The Rebellion Power of the F-word in Modern Songs

A corpus-based discourse analysis

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Abstract:
In this thesis, the general use and specific instances of F-words in modern music lyrics have been studied based on the corpora extracted from songs in Billboard year-end charts from 2013 to 2022, which represented the most popular songs in English-speaking countries. By screening the actual meaning and contexts of those F-words in the lyrics, I extracted those special instances in which F-words were used to express rebellious feelings to challenge social norms and fight against authority powers. The theme of those rebellious F-words was first studied by the quantitative analysis by years, which shows a clear time dependence associated with the social and political environments. Notably, there was a significant increase in the use of rebellious F-words in lyrics during the intense social and political crises of 2019-2020. A comparative investigation was then carried out across four distinct music genres: rap, rock, R&B, and pop. Among these, rap music stood out with a higher prevalence of rebellious F-words. However, the impact of these words was diminished due to their frequent occurrence, resulting in a reduced level of audience reaction and shock value. The following textual analysis of grammatical features and literary devices associated with those F-words provided evidence that more assertive and aggressive expressions, such as imperative sentences, were favored when incorporating rebellious F-words in the lyrics. This study provides a comprehensive overview of how modern pop music expresses and conveys rebellious power through the use of profanity.
1. Introduction

The use of profanity in music is not a new trend or issue in society (Faatihah et al., 2017). Swearing and vulgar language have been present in music since the 1950s (Rob Chirico, 2016), and despite censorship, music with explicit lyrics related to sex, violence, and aggressive behavior has continued to be widely distributed. The reasons why people use profanity in music are complex, but one common explanation is that profanity is emotional and effective in expressing strong emotions (Faatihah et al., 2017). However, “not all swearing is primarily affective in nature or purpose” (Stapleton et al., 2022). In some cases, the offensive nature of swearing is “effective for interpersonal and rhetorical purposes by violating normative social expectations” (Karyn Stapleton, 2010). This interpersonal function of profanity can also be associated with broader social relevance, such as challenging social norms and “expressing dissatisfaction towards authority” (Wardhaugh Ronald, 2006).

Linguist Michael Adams characterizes profanity as a “linguistic rebellion against the mainstream in its ability to irritate and shock” (Adams, 2016). The rise of rock and Punk music from the 1950s to 1990s witnessed the use of profanity for such purposes, with rock music often associated with counterculture and rebellion. For example, the song “F**k the Police” by the American hip-hop group N.W.A. had a substantial influence in the fight against police brutality and racial profiling, becoming a widespread cultural slogan. Profanity in these songs served rhetorical and stylistic purposes, attracting attention and enhancing the persuasiveness of the messages compared to normal language in the lyrics (Fägersten & Pereira, 2021; Generous et al., 2015).

Given that swearing is highly context-dependent and shaped by social and community norms (Stapleton et al., 2022), the rebellious usage of profanity in music may be strongly influenced by the social environment. Therefore, whether profanity, specifically the F-word, is used in recent modern songs to challenge social norms and fight for social issues is worth studying. To begin, I started with a general overview of the occurrence frequency of F-words for rebellion functions in a collection of the most popular English songs nowadays. Subsequently, I carried out a detailed quantitative examination, both on a yearly basis and across various music genres. Lastly, employing Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, I conducted a critical discourse analysis to uncover how these lyrics have been influenced by their social context and how they, in turn, have influenced society. This research approach allowed me to address the following research questions:
1. What is the occurrence frequency of the F-words in contemporary songs in the past ten years (2013-2022) that aimed to challenge social norms and convey rebellious themes?

2. What societal norms and expectations are being contested through the use of this profanity?

3. How are these F-words used to fulfill their rebellious intent?

4. Does the frequency of F-word usage and the focus of rebellion change over time, and what factors might account for such variations?

5. Are there disparities in the frequency of F-word usage and the targeted rebellious themes across different musical genres, and what explanations can be offered for these differences?

2. Background

2.1 Situation background

2.1.1 Profanity in the English language

Profanity refers to language that is considered offensive or vulgar, and can include a range of different types of words or expressions with the following common categories (Hughes, 1991):

   Sexual profanity: This type of profanity includes words or expressions that relate to sexual acts or body parts, e.g., F-words and expressions related to sexual organs, etc., and is often considered the most offensive type of profanity. The origination of the sexual-related expression of profanity was based on the fact that reflects the common social ideology of male dominance and female inferiority (O’neil, 2018).

   Religious profanity: This type of profanity includes words that are considered disrespectful or blasphemous to religious beliefs or practices (“Blasphemy,” 1970). Saying “God!” or “Jesus Christ!” is a typical example of blasphemy, which is due to the statement in mostly the Ten Commandments that not to quote God’s name “in vain.” Swearing oaths is another example of blasphemy following Jesus’ teaching against swearing oaths in the Gospels.

   Scatological profanity: This type of profanity includes words or expressions related to bodily functions, such as feces or urine, Examples of scatological profanity might include words like shit, piss, or crap, as well as other phrases that describe bodily functions in explicit detail (Bronner, 2007). The profanity within this category was established by breaking the common consensus of privacy.
Racial or ethnic slurs: This type of profanity includes words or expressions that are used to insult or demean people based on their race or ethnicity. These slurs are often used to reinforce negative stereotypes, discriminate against marginalized groups, or express prejudice and hatred towards people of a particular race or ethnicity. Examples of racial or ethnic slurs include words like the *N-word* used to denigrate Black people, *chink*, or *gook* used to insult people of Asian descent (Anderson & Lepore, 2013).

