‘Masculinities’: The Discursive Role of UK Rap in Perpetuating a Pluralistic Reinterpretation of Mental Health and Masculinity

Abstract

This paper explores the potential of UK rap, one of the most stigmatised, typically hyper-masculine cultural spheres in Britain, to shape societal attitudes towards an equally stigmatised issue: mental health. Drawing on interdisciplinary academic research and personal interviews with Bhishma Asare (a Thornton Heath-based rapper and founder of Rap Therapy) and Elias Williams (founder of MANDEM.com), it aims (i) to appraise the positive and negative effects of the increasingly prominent vocalisations of masculinity and mental health disorders in UK rap; (ii) to determine which coping mechanisms for mental health disorders UK rap most strongly references; (iii) to evaluate the influence that UK rap has in shaping the current zeitgeist around such issues. To do so, it conducts a lyrical content analysis of songs from five UK rappers. Given that psychopathological disorders afflict over 800 million people worldwide, and are a prominent risk factor in suicide, which – in the UK – was the cause of 5,224 deaths in 2020 (3,935 men), it has never been more urgent to apply research from this field into better understanding and alleviating mental health issues. Overall, this paper argues that UK rap is wrongly overlooked as a medium for progressive discourse regarding sociopsychological change. It posits that UK rap reveals crucial insights into the current mental health crisis, and that academia should further acknowledge and investigate its capacity to perpetuate a pluralistic reinterpretation of masculinity and mental health.

Keywords: mental health, UK rap, masculinity, psychopathology, major depressive disorder, coping mechanisms

1. Introduction

From birth, most men are societally conditioned towards a traditional masculine ideology. When displays of vulnerability by men with debilitating mental health disorders are met with instructions to "man up", conversations surrounding male mental health become taboo (Hart, 2019). This stigmatisation has catastrophic consequences. In the UK alone, 79 men take their own lives each week, and suicide is the single leading cause of death for men under 45 (ONS, 2021).

Underpinning this paper is the notion that certain aspects of traditional masculinity are sociopsychologically positive, and other aspects are sociopsychologically harmful. By abandoning the harmful traits and reincorporating the positive traits under a new ideology of 'masculinities', a multi-faceted, pluralistic reinterpretation of male identity and behaviour can be promulgated with the intention of better understanding and addressing mental health disorders in modern society. As one of the most compelling and pervasive modes of popular culture, music is fundamental in the process of acculturation (Frith, 1996). Symbiotically, as both a construction and reflection of the sociopsychological zeitgeist, UK rap plays a seminal role in this pluralistic reinterpretation, under which it is accepted that masculine behaviour variably falls along a spectrum from stoic and confident to introspective and candid.

This dissertation's principal objectives are: (i) to appraise the positive and negative effects of the increasingly prominent vocalisations of mental health disorders in UK rap; (ii) to determine which mental health disorders, masculine behaviours, and coping mechanisms UK rap references most strongly; (iii) to evaluate the influence that UK rap, as a reflection and mediator of the current zeitgeist, has in shaping societal attitudes towards such issues. Due to this paper's complex, multi-factorial topic, it is necessary to draw on research from a range of academic fields, from **critical discourse analysis**, its primary analytical framework, to **psychopathology** and **sociology**, its subsidiary theoretical underpinnings.

1.1 The Mental Health Crisis

In 2022, the pressing urgency of the mental health crisis needs little contextualisation, and yet requires copious research into the ideologies that fuel it, and the potential therapies to counteract it. Mental disorders are now some of the most prevalent illnesses in modern society, afflicting around 10.7% of the global population – over 800 million people (Dattani

et al., 2021). The most prominent of these is major depressive disorder (hereafter MDD), which is the primary driver of disability worldwide (Vos et al., 2015; WHO, 2021). Also common are generalised anxiety disorder (hereafter GAD), paranoid personality disorder (hereafter PPD) clinical anorexia and bulimia, bipolar disorder, and substance abuse (Dattani et al., 2021).

Suicide prevention is the most crucial application of this research. Globally, someone commits suicide every 40 seconds (WHO, 2019); in the UK, 5,224 people died from suicide in 2020 – 3,925 (75.1%) of these were men (ONS, 2021). In the past four years, UK suicide rates have seen a sudden increase, spiking from 9.4 suicides per 100,000 population (14.4 males, 4.6 females) in 2017, to 11 suicides per 100,000 population (16.9 males, 5.3 females) in 2019 (ONS, 2021). On average, women are actually likelier to experience suicidal thoughts and self-harm than men (McManus et al., 2016), but male suicide rates remain more than three times higher than female suicide rates (ONS, 2021). How does the ideology of traditional masculinity explain this imbalance? How can a reinterpretation of *masculinities* as a pluralistic ideology help to rectify it, and lower the number of men who see no other choice but suicide? This discourse study delves into one of the most typically hyper-masculine cultural arenas in Britain, critically analysing the dynamic between mental health and masculinity in UK rap music.

1.2 UK Rap

Much like the topic of mental health, rap is fraught with stigma. Since its conception in the 1970s, rap has sparked societal conversations about issues ignored by other media outlets, from political corruption, to police brutality, to racial discrimination (Hart, 2019). Coinciding with the increased accessibility of music through YouTube (2005), Spotify (2011), and Apple Music (2015), rap's rhizomic globalisation has seen it become the most streamed genre worldwide, responsible for 25.1% of total music consumption and 30.3% of all on-demand audio streams (Rys, 2017).

UK rap fuses different elements of North American, African, Caribbean, and British music culture. It is comprised of several sub-categories, including drill, trap, road rap, and grime. A syncretic genre, grime emerged out of musical styles as diverse as house, jungle, US hip-hop, and UK garage (Swain, 2018). Originating in Bow, East London (Hancox, 2018), grime's distinct sound is built around 'street aesthetic' and a heavy bass production, drawing

on American ‘rapping’ and the Jamaican tradition of ‘toasting’ (singing to a rhythm), both of which foreground the role of the MC (Master of Ceremonies) vocalists (Swain, 2018, p. 481).

Over the years, there have been countless attempts to ban UK rap from mainstream music platforms and shut down live performances (Swain, 2018). The most notorious example is the London Metropolitan Police’s ‘live music risk-assessment form’, otherwise known as Form 696 under the 2003 Licensing Act (Hancox, 2018, p. 170). By empowering the Met to pressure venue owners into cancelling grime events under the pretext of public safety, Form 696 was perceived by many as a thin disguise for racial profiling, due to its question: ‘Is there a particular ethnic group attending? If “yes”, please state group.’ (ibid.). Such discrimination has been reconstrued recently into the vilification of drill, a UK rap sub-genre labelled as ‘demonic’ for its glorification of violence and gang activity (Mararike et al., 2018). This has escalated to the extent that drill videos have been used as evidence in criminal investigations and court proceedings (Fatsis, 2019).

Given rap’s aforementioned status as the most streamed global genre (Rys, 2017), and that UK rap accounts for over a fifth of all UK singles consumption (22%), a six-fold increase from 1999 to 2020 (British Phonographic Industry, 2021), its cultural influence is irrefutable, particularly among the typical listener demographic outlined in Section 2.5. Rather than essentialistically categorising UK rap in a negative manner, as has been done for decades by legal (Mararike et al., 2018), media (White, 2018) and governmental (Hancox, 2018) institutions, a greater focus on the messages expressed by individual artists could allow for a nuanced understanding of masculinity’s role in mental health.

1.3 Mental Health in UK Rap

When grime caught the British public’s attention in the 2000s, it was pigeonholed by its aesthetics, rather than recognised for its substance. Even when Dizzee Rascal’s ‘Boy In Da Corner’ became the first UK rap album to receive widespread critical acclaim, winning the Mercury Prize in 2003 (Hancox, 2018), media reviews generally lauded its social commentary (Plagenhoef, 2003), rather than its discussions of psychological distress and paralysis in songs like ‘Do It!’ (Dizzee Rascal, 2003a) and ‘Sittin’ Here’ (Dizzee Rascal, 2003b). Contrastingly, the media response to Stormzy’s ‘Gang Signs and Prayer’, fourteen years later, focused almost entirely on his lyrical representations of such issues in the songs that book-ended it: ‘First Things First’ (Stormzy, 2017a) and ‘Lay Me Bare’ (Stormzy,

2017b), which even led Stormzy to be interviewed on national news about MDD (Channel 4 News, 2017). The disparity in critical reception between Dizzee's and Stormzy's albums epitomises how underdeveloped UK rap culture's mental health literacy was in the 2000s (Hart, 2019).

In the 2010s, breakthroughs like Stormzy's were supported by other UK rappers. Trailblazing grime artist Skepta released a contemplative twenty-five minute monologue video entitled 'Underdog Psychosis' (Skepta Grime, 2014), in which he referred to the damaging psychological impact of racial and socioeconomic marginalisation, drawing on his own experiences with authority, consumption, and the education system. Kojey Radical and Professor Green proceeded to create short films and documentaries about the UK's mental health epidemic (SSense, 2018; Real Stories, 2018). These actions moulded a landscape in which contemporary UK rappers display a more holistic view of themselves; still exuding confidence, but also introspection and candour.

1.4 Dissertation Outline

In order to directly address its research questions and objectives, this study is structured into five broad sections – introduction, theoretical background, methodology, analysis, and conclusion – with the analysis divided into two categories: mental health disorders and coping mechanisms. Both of these analytical categories is further divided into three sub-categories, as seen in Table 1.

