

Songs With Suicide References in the United States and Clinical Applications

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The portrayal of suicide in popular music has been a topic of interest for some time. In 1984 there was notable controversy after 19-year-old John McCollum died by suicide while allegedly listening to the song “Suicide Solution” by Ozzy Osbourne.¹ McCollum’s parents later filed a lawsuit against Osbourne claiming the lyrics incited their son to harm himself, though it was ultimately dismissed by the court.¹ In fact, Osbourne claimed the song was intended to promote an anti-suicide message.¹ In the mid to early 2000s, popular news outlets, including the *Daily Mail*, publicized the “dangers of emo,” a rock music genre characterized by its emphasis on emotional expression including suicidality and self-harm behavior.

Previous studies have investigated mental health themes in popular music, including substance use,² relationships, personal identity, and suicide.³ Some imply that music reflects the circumstances under which it was created.⁴ Others report links between music content and subsequent observed behavior; one longitudinal study of 548 adolescents found associations between listening to music with aggressive or sexual content and aggressive or sexual behavior, respectively.⁵ Some evidence exists to support the idea that musical preference is an indicator, rather than a causal factor, of emotional vulnerability.⁶ A cross-sectional study conducted to investigate the relationship between adolescents’ music preference and their psychological health found significant associations between rock/heavy metal music and suicidal thinking and deliberate self-harm.⁷

More recently, a content analysis of mental health references in 125 popular rap songs from 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018 was performed and found the proportion of songs with suicidal ideation, depression, and mental health metaphors more than doubled over time.⁸ Notably, 6% of the 125 songs referenced suicide.⁸ In

another analysis examining US top 40 songs from 1960-2010, references to suicide were found to be very rare, occurring in 0.6% of songs, and the authors found no trend in references over time.³ We performed a content analysis of suicidal references in US top 50 songs from the year-end Billboard Hot 100 between 2010 and 2019. Song lyrics were analyzed for the presence or absence of suicide reference. A song was considered to have a suicide reference if it included thoughts of wishing to be dead or direct mention of suicide or suicidal behavior. Two reviewers (PG + TD or PG + SG) independently examined each song, and any discordance in coding was discussed between the 2 reviewers to reach a consensus. Of all the songs examined, 1.7% of songs included a suicide reference, and three quarters of songs with a suicide reference fell under the rap/R&B/hip-hop genres. Songs with suicide references are presented in Table 1.

Discussion

The rise in popular rap songs with suicide references between 1998 to 2018⁸ suggests there may be an increased openness to discussing suicide in this genre, which in 2018 was considered a favorite for the majority of 16- to 24-year-olds.⁹ Furthermore, several young popular artists in recent years have been increasingly outspoken about mental health issues and suicide. For example, during their acceptance speech at the 2020 Grammys, Billie Eilish’s songwriter/producer brother Finneas O’Connell stated they write about depression and suicidal thoughts, among other things, which may help destigmatize and normalize discussions of mental health. Artist Selena Gomez has openly discussed her personal experiences with mental illness and treatment, including dialectical behavior therapy, and in 2019 was granted the McLean Award for Mental Health Advocacy, making her the youngest recipient since

Table 1. Songs With Suicide References

Year	Number on The Billboard Hot 100	Song	Artist	Genre(s)
2013	25	Sail	AWOLNATION	Alternative/rock/Dance
2013	43	Same Love	Macklemore & Ryan Lewis featuring Mary Lambert	Rap/R&B/hip-hop
2016	20	Ride	Twenty One Pilots	Alternative/rock
2017	13	XO TOUR Lif3	Lil Uzi Vert	Rap/R&B/hip-hop
2017	31	1-800-273-8255	Logic featuring Alessia Cara & Khalid	Rap/R&B/hip-hop
2018	17	Sad!	XXXTENTACION	Rap/R&B/hip-hop
2018, 2019	12, 48	Lucid Dreams	Juice WRLD	Rap/R&B/hip-hop
2019	30	Goodbyes	Post Malone featuring Young Thug	Rap/R&B/hip-hop

Note: Lyrics with suicide references are presented here. “Lucid Dreams” was a top 50 song for both 2018 and 2019.

