys provided various trends, many of which I did not suspect. The demographics concluded that rap music was not violent, yet major discrepancies in other conclusions made by the demographic remained. I set out to test these abnormalities through the use of another survey with a similar demographic. The second survey's results concluded that violence was clearly evident, the opposite of the first. This leads to the conclusion that there must be a barrier in understanding of rap music and the violence within the lyrics. Through dissection of these lyrics, I have come to the consensus that there is undoubtedly violence present. Thus, the stereotype must be diminishing alongside the passage of time.

Keywords: *rap, violence, diminishing*

The Core of Rap: Violence

Rap is violent. Rap music's constantly violent lyrics force many people into believing that one should not consume it. I decided to tackle this perceptual issue because I have always enjoyed consuming rap music and wanted to have a deeper understanding of others' aversion to it. The genre's immense lyricism often hides new meaningful depths which makes the music fun to listen to and dissect. Due to my fondness of the genre, I never truly understood why rap gets a bad perception from the general public. To begin, violence must be defined in order to accurately identify its usage and role in rap. According to the World Health Organization, violence is defined as, "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (Rutherford, A., Zwi, A. B., Grove, N. J., & Butchart, A., 2007). One must analyze why this violence is present to truly understand whether the violence in rap music is good or bad. The analysis of rap lyrics and interviews of the artists, along with self-conducted surveys, prove that rap is centered around violence.

This stereotype began to truly gain popularity following the release of N.W.A.'s debut album *Straight Outta Compton*. The group created music that was highly controversial at the time due to its explicit lyrics and glorification of drugs and crimes. To accurately depict the history of N.W.A., I will use the 2015 film *Straight Outta Compton*, which follows the group and its members throughout their time together. N.W.A. is known for being the pioneers of gangsta rap, which is a rap subgenre following the gangster or thug lifestyle. The group used

their platform to talk about their own lives and experiences, thus, they portrayed lives riddled with violence. A violence that originates in their upbringing. At that time in history, the war on drugs was in full swing and police brutality was a major political issue. Out of all the songs that N.W.A. made, the most memorable one that truly caused this stereotype to hit the ground running was the song “F*ck Tha Police.” The jarring title gives an accurate glimpse into what the song is going to be about and how attitudes toward authoritative figures was at the time. As shown in the movie, the group walked outside of the studio where they were working on music, a cop driving by pulled over to question them. Out of nowhere a multitude of cops show up and start to harass the rappers. The cops immediately jump to the conclusion that they are a group of hoodlums, up to no good, and proceeded to commit what is most definitely police brutality by verbally threatening them even though they were not doing anything wrong. The officer even tells their manager to stay back so they can make sure everything is ok, “Sir can you stay right there please, we are trying to check these bangers to make sure they’re clean”(Gray, F. Gary, 2015). This just shows how high tensions were at the time for a police officer to show up with back up just to check up on an assumption he made. Although the movie is not confirmed to be entirely accurate in every account, the major points such as this are in fact true: this incident in itself was the spark that created the song, “F*ck Tha Police.” The song caused an uproar throughout the whole country, it was all over the news and some places throughout the country banned the selling of the albums(Gray, F. Gary, 2015). Even radios banned their songs from being played. When on tour for the album Straight Outta Compton, it was a commonality to see people crushing or burning vinyls as the tour bus rolled in. Protestors were even crueler than that. The movie does an excellent job in showing the hatred towards the group through a scene outside

Joe Louis Arena where a person is driving over a big pile of “Straight Outta Compton” vinyls with a construction vehicle(Gray, F. Gary, 2015). Not long after the release of the album, police brutality in Los Angeles climaxed with the beating of Rodney King. The late Rodney King was a black male, he was driving when a traffic stop was initiated. This routine stop developed into a police chase until King finally stopped. After the two passengers that were riding with him had been put into the squad cars, King came out and was brutally beaten by officers(History.com Editors, 2010). All of this was caught on tape, which gained a lot of attention and caused a huge uproar around the United States. The officers that beat King went on trial, but none of them were found guilty of using excessive force(History.com Editors, 2010). This directly initiated the beginning of L.A. riots which started the next day. Through analysis of the background of N.W.A. and the issues that are present in the rapper’s upbringing, it only seems natural to include violent lyrics in their music. This is the same reason for why rap music nowadays still has so much violence in it. It is addressing real world issues and providing an outlet for those in a similar situation to connect to. I am not saying that violence in rap is bad, but one cannot deny that the violence in rap music has been greatly misunderstood.