1. Introduction	1.1 The Mental Health Crisis
	1.2 UK Rap
	1.3 Mental Health in UK Rap
	1.4 Dissertation Outline
2. Theoretical Background	2.1 Rap Music as Discourse
	2.2 Toxic or Traditional Masculinity?
	2.3 Psychopathology
	2.4 A Sociology of Mental Health
	2.5 Demographic Data on Rap Listeners & Mental Health Disorders
	2.6 Current Research on Mental Health Discourse in Rap
3. Methodology	3.1 Purposive Sampling

	3.2 Data Collection	
4. Analysis	4.1 Mental Health Disorders	4.1.1 Major Depressive Disorder
		4.1.2 Generalised Anxiety Disorder
		4.1.3 Paranoid Personality Disorder
	4.2 Coping Mechanisms	4.2.1 Consumption
		4.2.2 Hyper-Masculinity
		4.2.3 Suicidality
5. Conclusion		

Table 1. Dissertation structure

Having contextualised mental health, UK rap, and mental health discourse in UK rap, this study reviews its theoretical underpinnings, starting with critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Rap Music as Discourse

As the primary analytical framework, CDA is used to dissect the lyrics of the sampled UK rappers. Much of its groundwork is built on Bernsteinian sociolinguistics, whose overarching idea that language and communication are mediated by social relations informs the analysis section (Bernstein, 2005). This dissertation constructs itself in the spirit of Bernstein's outspokenness against the marginalisation of interdisciplinary studies, particularly the sociological aspects of linguistics and psychology, among other subjects (Charap, 2000).

CDA differs from traditional discourse analysis in its debunking of power asymmetries, exploitation, and structural inequalities (van Dijk, 2003). Since its rise in the late 1990s and early 2000s, notable scholars including Norman Fairclough (2001), Ruth Wodak (2002), and Teun van Dijk (2003) have dominated the field. Fairclough (2001) was instrumental in popularising the viewpoint that social practice and linguistic practice co-constitute one another. The influence of his 'three stages of critical discourse analysis' – 'description', interpretation', and 'explanation' (ibid., p. 109) – is seen in the headings of Table 3 and 4. The *description* of the text is reconstrued as 'song' and 'lyrics'; the *interpretation* of the relationship between text and interaction as 'techniques'; and the

explanation of the relationship between that interaction and the text's social context as the 'connections with the wider sociopsychological context' (ibid.).

Several sub-groups of CDA scholars have emerged, relatedly focusing on topics such as discursive social psychology (Billig, 1999) or social semiotics and multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021), among others. Some diverged from mainstream CDA in favour of a more ethnographic approach, such as Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000), whose core principles embody a Foucauldian discourse analysis, and are rooted in globalising sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. This stance has been repurposed by Talbot (2013), concentrating on recommendations for revisioning music education. While musical pedagogy pertaining to the interpretation of sociopsychological messages in UK rap (or any other cultural discourse) could be a potential application of this study's findings, as seen in the curative work of MANDEM.com (Appendix A) and Rap Therapy (Appendix B), it does not fall within its main scope, which aims to critically analyse UK rap's preventative sociopsychological impact on mental health and masculinity.

2.2 Toxic or Traditional Masculinity?

Having established this study's analytical framework, it is relevant to explore its applied theories and concepts, starting with masculinity. Much like this dissertation dissuades essentialist attitudes towards UK rap, it also rethinks the currently essentialist – and psychologically harmful – interpretation of masculinity (Addis and Cohane, 2005). In keeping with a certain set of standards, typically including stoicism, achievement, self-reliance, and an eschewal of weakness, this traditional conceptualisation simultaneously perpetuates positive traits of masculinity, as well as so-called "toxic" masculine qualities (De Boise, 2019).

This dissertation adopts the term 'traditional masculinity' rather than the buzz phrase 'toxic masculinity' due to the latter's simplistic condemnation of male behaviour, rather than certain gendered constructs, which incongruously allows toxicity to fester and gender polarisation to intensify (Addis and Cohane, 2005). Research has correlated traditional masculinist tendencies (namely emotional suppression) with the presence of undiagnosed, untreated depressive symptoms (Coleman, 2015). Traditional discourses cultivate resilience, but also contribute to psychopathological and even suicidal behaviour (Emslie et al., 2006.). Despite this, there are numerous ways in which masculine behaviour enacts itself outside of

these hegemonic standards. Within approaches like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, pluralistic masculinity, emphasising traits like compassion, intelligence, and creativity, are fundamental in preventing or alleviating psychopathological disorders (Scheid and Greenburg, 2007).

2.3 Psychopathology

Psychopathology is the study of mental disorders, their associated symptomology, and maladaptive behaviours (Thomson et al., 2014, p. 151). Broadly speaking, mental health problems are separated into two dimensions: *internalising* and *externalising psychopathology* (Miranda et al., 2012). While disorders (such as MDD or GAD) are categorised under internalising psychopathology, externalising psychopathology is more specifically behavioural, such as aggression, or long-term chemical dependency (ibid.).

Juxtaposed to psychopathology, mental health is a 'state of well-being in which an individual can realize his or her own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to their community' (WHO, 2022). As with physical health, mental health is non-binary: mental 'illness' and mental 'health' are not diametric opposites, but rather exist on a spectrum (Keyes, 2002). Often with psychological support or medication, a person diagnosed with a mental disorder can behave in line with the WHO's (2022) identification of a functioning individual; equally, someone with an undiagnosed mental disorder (or without any disorder at all) may be unable to. In other words, the absence of mental illness does not guarantee the presence of mental health, and vice versa (Keyes, 2002).

2.4 Sociology & Mental Health

Sociologically, mental health is characterised by *hedonic* wellbeing (e.g. enjoyment, happiness), *eudaimonic* wellbeing (e.g. purpose, fulfilment), and *social* wellbeing (e.g. healthy relationships, interpersonal connections). Seligman (2011) subsumes these under various affective and cognitive components of mental health, together with *self-actualisation* (e.g. optimism, accomplishments) and *resilience* (e.g. adaptive emotional regulation). It is worth noting that some studies into music-related mood regulation and psychopathology have identified music as a facilitator in self-actualisation – as well as social integration, coping

strategies, and identity formation (Miranda et al., 2012; Bakagiannis and Tarrant, 2006; Thomson et al., 2014). While promising, research on mood regulation frames music as a curative psychotherapeutic tool, rather than a pre-emptive method of altering socialised attitudes and gendered expectations which underpin mental health issues (Coleman, 2015).

Gender aside, the social determinants of mental health has become an increasingly prominent area of sociological research. This is largely due to the popularisation of social stress theory, which asserts that psychological issues are caused by *exposure to stress* – formed by early life experiences, environment, and sociodemographic statuses – as well as *vulnerability to stress*, often underpinned by low levels of self-esteem and social support (McLeod and Lively, 2007). Recent mental health research has evolved to address topics of a more meta-sociological nature. Theories around *labelling* and *stigma* reflect this shift, assessing the negative social consequences of receiving a mental health diagnosis (Pescosolido and Martin, 2007). While this study acknowledges the damaging role of labelling and stigma, particularly in the hyper-masculine contexts explored within UK rap music, it leans more heavily on literature addressing socialised expectations, environments, and their psychological impact. Before applying these to the under-researched field of mental health discourse in British rap, demographic data on rap listeners and mental health is noted.

2.5 Demographic Data on Rap Listeners & Mental Health Disorders

Demographically, rap is the most popular genre amongst listeners between the ages of twelve and thirty-four, male, living in urban or suburban areas (non-rural), of low to mid-ranking socioeconomic position, and of a liberal-leaning political orientation (Milkman, 2021). It consistently ranks as the most listened to genre amongst black and minority ethnic consumers, but is also popular among white and Hispanic listeners (ibid.).

There is some overlap between the typical rap listener demographic and the UK demographic most affected by mental health disorders. According to research by the House of Commons Library, eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds are the likeliest age group to receive a referral for mental health treatment (Baker, 2021, p. 23). From 2020 to 2021, referrals were 76% higher in the most deprived areas in the UK than in the least deprived areas (ibid.). In the same time period, white ethnic groups received the most referrals (1,081,034) followed by Asian or Asian British (84,884), then Black or Black British (51,247 – ibid., p. 25).

Contradictory to the number of referrals by ethnic group, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British people suffer from the highest rates of psychopathology (Cabinet Office, 2018, p. 12). Moreover, black and minority ethnic individuals are *four times likelier* to be detained under the Mental Health Act than white individuals (ibid.), which suggests that, if the prevalence of mental disorders is higher among ethnic minorities, then the reasoning for lower number of mental health referrals lies in community stigma, accessibility to treatment services, financial barriers, language barriers, and perhaps systemic discrimination (McAlpine and Boyer, 2007).

This overlap illustrates British rap's potential to reconstrue healthy cultural interpretations of masculine mental health. As a genre, it connects with underrepresented groups that healthcare has historically struggled to reach, particularly men in the black community (Sule and Inkster, 2020). In order to contextualise this potential, this paper next overviews the literature on mental health discourses in rap.

2.6 Current Research on Mental Health Discourses in Rap

On the whole, research into (typically American) rap has increased markedly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, correlated with its transnational rise in popularity. Current research is approximately divisible into three fields.

The first field explores US rap, with a wide-ranging focus on topics such as lyrical censorship (McLeod et al., 1997), street codes (Kubrin, 2005), violence (Herd, 2009), and misogyny (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). Within this field, it was first suggested that rap music is distinctive in that, unlike other genres such as heavy metal or rock, its lyrics are the focal point. Therefore, rap could have a greater influence than other types of contemporary music on the extent to which listeners accept the messages vocalised in its songs (Barongan and Hall, 1995). If true, it could be argued that rap is morally obliged to promote healthy forms of masculinity – whilst authentically depicting reality. It is also possible that rap's lexical emphasis is (partially) why it has repeatedly been condemned for glorifying misogyny (ibid.) and violence (McLeod et al., 1997) more than other genres which contain similar lyrical themes (Fatsis, 2019).