the award was established in 2008. Logic’s 2017 song “1-800-273-8255” is named directly after the former US National Suicide Prevention Hotline (Table 1), and the song’s release was associated with a 33% increase in phone calls to the Hotline and a 100% increase in Google searches of the Hotline compared to one year prior.¹⁰ Importantly, the widespread prevalence of social media and its popularity among young people likely helps propagate these messages. Selena Gomez, with over 265 million followers on Instagram, has used her platform to highlight her advocacy, which involves reducing the stigma associated with mental health and integrating mental health education into schools. Logic used Twitter to describe “1-800-273-8255,” explaining “I made this song for all of you who are in a dark place and can’t seem to find the light.”¹⁰ His tweets, in turn, were written about in magazines popular among youth, including *Teen Vogue*.¹⁰ While music has conveyed intense emotional states throughout time, it seems that mainstream songs and songwriters are increasingly more explicit and public in their relation to mental health themes.

Another important factor is that when an artist whose music depicts suicidal themes unexpectedly dies, their death may influence how listeners understand the meaning of their music. For example, Juice WRLD died of an accidental opioid overdose in December 2019, and XXXTENTACION was shot and killed in June 2018.

A poignant article from *The Guardian* includes reactions from fans of several rap artists who have died, including Juice WRLD and XXXTENTACION.¹¹ The fans, ages 20-27, each had unique experiences with the music, but common threads were the emotional connection to the artist, particularly when depression or addiction was depicted in their music, and grief with processing their deaths.¹¹ Though none of these artists died by suicide, their deaths clearly affected young listeners. Based on the impact made on the public by artists who have died by suicide in the past, such as Kurt Cobain of Nirvana and Chester Bennington of Linkin Park, psychiatrists should consider having proactive discussions with young people when artists die suddenly, particularly if the patient has expressed admiration for the artist.

As mental health themes become increasingly familiar in popular culture, child and adolescent psychiatrists should feel comfortable discussing music with suicidal references in clinical practice. Notably, AACAP has published a guideline for families, “Listening to Music and Watching Music Videos,” which encourages parents to have open discussions about music with their children, with the stipulation to consider evaluation by a mental health specialist if there is a constant focus on music with destructive themes.¹² We offer a few specific recommendations to help child and adolescent psychiatrists navigate using music with suicidal content in practice. First, we suggest asking youth and their

parents/guardians broadly about their music preferences and any perceived benefits of or concerns about the content of the music early in treatment, to facilitate the conversation about the potential role of music on a patient's mental health. Second, as highlighted in AACAP's guideline, we warn against pathologizing individuals based solely on their choice of music. Music depicting themes of depression, loneliness, and even suicide may be therapeutic for some individuals who otherwise may feel isolated.¹³ We suggest that psychiatrists take a curious stance and invite their patients to express their own interpretations of relevant songs, which may then be used to draw on themes related to larger treatment goals. The psychiatrist may consider asking questions such as "What do you think the artist means?" and "What stands out to you in this song?" We encourage providers to consider the larger perspective, wondering with their patients about their music preferences and making note of any meaningful changes over time. If a patient exhibits increased symptoms of mental illness correlated to increased listening of music with suicidal themes, we recommend first optimizing the patient's safety and then addressing potentially relevant factors, such as music.

Finally, we suggest that child and adolescent psychiatrists remain aware of the major trends in popular music and artists, not because every young patient is interested in this genre, but because such trends can largely influence the greater culture. Calhoun and Gold have described how celebrities who self disclose their own experiences with mental illness can positively impact public health.¹⁴ Child and adolescent psychiatrists should challenge themselves to approach music with suicide references with nuance, curiosity, and attention in their clinical encounters. In turn, they may learn insightful information about their patients and improve the therapeutic alliance.

Take Home Summary

While music has conveyed intense emotional states throughout time, it seems that mainstream songs and songwriters are increasingly more explicit and public in their relation to mental health themes, including suicidality. As themes about mental health become increasingly familiar in popular culture, child and adolescent psychiatrists should feel comfortable discussing music with suicidal references in clinical practice, particularly if artists die unexpectedly. Approaching such content with nuance, curiosity, and attention may help psychiatrists learn new insights about their patients and strengthen the therapeutic alliance.

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