

## Rap - A Different Language?

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**Abstract.** The music genre of rap is often criticized for its vulgar language and use of discriminating terminology. Similarly, the negative impact of this music, especially on youth and the young minds is questionable, especially since this seems to be the primary listener group targeted by the musicians. In this analysis, several lyrics are reviewed with a particular focus on the use of provocative or extremely secular usage of terminology.

Methodology of this analysis is based on surveys conducted with the listenership of rap to gain insights into the perception of this music genre in the general population. Furthermore, interviews are conducted with critics of rap and supporters / musicians of this music genre. The triangulation of the topic is rounded off with external sources.

Based on the findings, different terminology and its meaning is examined and discussed, in particular what this terminology actually means to youth and how it is different from the meaning the public might hold. While it seems undisputed that parents / guardians have the responsibility to guard youngsters against violence in language and look out for their best interest, often times they are not aware of youngsters' music consumption or the content of it.

In conclusion, a critical review of rap and its sometimes apparent discriminatory content is offered.

### 1. Introduction

“Ich schieß auf Claudia Roth und sie kriegt Löcher wie ein Golfplatz.“[1] [I gun down Claudia Roth and then she has holes like a golf course.] With this and similar statements Rapper Bushido (aka Anis Mohamaed Youssef Ferchichi) is making a lot of waves in his lyrics. However, the question must be asked whether it really needs to be considered as threat to life or whether he is taken hits at Claudia Roth for other reasons. Therefore, subject of this essay is to research whether speech and verbalizations in rap are truly to be considered discriminating and will be understood by the listeners as well as the effects of these statements onto the listeners. In order to have a meaningful discussion, basic terms need to be operationalized.

For further understanding it needs to be explained what rap is. In his track “Rap ist” the rappers Max Herre, MoTrip, Samy Deluxe and Afrob reflect what they associate with rap: “Rap ist bewusst auf die Regeln zu scheißen und sich den Frust von der Seele zu schreiben.”[2] [Rap is to shit on all the

rules and write all the frustration right off your soul.] As easy as this definition might sound, it still entails a meaningful and true core: to get rid of all your frustrations.

Rap's beginnings were found in New York towards the end of the 70's with Sugar Hill Gang and LL Cool J. Here rap was predominantly used by the Afro-American population of the ghettos to point to economic difficulties and discrimination [3].

Additionally, it needs to be clarified what discrimination is. According to the German Anti-Discrimination Law (AGG) discrimination is any unjustifiable inequitable treatment based on origin, religion, ideology, skin color, sex, age, sexual identity or physical disability [4].

## 2. Forms of discrimination

Forms of discrimination can be divided into three levels. While the first level, the individual one, is concerned with our behavior towards others in everyday life [5], the institutional level is referencing the results of actions within an organization or an institution. The societal level pertains to assumptions, naming, and images. Here the question is mostly what or who is normal, right, good, and pretty. The answer to this question is mostly presented in the media and in school books. Discrimination in general, as well as in rap, cannot be attributed. It takes place on all three levels simultaneously [6].

### 2.1 Discrimination in music

Based on experience, media predominantly reports scandalous actions of many rappers, their "bad lyrics" and the respective endangerment of youths [7]. An interesting insight, however, is that not only Rapmusic is containing such youths-endangering passages. In 2012, the song *Whistle* by Flo Rida was able to remain in the upper placement of the top 100 charts for a long time [8]. Even though this song contained pornographic elements, it was not indexed by the Bundesprüfstelle für Jugendgefährdende Medien (BPJM). In this song Flo Rida solicits a woman to have oral sex with him: "Can you blow my whistle baby" [9]. *Whistle* is not the only incident. While Andy Samberg and Justin Timberlake report of their intend of having sex with the mother of their friend in their song *Motherlover* [10], the song *Birthday Sex* tells how the artist would like to make a woman *happy* on her birthday [11]. Next to RnB, the genre of rock music also offers songs with pornographic or violence-glorifying content. An example is the song *I will hurt you*. With lines like "Du blutest für mein Seelenheil, ein kleiner Schnitt und du wirst geil, der Körper schon total entstellt, egal, erlaubt ist was gefällt" [12] the violent and sexual threshold will be minimized. "[I will hurt you.]" [You are bleeding for my salvation, a small cut and you will get horny, your body is already completely defaced, I do not care, everything you like is okay.]