I want to start by identifying violence in rap through both my own careful analysis and what the rappers themselves have said about their songs. These analyses are an attempt to prove to all that rap is centered around violence, regardless of the way in which it is being addressed. Logic, a mainstream rap artist, undoubtedly due to his hit song 1-800-273-8255. Before even going into the song’s lyrics, lets begin with analyzing the title. The phone number in the title, if one is not aware, is the number for the national suicide hotline. The song is about suicide. In fact, it is about suicide in the form of two opposing perspectives: the perspective of someone calling

the hotline and the perspective of a hotline operator receiving the call. “The hook and (first)verse is from the perspective of someone calling the hotline and uh, they want to commit suicide”(Hall II, S. B., 2017). The song then proceeds to the first verse from the caller’s perspective, going through their thought process on everything going on. “And my life don’t even matter I know it, I know it/I know I’m hurting deep down but can’t show it”(Hall II, S. B., Robinson, K. D., Caracciolo, A., Taggart, D., & Ivatury, A., 2017). These are obviously some dark, morbid thoughts and signs of depression undoubtedly. Those thoughts are the reason why the person is calling the hotline. One of the main reasons logic made the song was to be an outlet for those who are going through hard times and consequently having thoughts just like these(Hall II, S. B., 2017). Logic attempted to make all of the topics as relatable as possible, so those who listen can really connect to the song and make it become the anthem he desired(Hall II, S. B., 2017). Logic achieved this relatableness in the pre-chorus, the part he said he wanted to become an anthem. He sings, “I’ve been on the low/I’ve been taking my time/I feel like I’m out of my mind/It feel like my life ain’t mine”(Hall II, S. B., Robinson, K. D., Caracciolo, A., Taggart, D., & Ivatury, A., 2017). I feel as if almost everyone has been at a point in life where things just aren’t going well, consequently they don’t feel like themselves. This song serves as the outlet that can capture those people and help them realize that eventually it is going to be fine. Furthermore, for the extreme cases where one is truly considering ending their life, hopefully this song can help them see they need help and give them the idea to call the hotline. If everyone is singing or humming that line in the song, it is going to get out and spread everywhere. Hopefully it will get to that person that may be on the edge and need to hear the song the most(Hall II, S. B., 2017).

Immediately after the second hook the song switches to the perspective of the hotline operator, the second verse is that operator's response to the caller. "I want you to be alive/I want you to be alive/You don't gotta die/Let me tell you why"(Hall II, S. B., Robinson, K. D., Caracciolo, A., Taggart, D., & Ivatury, A., 2017). Putting in the operators perspective into the narrative speaks straight to the songs audience. Telling them that they don't gotta die and that they should be alive, that no matter how bad it may be now, it can always get better. These lines really speak straight to the listener, and it is one of those lines that will hopefully get through to someone struggling. "It can be hard/It can be so hard/But you gotta live right now/You got everything to give right now"(Hall II, S. B., Robinson, K. D., Caracciolo, A., Taggart, D., & Ivatury, A., 2017). Logic further explains how crucial the switch up in perspective is, "Switching up the perspective in the second verse is everything because that is the person going like hey this is not permanent, the way you feel it's ok things will get better"(Hall II, S. B., 2017). Just for someone in that situation to be able to hear and realize that they are not alone can truly make the difference in their life. Without someone to calm them down and relate to, one in this situation may feel so isolated that they would rather take their own life. Finally, the song ends with the final chorus from the perspective of the caller with a new peace of mind. The caller says, "But I don't wanna cry/I don't wanna cry anymore/I wanna feel alive/I don't even wanna die anymore"(Hall II, S. B., Robinson, K. D., Caracciolo, A., Taggart, D., & Ivatury, A., 2017). This complete change in the caller's thoughts and views highlights what is truly possible. It alludes to how much of a difference calling the hotline can make. In the past, I personally had a close relative attempt to commit suicide. Watching that whole situation unfold really made an impact on my life, especially in seeing how important it is to be there for someone going through it.

Making sure that they know they are not alone and that everything will be fine in the end is crucial to their wellbeing. Furthering that, watching how the proper help can really make the difference in the recovery process opened my eyes. If suicide hotline did not exist, my relative and so many others would not be with us today.

Now one may ask, “How is this song actually violent?” Based on the definition of violence given earlier, suicide, or attempts of suicide would be considered violent because it is a behavior intended to kill. After the release of this song, suicide hotline received huge increases in usage. According to Rebecca Rubin calls went up 33% when compared to 2016’s numbers(Rubin, R., 2017). Also, they are seeing three times the activity on their facebook account, Google searches for the hotline went up 100% in the spring of the songs release, and the NSPL(National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) website reported a 25% increase monthly from the release in april to August, going from 300,000 visitors a month to 400,000(Rubin, R., 2017). This suggests that even though rap may be centered around violence, it does not mean that it promotes it. Rather, in most cases rap music attempts to identify issues and tackle them in the perspective of the respectful artist: like in Logic’s case, tackling the hard topic of suicide and trying to promote the available preventative measures.