The second field of research, rather smaller in size, investigates UK rap and issues such as the commodification of crime (Ilan, 2014), black masculinity (Boakye, 2017), social

inequality (Hancox, 2018), and racial neoliberalism (Fatsis, 2019). It investigates factors of interest to this study, but does not typically extend ramifications to mental health.

The third field, even smaller still, examines mental health and coping discourse, but primarily in popular US rap. Examples include Herd's (2014) study into representations of alcohol, Hart's (2019) exploration of the evolution of mental health discourse, and Kresovich et al.'s (2021) appraisal of the rise of mental health references. An example of a finding from this field which was essential in inspiring this dissertation was that – over the last two decades – the proportion of (popular American) rap songs that referred to mental health struggles has more than doubled, rising from 32% in 1998, to 68% in 2018 (Kresovich et al., 2021, p. 288). Within this, references to GAD increased from 24% to 32%, suicide from 0% to 12%, MDD from 16% to 32%, and mental health metaphors from 8% to 44% (ibid., p. 289).

Nonetheless, while this demonstrates that academic circles are gradually accepting the legitimacy of mental health discourses in rap, the impetus has remained on US artists, and almost never exclusively on UK rap. This dissertation addresses this gap in current research, forming a fourth field which explores mental health and coping discourse in UK rap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purposive Sampling

While Hart's (2019) data collection framework for coding musical lyrics which contain mental health discourses is compelling, its selection of top-selling albums based on sales figures predicates itself on the commercial success of the artist, rather than their social impact. This study opts to hurdle this barrier by using *purposive sampling*, choosing lyrical data from five UK rappers with varying popularity and origin, outlined in Table 2. Songs disseminated solely on dominant streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music are incorporated alongside other UK rap-industry freestyles (e.g. Fire in the Booth [BBC Radio 1Extra] and Bl@ckbox [GRM Daily]), which are crucial in offering up-and-coming UK rappers an opportunity to reach a broader audience.

Artist	Popularity		Origin
	YouTube Subscribers	**Monthly Spotify Listeners**	
Santan Dave	1,350,000	8,050,410	Streatham Vale, London
Bugzy Malone	596,000	3,931,316	Crumpsall, Manchester
Frankie Stew & Harvey Gunn	10,100	750,173	Portslade, Brighton
Songer	5,040	244,562	Reading
Fox	6,670	18,508	Birmingham

Table 2. Demographic information on the sampled UK rappers in this study

3.2 Data Collection

From here, these artists' entire discographies (comprising 17 albums, 8 EPs, 34 singles, and 41 freestyles), was listened to, with the lyrics simultaneously displayed on screen using Genius (2022a). During the first listen, each song's general themes were noted down. On a second listen of these songs, lyrics referring to MDD, GAD, or PPD – either explicitly by name, or implicitly through some of the most common externalising symptoms (NHS, 2021) – were noted down verbatim using the coding categorisation in Table 3. Finally, these psychopathological disorders were cross-examined with the select coping mechanisms (consumption, hyper-masculinity, and suicidality) in Table 4. These tables are used as template to inform the in-depth analysis (Section 4).

Song	Lyrics Relating to Mental Health Disorders			Techniques (van Leeuwen, 1999; 2012; Genius, 2022b)	Connection with wider sociopsychological context
	Major Depressive Disorder	Generalised Anxiety Disorder	Paranoid Personality Disorder		

Table 3. Coding categorisation of references to mental health disorders

Song	Lyrics Relating to Coping Mechanisms			Techniques (van Leeuwen, 1999; 2012; Genius, 2022b)	Connection with wider sociopsychological context
	Consumption	Hyper-Masculinity	Suicidality		

Table 4. Coding categorisation of references to coping mechanisms

4. Analysis

4.1 Mental Health Disorders

The first section of analysis tackles mental health disorders, focusing on major depressive disorder (MDD), generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), and paranoid personality disorder (PPD). Starting with MDD, the most prevalent of the three, this section critically examines representations of masculinity and mental health in contemporary UK rap songs. In line with Table 3, specific lyrics from a variety of songs are selected, combed for techniques, and then contextualised amid the wider sociopsychological climate.

4.1.1 Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

Characterised by long-lasting or recurrent feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, or worthlessness, MDD affects approximately 3.8% of the global population – some 280 million people (WHO, 2021). Diagnoses fall on a spectrum from mild, to moderate, to severe depression, depending on the number and severity of symptoms (ibid.). Aside from mood, symptoms are also extended to behaviour (irritability, crying, isolation), sleep (insomnia, excessive sleepiness, difficulty falling or staying asleep), and cognition (diminished concentration, lack of focus – ibid.). Alterations in weight or appetite, losing pleasure or interest in activities, and suicidality can also be present (ibid.).

Stemming from the complex interaction between biological, social, and psychological factors, adverse life events are a common feature in MDD's onset (ibid.). This is vocalised in Example [1], a harrowingly introspective exploration of Songer's experiences with MDD following relationship difficulties and personal loss.

Mental trouble ain't a thing that just a story can heal
You can post what you want but that don't mean that you're real

It means you know the fucking person you want people to see
How many people do you check on when they struggle to sleep?
How many people do you check on when they're quiet at work?
We just stigmatise the truth and tell our idols to twerk
All we do is work for money, sell our data to scum
Since my best friend passed I'm never buying the Sun
This album's been a mess cos I've been lower than low
And my only plan of action is fucking go with the flow

1] I'd Rather You Cheat (Songer, 2021b, 1:22)

In this track, Songer dissects his own psychological burdens, and the societal expectations which induce judgement of such burdens. Highlighting his friend's death as a trigger of MDD, Songer refers to the premature death of nineteen-year-old Luke Freeman, who died following a fall from a balcony in Costa Brava – and The Sun's sensationalistic coverage of the tragedy (Couzens, 2019). This is supported by Cohen et al.'s finding that 50% to 80% of depressed people experience a 'major life event', compared to 20% to 30% of non-depressed people assessed in the same period (2007, p. 1686).

Songer condemns those who self-interestedly use social media to 'virtue signal' about mental wellbeing (Levy, 2019), juxtaposing this hollowness with genuine actions that could have a positive psychosocial effect, such as checking up on people who are 'quiet at work' and 'struggle to sleep'. In doing so, Songer encourages the listener to re-evaluate their own support for loved ones, friends, and acquaintances, and raises awareness for two of MDD's most common symptoms: social withdrawal and sleep difficulties (WHO, 2021). In Example [2], Songer reiterates the detrimental effects of the latter on mental health, underlining the potential for insomnia to lead to morbid or suicidal thoughts (Staner, 2010).

Can't sleep but I might yawn instead,
Then my brain slips into the thought of death
If I died how bad would the morning get?
Back to the real world, bored in bed

2] Morning Breath (Songer, 2021c, 0:50)

Although Songer's vocalisation lacks detail – for instance, it fails to highlight that the relationship between insomnia and MDD is bidirectional and arguably comorbid (Staner, 2010) – it offers an insight into the thought processes triggered by sleep deprivation or perpetual fatigue. Referring back to Example [1], Songer's metaphorical reference to his MDD ('I've been lower than low') reflects the norm for many UK rappers' representations of

mental health disorders. As a psychotherapeutic technique, metaphor is typically used when describing an emotional state that is draining and difficult to put into words (Lazard et al., 2016). In UK rap, metaphor's discursive power is harnessed to vocalise personal issues that are otherwise exceedingly tricky to communicate by conventional means, as delineated by Elias Williams, founder of MANDEM.com:

> Things that people may struggle to say in everyday conversations can be channelled through art. Inherently, that can foster some kind of psychotherapeutic help for some people, because music (and art in general) can break the barriers, restrictions, and categories of everyday life that we have to subscribe to, whereas art is a place we can go to explore ourselves and understand ourselves better. It doesn't feel as rigid and material as everyday life can be.

(Appendix A)

Generalised, vague, or metaphorical representations of mental health disorders make UK rap both a limited and exemplary arena to explore psychopathological issues. It is limited in the sense that specific disorders are not always clinically identified, but exemplary in that the majority of the UK (and global) population do not refer to mental health disorders in clinical terms (Lazard et al., 2016). In fact, an issue underlying the stigmatisation of such disorders is that conversations about them are exceedingly rare among the general population (particularly the segment underpinned by traditional masculine ideologies), even in non-clinical terms (Sule and Inkster, 2020). This is illustrated by Example [3], in which Bugzy Malone (2018) uses metaphorical imagery ('darkest places') and agentive verbs ('beat') to stoically depict MDD.

> I've been in the darkest places, please believe me, you can beat depression

3] B. Inspired (Bugzy Malone, 2018, 1:13)

Through non-scientific, non-specialist language, domains like UK rap can stimulate more of these conversations, in turn shaping a more open societal evaluation of masculinity and mental health issues. Empowering discourses which promote resilience in tackling mental health disorders can be lifted from traditional masculine ideologies and reincorporated under the pluralistic ideology of 'masculinities'. Although this ideology identifies the possibility for psychological distress to be approached stoically and optimistically, it is multi-faceted in that it acknowledges this approach's inefficacy for certain personality types (Emslie et al., 2006). 'Masculinities' is, by nature, a dynamic ideology which recognises variance in mood and behaviour, rather than confining discourses surrounding mental health

to a one-dimensional typecast. Example [4] reflects this variance both linguistically and sonically.