### 2.2 Discrimination in rap

According to some politicians rap is intolerant, discriminating, and hostile towards woman.

C. Delores Tucker, chairperson of the National Congress of Black Woman, claims that rap is "drug-driven, [...] greed-driven and violence-driven" [13]. Since politicians and many other critics are no experts in the area of rap and only reflect their personal perceptions, these generalized statements above need to be taken with care. With such statements the idea is spread that only gangster rap makes up the whole genre of rap.

## 3. Different forms of rap

Due to the fact that different rap forms are not defined in literature, the most important styles are classified here.

Gangster rap, battle rap, porno rap, deep rap, political rap and sarcastic rap. Each of these forms is concerned with different focal points and its different goals.

### 3.1 Gangster rap

Rap music of this genre is predominantly utilizing explicit lyrics that are concerned with drug consumption and violence within urban gangs and is articulating aggression towards other groups, in particular women, authority, and whites [14].

### 3.2 Battle rap

Like the name already indicates, battle rap is dealing with a conflict on rap level. Reasons for battles can be manifold. Most times, artists feel forced to produce a distract to disrespect another co-artist, based on inappropriate statements or actions. Often times battle rap is also used to gain popularity and market the music or artist. If someone only wants to show off their skills for fun and is not looking for a serious disagreement with the competition, this person can produce themselves at events such as *Feuer über Deutschland* [Fire over Germany].

### 3.3 Porno rap

Porno rap for the content of this Paper is defined as verbalization of sexual drives with pornographic content.

### 3.4 Deep Rap

Like the term *deep* already indicates, these lyrics have deeper meaning. Foremost topics are love, family, death, living in tough socio-economic strata and life circumstances.

### 3.5 Political rap

Rap artists voice their discontent with the current situation, in particularly with politics and the decisions taken by politicians; however, this kind of rap is hardly relevant.

### 3.6 Sarcastic rap

Sarcasm is from Greek and means “to tear flesh” [15]. Like in sarcastic language, it is also a concern of rap to ridicule people or common situations in a funny manner. An example for sarcastic rap is the artist Alligatoah with his track *Willst Du*: „Willst du mit mir Drogen nehmen, dann wird es rote Rosen regnen, ich hab’s in einer Soap gesehen. Willst du mit mir Drogen nehmen. Komm, Komm, wir geh’n, komm, wir geh’n zusamm’n den Bach runter.“ [Do you want to take drugs with me, then red roses will rain on us, I saw it in a soap. Do you want to take drugs with me, come on, come on, we will go down the drain together][16].

## 4. Methodology

In this passage the methodology for this empirical study is presented.

### 4.1 Approach

In order to gather sufficient information to determine which effects rap has on its listeners, it is important to weigh the opinion of supporters and critics of rap. Supporters can be classified as the listeners that are also familiar with the content of the music. Furthermore, it is important to ask experts that have substantial knowledge in the area. The authors were able to interview the rapper Addis Mussa aka Raptile as an expert and gained important information to derive at a meaningful conclusion. Furthermore the opinion of the opposition was regarded and incorporated into the results. Critics are considered to be the conservative public and the BPJM [Inspection Authority for Youth-Endangering Media].

An additional alternative to examine whether rap contains endangering elements is the content analysis. Contrary to the survey questionnaire, the content analysis delivers objective results. „The central problem of content analysis originates mainly in the data reduction process by which the many

words of texts are classified into much fewer content categories.” (Weber, 1990, p. 15). Another difficulty of content analysis is the ambiguity of the words. While the pure count of the words does not offer strict guidance concerning the meaning used by the musicians, a triangulation with the meaning derived by the listeners provides clarity as to their interpretation (Weber, 1990, p. 15).

## 4.2 Instruments

In order to determine whether rap has negative impact on the listeners, the authors preferred to utilize three empirical methods: survey questionnaire, content analysis and expert interview to gather information to triangulate with literature.