### 2.1.2 Profanity in music-1900s

Despite the controversial opinion on profanity in language usage, there was actually a long history of profanity being included in the music. Some swear words could be occasionally observed in early blues and jazz music dealing with taboo topics such as sex, drugs, and violence, which could be traced back to the 1920s. As a result, Jazz was sometimes called the “devil’s music” (Rastrick, 2021). However, the swear words involved were still relatively conservative and the majority of them referred to “improper language” like “damn” (Merriam & Mack, 1960). Most of them were used as a rebellion voice from marginalized communities, such as African Americans (Sajche, 2016). The first surge era of profanity’s inclusion in music emerged in the mid-20th century followed by the boosting of rock music, when sexually related swear words/expressions started to appear in the songs. The song “Sixty Minute Man” (The Dominoes, 1951) could be one of the most famous examples, whose sexual content induced large social controversy and was banned by some of the radio stations at that time. Such a trend continued over the 1960s to 1980s in rock music and hip-hop music. This was, of course, associated with the rebellion and anti-mainstream features of rock music (Ullestad, 1987). Besides that, the involvement of swear words in music could also be influenced by the social/political reformation, such as the sexual revolution and self-awareness of the minority groups (Humberset Hagen, 2013). Consequently, swear words could occasionally be found in the output of some famous artists like the Rolling Stones, N.W.A, and Public Enemy. Those songs contained more explicit profanity where sexual, gender, and racial-related profanity all emerged. However, those contents were highly controversial and culturally unacceptable according to the conservative social environments. Their censorship significantly reduced the instances of profanity in publicly released texts, which was the same case in music production (Seach, 2020). Traditional approaches to pop music release were based on the publication of hard copies of the music album, and promotion in public media like radio and TV. In those channels, rigid gatekeeping was set to restrict profanity inclusion in the music (Bjornber & Bossius, 2016). For example, the
Hollywood Production Code (1930-1968) strictly banned the inclusion of depictions of sex, violence, and profanity for Hollywood studios (Black, 1989), and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) code set clear guidelines to restrict any kind of profanity and obscenity to be presented in the broadcast content including music (Jaramillo, 2018).

2.1.3 Profanity in music-2000s
In the new century, the rise of digital music platforms like iTunes, Spotify, and Pandora allowed people to easily access music online and sometimes without paying for it by free trial, which totally changed the configuration of the music industry. Very recently, the emergence of self-media further enhanced the private ownership of music products and individualism during music production. As a result, record sales declined, and “the industry had to adapt to new ways of distributing and monetizing music, which helped to detour the traditional censorship” (Menell, 2016). The digital music industry and self-media-based music industry gave artists more freedom to express themselves without the constraints of traditional gatekeepers (Savage, 2022). This has led to the increased feasibility of profanity and explicit content to occur in music.

In the past 20 years, rap music has become increasingly popular and mainstream, associated with affirmative action for minorities in Western countries (West & Gates, 1995). The voice as well as the culture of African American and Latino people have therefore been more heard and promoted. This trend has been further driven in part also by the rise of digital music platforms and the self-media-based music industry mentioned above, where the booming of “social network placed an impact on collective action … and attitudes toward affirmative action” (Behm-Morawitz, 2020). This has led to a proliferation of hip-hop and rap artists and a wider variety of voices and perspectives in the genre. Some artists have faced backlash for their explicit lyrics, such as Eminem, who was criticized for his use of homophobic slurs in his 2013 song “Rap God.” Other artists, such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, have also faced controversy for their sexually explicit lyrics.

2.2 Specific background
2.2.1 Profanity and rebellion power
Profanity refers to the use of vulgar or offensive language, often intended to shock, offend, or express strong emotions. Profanity can be used as a means of rebellion and challenging social norms because it can be seen as a form of resistance against traditional language conventions and power structures (Stapleton, 2010). Psychologically, when someone uses profanity, they
are often making a deliberate choice to break from the norms of polite or formal language. This can be a powerful way of expressing unconventional attitudes and asserting unconventional views. Profanity can also be used to challenge authority figures or social institutions by expressing anger or frustration toward them (Stapleton et al., 2022).

In my studies, the objectives of challenging social norms and opposing authority will serve as reflective signs of expressing rebellious sentiments through the use of profanity. This choice arises from the absence of a direct and precise metric to gauge the rebellious potency of profanity, given that the experience of rebellion is subjective and varies from individual to individual. Rebellious power or rebellion feeling is often associated with complex emotions such as anger, frustration, and resentment. These emotions can be challenging to measure accurately, as people may not always be aware of their emotional state or may not be willing to disclose.

Furthermore, how to judge if the profanity is rebellious or not really depends on the corresponding social environment to see whether the connotation of a word is irreverent and insulting. As demonstrated by modern socialists, “A profanity is a form of rebellion against someone or something in power” (Mellem & Taylor, 2007). Therefore, profanity is also determined by the whims of those in power (Mohr, 2003). Swearing words like “God damn” and “Jesus Christ” have been considered rebellious in old times with religion-dominated culture (Mellem & Taylor, 2007). Similarly, words like “shit” or “fuck” were considered extremely rebellious before the sexual revolution (Mellem & Taylor, 2007). But when religion is not the dominant institution, and in a society unashamed of sexual and excremental behavior, the rebellious feeling would be diminished (Mellem & Taylor, 2007). Such reduced potency of profanity in serving rebellion functions over time might be another obstacle to identifying the rebellious power of profanity in language usage.

However, there are other scenarios where the rebellious function can be easier to define, where profanity was used as a rhetorical tool to create a rebellious environment in order to facilitate the purpose of challenging specific social norms (Stapleton et al., 2022). In this case, the rebellious power directed at the anti-mainstream topics to be challenged, while promoted or enhanced by the utilization of profanity. “F**k the Police” mentioned above is a typical example. Since, in this case, profane words are collocated with other markers of rebelliousness, such as references to drugs, sex, violence, and political themes (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014), it is feasible to qualitatively identify the rebellion function by tracing the association between profanity and the markers mentioned above, which will be the main study strategy of this thesis.
2.2.2 Use profanity in music to challenge social norms

The way that profanity is used to challenge social norms in music is by expressing a rebellious or non-conformist attitude. This has been widely observed in genres like rock or hip-hop, where there is a tradition of challenging authority. By using profanity, an artist can signal to the listener that they are not interested in following traditional rules or conforming to societal expectations. This can create a sense of liberation or empowerment for the listener, who may also feel that they are being encouraged to question the status quo and challenge authority. The lyrics of “F**k the Police,” as mentioned above, expressed anger and frustration with police brutality and racial profiling, and the profanity is used to emphasize the group’s rebellious attitude and shock listeners into paying attention to the message (Martinez, 1998). Even today, the “Fuck the Police” slogan continues to influence popular culture in the form of artwork and political expression. Hip-hop and rap songs in the new century exhibited more rebellious content via profanity against social injustice and discrimination. For instance, “WAP” by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, released in 2020, is perhaps the most talked-about example in recent memory. The use of profanity in this song has sparked debates about female empowerment, sexual liberation, and censorship. Despite the criticisms of its offensive use of profanity, supporters embraced its positive value that is “unapologetic in celebrating the sensuality and sexuality of women” (McClinton, 2020).

Nowadays, the rebellion or resistance function of profanity in various music genres has been more and more recognized. Heavy metal songs usually dealt primarily with anti-authority statements (against parents and teachers for the most part) with violent metaphors for sex (Binder, 1993). Other analyses suggested that “rap music as a popular cultural form in the African American community is a valid and strident form of oppositional cultural expression” (Martinez, 1997). All in all, rebellious expression using profanity has a strong correlation to social and political environments, which is worthy of systematic study.