Another song that is all about violence is the song m.A.A.d. city by Kendrick Lamar. Once again lets begin with the title of the song, Kendrick says that the title has two meanings: my angel on angel dust and my angry adolescence divided. My angry adolescent divided meaning that he is going look back on his adolescence. The first verse of the song is what I want to focus on due to it’s immensely strategic lyricism, along with a meaning that is somewhat hidden or unable to be fully comprehended without further analysis. The first verse starts with,

“Brace yourself!/I’ll take you on a trip down memory lane”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012). This implies that Kendrick is about to go into his past experiences and elaborate on them. One must assume that his past is not one filled with sunshine and rainbows. “It got ugly wavin’ yo’ hand out the window - check yourself”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012). This lyric warns listeners against waving gang signs to attract unnecessary attention to oneself because it is a good way to get hurt. “Seen a light-skinned n*gga with his brains blown out/At the same burger stand where *beep* hang out/Now this is not a tape recorder saying that he did it/But ever since that day/I’ve been lookin’ at him different/That was back when I was nine.”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012). According to Kendrick, this is a true story from when he was nine years old and he witnessed someone get murdered. “F**k you shooting for if you ain't walkin up you f**kin punk?”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012). This line refers to how in Compton if one does not walk up to the person they shoot, they are cowardice. It also refers to gang initiations in which one may have to kill another to join, which is obviously a very demanding and violent requirement. “Aw man god damn all hell broke loose you killed my cousin back in 94’ f**k yo’ truce”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012), this line alludes to the truce made by the bloods and crips the day before the L.A. riots began. The truce is known as the Watts Truce. It was signed to stop the war between the gangs in an attempt to join forces against the L.A. police due to the immense brutality discussed earlier. Kendrick also alludes to the killing of his cousin, which signifies the breaking of the treaty as it did not last long and the two gangs were back to fighting

soon after the treaty was made. “You moving backwards if you suggest you sleep with a tec/Go buy a chopper/And have a doctor on speed dial I guess”(Duckworth, K. L., Hanley, Q. M., Spears, M., Morgan, A., Tyler, A., & Riera, R., 2012). This line identifies that in Compton, to stay safe you have to have a gun on you. However a tec (otherwise known as a tec-9), which is a pistol, is not good enough. Instead, a chopper (otherwise known as an ak-47) is necessary to stay safe. Then, Kendrick goes on to say keep a doctor on speed dial as an allusion to the fact that if everyone has guns on them, their use is promoted. Just because shooting their attacker is now a viable option with the weapons on them, if things get sticky, someone has a higher likelihood to get shot and need a doctor. Just looking at the first verse of the song, any audience can see through careful analysis that Kendrick Lamar has very insightful lyrics with meanings that go way deeper than they may seem to superficially. Throughout the entirety of the song, Kendrick refers to the past and all of the violence involved with the gangs of Compton, predominantly the Bloods and the Crips and drug traffic. Yet once again, Kendrick like Logic is not saying these things just to say them, he is putting these stories into a song in an attempt to draw attention upon the issue. To show the true struggle inner city Compton residents struggle with, in an attempt to bring together the west coast once more instead of being so divided.

The final song I will be analyzing is the song Swimming Pools by Kendrick Lamar. Swimming Pools is one of Kendrick’s first big songs, succeeding in topping the charts at number 17 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. Kendrick’s song begins with “Now I done grew up ‘round some people live in’ they live in bottles”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012). This is Kendrick looking back upon his past, saying that he’s been around all these people that drink and drink. Later in the song he realizes in himself why these people are addicted to alcohol. He says,

“Granddaddy had the golden flask, Backstroke everyday in Chicago”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012). This line is connecting the previous one to his life, further affirming that he is talking about his own past experiences. In fact, he is talking about his grandpa and adding further to the song title swimming pools as if he is swimming in the liquor. This clever play on lyricism that makes his point in a way that stands out while still coming across well. Also, Kendrick saying his grandpa has a golden flask it is in a way glamorizing the idea of drinking. When thinking about golden items, one usually associates them with things of high quality. Usually, one uses these high quality items in an attempt to show them off. The only way one could do such a thing with a golden flask would be excessively drinking. “Some people like the way it feels some people wanna kill their sorrows, some people wanna fit in with the popular, that was my problem”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012). These lines go back on the first line of the first verse, this is the explanation for why the people around him, when he was growing up were always drinking. They either liked the way it made them feel, wanted to use it as a depressant that it is, or they wanted to try to fit in with all the people around them doing it. Yet, this is also the point in the song where Kendrick realizes his problem. He was trying to fit in with the popular people that were drinking, but now he realizes that these people he thought were cool and popular are actually the people trying to kill their sorrows and feel better. This idea of peer pressure making him drink is highlighted much further in the song’s hook, “N*gga why you babysitting’ two or three shots/I’ma show you how to turn it up a notch/First you get a swimming pool full of liquor/Then you dive in it/Pool full of liquor then you dive in it/I wave a few bottles and I watch em’ all flock/All the girls wanna play baywatch/I got a swimming pool full of liquor and they dive in it/Pool full of liquor and I dive in it”(Duckworth, K. L., &

