

A hip-hop state of mind

The global popularity of hip-hop has transformed the culture from the inner-city streets of New York City (NY, USA) into a multibillion-dollar industry within about 40 years.¹ Hip-hop music is a worldwide platform for self-expression and unification. It has a unique capability to translate across cultures, languages, and socioeconomic boundaries. Hip-hop first emerged during the early 1970s out of the politically forsaken and socially neglected South Bronx area, New York. Toxic environmental factors such as poverty, illegal drug use, crime, and social segregation put those who lived in these areas at a high risk of developing mental health problems.² However, for many, the conception of hip-hop also helped to positively transform their lives and achieve a formidable sense of empowerment, street knowledge, resilience, and self-healing.³

Here, we discuss the potential of hip-hop music in the context of mental health and psychiatry. We focus on some of the avenues through which hip-hop can be implemented as a unique tool for refinement of psychotherapies and psychoeducation, for enhancement of recruitment and retention in psychiatry, and to help with public health education and anti-stigma campaigns.

Through psychoeducation and psychotherapies, medical knowledge can be actively transferred to empower individuals to form clearer personal identities, and to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Bridging such techniques with hip-hop music can cultivate a new culture of understanding, based on a context-enhanced partnership of mutual respect and trust. Merely increasing the availability of psychological interventions and psychoeducation is not enough; they must also be made culturally accessible to those who most need them. An innovative study by J W Pierce⁴ examined the effect of music therapy and psychoeducation versus psychoeducation only for the promotion of societal inclusion of people with mental health problems. Both groups consisted of patients with a range of mental health problems such as schizophrenia and depression. The experimental group had music lyrics and music played to them to help with psychoeducation. Popular songs—eg, “Man in the Mirror” by Michael Jackson and “Take Off Your Cool” by Outkast—were used to enable discussions among the

patients in the experimental group. On the basis of test-scores, the results showed that the experimental group learned significantly more of the psychoeducation curriculum than the control group. A limitation of the study was that the key contributing factors of the music therapy that lead to the positive results were not identified. For example, whether listening to the music itself helped, or whether music preference contributed to the positive result, was not clear; future studies should delineate such effects. Positive visual imagery is also being currently used in the treatment of affective disorders, including depressive disorders, based on the work of Emily Holmes and colleagues,^{5,6} and has been validated crossculturally, as shown in an Iranian population.⁷ We believe that hip-hop music, with its rich, visual narrative style, can be used with this form of psychotherapy to address the cultural needs for specific populations. For example, the song “Juicy”⁸ by the hip-hop artist, The Notorious B.I.G., is characterised by positive visual imagery. We speculate that patients with depression who are interested in hip-hop music could be encouraged to enhance positive images of themselves, their situations, and the future, through this form of music.⁹ These patients could also be encouraged to give a positive interpretation via rapping, by use of scripts with ambiguous situations as highlighted in studies by Holmes.^{5,6}

Mental health services are increasingly needed worldwide; eg, major depressive disorder has increased in ranking to the 11th position for disability-adjusted life years, as reported in the Global Burden of Disease Study in 2012.¹⁰ This crisis is intensified as mental-health support decreases; specifically, the uptake of medical students into the specialism of psychiatry has markedly fallen over the past 25 years, and retention rates of psychiatry trainees are also low.^{11–14} The use of a hip-hop framework for medical education allows for the incorporation of arts and popular culture into training, but not compromising on scientific merit. Popular culture through the use of cinema is already being used to teach psychiatry;¹⁵ MedFest,¹⁶ supported by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, is a typical example of using popular media films with a psychiatric theme to stimulate an interest in psychiatry among medical students and doctors. Such stimulation is important



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as it underlines the relevance of psychiatry to a wider culture, and helps with the recruitment of a more diverse mental-health workforce.

Hip-hop has already been implemented into *Let's Move*, a US public-health campaign against childhood obesity promoted by the Presidential First Lady Michelle Obama.¹⁷ We believe that incorporation of hip-hop into antistigma campaigning for mental health could do likewise. HIP HOP PSYCH is a pioneering social venture that we co-founded to bridge the gap between the hip-hop community and the medical community. Our project has several aims: to refine psychotherapies and psychoeducation, to bring teaching innovation to medical personnel and academics, to engage with the general public, and to launch antistigma campaigns. We are particularly keen to do outreach work in prisons, schools, and youth hostels to promote positive self-esteem through engagement with hip-hop artists.

We translate medical information in an accessible manner, and also incorporate cutting-edge medical and neuroscientific research to promote the positive messages that hip-hop music has to offer—eg, verbal dexterity and freestyle brain connectivity patterns.¹⁸ We have witnessed the integration of HIP HOP PSYCH in a variety of settings (eg, prisons, lecture halls, schools, and nightclubs), and how it empowers individuals and creates space for discussion and debate about mental health from different perspectives, especially from the viewpoint of hard-to-reach audiences, such as prisoners. After 40 years since its inception, hip-hop has come a long way and has influenced an array of areas, including politics and technology,—and now potentially medicine.

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