But what's the point in me being the best if no one knows it?
Brother I'm a careful, humble, reckless, arrogant, extravagant
Nigga probably battlin' with manic depression
Man, I think I'm going mad again
It's like I'm happy for a second then I'm sad again
And to my fans, the reason I could get to this
You're my drug, the instrumental my therapist
Man, I need some therapy

4] Psycho (Dave, 2019b, 2:55)

Throughout Psycho, the mood shifts from aggrieved, to feverishly energetic, to dark and vulnerable; the song itself is bipolar in its tempo and melody patterns (van Leeuwen, 1999). This reflects Dave's battles with 'manic depression', now clinically diagnosed as *bipolar disorder*, in which depressive episodes alternate with periods of manic symptoms such as increased energy, self-esteem, recklessness, distractibility, and euphoria (WHO, 2021). Other patterns of MDD include a *single episode depressive disorder*, in which an individual suffers from their first and only depressive episode, and *recurrent depressive disorder*, in which an individual has a history of two or more depressive episodes (ibid.).

By labelling his 'fans' as his 'drug' and the 'instrumental' as his 'therapist', Dave articulates a discourse of dependency in dealing with MDD. This inverts the conventional dynamic of fans seeking solace or empathy in an artist's music (Thomson et al, 2014). However, Dave's lyrics imply that this relationship is sometimes as unhealthy or even addictive as drug usage, whereas the process of creating music itself, as a cultivation of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, is more proactively psychotherapeutic (Seligman, 2011).

Psycho, as the first track on Dave's 'Psychodrama' – a concept album linked by spoken-word snippets featuring Dave's psychotherapist – also highlights the role of therapy in tackling mental health disorders; a ground-breaking step in destigmatising attitudes towards men receiving therapeutic treatment (Petridis, 2019). For this, and for its dexterous explorations of race, prison, and abusive relationships, Psychodrama received high critical acclaim as one of the most thoughtful and self-aware UK rap albums of this generation, winning the Mercury Prize and Album of the Year at the 2020 Brit Awards (ibid.). It

exemplifies UK rap's potential to normalise public conversations around MDD, as well as other mental health disorders like GAD.

4.1.2 Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

As an intense and long-lasting subset of anxiety, GAD is defined as having repeated, uncontrollable worries about everyday life, often disproportionate to the intensity of the situation (Mind, 2022a). While GAD is the most frequently diagnosed anxiety disorder with a 5% lifetime prevalence rate (Newman, 2000, p. 158), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are also highly prevalent (Mind, 2022a). Co-morbidity, or the simultaneous presence or more than one illness or disease in one person, is relatively common between MDD and GAD (Hammen, 2015), exemplified by Songer in Example [5].

If you saw me at the pub you'd think I'm chatting the most
How you cocky and depressed bruv I don't even know
And there ain't an ounce of fear when I'm out with my bros
But anxiety's a killer when I'm back in my home
I distract myself by chasing after beautiful women
I ain't ever felt depressed when there's a worldie I'm kissing

5] I'd Rather You Cheat (Songer, 2021b, 2:15)

Songer illustrates the direct juxtaposition between his talkativeness and extroversion ('chatting the most') – desirable masculine traits – and his struggles with GAD ('anxiety's a killer') and MDD ('cocky and depressed'). Behaving with excessive or exaggerated bravado is a form of social posturing used to camouflage insecurities and anxieties (Lindsey, 2020). Songer extends the scope of this posturing to include his prowess at romantic relationships with women ('a worldie I'm kissing'). This representation is complex and controversial; it perpetuates hegemonic masculinity ('out with my bros … chasing after beautiful women'), while also revealing that Songer's experiences with mental health are predicated on social isolation ('anxiety's a killer when I'm back in my home' – Moore and March, 2022). To admit a certain amount of emotional reliance on the company of friends or a romantic partner is to shun the traditionally masculine trait of hyper-independence (Coleman, 2015). However, Songer's representation also contains superficiality – his desire to win over 'beautiful women' offers him a temporary relief from feelings of anxiety by proving his manhood to

others, a short-sighted strategy explicable in the context that loneliness negatively impacts people's ability to choose healthy coping mechanisms (Moore and March, 2022).

While Example [5] focuses on social isolation as a cause of anxiety and hyper-masculine social posturing as a coping mechanism, Example [6] explores GAD's specific indicators. Symptomatically, GAD triggers light-headedness, faster breathing or heartbeat, nausea, sleep problems, and panic attacks (ibid.). Despite the latter's social stigma as an anti-masculine sign of weakness or inability to cope (Pescosolido and Martin, 2007), Dave reveals that the flash of a camera was enough to provoke a panic attack in Example [6].

I been going through a phase, I ain't been feeling myself
To keep it G with myself, think I'm in need of some help
At Merky Fest I broke down because a camera flashed
Janelle was in the back, I had a panic attack

6] Mercury (Dave, 2021a, 0:36)

As a celebration of the most talented UK rap artists (hosted by Stormzy in Ibiza), 'Merky Fest' should offer rappers like Dave a spotlight to showcase their talent. However, it seems as though this spotlight ('a camera flashed') triggers the onset of Dave's panic attack, perhaps because it is a reminder of the ceaseless media pressure he has faced since his late teens (O'Connell, 2020). As representations of mental health disorders, Examples [5] and [6] are laudable for their authenticity, and relatable for listeners who have experienced panic attacks or GAD (Newman, 2000). Nevertheless, in Example [6] this relatability is somewhat limited, as some listeners may feel as though the high-pressure situations which cause Dave's anxiety diminish the severity of their own issues, or make the causes of their GAD comparatively trivial. Although it raises awareness for the struggles of high-achieving people, Example [6] fails to illustrate the struggles of people who barely make ends meet, and the socioeconomic pressures that come with that (Muntaner et al., 2004). Perhaps inadvertently, it sets a high threshold for the acceptance of mental trouble, given that, in reality, most people who suffer from anxiety do not regularly experience hyper-stressful situations like Dave.

The person they call mental health is the person that we call Mum
We either don't have a dad or we have more than one
And we're told to fly the nest before we even learn to run
You don't have to be a soldier here to hold a gun
And watching other people suffer is what we consider fun
"Cause suffering is standard, you'll have to toughen up"
At least that's what your mother tells you when she's fully drunk

People steal for a living, and end up in the can
It's miles easier in jail, but you wouldn't understand
Being a criminal is not part of the plan
But how are you supposed to work when nobody will take you on?

7] Welcome to the Hood (Bugzy Malone, 2021c, 1:58)

Bugzy Malone explores the themes of socioeconomic deprivation, gendered family roles, and criminality in Example [7], contextualised under the association of 'mental health' as 'Mum'. The meaning of this is slightly ambiguous, but given the subsequent description of Bugzy's broken family ('we either don't have a dad or we have more than one'), it may emphasise the vital, multi-faceted role of single mothers in caring for their family in the father's absence, both economically and emotionally. It is worth noting that in areas of increased economic deprivation, single-parent families make up a higher percentage of the demographic, and these families are more often headed by mothers than fathers (Artazcoz et al., 2004). There is a vast amount of cultural pressure on men to be financially self-sufficient, particularly those with families (Hill and Needham, 2013), but Bugzy's representation is pluralistic in that it acknowledges how this pressure causes absentee parenting, which also exacerbates stress and anxiety on single-parent women, and intergenerationally on the children raised without a male role model (Artazcoz et al., 2004).

To reflect the harsh reality of this family dynamic, Bugzy draws on sibilant, indifferent discourses ('suffering is standard, you'll have to toughen up'), but attributes them to his mother, reversing the traditionally masculine behaviourism of hardheartedness (Bailey, 2013). In this context, Bugzy explains how unemployment ('no one will take you on') and a lack of role models ('we either don't have a dad…') pushes people towards criminality ('steal for a living'), without glorifying the latter. He judiciously highlights how certain family situations are so severe and disadvantaged that 'it's miles easier in jail but you wouldn't understand', implying that this type of scenario is near-impossible to fathom for those of higher socioeconomic position. As put by Bhishma Asare, rapper and founder of Rap Therapy:

> Those who come from a disadvantaged background or live in a somewhat deprived area are exposed to avenues of self-medication and deprivation. Many turn to drugs, alcohol and turn to gang life, which is deemed 'normal' in environments like mine. I believe that the normalisation of these activities relates to mental health, as in a juxtaposing environment this lifestyle would be deemed as "crazy".

(Appendix B)

These representations of GAD reflect the contrast of lived psychosocial experiences in Britain. Example [7] illustrates the alternative possibility of living completely disassociated from the conventional route of education followed by employment – not by choice, but by enforced circumstance – and the social hierarchisation that comes with that circumstance (Muntaner et al., 2004). Such multiplicity is now analysed in UK rap's representations of PPD.

4.1.3 Paranoid Personality Disorder (PPD)

Although the term 'paranoia' regularly surfaces as a label for 'a way of perceiving and relating to other people and to the world that is characterized by some degree of suspicion, mistrust or hostility' (Cromby and Harper, 2009, p. 335), it is not a diagnosis itself, but a symptom of numerous mental health disorders (Mind, 2022b). Paranoid feelings can indicate PPD, paranoid schizophrenia, or delusional disorder – all are forms of psychosis, which is itself defined as an umbrella term for a spectrum of experiences ranging from a loss of contact with reality to delusions and hallucinations (ibid.). Fox delves into the intrafamilial trauma induced by psychotic episodes in Example [8].