However, it should be noted that with more profanity occurring in modern music than before based on time evaluation research (Moloney & Sylva, 2020), profanity or swearing words might not be so shocking resulting in reduced potency of profanity in serving rebellion functions as mentioned above. As a consequence, it is possible that songwriters can use other shocking words nowadays because people aren’t shocked by them. Therefore, the rarity of the profanity should also be considered as an important determining factor when assessing the rebellious power of profanity within society.
2.3 Theoretical background

2.3.1 Linguistic characteristics of F-words

The F-word is a taboo word in the English language, and its use is often associated with strong emotions, such as anger, frustration, or aggression (Fairman, 2006). From a linguistic perspective, the F-word is notable for its phonetic and semantic features.

Phonetically, the F-word is characterized by its strong fricative sound, made by forcing air through the teeth and lips, and by its monosyllabic structure. It has been claimed that this sound is particularly strong when the word is pronounced with emphasis, which is often the case when it is used to express strong emotions (Vatvedt Fjeld et al., 2019).

Semantically, the F-word is a versatile word that can be used in many different ways, depending on the context and the speaker’s intentions. It can be used as a noun (fuck, fucker), a verb (fuck), an adjective (fucking), or an adverb (fucking), and it can have a wide range of meanings, from a simple exclamation of frustration or anger to a more complex insult or expression of contempt (Vatvedt Fjeld et al., 2019).

2.3.2 Critical discourse analysis and Fairclough’s three-dimensional model

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach used to analyze the ways in which language and discourse shape and reflect power relations, social structures, and ideologies. It examines how language is used to construct and maintain power imbalances, as well as how it can be used to challenge and resist dominant ideologies. One of the key principles of CDA is the understanding that language is not neutral but is instead a socially constructed tool that reflects or reinforces existing power structures (Simpson et al., 2019).

An important approach to achieving CDA is Fairclough’s three-tiered model for the analysis of discourse which involves three parts (Simpson et al., 2019):

Textual Analysis: To analyze the linguistic features of the text itself. This includes examining aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and discursive strategies used within the text. The goal is to uncover how language is structured and deployed to convey specific meanings, ideologies, and power relations.

Discursive Practice: To examine the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape and influence the production and interpretation of the text. This tier looks at how power relations, social structures, and historical contexts interact with language use and contribute to the discursive practices surrounding the text.
Social Practice: To analyze the broader social practices and structures that are influenced by and influence the discourses. It aims to uncover how the discourses contribute to or challenge existing power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities.

The three-tiered model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interconnections between language, discourse, power, and social practices. By considering the multiple layers of analysis, Fairclough’s model enables uncovering and critically examining the complexities of discourses and their impact on society.

2.3.3 Strategic functions of profanity in songs

While profanity can be offensive and inappropriate in many contexts, researchers argue that it can also provide strategic functions in song lyrics (Faatihah et al., 2017). According to Faatihah, firstly, as a more technical function, profanity can be used to enhance the rhythm or rhyme of the song. They usually can create a certain flow or cadence in the lyrics, which is especially common in genres like hip-hop, where wordplay and rhythmic complexity are highly valued (Faatihah et al., 2017). Secondly, he found profanity is widely accepted to express strong emotions in the songs. Those intense emotions might be difficult to communicate via conventional polite language. For example, a songwriter might use a curse word to convey anger, frustration, or pain in a way that feels more authentic or visceral to the listener. Other psychologists actually found the reason why profanity is effective in expressing emotions, where “there is an inherent relationship between emotional experiences, class I types of consciousness, and powerfully expressive and evocative language, the most powerful of these being our swearing expressions” (Hirsch, 1985). Here class I consciousness is associated with emotions and attitudes compared with class II consciousness dealing with imagining and class III consciousness dealing with reasoning (Hirsch, 1985). In other words, it is related to the intrinsic physiological instinct of a human being. Faatihah believed the third strategic function refers to establishing a persona or attitude (Faatihah et al., 2017). Profanity in this way can help create a certain image or persona for the artist or song. For example, a rapper might use profanity to establish a tough, streetwise image and independent personality. Standing out from the crowd is one of the important motivations for the artist to curse in their songs in this case. Finally, this is also a rebellion function for profanity to push social boundaries and challenge social norms by “expressing dissatisfied feelings towards authority” (Faatihah et al., 2017). In this case, artists use profanity to challenge socio-cultural norms around what is considered acceptable behaviors.
3. Design

3.1 Data

The data were established from the lyrics of songs in the Billboard Year-end Chart Hot 50 Songs within four music genres: pop, rap, R&B, and rock. The songs were selected from the last ten years from 2013 to 2022. Therefore, the original raw data are 2000 song lyrics. It should be noted that songs could overlap into the Year-end chart within different years. I still choose not to merge them since this can reflect the time-related evolution of the data during the corpus linguistic analysis. Billboard Year-end Chart Hot songs were extracted since Billboard has been considered the most influential musical chart in English-speaking countries, with the combined balance between profession and popularity. The data was automatically extracted using a Python code based on the Genius OpenAPI source (see Appendix). The above four genres of music were selected based on the common sense of the most popular genre of music in general populations, and the assumption that Rap and Rock contain more profanity compared with other music genres. Therefore, an effective contrast was expected to be created among those four data. After obtaining these raw data, songs containing at least one instance of the F-word were extracted to create the final processed four corpora for each year (i.e., processed pop corpus, processed rap corpus, processed R&B corpus, and processed rock corpus), with overall words 379978 within total 39 corpora (One corpus is missing since there was no F-word containing rock songs in the year of 2016 in my database).

3.2 Method

The analysis commenced with corpus-based research utilizing AntCont software on four distinct corpora. The search term employed will be “*fuck*”, encompassing all instances of words containing “fuck”. The examination will initiate with a general quantitative assessment of the frequency of F-words (Chapter 4.1). Subsequently, there will be a refinement process to filter these words for their usage in rebellious contexts aimed at challenging societal norms (Chapter 4.2). Following this, the study will proceed with a time-dependent quantitative analysis of these rebellious F-words within each year (Chapter 4.3) and across different music genres (Chapter 4.4), considering the corresponding social and political background. Finally, an in-depth textual analysis of the rebellious potency of F-words will be conducted, drawing inspiration from the classic Fairclough model (Chapter 4.5). This analysis aims to uncover
the textual characteristics of these F-words, in conjunction with their discourse and social relevance.