Williams, T., 2012). The hook begins with a peer antagonizing Kendrick for “babysitting,” which means taking baby sips slowly and drinking with care instead of slamming shots. Then, the peer proceeds to tell Kendrick that one must get a swimming pool of liquor and dive in it, meaning that one must get a large amount of alcohol and consume it in a quick manner. Kendrick proceeds to say that he waves a few bottles and watches them all flock, meaning that he literally is waving some liquor bottles in the air and all these people flock to him in attent. Digging deeper into the metaphorical meaning I feel as if this line is hinting at someone drowning, it is common for someone that is drowning to wave for help. This portion of the song is representative of Kendrick’s cry for help. He is asking to be saved from drowning in the liquor and most definitely making his own statement against the substance abuse. Kendrick also states that “all the girls wanna play baywatch”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012), This is a poetic play of words to hint at the t.v. show and now movie as well. Saying that these girls are trying to play this lifeguard role where they are jumping in after these people in the swimming pool. This song is not just about alcohol and drinking, instead it is about the abuse and excessive usage of alcohol. This consumption of alcohol is then connected to the gang violence surrounding Kendrick in the interlude, “I ride, you ride, bang/One chopper, one hundred shots, bang/Hop out, do you bang?/Two choppers, two hundred shots, bang”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012). In this interlude Kendrick is relating the gang violence to the song. When saying “I ride, you ride”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012), he is talking about alcohol. If he drinks one drink with him, it is implied that one way or another trouble will come about. The trouble is highlighted by “hop out, do you bang?”(Duckworth, K. L., & Williams, T., 2012), which is supposed to be from the perspective of someone getting out of a car and asking if

Kendrick is a part of a gang. Banging is short for gang banging, thus, if one is asking do you bang, they are asking for your gang affiliation. Kendrick also talks about choppers and shots, this is in reference to the people asking him if he bangs. Choppers(AK-47s) and shots refer to those people using the choppers to shoot. All in all, the song is an attempt to address the issue that is hitting our modern society like a storm. So many adolescents are drinking and it is not in small volumes, rather in excessively high amounts. So much to the point that there are kids all over the world dieing from substance abuse. On top of that, substance abuse connects to violence through the bad decisions one makes while impaired and the terrible things it can do to one's body. Rather than glorify substance abuse, like many believe Kendrick has done with the song, he is criticizing it in an attempt to spread awareness of this overlooked issue.

I conducted experiments in an attempt to see what people thought about the violence present in rap. The first experiment was a survey with 10 questions and the demographic identified in figure 5. and figure 8.. This survey handled yes or no questions focusing on rap and the different subjects within the music. The biggest concern that I found in the survey was that a majority of the demographic thought that rap music portrayed women in a negative light yet the they did not think that rappers using b*tch in their lyrics was hurtful towards the image of women, in fact they thought that kind of vocabulary was not even violent towards women(Figure 2.). Seeing these results made me question if people even pay attention to the things these rappers say sometime, there are a countless number of songs that portray women in a despicable light, usually it is in the form of abuse yet people must not think that this is violent towards women. After viewing these results I decided to perform another survey because I felt as if there was a big disconnect in the results. It just did not make sense that the demographic thought usage

of vulgar language against women and portrales in negative light was not present in rap, in an overwhelming majority as well. Thus, I made the second survey with a twist to it. Instead of having anything to do with rap on it, I changed it to be geared to thoughts in general without pertaining to rap. This way I could get down to what the demographic thought without any bias knowing rap is involved. Figure 6. and figure 7. Represent the demographic that took this survey. The second demographic provided statistics that led to an astonishing discovery. When asked the same question about the usage of b*tch affecting the image of women in both surveys, just the second survey not mentioning rap, an overwhelming majority of the demographic said it was hurtful and violent towards women (figure 3.). In the first survey I asked the demographic if the thought rap was all about violence and I gave them a list of examples of violence, a majority said no, yet when I used those same violent examples in the second survey and did not say anything about raps involvement, the numbers nearly evened out (Figure 4.). This must mean that the pure fact that rap is involved makes a change in how people see what is and what is not violent. At the end of both surveys I had two questions identical to each other asking for the demographic to analyze how much they consume and enjoy rap music. In both demographics the number was nearly the same, thus, the results were not affected by bias between the two different surveys (Figure 1.). The surveys concluded with the finding that people have become desensitized to the violence portrayed in rap music, this is affirmed by figure 2. In which it shows a clear opposition in answering the same question just based off of one containing rap and the other not containing rap.

Rap is centered around violence. Through the many analyses of rap music in this document, it cannot be denied that rap has a heavy focus on violence. How that violence is

portrayed in rap is what is truly sporadic. While violence is a key element in rap, it is not promoted, rather it is identified and put on a pedestal for the listener to consider. The rappers like Logic, Kendrick Lamar, and N.W.A. want to use their platform to push issues they have experienced or witnessed in hopes that they become recognized and handled. Violence in rap was not identified in experimentation due to the desensitization that has taken a toll on listeners. While what rappers say can be violent and hard to depict, their messages could never be more clear, they want change.