### 4.2.1 Survey questionnaires

The sample consists of pedestrians in downtown Weiden and students at the Ostbayrische Technische Hochschule Amberg-Weiden that are asked about their attitude and evaluation, knowledge and conviction, behavior and deeds as well as demographic information [17]. Predominantly, the authors use closed and hybrid questions to ensure high objectivity of interpretation.

### 4.2.2 Expert interview

The authors conducted two expert interviews, one with the rapper Addis Mussa, aka Raptile, and the other one with Petra Meier, Assistant Chairperson of the BPJM.

### 4.2.3 Content analysis

The authors see particular advantage in using the content analysis, since it will not contain personal opinions – contrary to survey questionnaires and expert interviews – and therefore ensures high objectivity [18].

## 4.3 Quality criteria

In order to assure the quality of the empirical study, it is necessary to consider objectivity, reliability and validity [19].

### 4.3.1 Objectivity

The three kinds of objectivity – execution, evaluation and interpretation - are given when the results are independent of the researchers [20].

### 4.3.2 Reliability

The reliability of this study can be assumed to be high, since survey questionnaires and interviews were developed according to scientific standards.

### 4.3.3 Validity

In order to have most exact instruments, validity is divided into three subcategories: content, criterion, and construct [21].

## 5. Data

The data is described based on the different instruments used, namely survey questionnaire, content analysis and expert interviews.

### 5.1 Data attained from survey questionnaire

Of the sample  $n=90$  only 12.4% entirely refuse to listen to rap, whereas 9% exclusively consume rap music; the other 78.6% listen to rap music in varying degrees regularly, so the conclusion can be made they are sufficiently familiar with this genre to answer the questions in a meaningful manner. However, not all of them prefer to listen to all kinds of different rap genres. Primarily, sarcastic rap is the favorite followed closely by deep rap. The least chosen one by the listeners is porno rap.

Contrary to C. Dolores Tucker, most subjects do not only see negative aspects of rap. When asked about the different characteristics of rap music, the majority decided to describe it as critical of society, emotional, and descriptive of socio-economic strata.

Prime object of investigation is whether wording and expressions in rap are actually considered discriminating or are understood by the listenership as such, and which effects wording might have on the listeners. About 4/5 are of the opinion that rap can have positive as well as negative effects; however, meanings drift far apart. As can be seen in the below graph (Fig. 1), subjects are of the opinion that rap music has the following negative effects:

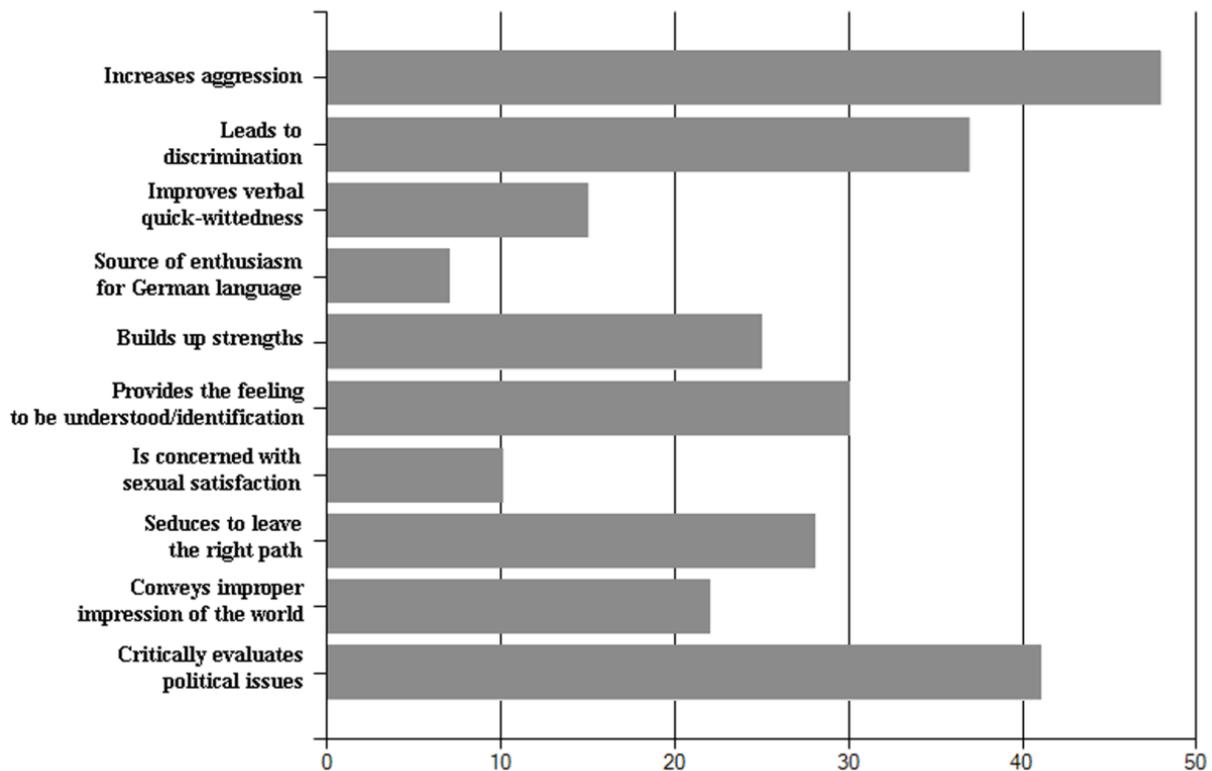


Fig. 1. Positive and negative effects of rap according to the subjects n=90.

increases aggression (56.5%), and discrimination (43.5%). On the other hand, subjects consider the following positive effects of rap music: identification with rap (64.7%) made up approximately equally of those that claim rap builds up strengths and provides the feeling to be understood, and critical reflection of political issues (48.2%). Since typically several aspects are relevant, subjects were offered the opportunity for multiple answers.

Eight questions were concerned with specific terminology and lines from rap lyrics and had to be rated by the subjects in predefined scales. The following table (Table 1) offers an overview of the results of interpretation.

Table 1. Rating of rap terminology according to the subjects n=90.

		Literally	Party membership useless	Politics dominated by lobbyists
Fick deine Partei		9,2% (8)	58,6% (51)	37,9% (33)
		Creative methaphor	A line like all others	Rap can be intelligent
Diese Rapper treiben mich zum äußersten wie Zentrifugalkräfte		54,0% (47)	27,6% (24)	18,4% (16)

		Does not concern me	A line like all others	Makes me feel understood
Ich komm nicht klar damit, das Leben ist ein großer Kampf, doch leider Gottes hab ich leider nicht die Oberhand		39,3% (35)	48,3% (43)	12,4% (11)
		Does not concern me	A line like all others	Makes me feel understood
Das erste Mal abends in der Jugenddisco, heimlich rauchen, weil wir dachten, es wäre schick so		39,8% (35)	44,3% (39)	15,9% (14)
		A line like all others	Tempts youth to neglect school	Makes me feel understood
Ich schlug den Unterricht mit Pausen tot, pausenlos, das Schulsystem ist für'n Arsch, ihr kommt nicht an uns ran		15,9% (14)	59,1% (52)	25,0% (22)
		Has no meaning	Hostile towards USA	Criticises current politics
Guten Morgen NSA, heute schon Facebook gecheckt, wahrscheinlich habt ihr damals schon mein Gameboy gehackt		4,5% (4)	12,4% (11)	83,1% (74)
	Gay person	Dislikable person	Inappropriate action	Metropolitans (i.e. David Beckham)
Homo	76,7% (66)	30,2% (26)	8,1% (7)	9,3% (8)
	Hoe	All female beings	Females not belonging to family or friends	Pussy/Softy (male or female)
Bitch	84,1% (74)	9,1% (8)	8,0% (7)	19,3% (17)

## 5.2 Data from content analysis of rap lyrics

In the content analysis, the authors examined whether and how the different rap genres contain the following criteria: critical of society, discriminating towards minorities and women, hostile towards politicians, hate speech, emotions, and descriptive of life in socio-economic strata.