4. Results/Discussions

4.1 Frequency of F-words in the music with four representative genres

![Frequency of F-words in the songs](image)

**Figure 1.** Occurrence frequency of F-words in the songs with four representative genres.

To gain an overview of the usage of F-word in the analyzed corpora, I have compiled general statistics on the frequency of occurrence of all variations of the F-word. This data is presented in Figure 1. The frequency data was extracted using the search term *fuck*, encompassing all forms of the F-word. Among the four music genres studied, Rap songs consistently contained the highest number of F-words, surpassing other genres. The frequency of F-words in Rap songs ranged from 124 (in 2016) to 192 (in 2017), with an average yearly frequency of 152. R&B songs ranked second in terms of F-word usage, with an average yearly frequency of 64. In contrast, Pop and rock songs displayed notably lower average yearly frequencies of 26 and 13, respectively. This variation in F-word usage can potentially be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the cultural context, social commentary, provocative themes, and personal characteristics of the songwriters within each specific genre. These factors will be elaborated upon in Section 4.5. It’s noteworthy that a clear upward trend in the inclusion of F-words over time was not observed across all music genres, except for rock songs. This discrepancy may be attributed to the time lag involved in the implementation of changes in policies and social norms, as discussed by other researchers (Varnum, 2019).

However, my interpretation of the increase in the use of F-words in rock music from 2010 to 2022 differs from the traditional use of profanity in rap and R&B songs. Despite their
provocative, rebellious, and countercultural themes (Ullestad, 1987), rock songs historically did not heavily rely on profanity, and this shift towards increased profanity in rock songs can be linked to changing public and audience expectations. The shift toward more permissive attitudes regarding profanity, particularly among younger audiences, may be a significant factor contributing to the recent rise in the use of F-words in rock songs (Mellem & Taylor, 2007). Conversely, pop music, which tends to prioritize mainstream appeal and commercial considerations during production, generally steers clear of profanity in its lyrics. Pop music primarily focuses on themes related to love, relationships, and positivity, which act as deterrents to the inclusion of profanity.

4.2 Screening out the F-words with rebellion functions

In the next step, the F-words used in the songs expressing rebellious feelings needed to be extracted and analyzed. However, I found the conventional quantitative analysis strategy in AntConc software by using collocation and cluster survey to identify if the F-words were used to challenge the social norms did not work very well. The reasons were first pronouns or referents were frequently used near the search terms while the real targets could not be easily located. For example, in the lyrics of the song “Bitter,” the word fucking was used to promote the emotions of daring to speak out about personal business: “Don’t let them feel like they have a one-up by destroying your moment by fucking telling your business to the world” (Walker & Cardi B, 2011). But here word business referred to the series of unfair condemnations of one of the songwriters from his ex-wife on irresponsibility to his children. The lyrics of the song encourage exposing such injustice in the song to the public, which challenges the social norms that relationship and family issues should be in private. However, such content can only be revealed from the context of the whole lyrics.

Therefore, I conducted a sequential screening process to manually filter out the F-words contained text that followed the selection criteria. By looking at the complete concordance lists of F-words, there were numerous F-words containing phrases that expressed entirely different meanings than the original meaning of fuck itself. For example, fuck off means to leave or to go away (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.); fuck around means to waste time by behaving in a silly way or to have a lot of different sexual partners (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Therefore, the utilization of those phrases was first excluded. It should be noted that although in most cases, the word fucking has been used as a general emphasis of a comment or an angry statement (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), I still find in some cases it is associated to challenge specific social norms. Those cases can be easily extracted by
screening at the concordance pattern of *fucking* with Kwic sort on the right side (i.e., 1L, 2L, 3L) of the search term. Finally, about half of the expressions in the corpora do retain the original meaning of *fuck*, *fucked*, and *fucking*, then the next step is to examine those cases by looking at detailed contexts to finally extract the rebellious expression by finding the objective challenged social norms around the F-words in the concordances. Among those cases, the F-words were mainly used to challenge political power and authorities, social injustice, as well as discrimination against social minorities, which will be discussed in the next sections.

**Figure 2.** Numbers of F-words with rebellion functions.

Figure 2 provides a summary of the F-words present in song lyrics, specifically those employed to challenge societal norms. The total frequency of these rebellious F-words amounts to 125. When compared to the total frequency of F-words across all four music genres (2429), it becomes evident that the proportion of F-words serving as expressions of rebellion is calculated at 5%. In contrast, in other instances, F-words are primarily used either to describe sexual intercourse (in line with the original meaning of the term) or to convey spontaneous emphasis and exclamation, devoid of a specific social issue as their target. In such cases, these words tend to stand alone without strong contextual connections. As depicted in Figure 2, rap music consistently contains the highest occurrence of rebellious functional F-words, with an annual average frequency of 8.3, notably surpassing the values for R&B (1.3), pop (1.9), and rock (1.7). This suggests that, when considering the absolute occurrence frequency, rebellious functional F-words are more prevalent in rap music.
Additionally, unlike the summary of all F-words in Figure 1, the frequency of rebellious functional F-words demonstrates a distinct temporal pattern, experiencing a significant increase between 2017 and 2020, peaking in the year 2020, which will be rationalized in the following sections.

Nevertheless, the frequency of occurrence alone may not provide an accurate perspective on the rebellious power of F-words. From a social-psychological standpoint, rebellion is a form of resistance against social norms or authority and the degree of shock that an action causes against social norms determines whether it is considered rebellious in society (Roberts & Ash, 2009). In general, the core features of shock events consist of extreme in magnitude, short-lived in duration, and rare in frequency (Durbach & Montibeller, 2018). Thus, the rarity of F-words challenging social norms becomes the primary factor influencing their shock value.

To quantify the shock value (S) of rebellious F-words, I define it based on their rarity within the entire body of words in the lyrics. This is calculated using the following equation:

\[ S = \frac{N_w}{N_R} \]

Here, \( N_R \) represents the frequency of F-words, while \( N_w \) denotes the total number of words within specific genres and years. A higher S value signifies a greater degree of shock value.

**Figure 3.** Shocking values (S) of a) all F-words, and b) rebellious functional F-words in songs.
Figure 3 illustrates the progression of shock values over time for both all F-words and specifically for rebellious functional F-words. Concerning all F-words in Rap music, they exhibit the lowest shock values over the years, averaging at 148, as opposed to the other three genres (i.e., pop at 158, rock at 168, and R&B at 184). This phenomenon arises because the widespread use of F-words in this music genre diminishes their capacity to evoke a sense of shock. In such cases, people might perceive F-words as mere spontaneous and meaningless swearing. Furthermore, the shock values for all four genres do not display a prominent time-dependent trend. This suggests that the public’s perception of F-word usage across different genres has remained relatively constant over the past few decades. However, when considering rebellious functional F-words, a distinct time-dependent pattern emerges, as evident in Figure 3b. There is a noticeable reduction in the shock values associated with F-words used for rebellious functions between the years 2017 and 2020, with the lowest values occurring in the year 2020. This trend runs counter to the one described in Figure 2, where the highest frequency of rebellious function is observed during this same time frame. I will provide a rationale for this phenomenon in the next section.