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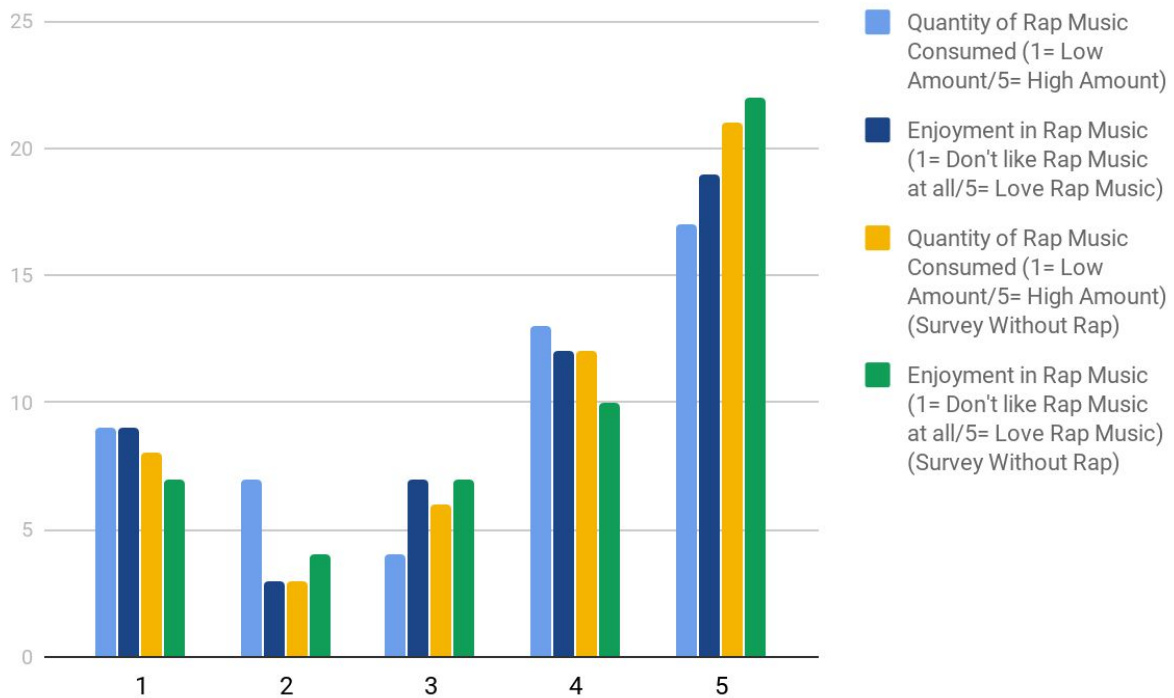


Figure 1. This figure represents the demographic that was surveyed in two ways, quantity and enjoyment. At the end of both surveys the two same questions were asked in attempt to find out how much the demographic listened to and enjoyed rap. I asked these questions in attempt to have the ability to identify any possible bias due to the demographic favoring rap music, which I didn't find to be true. The graph shows that in both surveys the demographic was roughly the same in quantity and enjoyment in rap music.

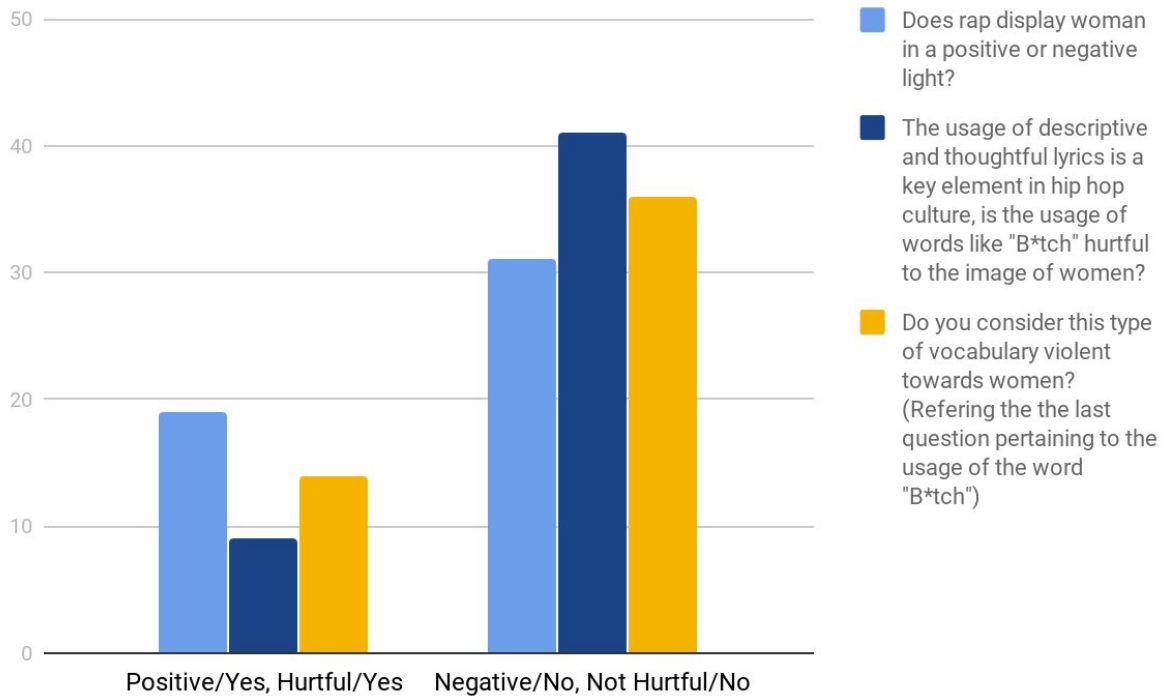


Figure 2. This graph represents the demographic’s view of women in rap along with the the usage of the word “b*tch”. The goal of these questions was to identify whether or not rap music is violent towards the image of women. The demographic had a majority of people(31 to 19) that thought rap portrayed women in a negative light, and that the usage of the word “b*itch” was not hurtful to the image of women in an overwhelming 41 to nine majority. Finally the demographic also identified that they thought the vulgar vocabulary was not violent towards women in a 36 to 14 majority.

