

Acceptance of Swear Words in Rap Culture: How Swear Words Are Being Celebrated in “Real N***a Roll Call” and “Dance A\$\$”

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of swear words within contemporary rap culture, focusing specifically on how profanity is flagrantly accepted and even celebrated in the songs “Real N***a Roll Call” and “Dance A\$\$. Through critical analysis of lyrical examples, cultural context, and linguistic function, this study argues that swear words in these tracks operate not merely as expressive intensifiers but as markers of identity, resistance, and community. The essay situates these songs within broader traditions of African American vernacular expression, exploring how profanity intersects with authenticity, empowerment, and commercialization. In conclusion, this essay considers the cultural implications of profanity’s visibility in popular music and its effect on wider societal norms around language.

Key words: swear words, rap songs, popular culture, profanity, participatory culture

Introduction

Rap music, since its inception, has been marked by a raw and unfiltered engagement with language that reflects lived experiences, emotional intensity, and cultural resistance. Among its most controversial features is the pervasive use of swear words and taboo terms—an element that both attracts critique and cements rap’s distinct aesthetic. In the mainstream music industry, profanity has become a fixture of rap lyrics, embraced by audiences even as it remains contested in broader society. This essay explores the flagrant acceptance of swear words in rap culture, with particular attention to two rap songs: “Real N***a Roll Call” and “Dance A\$\$. These tracks exemplify how profanity is not only tolerated but celebrated within certain rap communities, functioning as a linguistic badge of authenticity, solidarity, and defiance.

The songs analysed in this essay are emblematic of a broader trend: the normalization and valorisation of swear words in rap. Rather than incidental or gratuitous, the employment of taboo expressions in these songs reflects complex social and cultural dynamics. By examining specific lyrical examples, this essay considers how profanity contributes to identity formation, narrative voice, and audience engagement. In doing so, it interrogates how rap's embrace of swear words both challenges and reinforces mainstream linguistic norms.

The Cultural Context of Profanity in Rap

To understand the flagrant acceptance of swear words in rap culture, it is necessary to recognize the historical and social contexts from which rap emerged. Rap music originated in African American communities in the 1970s as a form of expressive resistance to socioeconomic marginalization, systemic racism, and cultural erasure. Its vernacular style drew on African American English (AAE) and other linguistic traditions, which include expressive features such as bluntness, rhythmic repetition, and coded meanings. Within this tradition, swear words often serve expressive and social functions—signalling emotional intensity, establishing in-group solidarity, and resisting dominant cultural norms that stigmatize certain forms of speech.

Scholars of language note that profanity is deeply tied to context: a word considered taboo in one social setting may be neutral or even affectionate in another (Jay 22). In rap, profanity—including profane intensifiers and reclaimed slurs—can operate as linguistic markers that index authenticity and lived experience (Morgan 45). Thus, profanity in rap is not a mere deficit of vocabulary but a deliberate rhetorical choice rooted in cultural practice.

The songs “Real N***a Roll Call” and “Dance A\$\$” illustrate how profanity functions at multiple levels in rap culture. Their lyrics feature repeated taboo language that signals membership in a shared cultural space, conveys emotional force, and aligns the artists with specific community values. By examining the role of profanity in these songs, we can better understand how rap culture has normalized and even celebrated what mainstream discourse often labels as “vulgar” or “offensive” speech.

Analysis

1. Identity and Authenticity in “Real N*a Roll Call”**

“Real N***a Roll Call” exemplifies how swear words are used strategically to construct and assert identity. In this song, profanity is woven into verses that emphasize authenticity, loyalty, and respect within the artist’s community. The repeated use of taboo language serves to reinforce the speaker’s credibility, aligning the artist with a cultural persona that values frankness and honesty above social etiquette.

The chorus of “Real N***a Roll Call” repeatedly invokes a censored version of a reclaimed racial term alongside profane modifiers to assert membership in a community defined by resilience and shared experience. Rather than functioning merely as expletive fillers, these terms operate as identity markers—signalling to the listener that the speaker belongs to a particular socio-cultural group and has earned the right to voice such language. When the artist declares himself as the “real” version

of this identity in contrast to others, the profanity underscores both emotional emphasis and social positioning.

Linguistic anthropologists argue that such use of profanity in AAE and related cultural expressions can be a form of reclamation and resistance—using a term historically weaponized against a group as a means of empowerment from within (Rosa 301). In “Real N***a Roll Call,” profanity does not occur in isolation; it is embedded in a larger rhetorical strategy that privileges lived experience and rejects socially imposed standards of “polite speech.”