4.3 Theme analysis by years
In this section, I analyzed the frequency of rebellious language, specifically words denoted as “F-words,” within the years 2013 to 2022. As previously discussed, my quantitative analysis of word frequency reveals notable trends. Initially, in the early 2010s, there was a relatively low occurrence of these F-words challenging societal norms. However, a significant increase in their frequency occurred after 2017, reaching its peak in 2020. Subsequently, post-2020, the frequency declined. In addition, the value of shock or surprise (S) associated with the use of these F-words followed a reverse trend, with the lowest point observed between 2017 and 2020. According to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory, language is not neutral; it is closely linked to the social and political environment (Simpson et al., 2019). This principle applies to the utilization of profanity in song lyrics as well. Therefore, building on my quantitative findings, I will conduct a detailed analysis across three distinct time periods: 2013-2016, 2017-2020, and post-2020. My focus will be on the prevailing social and political conditions during each of these periods and how they influenced the production of music.

Years 2013-2016
During the years 2013 to 2016, as indicated in Table 1, I consistently observed a low frequency of explicit language, particularly the use of profanity (F-words) in song lyrics. Specifically, there were 12 instances of such language in both 2013 and 2016, and 9 instances in both 2014 and 2015. It’s important to note that the majority of these instances revolved around themes related to political authority and social inequality, with fewer instances challenging discrimination against minority groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Political power</th>
<th>Social Injustice</th>
<th>Discrimination</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This phenomenon can likely be attributed to the relatively stable global political and economic conditions during that period. In the early 2010s, many countries, including the United States, enjoyed a period of political stability. The United States and its international partners had withdrawn their troops from Iraq, and the situation in Afghanistan had become less volatile. This shift in global focus away from war and conflict, coupled with gradual economic recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis, contributed to a sense of economic stability and a more peaceful political climate. In the United States, in particular, the early 2010s were marked by the continuation of Barack Obama’s presidency, characterized by diplomacy and cooperation. His African-American identity further fostered social trust in racial equality. These factors collectively created a relatively stable and conflict-free societal environment, possibly reducing the inclination for artists to use their music as a platform for political or rebellious commentary.

Conversely, instances of rebellious language within this time period tended to arise in response to social injustices stemming from the unequal distribution of social benefits amid rapid economic growth. Notably, in 2013, there were eight instances of F-words used in songs to challenge the wealth gap. For instance, Rich Gang’s song “Tapout” highlighted the stark contrast between the lavish lifestyles of wealthy rappers and the struggles of ordinary people. The songwriter used a clear voice of “fuck the money game” to emphasize the lifestyle nowadays has been kidnapped by money and power. In the song “Tom Ford,” the songwriter criticized the ostentatious displays of wealth on social media. The line “fuck
hashtags and retweets” conveyed a critique of materialism and vanity within the black community.

In the years 2014 to 2016, F-words were predominantly used to challenge authorities. Interestingly, during this period, there were notable protests and concerns within the music industry regarding unfair earnings distribution and a corrupted evaluation system. For instance, Lil Wayne’s song “Believe Me” critiqued the corrupt chart and music award system, expressing dissatisfaction with the recognition received using lyrics like “Yes, right now you are lookin’ at the best, Motherfuck award shows and mothafuck the press like that.” As another example, the Weekend’s song “Might Not,” released in 2016, portrayed corruption within the music industry:

    Shout-out to the ones who spend money like a habit
    Even if they had a million dollars, they’d be trappin’
    Got a couple girls shootin’ movies on the mattress
    Then I hit the booth, make the motherfuckin’ soundtrack

Here, the symbolized term “motherfuckin’ soundtrack” represented music production being exploited by the wealthy for their luxurious lifestyles.

Two key societal factors can rationalize this phenomenon. Firstly, there was a significant shift in music consumption with the emergence of digital streaming platforms. This disrupted traditional revenue models, raising issues related to contract transparency, piracy, and copyright. Secondly, during this time, there was an absence of well-established supervision and administration systems, making it susceptible to monopolization or exploitation by influential figures within the music industry.

**Years 2017-2020**

As depicted in Figure 2, there was a notable increase in the usage of F-words for rebellious purposes from 2017 to 2020. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the numbers. With the exception of the year 2019, all the years during this period witnessed more than 20 instances where F-words were employed to challenge societal norms. In both 2017 and 2018, the majority of these instances were primarily directed towards political power and authorities. However, in 2020, there was a substantial surge in using such language to combat discrimination. This observation strongly underscores and mirrors the corresponding social and political realities of that time, which had a significant influence on music production.
Table 2. Frequency of F-words used to challenge social norms (2017-2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The topic of social issues to challenge</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political power</td>
<td>Social Injustice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the years from 2017 to 2019, the prevailing social issues that attracted attention were primarily related to political authorities. For instance, let’s take a look at the lyrics of Chris Brown's “Party,” which exhibited a clear sense of rebellion against the legal system. The line “fuck the judge and the sentence” expressed disdain and distrust toward the existing U.S. legal system. The songwriter seemed to believe that having a “good lawyer” could be the key to resolving all their court-related problems, as evident in the lyrics. In “Gucci Gang,” the lyrics “fuck your airline, fuck your company” expressed the songwriter’s frustration with the double standards of flight companies. They appeared to impose strict rules on ordinary passengers regarding security while granting exemptions to wealthy individuals with private planes. Another example can be found in the song “Moonlight,” where the phrase “Fuck a Scorten” was used to challenge alleged manipulation in the presidential election. This accusation revolved around Donald Trump manipulating the entire voting and scrutiny process.

The year 2020 stood out as an extraordinary year, with the overall instances of rebellious F-words in songs reaching their peak at 33 cases. Moreover, many of these instances were aimed at challenging discrimination against social minorities, with 15 such cases recorded. This trend was a response to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, sparked by the murder of George Floyd by police in the United States, which was widely recognized to influence popular culture at that time (Tillery, 2019). One of the most prominent protest anthems of that year was Juicy J’s song “Hella Fuckin’ Trauma,” which even incorporated the F-word into its title. In this song, the 45-year-old rapper repeatedly declared “Enough is enough” in response to the racist violence plaguing America. He also expressed concerns about political manipulation and mishandling of COVID-related issues, as seen in the line “I just drank a Corona, is it a virus or what?” In Roddy Ricch’s rap song “The Box,” there was a clear use of profanity against the police with the line “fuck 12, fuck SWAT.” Here, “fuck 12” is a slogan frequently used in the rapper community to express disdain for the police. It originated from the TV show “Adam-12” and refers to a narcotics unit or a radio code used...
by the police themselves. Although this song was released in 2019, its appearance on the Billboard Year-End Chart for 2020 reflected the prevailing social trend in support of rebellious voices against racism and police authority.