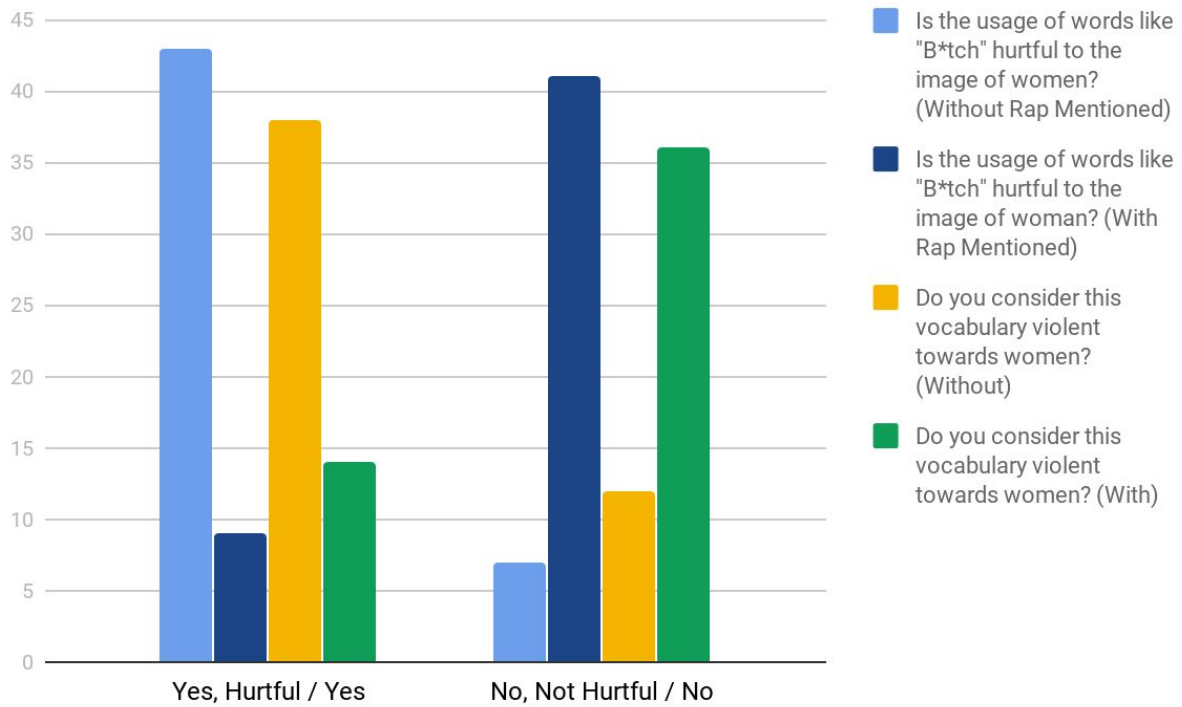


Figure 3. In this graph I identified a major conflict between the demographics and the separate surveys. The same question was asked on both surveys except one survey was geared towards the rap aspect while the other did not mention rap music. The results for the same question came out to be polar opposites. When rap was mentioned an overwhelming 41 to 9 majority said the usage of “b*tch” was not hurtful to the image of women, yet when rap was not mentioned an overwhelming majority of 43 to 7 said the usage of “b*tch” was hurtful to the image of women. In both cases the following question of whether or not it was thought to be violent towards women, five people moved from the stance of either yes, hurtful or no, not hurtful to no(not violent) or yes(yes violent) respectively.