Used to move aggressive, don't you know that I was sectioned
My mum dialled emergency services must have broke her
My dad and brother had to pin me on my sofa
They decided I need further help my mind is far from kosher
I grabbed the taser off the feds and try to shoot em' up

8] Sobering Truth (Fox, 2021, 0:25)

Fox's descriptions of PPD include urges of aggression, detachment, and neuroticism against even his closest family, culminating in his near-assaulting of police officers ('the feds'). Fox is eventually 'sectioned', by which an individual at risk of harming themselves or others is involuntarily detained and treated under Part II of the Mental Health Act (Audini and Lelliot, 2002). Use of the Mental Health Act (1983) has risen by 40% from 2005 to 2015, with a reported 50,893 new detentions in 2019/20 (NHS Digital, 2020). The Act has been scrutinised for its outdatedness, for causing distress through coercion (Hatfield, 2008), and for disproportionately affecting black and minority ethnic groups, who are twice as likely to be diagnosed with PPD (Hammen, 2015, p. 339), and four times more likely to be sectioned

(NHS Digital, 2020). Unconfirmed plans have been made for the publication of a new, more pre-emptive Mental Health Bill in 2022, which could avoid over-hospitalisation by allowing people to express their preferred treatment prior to a crisis (Buchanan, 2021).

Compared to research on the consequences of PPD, research into its causes remains relatively scarce (Cromby and Harper, 2009). Clinical psychology often individualises paranoia, overlooking the influence of social factors in its diagnoses (ibid.). Based on social stress theory, one possible cause lies in the imbalanced exposure to stress endured by underprivileged communities, which are typically of lower socioeconomic position, or ethnic minority status (McLeod and Lively, 2007). 'Maleness' has also been equated with paranoia, as men are 7.5 times likelier to receive diagnoses of PPD and schizophrenia than women (ibid., p. 339), due to the misinformed belief perpetuated by traditionally masculine ideologies that reaching out for help before paranoid symptoms escalate is weak or emasculating (Lindsey, 2020).

While Example [8] offers a representation of PPD at the extreme end of its behavioural spectrum, it is estimated that around one-third of the global population experience mild paranoia (usually termed *non-clinical paranoia*) at some point in their lives (Mind, 2022b). This number spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moore and March, 2022), a point worth remembering given that many of the songs analysed in this study were created between 2019 and 2021, at the height of the pandemic's enforced social isolation. Relatedly, another factor underpinning PPD is technological 'advancement', explored by Dave in Example [9].

Or blame all of the apps that make a killing
By finding a sweet spot in your self-hate and vanity?
Could you argue that it's borderline dangerous
To take a picture of a girl's face
And start changing it, in one quick filter
Your nose looks thinner, your eyes look fuller, your lips look bigger
Your software is better and your phone knows everything
If anything it's getting George Orwellian

9] Children of the Internet (Future Utopia and Dave, 2020, 1:34)

Initially through parallelism, Example [9] encapsulates the psychological impact of superficial obsession and comparison ('Your nose looks thinner, your eyes look fuller, your lips look bigger'). Dave rationalises cyber-paranoia ('your phone knows everything'),

through an ‘Orwellian’ evaluation of a technologically monitored surveillance state (Giroux, 2015). Unusually for popular culture, technology (specifically the Internet) is depicted as an omnipresent, menacing feature of modern society, unlike in Example [10], which focuses on one of its (few) restorative qualities.

Tryna take my mind off the pressures only my bed knows
No headphones on the train, I'll struggle where my head goes

10] The Sunrise Session (Songer, 2021c, 6:00)

Despite not identifying any specific mental health symptoms or disorders, Example [10] evidences the psychotherapeutic benefits of music listening as a distraction from the ‘pressures’ of daily life (Miranda et al., 2012). This illustrates the need for multi-faceted representations of factors which induce emotional stress and paranoia (such as technology, which here also functions as a coping mechanism through music listening), while advocating for public scrutiny on technology’s role in society through critical, accessible discourses (Fairclough, 2001). Before analysing these discourses relating to coping mechanisms, it is essential to dissect the marijuana-psychosis debate, which appears frequently in UK rap.

Wanted me on meds to calm me down, true I was frustrated
Can't have me sitting in chairs like I'm vegetated
Found myself alone in rooms I was meditating
Brought myself back to life I was excavated
Started off with weed paranoia then it escalated

11] Sobering Truth (Fox, 2021, 0:56)

Amid wider discussions regarding the decriminalisation of marijuana, a hotly contested sub-argument has been to what extent it is an effective form of self-medication, and to what extent it exacerbates underlying mental health issues (Hall et al., 2019). Regular cannabis use is linked with the development of psychotic illnesses such as PPD, triggered when the amygdala, which regulates responses to fear, anxiety, stress, and paranoia, becomes overstimulated, resulting in excessive or overwhelming bouts of these emotions (Ramikie et al., 2015).

On the other hand, some argue that marijuana consumption does not precipitate paranoia or anxiety, but reveals its pre-existence (Mouhamed et al., 2018). Light dosages have been proven to alleviate symptoms of psychopathological disorders such as MDD, as well as other health issues including epileptic seizures, glaucoma, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s Disease, cancer induced-pains, and appetite loss for those with HIV/AIDS (ibid.,

pp. 50–55). Even if Example [11] frames this debate reductionistically, it conveys the academically validated duality of marijuana use and mental state, highlighting both its debilitating ('vegetated', 'weed paranoia') and therapeutic ('meditating') impacts. Doctors or family wanting Fox 'on meds to calm me down' implies that self-medication through cannabis, while not always advisable, may have offered a less intense alternative to Olanzapine or Quetiapine, the most commonly prescribed anti-psychotics by the NHS (Marston et al., 2014).

It has been demonstrated that UK rap contains symptomatically accurate (if predominantly non-clinical) representations of mental health disorders, as well as exploring underlying factors as varied as traditional masculinity, socioeconomic position, technology, isolation, and ethnicity. In concluding this section on mental health disorders, the marijuana/psychosis debate leads on suitably to the next section of analysis: coping mechanisms, starting with consumption.

4.2 Coping Mechanisms

Defined as an individual's psychological and behavioural efforts to deal with the impact of stress on their emotional wellbeing (Dewa et al., 2021), coping mechanisms are divided into *adaptive* or *maladaptive*. Adaptive coping mechanisms (routine, therapy, or lifestyle factors) involve active problem-solving, and are typically emotion-focused, whereas maladaptive coping mechanisms (substance abuse, self-isolation) are passive or dysfunctional, often consisting of avoidant behaviour (ibid.). While analytical contrast is offered between UK rap's vocalisations of adaptive coping mechanisms (which are less prominent) and vocalisations of maladaptive coping mechanisms, this dissertation places greater impetus on the latter, due to evidence that they are both triggered by – and triggers of – mental health disorders (Campbell-Sills and Barlow, 2007). Based on Table 4, UK rap lyrics are used to investigate how masculine identity affects the psychological states which precipitate these coping mechanisms, and how influential domains like British rap can reshape this identity for positive sociopsychological change.

4.2.1 Consumption

Having outlined the various functions and classifications of coping mechanisms, specific examples are identified in UK rap, starting with consumption – referring to the intake of substances, particularly psychoactive drugs. Justified by Example [12], and by the wealth of research into its psychotropic effects (Herman, 2012), alcohol is included under this categorisation, despite the popularly held misconception that, due to its status as legal, it is not a 'drug' (Kassel et al., 2003). Other examples of psychoactive substances include caffeine, nicotine, marijuana, certain pain relief medicines, heroin, LSD, cocaine, and numerous other illegalised drugs (ibid.).

I'm not alcohol dependent it just helps me escape

12] I'd Rather You Cheat (Songer, 2021b, 1:03)

In Example [12], Songer relates his experiences with alcohol as an effective if debilitating form of escapism. When deployed as a (maladaptive) mechanism of coping with the symptoms of a mental health disorder, drugs facilitate general mood regulation, self-medication, and stress-coping (Kassel et al., 2003). Despite denying that he is 'dependent', Songer's implied alcohol reliance points to the significant role of stress systems in addictive processes; as with many drugs of abuse, alcohol intake is linked to the modulation of reward-stress circuitry, and the amplification of dopamine release (Herman, 2012). In this light, it is evident how the initial use of a psychoactive drug for emotional coping can escalate into a cycle of dependency.

Some days I get depressed but you could never tell the difference
Smoking up the room because I love the way it glistens
When I tell my drink about my day it never listens
World don't get the picture 'cause it's so concerned with image

13] Endlessly (Songer, 2021a, 2:01)

In Example [13], this is reiterated through personification ('I tell my drink about my day'). Songer concurrently demonstrates the passive, futile nature of his behaviour ('it never listens'), inferring that the curative effect of talking about his mental disquietude ('some days I get depressed') with a human would be far more therapeutic (Newman, 2000). Much as UK rap has been condemned in politics and media for promoting violence, theft, promiscuity, and anti-social behaviour (Fatsis, 2019), it has also come under fire for glorifying drug use (Smiley, 2017). While it is tricky to refute such criticism in Example [13], other representations of consumption as a coping mechanism provide a more nuanced sense of

reality. In Example [14], Dave details his struggles with consumption following the trauma of his brother's incarceration.