**Years 2021-2022**

When the global political and social crises related to the anti-racism movement and the COVID pandemic began to subside, there was a noticeable decline in the presence of rebellious content in songs after 2020. As outlined in Table 3, the total instances of rebellious F-words in songs decreased significantly to 9 in 2021 and 10 in 2022, which is nearly three times lower compared to the year 2020.

Nevertheless, a notable number of cases involving the use of F-words for rebellious purposes to challenge discrimination issues persisted, with 4 cases in 2021 and 7 cases in 2022. However, a closer examination of the specific themes revealed a shift from racial discrimination to gender and LGBTQ+ discrimination. For example, in the song “Industry Baby,” the line “I don’t fuck bitches” uses misogynistic language to mock misogynists. It’s worth noting that the songwriter is a queer individual, whose gender is identified based on self-psychological perception (Majeed et al., 2021). This represents a typical challenge to prevailing social norms, echoing the significant social movements advocating for gender and LGBTQ+ equality in the early 2020s in the United States.

**Table 3.** Frequency of F-words used to challenge social norms (2021-2022).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The topic of social issues to challenge</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political power</td>
<td>Social Injustice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the same period, there was a significant decrease in cases challenging political power in these two years, and the reasons for this decline could be multifaceted. One plausible explanation may be attributed to the emergence of social media and other digital platforms, which have offered new avenues for individuals to articulate their political viewpoints and participate in activism (Shirky, 2011). These platforms facilitate instantaneous communication, effortless sharing of information and perspectives, and the potential to reach a broad audience. Consequently, individuals desiring to express their political rebellion or dissent might opt for social media as a direct means of communication rather than relying exclusively on music or other artistic expressions. Furthermore, some artists have cultivated a
significant presence on social media platforms. Notably, numerous artists condemned the events of the January 6th, 2021, Capitol riots carried out by supporters of Donald Trump on Twitter and Instagram. Prominent figures like Cardi B, Pink, and Taylor Swift voiced their disapproval. Cardi B tweeted, “The irony is pretty funny… weren’t people just wild animals in the summer for demanding justice and now?... Let me just watch (sic).” Meanwhile, Pink conveyed her disappointment more explicitly on Twitter, stating, “As a United States Citizen, … I am ashamed of what is happening in Washington. … Unpatriotic hypocritical sheep drinking poison Kool aid. This a sad day for America.” (Hoffmann, 2021) These instances illustrate the emergence of alternative outlets for the musician to express their rebellious sentiments apart from incorporating them within their song lyrics.

4.4 Theme analysis by genres

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.png)

**Figure 4.** (A) Total frequency of F-words appeared in different genres of songs from 2013-2022. (B) Fractions of f-words used as rebellion function within all F-words in each corpus.

In addition to providing an overview analysis of the use of F-words within different years, a comparative analysis was also conducted among four different music genres. As depicted in Figure 4, it was expected that F-words would be more prevalent in Rap and R&B music with total counts of 641 and 1519, respectively, which are nearly double or triple those of Pop and Rock music (Figure 4A). However, upon analyzing the fraction of F-words used for rebellious functions, it was found that Rap and R&B genres exhibited much lower values compared to Pop and Rock music, as shown in Figure 4B.

Within the hip-hop culture, “rap music has served as a prominent means of expression for African Americans to project their voices and incorporate subliminal messages regarding black oppression as a form of politically progressive popular culture” (Tsang, 2020). This is clearly evident in the analyzed corpus. In the year 2020, out of the 15 instances where “fuck”
was used to address racial discrimination, as outlined in Table 2, 7 occurrences were found in Rap genres, making up 47% of the total. Similarly, in the year 2021, 2 instances were identified in the Rap genres, representing 50% of all instances across the four genres. As mentioned earlier, a notable example of this is the line “fuck 12, fuck SWAT” in Roddy Ricch’s rap song “The Box,” which serves as a powerful expression against white supremacy within the Black Lives Matter movement.

However, this expression is simultaneously dependent on the hegemonic frameworks of white people that it resists in order to attain success. This dependence could have two consequences. Firstly, it may lead to the neutralization or diminishment of rebellion against white supremacy during music production. A striking example of this is the frequent yet seemingly meaningless collocation between F-words and N-words. Table 4 lists the ten most frequent lexical collocates for the word *fuck* in the Rap corpora. Notably, the words *niggas* and *nigga* rank as No. 1 and No. 3 with frequencies of 154 and 119, respectively. However, when examining the concordance patterns of these collocations, the N-words are used primarily as the general, non-discriminatory first-person, second-person, and third-person pronouns for black individuals, devoid of any added sentiment. Expressions like “find a nigga” are commonplace, and they lack a clear context of racial discrimination in the lyrics. In the song “No new friends,” the line “fuck all niggas except my nigga” distinctly showcases the impartial, all-encompassing use of the F-words and N-words, as they are employed to denote anyone, irrespective of their racial background. Consequently, the use of profanity has evolved into a form of self-deprecating self-identification within the hip-hop community rather than a real expression of rebellion against racial discrimination (Beers Fågersten, 2006).

**Table 4.** Collocates of F-words used in Rap songs (2013-2022).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>niggas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>bitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>nigga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>bitches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>commas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>shit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>bet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Secondly, the profanity, including F-words, that were once utilized as weapons of rebellion has now been commodified as selling points for business purposes. Some rap songs have even been titled by F-word, for instance, Big Sean’s song “I don’t f**k with you.” Another strategy involves the frequent repetition of F-word-laden phrases as a central part of the song’s chorus. For example, in the song “Deja Vu,” the line “She fuck with small-town niggas, I got bigger dreams” serves as the main chorus and is repeated more than eight times throughout the song. Apparently, here, the F-words are used primarily for repetitive sensory stimulation to attract a larger audience. In fact, the secret of “profanity can sell” has already been highlighted in previous studies (Bergot, 2022).