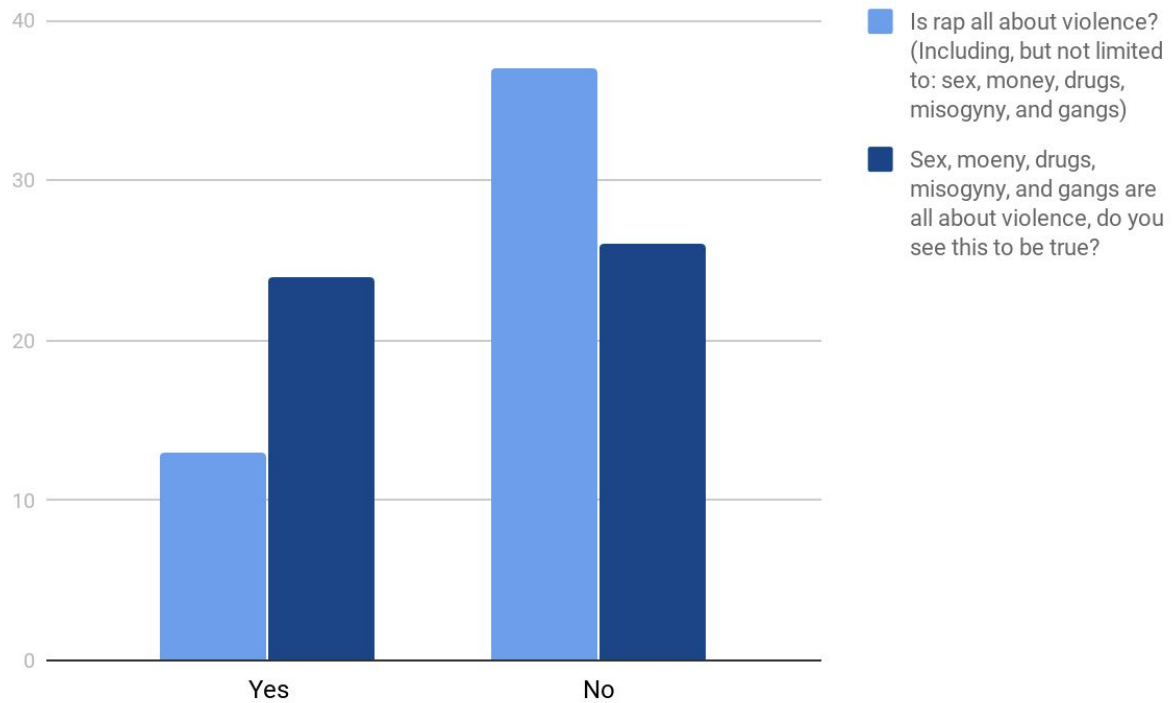


Figure 4. In the above graph the goal was to identify the two different demographic's thoughts on what is violent. The goal was to try to identify if rap being involved was what made the change in views on violence. When asked if rap is violent a majority of 37 to 13 concluded that it is not, yet when rap is not mentioned the numbers even out a bit. When asked if the examples of violence provided in the rap question are violent 24 answer yes and 26 say no.

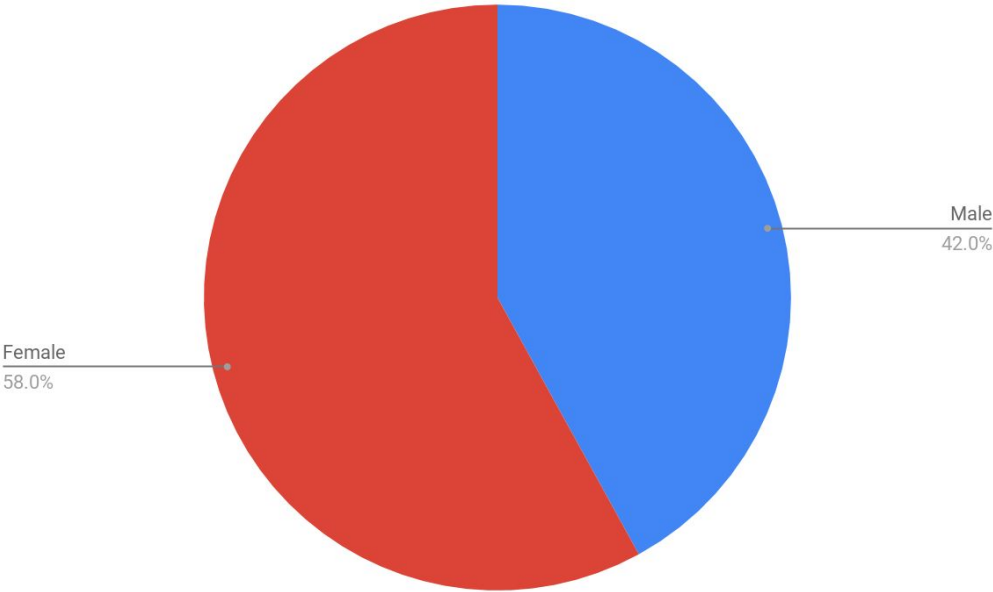


Figure 5. This pie chart represents the gender demographic that took the survey that had questions explicitly talking about rap music. A majority of which were female.