They gave my brother eighteen for a fucking murder
A knife crime, the lifetime, the whole sentence he's serving
Now in my chest, my brother knows it's burning
Them visits had me crying, had me whelping
Had me taking pills to help it

14] Bl@ckbox (Dave, 2015, 2:00)

Here, a representation of extreme substance abuse ('taking pills') coincides with a discourse of intense trauma experienced physically ('burning', 'crying', 'whelping'). This triumvirate of gerunds vivifies Dave's mental distress – instead of glorifying consumption, he confesses that 'taking pills' was a last resort at a time of unimaginable emotional turmoil. In the hyper-masculine world of UK rap, admitting to the effeminate behaviour of 'crying' requires courage, particularly given Dave's status as an up-and-coming rapper aged just sixteen at the time of this freestyle's release (O'Connell, 2020), in which Dave also references his father's deportation, his other brother's imprisonment, his grandmother's death, and his mother's ensuing suicidal urges (ibid.). Representations of this sort instil an invaluable awareness of the psychological harm caused by racial and socioeconomic discrimination, seen in the contexts of employment (Artacoz et al., 2004), poverty (Delgadillo et al., 2016) and youth violence (City Hall, 2021).

These factors play an intertwining role in psychopathological development, and the capacity to respond with adaptive coping mechanisms. For instance, research has proven that socioeconomic position predicts the utilisation of mental healthcare services independent of clinical severity (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2010). The contrast between the coping mechanisms articulated in Example [14] and Example [15] reinforces this – in 2015, Dave's socioeconomic status would have rendered the idea of affording a therapist impossible. Despite acknowledging that therapy costs 'too much cheddar', Frankie Stew and Harvey Gunn articulate the socioeconomic possibility of even undergoing therapy 'once or twice'.

Had a mental breakdown
Went to get off the floor but stayed down
I wanna go back in time to the start of when I was a kid in playgrounds
Too much pressure
Went to a therapist once or twice it helped but it's too much cheddar
It's mad cos nobody knew me better

15] Lost at Sea (Frankie Stew and Harvey Gunn, 2020, 2:20)

By advocating adaptive coping mechanisms like therapy, Example [15] destigmatises outdated attitudes that psychological support makes an individual (especially a man) 'weak' (Pescosolido and Martin, 2007). It also points to the astronomical cost of privatised healthcare and the inefficacy or long waits for treatment at community healthcare services, which are massive issues underpinning the current mental health crisis (Delgadillo et al., 2016).

Never seen that yute at the after
My man's fucked off a zoot and lager
Wasteman
Can't hack a zoot and a Stella
Swing man around like a human propeller
And if his girlfriend's cute I'll tell her

16] Bl@ckbox Part 1 (Songer, 2018, 1:12)

Example [16] reframes consumptive issues in a gendered context. By mocking an unknown 'yute' (youth) for his apparent inability to tolerate heavy consumption ('my man's fucked off a zoot [cannabis cigarette] and lager'), Songer conforms to traditional masculine ideals of hostility and hyper-competitiveness (Lindsey, 2020). He adds physical superiority ('swing man around') and romantic bravado (if his girlfriend's cute I'll tell her') to these traits, further emasculating the unknown man. Problematically glorified representations of this sort restrict UK rap's capacity to promote healthy coping mechanisms for men struggling with mental health issues, which is particularly important when considering that men are more than five times as likely to have an alcohol-use disorder and three times as likely to have a drug-use disorder than women (Brady and Randall, 1999, p. 241).

Overall, coping discourses in UK rap pertaining to consumption are varied, with some artists favouring glorification or maladaptability, and others preferring introspective or adaptable vocalisations. Building on the gendered dynamic established in Example [16], this analysis now shifts to hyper-masculinity as an (often unrecognised) emotionally reactive coping mechanism.

4.2.2 Hyper-Masculinity

Hyper-masculinity exists at the very edge of the masculine behavioural spectrum referenced in Section 1. As an exaggerated display of masculinity, it idealises power and self-sufficiency, considering vulnerability as a sign of weakness (Boakye, 2017). In UK rap, hyper-masculinity surfaces as boasts of physical strength (ibid.), threats of violence (Herd, 2009), and heterosexual control over women (Hart, 2019). This dissertation bridges the gap between two competing perspectives: the *prescriptivist argument*, which identifies the harmful sociopsychological impact of hyper-masculine lyrics (Barongan and Hall, 1995; McLeod et al., 1997), and the *progressive argument*, which frames hyper-masculinity as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Genuchi and Mitsunaga, 2015; Hart, 2019).

Hyper-masculine lyrics have been an ever-present feature of UK rap since its conception. Reasons for this include the extensive history of gendered posturing across genres which inspired its syncretic emergence (particularly 'gangsta rap', a subset of US hip-hop – Swain, 2018), record industry pressures to maximise sales through provocative lyrics (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009), and UK rap's role of reflecting gender relations in disadvantaged, inner-city neighbourhoods (Barron, 2013). In Example [17], Dave explores how these industry and neighbourhood pressures socialise men towards hyper-masculine displays of bravado.

You see our gold chains and our flashy cars
I see a lack of self-worth and I see battle scars
He has to be with twenty man when he wears jewellery
And you see it as gangster, I see it as insecurity

17] Environment (Dave, 2019a, 0:12)

Example [17] explains the desire for a glamorous, wealthy appearance ('gold chains', 'flashy cars', 'jewellery') as a sign of financial self-sufficiency, a coveted masculine trait (Addis and Cohane, 2005). However, this representation is multi-layered; through inclusive possessive pronouns ('our'), Dave initially relates to this posturing, before exposing the emotional vulnerability which underlies it ('a lack of self-worth', 'insecurity'). Needing to 'be with twenty man when he wears jewellery' as protection from robbery illustrates reality for those in underprivileged inner-city neighbourhoods like Streatham, Dave's birthplace (O'Connell, 2020). Such material success is juxtaposed by the physical and psychological trauma ('battle scars') Dave has endured to garner it, and points to the correlation between gang or street life and paranoia, depression, anxiety, survivor's guilt, perpetrator trauma, and

victim trauma (Naldrett and Wood, 2020). In Example [18], Dave addresses lingering expectations of hyper-masculinity in the rap industry.

I'm seein' them laugh at me, cah I'm vulnerable
Ain't that the shit that rappers' supposed to do?
I'd rather rap about arguing with my girl than fuckin' your girl
But I don't mind, because the both are true

18] Survivor's Guilt (Dave, 2021b, 1:35)

By simultaneously critiquing and exhibiting traditionally masculine traits, Dave encapsulates the duality (and hypocrisy) of the contemporary UK rap landscape. He criticises the socialised urge to disguise vulnerability with sexual bravado, before demonstrating that exact behavioural cycle himself ('fuckin' your girl'). This is an example of *homolatency*, a concept proposed by Bailey (2013) to signify certain rappers' incompetence at expressing their emotions due to patriarchal expectations, which in turn cause these emotions to pressurise. Bailey (2013) suggests that homolatency contributes towards the prevalence of depression (Kresovich et al., 2021), consumption (Herd, 2009), misogyny (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009), violence (Herd, 2014), and nihilism (Ralph, 2006) in rap as materialisations of this build-up of overwhelming emotion.

As a primary conduit in hyper-masculinity's function as a coping mechanism , the concept of *surplus time* links rappers' vocalisations of self-destructive behaviour to the morbid notion that, 'according to perceived life expectancies, these rappers should already be dead' (ibid., p. 1). Coupled with the still-present fear of imminent demise, these reckless, self-indulgent, and at times misogynistic behaviours are a way to 'seize the moment and squeeze as much fun as possible out of it' (ibid., p. 79). However, while Ralph's conceptualisation is compelling when applied to US rap from the 90s and 00s, surplus time – like masculinity – requires a reinterpretation in the context of contemporary UK rap. As seen in Example [19], UK rappers are likelier to frame experiences of surplus time from a perspective of psychological anguish, rather than impulsive gratification.

The world was fading out as I was bleeding from my head
And it's a shame to say it now but I didn't care if I was dead

19] The Resurrection (Bugzy Malone, 2021b, 1:28)

Referring to his near-fatal crash while speeding on a quad bike outside Manchester (Vesty, 2021), Bugzy vividly depicts the physical repercussions of coping with emotional turbulence through nihilistic recklessness ('I was bleeding from my head'). Where Ralph

(2006) might perceive this as the lawless pursuit of 'fun', Bugzy's harrowing confession that 'I didn't care if I was dead' reveals an altogether darker side to rash behaviour as a maladaptive, typically masculine coping mechanism (Genuchi and Mitsunaga, 2015).

Emerging research has overturned the long-accepted misconception that rates of MDD are higher in women than men, despite astronomically higher rates of male suicide (ibid.). For decades, the depressive measuring criteria were limited to prototypic, internalising symptoms ('amotivation, worry, concentration problems, self-criticism, and disillusionment' – ibid., p. 248), underemphasising externalising symptoms ('impulsivity, increased work and sex drive … stress, irritability, aggression, anger, alcohol/drug abuse, risk-taking behaviors, and hyperactivity' – ibid., p. 244). Since the implementation of the *Gender Inclusive Depression Scale (GIDS)* rates of depression have evened out, with Martin et al. (2013, p. 1104) identifying 26.3% prevalence in men, and 21.9% in women. The GIDS is a fundamental step in modernising psychiatrists', doctors', and researchers' diagnostic criteria towards an ideologically pluralistic conceptualisation of 'masculinities'.

Overarchingly, those demonstrating surplus time yearn for escapism from either their physical or psychological reality. As put by grime artist Wretch 32, "We're writing to escape. If you listen deep into the lyrics, there's probably a lot of cries for help in there' (Hart, 2019, p. 5). Recognising these (oftentimes camouflaged) cries for help, whether in a creative medium like UK rap, another cultural domain, or everyday life, is essential in preventing mental health difficulties to fester and spiral out of control. Without such recognition, an emotional state of sheer desperation can engender *suicidality*, this dissertation's final – and most crucial – sub-section of analysis.