Consequently, the overuse of profanity in rap music may induce aesthetic fatigue among the audience, resulting in a loss of its shocking power, which is a key feature in expressing rebellious feelings. This phenomenon can be likened to the widely accepted “marginal effect” in social science (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016). It is plausible that the excessive use of profanity in music may lead to what is known as “aesthetic fatigue,” where individuals become desensitized to its impact, causing it to lose its effectiveness as a form of expression (Scanlan & Clark, n.d.). Recent research has actually found that excessive swearing can have a positive effect on desensitizing or numbing pain sensations (Stephens & Robertson, 2020). I can clearly confirm this phenomenon via the lowest shocking values found in rap songs (average number of 1986 between years between 2013 and 2022) among four genres in Fig. 3a&b.

In contrast, this effect has not yet been observed or has not occurred to the same extent in other music genres where profanity, particularly the use of F-words, is still considered abnormal or unconventional based on commonly accepted values, thus producing the needed shock-value effect. In particular, the R&B genre exhibits the highest shock value when using rebellious F-words (an average number of 2701 between the years 2013 and 2022). Many R&B songs containing these rebellious words have gained significant attention in the public eye after their release. For example, the declaration of “I don’t engage in intimate relations with individuals” in the song “Industry Baby,” even though it appears only once in the lyrics, became the central theme of the song, drawing attention to black queer sexuality. The artist behind this song, Lil Nas X, was one of the first black male musicians in pop music to openly embrace a queer identity. According to music critics, he “has made it his mission to be authentically and proudly queer in his music,” as exemplified by this song (McCracken, 2021). “Industry Baby” debuted at the number one spot on Billboard's charts, and Lil Nas X has amassed 50 million monthly listeners on Spotify. The success of “Industry Baby” has
also allowed Lil Nas X to establish the Bail X Fund in support of the queer movement, raising $21,000 to date.

4.5 Textual analysis of rebellious F-words
In this section, a more focused examination was taken to reveal the correlation between textual content and its discursive and social significance. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of how the power of rebellion is conveyed through the use of F-words in these songs. In particular, my focus was on the grammatical features of these words and the literary devices that have been employed.

4.5.1 Grammatical features of rebellious F-words
After going through all the cases of rebellious F-words extracted from the corpora, I found most of them exhibited the following two forms: 1. using fuck as a transitive verb to initiate the imperative sentence to express oaths and imprecations; 2. using fucking as an adjective for the target issues to challenge.

4.5.1.1 Using fuck as a transitive verb
In the first kind of cases, rebellious F-words were used as a transitive verb followed by the target issues to be challenged. In this context, to fuck departs from its original connotation of sexual intercourse and instead implies the idea of causing damage, destruction, or spoilage, often laced with heightened rebellious emotion (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). However, in most instances of this usage, fuck was employed to initiate imperative sentences without clearly defined subjects. For example, “Fuck the judge!” in the song “CoCo” symbolizes the challenge to the legal system; In the song “Downtown,” the sentence “Fuck a bus pass, you got a moped, man” satirized the societal phenomenon of favoring the wealthy while looking down on the less affluent. In the song “King’s Dead,” a part of the soundtrack from the film “Black Panther,” the songwriter even strung ten imperative sentences initiated by fuck to articulate their rebellion against the traditional social norms that constrict the free spirit of the rappers:

- Fuck integrity, fuck your pedigree, fuck your feelings, fuck your culture
- Fuck your moral, fuck your family, fuck your tribe
- Fuck your land, fuck your children, fuck your wives

When compared to the conventional placement of transitive verbs within a sentence, fuck initiated imperative sentences tend to convey a higher degree of annoyance, hatred, and
dismissal (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.). This is due to the advantages of the imperative form to add a sense of urgency, provide clarity in communication by eliminating unnecessary words, and consequently effectively convey strong emotions (Keltner et al., 2019). A previous corpus analysis in the literature comparing the use of declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentences in rock music lyrics indicated that imperative sentences in lyrics “are employed for maximum efficiency in a communicative urgency” (Sophiadi, 2014). In addition, an increasing frequency of such imperative sentences in songs over time was also observed, attributed to the fact that “lyrics in popular music are more assertive, the speaker is—or considers himself/herself to be more powerful, and subsequently language becomes rather bald, without really worrying about civility, courtesy or politeness in the lyrics discourse.” (Sophiadi, 2014) Such argumentation should be particularly relevant when dealing with rebellious F-words, since challenging social norms usually requires a more assertive and aggressive attitude. This explains why nearly all rebellious F-word, when used as transitive verbs in my corpora, are employed in imperative sentences rather than declarative and interrogative ones.

4.5.1.2 Using *fucking* as an adjective

The other scenario is the use of the adjective word *fucking* as an intensifier to express anger and fury towards challenged objects. I can also observe other variants like *motherfucking* and *motherfuck*. For instance, in Eminem’s song “Rap god,” a line like “How to give a *motherfuckin*’ audience a feeling like it’s levitating” reflected concerns that rap music has increasingly been influenced by commercialism, where the taste of the audience has taken precedence, sometimes at the expense of artists’ originality and self-identity. Another example can be found in the song “Rockstar,” where the songwriter satirized the money-driven mindset of many current pop singers with a line like “I’ve been in the Hills fuckin’ superstars, Feelin’ like a popstar.” Here, living in Beverly Hills has become a symbol of success for artists, often irrespective of their true talents. On the other hand, in the song “Brutal,” the songwriter highlighted the harsh reality that dreams of youth are crushed under the weight of life’s pressures and the pursuit of wealth in today’s society:

> Cause who am I if not exploited?
> And I'm so sick of seventeen
> Where's my *fucking* teenage dream?

The word *fucking* in those instances did not carry a specific meaning but served as an offensive intensifier (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.). However, these cases are far less
common (20) compared with transitive verb usage discussed earlier (105) within all the corpora. One reason for this disparity could be that fucking has become more widely accepted as a less offensive intensifier in written text, functioning as a normal adjective or adverb, rather than a taboo word. Actually, the opinions about the offensiveness of this word have changed over time and varied depending on the context and culture. Some argue that the word has lost its impact and is now used as a normal adjective in clickbait (Saner, 2023). This can be further supported by the observation that fucking is often associated with more positive descriptors in lyrics, such as fucking good, fucking beautiful, and fucking awesome, etc. Furthermore, as discussed above, in Rap or hip-hop genres, profanity has been considered a fingerprint for the self-recognition of the black community, where fucking is overwhelmingly utilized as an intensifier. Therefore, the rebellious power of fucking should be typically less pronounced compared to its use as a transitive verb in imperative sentences.