Moreover, the way profanity impacts the song’s rhythm and delivery contributes to its performative force. The percussive placement of taboo terms accentuates the beat and energizes the performance, making profanity part of the song’s musical architecture rather than extraneous content. Rather than detracting from the song’s artistic quality, this embedded profanity is integral to its expressive power.

2. Emotional Intensity and Celebration in “Dance A\$\$”

“Dance A\$\$,” while stylistically different from “Real N***a Roll Call”, also demonstrates how profanity can function as a tool of celebration and emotional intensification. In this track, adult party themes are accompanied by language that combines taboo terms with rhythmic expression. The song’s use of swear words amplifies a mood of liberated release—listeners are invited into an atmosphere of indulgence where social constraints are temporarily suspended.

The repeated profane refrains in “Dance A\$\$” serve a dual function. First, they operate as intensifiers, heightening the emotional charge of the celebration. For example, when the chorus emphasizes the act of dancing with a series of censored expletives, these words punctuate the experience with raw energy and unfiltered expression. In this context, profanity is less about aggression and more about unrestrained joy.

Second, the use of swear words in “Dance A\$\$” reflects the song’s commodification of taboo aesthetics. In the commercial marketplace of popular music, the shock value of certain words can contribute to a track’s memorability and appeal. Profanity becomes part of the song’s brand—an element that audiences expect and celebrate in a genre that prizes boldness and transgression. Cultural critics note that when taboo language is repeatedly featured in popular media, it shifts from being shocking to being familiar and even desirable (McLeod 119). The popularity of “Dance A\$\$” suggests that profanity, far from alienating listeners, can be an accepted and celebrated part of musical experience.

3. Audience Reception and Community Standards

The acceptance of swear words in “Real N***a Roll Call” and “Dance A\$\$” cannot be separated from how audiences receive and interpret them. Within rap culture, swear words often signal verisimilitude—a reflection of everyday speech patterns within certain communities. Fans of these songs are not merely tolerating profanity; they often value it as an expression of authenticity and unfiltered truth.

Listeners who engage with rap on an emotional and cultural level understand that profanity in

this context often serves a communicative purpose beyond shock. It reflects lived realities, social critique, and emotional candour that more sanitized language cannot capture. For many fans, the presence of taboo language enhances rather than detracts from the music's credibility and emotional impact.

Furthermore, fan discourse around these songs often celebrates the very profanity that mainstream commentators might condemn. On social media, listeners quote taboo refrains from "Real N***a Roll Call" and "Dance A\$\$" as memorable lines, celebrating their linguistic boldness while reinforcing a shared cultural lexicon. This phenomenon aligns with participatory culture theory, which suggests that audiences actively shape and circulate cultural materials—including profane language—through communal engagement (Jenkins 203).

4. Critique and Controversy

Despite rap culture's internal acceptance of profanity, these songs have also generated controversy in broader public discourse. Critics outside the culture often frame swear words as evidence of moral decline or linguistic degradation. They argue that the visibility of taboo language in popular music contributes to the erosion of social standards and the normalization of vulgarity. These critiques, however, often fail to account for the cultural specificity, rhetorical function, and aesthetic value of profanity within rap.

Academic linguists emphasize that language norms vary across social contexts and that what is stigmatized in one setting may be ordinary in another (Labov 56). The critics' focus on surface features—e.g., the presence of swear words—oversimplifies complex dynamics in rap culture where profanity is interwoven with identity, resistance, and artistry.

Summation

Rap music has emerged as one of the most influential cultural forms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, shaping language, identity, and social attitudes across global audiences. Among its most distinctive features is the frequent and often celebrated use of swear words and profane expressions. Within rap culture, such language is commonly defended as a form of authenticity, resistance, or artistic freedom. However, despite its normalization and valorization within the genre, the persistent use of swear words in rap songs remains inappropriate when examined through a broader social and psychological lens. More importantly, repeated exposure to such language can exert a negative influence on audiences, particularly through the mechanisms explained by Cultivation Theory. While rap music's cultural significance cannot be dismissed, its reliance on profanity risks normalizing linguistic aggression, reinforcing social inequalities, and reshaping audience perceptions of acceptable behaviour.

Swear words in rap music are often framed as symbolic tools of rebellion against dominant cultural norms. Artists employ profanity to express anger, marginalization, or resistance to systemic oppression. In this context, swear words function as markers of authenticity and raw emotional truth. Nevertheless, the celebratory framing of profanity does not eliminate its inherent social implications. Swear words historically derive their power from insult, taboo, and exclusion, frequently targeting

women, racialized groups, or sexual identities. When such language is repeatedly used without critical framing, it ceases to function as mere artistic expression and instead becomes a normalized mode of communication. The argument that profanity is acceptable because it is culturally embedded in rap ignores the broader consequences of its widespread circulation in popular culture.

Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner, provides a useful framework for understanding how repeated exposure to media content shapes audience perceptions of reality. According to Gerbner, the media does not simply reflect the world but actively cultivates a shared sense of what is normal, acceptable, and expected in social life. When audiences are continuously exposed to rap songs that celebrate swear words, they may begin to perceive profane language as ordinary and socially permissible. Over time, this repeated exposure can blur the distinction between expressive language and verbal aggression. Cultivation Theory emphasizes that the cumulative effect of media messages is more influential than isolated instances, making the pervasive use of profanity particularly concerning.

One of the most significant negative influences of swear words in rap music lies in their potential to normalize verbal violence. Many profanities used in rap lyrics are not neutral expressions but are embedded in power relations, often reinforcing misogyny, homophobia, and hypermasculinity. Cultivation Theory suggests that consistent exposure to such language can desensitize listeners, reducing their sensitivity to verbal harm and social inequality. As audiences internalize these linguistic patterns, they may replicate them in everyday interactions, perpetuating cycles of disrespect and symbolic violence. This normalization is especially troubling for younger listeners who are still developing their moral and social frameworks.

Furthermore, the global reach of rap music amplifies the negative influence of swear words beyond their original cultural contexts. Audiences unfamiliar with the historical or political meanings of certain profanities may adopt them uncritically, using offensive language without understanding its implications. Cultivation Theory highlights how the media constructs a symbolic environment that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. In this environment, swear words are stripped of their contextual nuance and become fashionable linguistic trends. The result is the casual use of language that may perpetuate racial, gendered, or sexual hierarchies, even when used by individuals outside the communities from which the terms originate.

Another concerning aspect is the erosion of linguistic boundaries between private expression and public discourse. Swear words traditionally functioned as marked or restricted forms of speech, signalling strong emotion or social transgression. However, their constant presence in rap music contributes to their mainstream acceptance in everyday language. Cultivation Theory explains that when the media repeatedly portrays certain behaviours as common, audiences come to view them as normal. This shift can lead to the breakdown of respectful communication norms, particularly in educational and professional spaces, where such language remains inappropriate. The normalization of profanity thus challenges broader societal standards of civility and respect.

Defenders of profanity in rap often argue that censorship threatens artistic freedom and silences

marginalized voices. While this concern is valid, it does not negate the responsibility artists and audiences share in recognizing media influence. Cultivation Theory does not advocate censorship but calls attention to the long-term social effects of repeated media messages. A critical distinction must be made between acknowledging the expressive function of swear words and celebrating their unchecked use. Artistic expression can coexist with social responsibility, particularly in a media landscape where content reaches impressionable and diverse audiences.

In conclusion, although swear words are widely used and celebrated in rap songs, their continued prominence remains socially inappropriate due to their potential to cultivate negative attitudes and behaviours among audiences. Through the lens of Cultivation Theory, it becomes evident that repeated exposure to profanity does more than entertain; it shapes perceptions of language, power, and social norms. The normalization of swear words in rap music risks desensitizing listeners to verbal aggression, reinforcing social inequalities, and undermining respectful communication. Recognizing these effects does not diminish rap music's cultural value but rather encourages a more critical engagement with its linguistic practices. Ultimately, responsible consumption and production of media are essential to mitigating the negative influence of profanity while preserving artistic expression.

Thus, the blatant acceptance and celebration of swear words in rap culture, as exemplified by "Real N***a Roll Call" and "Dance A\$\$," reveals how profanity functions as more than taboo expression. These songs illustrate that swear words in rap are identity markers, emotional intensifiers, and aesthetic tools that contribute to artistic meaning, community solidarity, and cultural resonance. Rather than gratuitous vulgarity, profanity in these tracks is deeply embedded in cultural practice—rooted in historical linguistic traditions, expressive needs, and audience expectations.

This essay has shown that the celebration of swear words in rap challenges mainstream norms about language propriety and underscores the genre's role in shaping contemporary linguistic landscapes. By embracing profanity, rap culture resists sanitized standards of speech and asserts a linguistic authenticity that speaks to lived experience. The popularity of "Real N***a Roll Call" and "Dance A\$\$" indicates that audiences are not merely accepting of profanity but are actively engaging with it as part of a shared cultural dialogue.

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