4.2.3 Suicidality

Suicidality, or the risk of suicide ranging from ideation to an attempt (Durkheim, 2005), is the most pressing sociopsychological issue modern society faces. As outlined in Section 1.1, UK (and global) suicide rates are escalating, particularly amongst men with psychopathological symptoms (ONS, 2021), as 46% of people who die by suicide have a *diagnosed* mental health disorder (Franklin et al., 2017). Dave, who has previously lyricised about bipolar and depressive symptoms, ruminates over his and others' experiences with trauma, pressure, and suicidality in Example [20].

Deeper insecurities, like
What if I don't leave a legacy?
Money, why they check for me?
Mummy lost respect for me
I wish we could be together but that ain't how life works
I used to cry about my dad until my fucking eyes burnt
Nose running, you don't know nothing
Before I put a penny on the table, I provided for my family
Held my mother's hand through the agony, hey
You ever fall asleep 'cause you don't wanna be awake?
In a way, you're tired of the reality you face?
If you're thinking 'bout doing it
Suicide doesn't stop the pain, you're only moving it
Lives that you're ruining
Thoughts of a world without you in it, hiding
I ain't psycho but my life is

20] Psycho (Dave, 2019b, 3:20)

Adopting a non-traditional masculine stance, Dave's lyrics are emotive ('I used to cry') and intimate ('Held my mother's hand'). His father's deportation is described as a source of anguish ('my fucking eyes burnt'), and a formative experience in his upbringing, piling pressure on him, as the oldest man of the house, to 'provide[d] for my family' (O'Connell, 2020). Halfway through Example [20], Dave reverses the directionality of his discourses, using second person direct address ('you're tired', 'you're thinking') to directly projecting his own opinions regarding suicide onto his listeners. This is also indicative of a switch in topic from the causes of suicidality to its consequences and ethicality ('Suicide doesn't stop the pain, you're only moving it, lives that you're ruining').

While this lyric is likely intended to remind listeners with suicidal urges of its damaging psychological after-effects on loved ones (Durkheim, 2005), it is also somewhat problematic in its implication that suicide is selfish. As the climax of an intense, unbearable crisis, suicide should not be framed (linguistically or otherwise) as a choice – this ladles guilt on those struggling to suppress suicidal thoughts, and associates it with weakness, a misinformed belief which has resulted in the identification of traditional masculinity as a suicidality risk factor (Coleman, 2015). Unhealthy masculinist constructs and suicide is even more directly addressed in Example [21].

Couple things I've never said out loud, I just been living with it
I've gotta speak out, though it's fucking with my spirit
A school tie around my neck and hanging from the ceiling

He burst into the room, I was embarrassed when he seen me
So I put it to my wrist and, yeah, I slit it
Didn't cut it deep though, I gotta say I shit it
And mummy was a nitty
But when I heard she turned one of her customers into my dad I gotta say I really nearly did it
But I told myself, I would never do anything silly
I told myself I'd take it out on niggas that fuck with me
And that's why I never lost
And that's why I am a boss
And that's why I was the first one to rep my city

21] M.E.N. III (Bugzy Malone, 2021a, 0:59)

Bugzy outlines how emotional suppression ('things I've never said out loud') becomes overwhelming ('fucking with my spirit'), and culminates in a suicide attempt ('hanging from the ceiling'). This denotes the need for mental health issues to be addressed *preventatively* (e.g. therapy before suicidality develops), rather than *curatively* (e.g. therapy as a response to a suicide attempt – Coleman, 2015). Bugzy's unadulterated description of his own attempted suicide ('I put it to my wrist … I slit it') elucidates the sociopsychological harm of traditional masculinity: he feels 'embarrassed' and perhaps emasculated to be discovered in such a defenceless state, and troublingly frames his failed suicide attempt as somehow weaker than if he had followed through ('Didn't cut it deep though I gotta say I shit it').

This epitomises traditional masculinity's dichotomy of psychological self-destructiveness on one hand, and psychological resilience on the other (Lindsey, 2020). Bugzy's suicide attempt is fuelled by his masculinist thinking, but his subsequent narratives of overcoming suicidality to achieve massive success ('that's why I never lost') are also tinged with desirable male qualities. By dropping the self-destructive and reincorporating the resilient under a pluralistic ideology, UK rap could increasingly promote progressive discourses towards masculinity, mental health, and suicidality – and perhaps shift the ways in which men are conditioned to seek help from predominantly curative to preventative.

Songer delves into this artistic responsibility to create music which is authentic and destigmatising in Example [22].

I've done stupid shit before, but all my thoughts are pure and I'm not insecure about it
I've done plenty shit before I even thought about it
Now I have won't be the guy to walk around it
Use your voice and talk about it

22] The Sunrise Session (Songer, 2021d, 2:01)

By alluding to suicidal ideation ('I even thought about it'), Songer portrays the reality of emotional turmoil, if a little ambiguously. By stating that he 'won't be the guy to walk around it', Songer vows to propagate his own form of sociopsychological activism, presumably through his songs. He even lyricises a call to action ('Use your voice and talk about it'), urging other rappers, musicians, and his listeners to utilise their own platforms, however seemingly insignificant, to normalise conversations around mental health (Sule and Inkster, 2020). This embodies UK rap's potential to promote adaptive coping mechanisms, to deglorify maladaptive strategies, and to debunk widespread fallacies that it is not 'masculine' to struggle with mental health.

6. Conclusion

Having analysed UK rap discourses around masculinity, mental health disorders, and coping mechanisms, this dissertation posits that British rap, as a male-dominated domain of popular culture, can perpetuate a pluralistic reinterpretation of 'masculinities'. Young men are the likeliest to see UK rappers as prestigious role models, despite the majority of these rappers being young men themselves (Boakye, 2019). Therefore, UK rap can encourage young men to 'open up', either by using music as a point of discussion (the listeners), or creating music (the rappers themselves). Moving forward, it is crucial that academia investigates other sociopsychological aspects to UK rap. How, for example, are factors like ethnic discrimination or socioeconomic position vocalised as causational factors in psychopathology? Do female UK rappers disseminate similar discourses relating to traditional femininity and mental health? Are long-established rappers granted more scope to discuss traditionally emasculating issues than newcomers?

Throughout this dissertation, UK rap has been approached as a discourse; as a barometer in measuring, reflecting, and constructing the sociopsychological zeitgeist; as a catalyst in pluralistically reinterpreting masculinity and mental health. Its representations – imperfect may they be – offer crucial insights into the mental health crisis, and are applicable across a range of clinical, psychological, sociological, discursive, and cultural practices, from alleviating the burden on NHS crisis helplines (NHS, 2019), to modernising psychopathological diagnostic criteria (Martin et al., 2013), to promoting adaptive coping mechanisms in popular culture (Hart, 2019). It is hoped that UK rap becomes a source of

inspiration, encouraging men to not just survive, but to thrive, and to feel self-assured in their own masculinity. Or is that masculinities?

Word Count: 10,980

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview with Elias Williams, Founder of MANDEM.com

AB: How would you summarise MANDEM, and why did you set it up?

EW: MANDEM is an independent media platform that seeks to shine a light on some of the struggles that men of colour face in society, while also giving them a platform to engage in social issues and display their work. I set it up because, around 2016 and 2017, there were a lot of conversations around diversity in the media, and there were also conversations around masculinity growing in the public arena. I just ended up snowballing the idea in my head a little bit, meeting a lot of people in Bristol; I was a student at the time so I did a lot of networking with people. I found that there was a platform set up by women of colour, you might've heard of it, called GALDEM.com, and that originated in Bristol too, and so that sparked the idea of doing something similar but for men of colour essentially. I networked a lot and built up a lot of content before the launch, and then kicked it off as an attempt to try and create a more wholesome image of men of colour in the conversation about masculinity and race.

AB: What role would you say that media, whether it be multimodal platforms like MANDEM, or monomodal formats like rap songs, has in influencing cultural attitudes towards stigmatised issues such as mental health?

EW: The last talk we did, literally days before the pandemic kicked off, was an exploration of that at The Barbican with several co-guests. It was interesting to hear them speak on this, especially about the power of lyrics in terms of the effect that can have on people's mental health. I think that when rap songs include more thoughtful lyricism about mental health it definitely gives their audience permission to allow themselves to also feel 'that way'. It's an empathy thing between the artist and audience, which is a positive. In terms of the platform (MANDEM) and mental health, it gave people an opportunity to write articles that expressed elements of their identity that they hadn't previously uncovered, while the panels served as important conversation starters, even for people just in attendance, it would maybe give them confidence to pose some questions about their identity that they wouldn't have otherwise, which is an inherently healthy thing for mental health, being able to express yourself.

AB: As you've no doubt discovered through your work, offering people a space to produce creative pieces of work is not only important for speaking out against social injustice, but for therapeutically alleviating psychological burdens. Although music listening is mostly a passive, consumptive activity, why do you think it can also be of psychotherapeutic benefit?

EW: I think that because – not to get too left field with it – but music is essentially vibrations and stuff, which is in our DNA as humans. I think that because art is a form of expression, it allows people to be creative and little bit more honest. Things that people may struggle to say in everyday conversations can be channelled through art. Inherently, that can foster some kind of psychotherapeutic help for some people, because music (and art in general) can break the barriers, restrictions, and categories of everyday life that we have to subscribe to, whereas

art is a place we can go to explore ourselves and understand ourselves better. It doesn't feel as rigid and material as everyday life can be.

AB: Do you think that listening to music as psychotherapeutically beneficial as creating it?

EW: I think so. Listening to upbeat music can change your mood from bad to good, and give you energy. Equally, if someone's feeling a bit low or sad and they listen to a sad song, there's sometimes a comfort in doing that. It's both for the consumer and creator.