4.5.2 Literary devices employed
Next, there exist some interesting instances in that special literary devices were employed when using the F-word to express rebellious feelings. It should be noted that those cases were really rare in numbers, so they cannot provide a general representation of the rebellious F-words in the songs. But since their forms are entirely different from other instances, it is worthwhile to demonstrate those examples here.

The first strategy is to use sex activities expressed by F-words to present a metaphor. In Nicki Minaj & Remy Ma’s rap song ShETHER, the phrase finger-fuck was used in the text of “Endorsements, tour, and merchandise, they finger-fuck it” (Mackie et al., 2017):

Through Young Money, through Cash Money, through Republic
Which means your money go through five niggas before you touch it
Any videos, promotions come out of your budget
Endorsements, tour and merchandise, they finger-fuck it
You make, like, 35 cents off of each ducat
I own my masters, bitch, independent

(Mackie et al., 2017)

The original meaning of finger-fuck is to penetrate (a vagina or anus) with a finger or fingers as a sexual act, according to OED definition (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). However, here finger-fuck presented a metaphor that profit commission is a kind of rape. The aim of this sentence in the lyrics was to reveal the complexities of Nicki’s rapper record deal, implying that a lot of people took their cut from her earnings during the music production.
The second clearly identified literary device is parallelism. The above-mentioned repetitive stacking for the F-word-initiated imperative sentences in the song “Black Panther” is an obvious example. Another example can be found in the song “Dah Dah DahDah,” where the phrase “how the fuck” was used as an intensifier in interrogative contexts to express annoyance against the discriminative stereotype of black people. In this case, parallelism was employed to further emphasize these emotions:

“All them niggas 'round you bitches, so how the fuck you gangsta?
Niggas shot and hit the fences, so how the fuck you aimin’?
Nigga ain't killed nobody, how the fuck you dangerous?” (Dah Dah DahDah)

Music critics interpreted this use of parallelism style as a stylistic choice that reflected “an expression of the rapper's aggressive persona, emphasizing his willingness to use violence to get what he wants” (Wick, 2023).

However, the use of literary devices seemed to be relatively uncommon. This implies that contemporary songwriters are inclined to use more direct and assertive language to underscore their rebellious emotions in lyrics. Multiple social factors may contribute to this trend. In a landscape where issues such as racism, sexism, and climate change dominate the public discourse, songwriters might feel a sense of urgency to address these issues in their music. Many songwriters highly value authenticity and honesty in their lyrics, believing that direct and assertive language provides the most effective means to convey their genuine emotions and experiences. Moreover, contemporary audiences may also expect songwriters to be more direct and assertive in their lyrics. With social media and other forms of instant communication, audiences may be more accustomed to receiving information quickly and directly.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this thesis undertakes a systematic examination of the use of F-words in contemporary songs, specifically focusing on extracting and analyzing instances of rebellious discourse. Utilizing data from four distinct music genres taken from the Billboard year-end charts spanning from 2013 to 2022, the research conducts a quantitative theme analysis and qualitative textual analysis of identified occurrences where F-words are employed to challenge societal norms and push boundaries.

Between 2013 and 2016, a relatively stable social climate resulted in a low number of instances (42 cases) where rebellious profanity challenged social norms in song lyrics. The
sole observed instances pertained to grievances about social inequality resulting from rapid economic growth. Conversely, the period from 2018 to 2020 witnessed a peak in the use (76 cases) of F-words to challenge social norms, driven by various social and political crises such as George Floyd's murder and the COVID pandemic that necessitated greater public expressions of rebellion. The occurrence of rebellious F-words began to decline after 2021 (19 cases), coinciding with the re-establishment of social stability.

When comparing the four music genres, Rap music exhibited a notable prevalence of rebellious F-words with a higher occurrence number than other genres by order of magnitude due to the cultural feature and long history of resistance against oppression within the black community. However, their impact was diluted due to their frequent use, resulting in diminished audience reaction with a low shock value of 1986. In contrast, other music genres, such as rock music, where profanity is less common in contemporary songs, had a more significant shock value of 2701 when used during critical social crises to attract attention.

A close qualitative analysis of the textual features of those rebellious F-words revealed that, in most cases, they are employed as transitive words to initiate individual imperative sentences. Less frequently, the adjective fucking was used as an intensifier when challenging certain targets. In even rarer instances, literary devices such as metaphor or parallelism were utilized to further emphasize the rebellious emotions. This trend clearly indicates a preference for more assertive and aggressive expressions when using these rebellious F-words in lyrics.

However, it should be noted that the conclusions drawn in this study are constrained by the choice of corpora. Despite the songs in the Billboard chart being among the most popular and professionally curated music, they are still preselected by editors, introducing an element of personal preference that may not entirely represent the songs’ popularity. Furthermore, the use of profanity is culturally dependent, meaning that the findings from mainstream pop music in the United States and the United Kingdom, as represented by the Billboard chart, may not necessarily apply to other English-speaking environments. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to investigate data from a more diverse range of cultural and social contexts in future research.
Reference:


Hoffmann, L. (2021, January 7). *Celebrities including Kevin Hart, Cardi B, Pink and Mark Ruffalo react to US Capitol riots*. The West Australian.


https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00723


https://doi.org/10.2307/2935300

Appendix

Python code for Genius OpenAPI source data extraction

```python
import os
import requests

# Insert your Genius API access token here
access_token = 'SFci2uEoOjCXdgCrVgXqa_Nn9TVSBNM8xuvKLNRheZM0Kjgyv8Ic3Qfk44dj1h8cS'

# Path to folder containing text files
folder_path = 'd:/BA thesis/Pop corpus/

# Loop through all text files in the folder
for filename in os.listdir(folder_path):
    # Check if file is a text file
    if filename.endswith('.txt'):
        # Extract song title from file name
        song_title = filename[:-4]
        # Search for the song on Genius.com
        search_url = 'https://api.genius.com/search?q=' + song_title
        headers = {'Authorization': 'Bearer ' + access_token}
        response = requests.get(search_url, headers=headers)
        response_json = response.json()
        # Extract the song ID from the search results
        song_id = response_json['response']['hits'][0]['result']['id']
        # Get the song information using the song ID
        song_url = 'https://api.genius.com/songs/' + str(song_id)
        response = requests.get(song_url, headers=headers)
        response_json = response.json()
        # Extract the primary artist and all featured artists on the song
        primary_artist = response_json['response']['song']['primary_artist']['name']
```

writer_artists = [writer['name'] for writer in response_json['response']['song']['writer_artists']]
release_date = response_json['response']['song']['release_date']

# Print song information
print("Song:", song_title)
print("Primary artist:", primary_artist)
print("Writer artists:", writer_artists)
print("Release date:", release_date)