In this selection, the authors paid attention to use tracks that are typical and include the necessary criteria.

### 5.2.1 Gangster rap

For this genre the content analysis displayed that it is mostly discriminating and hostile towards politicians. On the other hand, rappers present themselves as better than their competition or the rest of the population and use hate speech. The definition that gangster rap typically expresses hostility

towards whites, women and civil authority is not completely applicable, inasmuch German gangster rap is not anti-women and does not include statements against other nations.

#### 5.2.2 Sarcastic rap

Common ground of gangster and sarcastic rap is the use of discriminating terminology. Contrary to gangster rap, however, sarcastic rap is predominantly critical of society.

#### 5.2.3 Battle rap

An emphasis of battle rap is also to voice critique. The content analysis provides that this critique is more so in subjective form and not against society, but rather against individuals. Especially its creative expressions and the combination of hate and love as prime properties differentiate battle rap.

#### 5.2.4 Deep rap

Similarly, hate and love are also main aspects of deep rap. During the content analysis, it became apparent that deep rap is mostly concerned with life in lower socio-economic strata and deals with societal problems.

#### 5.2.5 Political rap

Next to deep rap, political rap also strongly criticizes society but is not hostile towards politicians. Much rather it is questioning politics in general.

#### 5.2.6 Porno rap

Contrary to the other rap forms, porno rap cannot be assigned a singular criterion, except for hostility against women, since they are seen as objects of sexual desires and satisfaction.

As can be seen, the individual rap forms cannot be clearly allocated to a sole criterion with the exception of porno rap. So the content analysis determined that the rap forms do not distinguish selectively, but are rather hybrid mixed forms.

### 5.3 Data from expert interviews

The authors were able to obtain the following insights through expert interviews from opposing perspectives.

#### 5.3.1 Data from expert interview with BPJM

During an interview with Petra Meier, Assistant Chairperson of the BPJM, the authors were first presented with criteria that cause a song to be indexed and make it not accessible for minors. The prime criterion is crossing a certain threshold. As an example, Meier provided porno rap, which is classified as strongly youth-endangering because women are degraded as objects of sexual desires. Similarly, she indicated crossing the threshold in gangster rap in case depictions are too realistic since young people, according to her, are not able to distinguish between seriously meant messages and provocations intentionally used for marketing purposes.

#### 5.3.2 Data from expert interview with Addis Mussa aka Raptile

The German-Ethiopian rapper Raptile was born in Munich in 1976 and wrote his first lyrics at the age of 16. Featuring for Samy Deluxe he began to become famous. Today he lives in the USA and performs exclusively American rap music. Raptile made it possible for the authors to be introduced to the opinion of an expert and therefore, as part of the triangulation of the topic, take different perspectives. Raptile considered rap to be the voice of the street. For him rap motivates young people, provides hold and is an instrument to deal with emotions. He is of the opinion that many factors, not rap alone, might result in changes of behavior of the listeners.

For one it is up to the listeners how to deal with music; so if the listeners are young and not considered to be stable or mature enough, parents are responsible for their children and need to discuss the content of the lyrics with them. According to him it is not the responsibility of the musicians but that of the parents. For him it is not understandable why politicians often times have prejudices towards rappers and collaborate with BPJM to index supposedly youth-endangering tracks. To him it appears that everything forbidden seems to be even more tempting for young people.

On the other hand, situational context also pays an important role when it comes to the effects of rap lyrics. For him, all texts – regardless whether gangster or porno rap – have the potential to influence the listeners. Overall, he considers it to be important that listeners learn how to deal with the content of the music properly.

## 6 Data analysis

Through triangulation, the authors were able to derive at the following interpretation based on the criteria used as framework for this study: critical of society, discriminating towards minorities and women, hostile towards politicians and hate speech, emotions, and descriptive of life in socio-economic strata.

### 6.1 Critical of society

Based on the survey, almost 70% of the subjects consider rap as critical of society. BPJM does not explicitly see any kind of disadvantages, but is concerned that particularly young listeners are not able to question the meaning of lyrics and therefore often might not understand the core message. As such, neither the listeners nor the critics seem to object rap critical of society or consider it endangering or discriminatory.