AB: UK rap frequently references alcohol and drug consumption as a coping mechanism for mental health difficulties. What are your thoughts on the display of hyper-masculine traits in UK rap, such as bragging about musical talent or sexual prowess, also serving as a subtle means of masking psychological insecurity and self-doubt?

EW: Big question. I don't know if it's dramatically different to the promotion of drugs and violence, in the sense that it fits into this fantasy realm – everyday people aren't engaging in the things that they're enjoying through music. But I definitely think there's a glaringly obvious damaging effect that the music has on women, because it's not simply about sexual prowess, it's the objectification of women. There's sometimes a cognitive dissonance, a denialism that it isn't even happening. I think it's tricky for women as well, because are they not allowed to like and listen to that music? Lots of women listen to music which has problematic lyrics about women. But it's also about the diversity of artists, there are plenty of artists who don't do that, and are more respectful in the language they use about women. You see the emergence of artists like Dave, and there's a more wholesome approach to some extent if you're looking at his whole range of music. Sure, he's got the gas tunes and the bragging tunes and all of that, but there's a little bit more depth in some of the other stuff he's done. It's a balancing act.

AB: Do you think that UK rap should be held accountable for glorifying these coping mechanisms (consumption, hyper-masculinity etc), or that these vocalised attitudes are simply a reflection of the artists' reality, upbringing, and environment?

EW: There's definitely an element of that, and perhaps sadder sounding music can encourage wallowing in misery, but there's also a need to allow oneself to feel emotions and sadness, rather than rejecting it; as humans we're really good at distracting ourselves and rejecting negative feelings instead of embracing them. Particularly as men. In terms of the glorification of coping mechanisms, drug use, or aggressive sexuality, it's a good question that's been raised many times, and I've been back and forth about it in my head a lot over the years. Someone once made a really good point at one of our events that the organisations and labels behind this music are equally if not more accountable for the music that's being produced. So, if they're putting on rappers who glorify sex, drugs, and violence – what comes first, the chicken or the egg? The artist is going to know in his or her subconscious that that stuff sells, and the labels love that shit and they pump it out, so it's going to actually encourage them to include that stuff more when they see it is successful. We all know that not every rapper is living a rock-and-roll lifestyle, but I suppose it becomes a form of escapism for people who maybe don't have access to that lifestyle to imagine it or vicariously enjoy it. But I do still think there should be some accountability with the artist, because, at the end of the day,

reflecting reality is significant, but if it's not wholesome, if every song they put out is just about stupidness, without anything reflective, they're not doing a good job of representing reality.

AB: Following on from that 'chicken and egg' analogy, could there be a third dimension to this responsibility for listeners?

EW: That's a sick question, to be honest – it's so important in the debate about the consumer's responsibility for the goods we buy and where they come from, relating to sweat shops and all of that. I think the listener does have a responsibility. I've grown up with hip-hop and rap, and I've loved it, but then when I started to get a greater awareness of social issues like sexism, racism, and how the music produced by some artists can be detrimental to the black community when it paints it in a certain light. There have been periods when I've felt guilty listening to music that promotes certain things for that reason, but then I feel like I'm in a place now where, because I've got that wider understanding, I can just enjoy it for the art, for the music, without overthinking what's being promoted. But music and lyrics do affect and influence people, so it's tricky – people just want to be cool and follow trends. I remember half the time when I was younger, in school, and you'd listen to certain music sometimes to just be accepted by your friends. So there is responsibility, but sometimes music listening choice isn't the most conscious decision, and not everyone should be expected to be critically analysing every lyric. It's a complicated one.

AB: Traditional, stoic masculinity is (often justifiably) criticised for lacking emotional range and exacerbating mental health problems. Contradictory to these critiques, do you think there are any positives to this form of masculinity?

EW: I like this question a lot, because I actually think that in some ways there are (positives), and for a lot of people that's an uncomfortable conversation, particularly for radical feminist thinkers, to some extent. It's very easy to align traits like aggression, competition, and stoicism as being negative when performed by men, and of course in some instances they can be negative traits. But objectively, a lot of these traits are also present in women. I personally think that it's a matter of if and when they're used. In sport, for example, it is not a bad thing to a bit aggressive sometimes, as I'm sure you know. It's healthy and part of the competitive nature of sport. I think that as humans we can't deny we have aggression in us, and obviously men are biologically hardwired to be a little bit more aggressive, and it's important to have avenues for that. In society, we don't seem to have done the work to channel those traits in the most effective way, so they often spill out into violence in unnecessary situations, and abuse of women, and obviously you've got the fucking tragic situation of Mason Greenwood recently. It's a shame that as a society we haven't been able to encourage and foster men to channel these traits in more productive ways.

AB: In 2020, MANDEM released a short film entitled 'Can White Writers Tell Black Stories?', directed by yourself. While this research paper doesn't focus specifically on ethnicity in its exploration of masculinity and wellbeing, it does examine the role of ethno-racial discrimination as one cause of mental health difficulties. Do you have any words of

advice or warning for white writers like myself before they delve into weighty topics of this sort?

EW: It's just about being respectful and honest in the approach. The fact that you're reaching out to people such as myself or whoever else is part of the process. It's always going to be tricky to navigate certain topics, but if there's humility and a positive intention behind the work, people will notice that. Often, it's about listening rather than imposing your thoughts and opinions on subjects. There's plenty of people who get it right, and there's people who get it wrong, and if you get it wrong you get found out. It's a tricky one, but I'm not someone who feels like your identity should limit what you're allowed to write about. If you care enough about what you're writing about, you will do the work to make sure you're doing it justice, essentially.

Appendix B: Interview with Bhishma Asare, Rap Therapy Founder & Rapper

AB: How would you define Rap Therapy, and why did you feel there was a need to set it up?

BA: Rap Therapy is a community interest company that teaches young people how to express themselves positively. There was a need to set up Rap Therapy as many young people have emerging problems and at times do not know how to deal with these problems – rap was the best mechanism to help young people. Despite young people listening to rap every day, I slowly discovered that nobody truly taught them the art of self-expression. Rap Therapy aims to strengthen young people's mental health through rap. We have been able to teach thousands of young people how to express themselves positively and aid them in getting back on track in school.

AB: In interviews and your album Invisible Guidelines, you've addressed social issues as wide-ranging as drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime, and the education system. How would you say these issues relate to mental health?

BA: I think the overall topic that this question is covering is a wider issue besides alcohol, drugs and violence. The wider message that I have been covering is in relation to environment. Those who come from a disadvantaged background or live in a somewhat deprived area are exposed to avenues of self-medication and deprivation. Many turn to drugs, alcohol and turn to gang life, which is deemed 'normal' in environments like mine. I believe that the normalisation of these activities relates to mental health, as in a juxtaposing environment this lifestyle would be deemed as 'crazy'. Being placed in environments like these isn't a choice and those who are often adapt and normalise the events that link with the above. The things you see when you are young impact mental wellbeing – the normalisation of violence and other issues is essential to this. This is normalised from a young age, but when many get older they realise that there are signs of PTSD and wider mental health problems. These environments at times could make people stronger but for some also break them to the point that they are sectioned or turn to alternate avenues.

AB: Violence or violent threats have sometimes been cited as an unhealthy coping mechanism/mask for insecurity regarding mental health. To what extent do you believe this to be true in UK rap?

BA: There is violence all around the world, however I do believe that there is only a partial link to mental health and violence. Violence and violent natures often stem from surroundings and if you look a little wider than UK rap and look at presidents of the US and prime ministers who have violent methods and natures then we can argue that they are not fit to run the countries due to their violent nature and link to their own mental health. In UK rap, I believe that there are many who speak about their own experience, however many do not live in such environments and make it seem as though they do to get sales. I do however believe that what is deemed as violent is also many young peoples' realities and they are speaking about their experiences and what they have seen and lived. Many who make music are no longer living the life that they rap about.

AB: Studies have highlighted that the process of creating and/or listening to music can be therapeutic. Has this been true in your own experience, and the experience that Rap Therapy offers to school-age children?

BA: When growing up, music was a therapeutic tool which I myself used but without knowing that it was helping me. Going into schools and youth establishments, we work with students who have different issues and we teach them the process in writing about these feelings. When entering the schools we do feeling assessments and 98% of the time, the students feel better after writing raps about their feelings. Young people have been able to walk away from situations and write raps about how they feel and this has proven to be a viable tool for young people to express themselves in a positive way.

AB: Through songs like Blue Tears, and in previous interviews, you've voiced the opinion that the London rap scene isn't helping to alleviate the pressing issue of knife crime, partly because (typically drill and trap) songs tend to glorify it, rather than condemn it, so as to appease listeners and media outlets (SBTV, GRM Daily, Link Up TV etc). What are your thoughts on there being a similar trend of glorification emerging with regard to mental health disorders and maladaptive coping mechanisms?

BA: I think there is a fine line between glorification and reality. I don't believe in many cases that there is a glorification of mental health disorders, I believe that many are talking about their experiences. These things are very difficult to tell as we are not in the person speaking out's thoughts so we cannot say if they are telling the truth or not about their own mental health. I think that there needs to be more focus on therapeutic methods of expression and creative outlets.

AB: If the media we consume really can influence our actions, do you think British rap has the capacity – or responsibility – to cause real change regarding mental health?

BA: Conscious rap does not sell as much as violent rap. I think as long as there are people talking about violence, it is difficult for British rap to make that change. I think that British rap could aid that change as long as more people decide that they are going to write about their experiences, but not only their experiences but how they overcame such times.

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