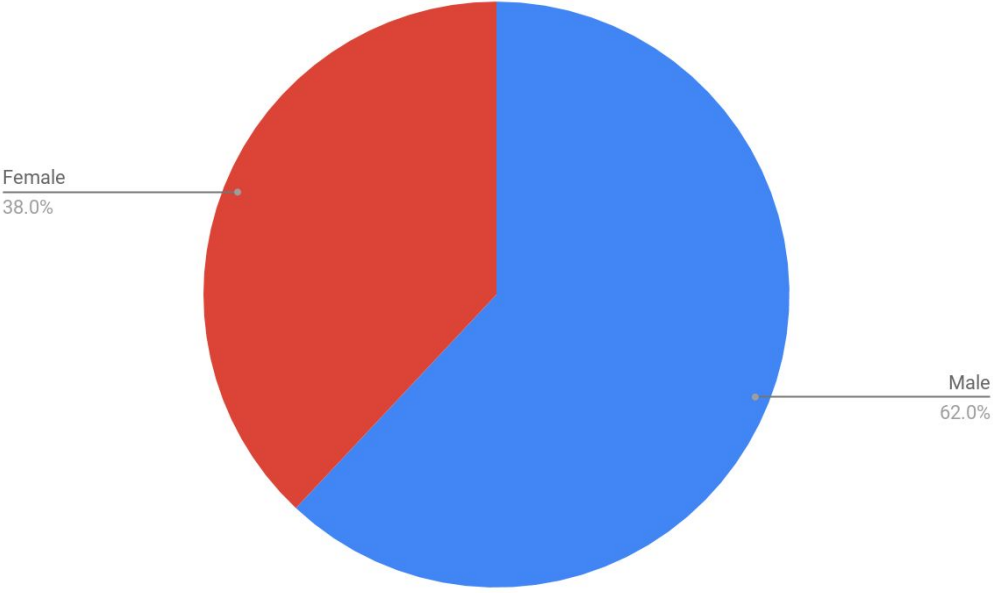


Figure 6. This pie chart represents the gender demographic that took the survey that had questions that did not mention rap. A majority of which were male.

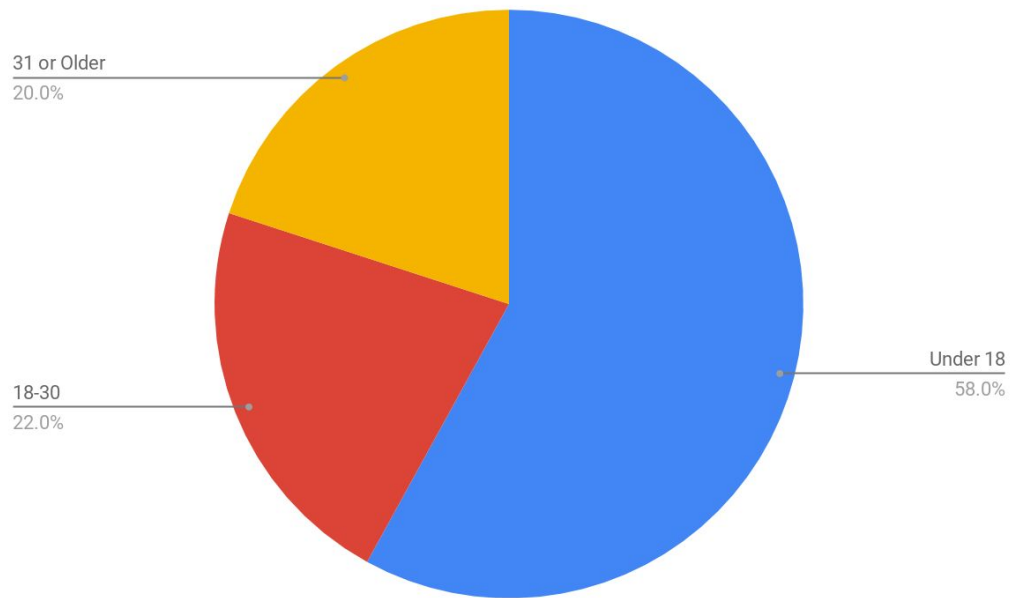


Figure 7. This pie chart represents the age of the demographic that took the survey that did not talk about rap music. A majority of those involved were under 18.

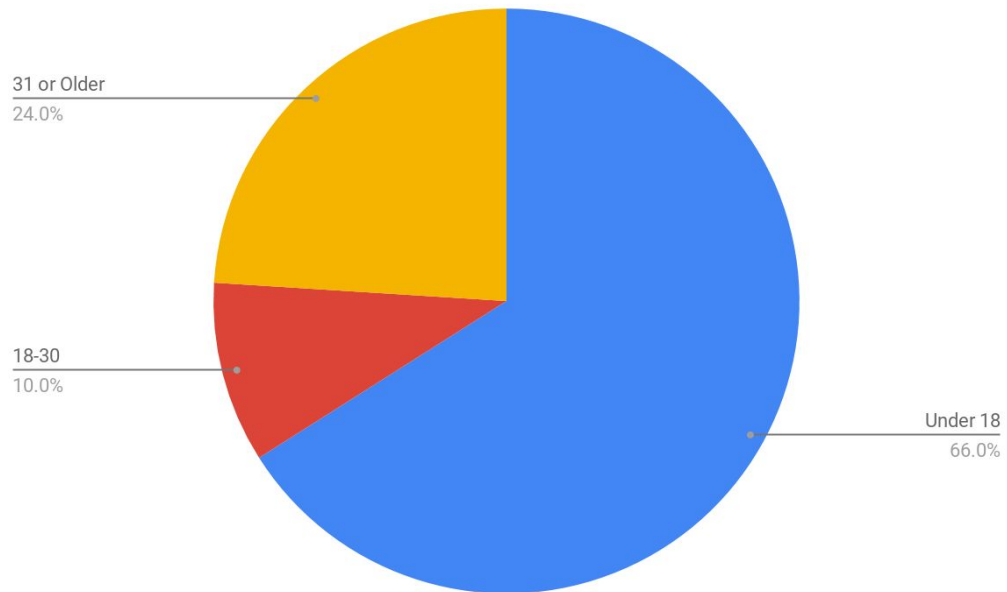


Figure 8. This pie chart represents the age of the demographic that took the survey explicitly talking about rap music. A majority of those involved were under 18.