### 6.2 Discriminating towards minorities and women

While many terms appear hostile towards women (i.e. bitch, hoe, and slut) and might be considered as insult, they cannot clearly be rated as such according to this study. The survey indicated that 84.1% of the subjects took the word *bitch* literally, but it also can be actually understood in many other ways, i.e. AggroBerlin indicates that it is classified as all female beings, not addressing a particular female [22]. Also it can be seen as an insult against men and women since 19.3% of the subjects are of the opinion that it can be seen as *softy* or that artists use this terminology against competition in rap or music business.

Many rap tracks also contain homophobic or homosexually hostile terminology. It certainly is against the German Anti-Discrimination Law (AGG) to discriminate homosexuals due to their sexual preferences. On the other hand, it needs to be pointed out that homosexuality – qualified to be *normal* by many homosexuals – therefore cannot be evaluated as insult.

### 6.3 Hostile towards politicians and hate speech

Here politicians are affronted by name and sometimes their life is also threatened verbally. Petra Meier, Assistant Chairperson of the BPJM, points out this is an invitation to an act of violence. Since many young adults have not reached full maturity and are not able to differentiate which statements of the rappers are meant seriously or not, according to her, the BPJM saw it necessary to index tracks that cross the threshold. For example, Bushido stated in an interview with N24 that his intend was not to threaten anyone, not even when he rapped “ich schiess auf Claudia Roth” [I gun down Claudia Roth] and did not mean it seriously. Contrary to BPJM, he is of the opinion that fans and rap lovers are able to understand his lyrics, while those who are unfamiliar with rap have difficulties to read between the lines and to understand the messages properly [23]. Even though the concern of BPJM is understandable, it needs to be questioned whether paternalism is the proper approach; the authors would prefer education and critical-analytical skills on part of the listeners.

### 6.4 Emotional

According to Raptile, lyrics with emotions help young people to gain stability since they can identify with the text. However, the results of the survey demonstrate differently: Approximately 40% of the subjects stated that situations described in deep rap are not fitting for them. It appears contradictory that emotional rap is one of the preferred genres by the listeners, but at the same time 40% lack

identification with it. This phenomenon can be explained since the 40% are made up of all the subjects that participated in the survey, whereas not all participants are actually listeners of rap. BPJM as well as the authors do not criticize deep rap as discriminatory.

### 6.5 Descriptive of life in socio-economic strata

Raptile labels rap as the voice of the street. In German rap, often times life in socio-economic strata is described with its daily problems and challenges. The authors question whether wealthy rappers actually appear authentic with their lyrics. It cannot be explained that 58.4% of the subjects are of the opinion that wealthy and well-known rappers really live the life they describe in their lyrics.

Many rappers such as Bushido or Fler came from difficult backgrounds where drugs and violence were part of everyday life. This might provide for authenticity since they can offer empathy instead of discrimination, even though they do not live this life any longer.

## 7. Summary

Through provocative topics and statements rappers succeed in gaining attention of politicians, schools, parents, and youth and increase their level of familiarity which is important for sales. Not only rap, but also music in general has a very strong influence on humans. There are only few things that fulfill us in such a simple manner with happiness and have such a presence and influence on our lives as music [24]. The way rap influences the listeners might vary from person to person, context, and situation. In order to avoid possible negative impact on the listeners parents should teach their children to evaluate critically and to take different perspectives. What do rappers need to contribute so their art is not misunderstood? To answer this question the word music must be operationalized. Music and its use is widely spread even though it is mostly seen as intent-free art [25]. From this definition it can be concluded that rappers do not have to have particular goals with their music and therefore do not carry any responsibility. Many rappers like Bushido, Hüsseyin Kökseccen aka KC Rebell or Raptile voice their opinion indicating not to carry any responsibility. Bushido even questions whether others think he animated their kids with his music in his song *Eure Kinder* [Your Children]. BPJM on the other side sees rappers as responsible to function as role models and asks them to notice their responsibility towards youths. So at least the BPJM assumes rap to endanger or discriminate on the level of individual, and possibly also institutional or societal one.

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