

# Issue of illegal drugs in music lyrics



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- Julia Dugger

Music is and always has been an integral part of society. It is, according to Glowacka Pitet, 2004, one of the longest celebrated traditions of humankind that enables the exchange of feelings and experiences that cannot be articulated by the use of common language. Moreover, its strength is based on the fact that it can provide us with meaning, without saying anything at all (Hormigos-Ruiz, 2010). Daily life does not exist without music and since every age group within a society is exposed to it, it comes to no surprise that each age group evaluate its importance differently. For example, studies conducted by various researchers (e. g. Arnett, 1996; North & Hargreaves, 2008; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003) uncovered that American adolescents did not just listen to music approximately two and a half hours per day, rather than also how they vigorously employ music to satisfy social, emotional and developmental requirements. However, according to Walker Kennedy (2010), the impact of popular music has sparked many debates. Particularly over the past decade, numerous news stories have claimed that bands like Marilyn Manson or Slipknot have negatively influenced the shooters at Columbine (US)/Erfurt (Germany) or that suicidal connotations in rock/metal music has led to an increase in adolescence taking/trying to take their lives (Walker Kennedy, 2010).

It therefore comes to no surprise that North and Hargreaves (2006) have argued that music genres like heavy metal/hard rock, hip hop/ rap, and alternative/punk should be described as “ problem music.” But labeling particular genres as “ problem music” and denoting that adolescent listening to it are automatically negatively influenced, seems like generalization of a

very complex issue. According to Walker Kennedy (2010), much research has been conducted on why adolescents listen to music and in short two main reasons can be noted: to explore identity issues including self-identity and peer relationships as well as regulation of emotional impulses. And although various themes of different music genres – heavy metal lyrics often deal with hostility or vengeance and may contain sex, drug use, suicide, and alienation references (Arnett, 1996); rap lyrics are full of offensive language combined with subjects like sex, drug use, misogyny, violence (Epstein, Pratto, & Skipper, 1990); pop music lyrics deal with a multitude of themes and typically reach a larger audience; and country music often tells a story that either deals with love; sadness; rebellious behavior, promiscuity, or betrayal (Ballard, Bazzini, & Dodson, 1999) – can, according to Ter Bogt (2012), encourage listeners to interpret these themes, particularly the negative ones, as cool, socially acceptable, satisfying, and not particularly destructive, it should be recognized that lyrics are merely one aspect of a song's overall message.

Unfortunately many studies limit themselves by only looking at one characteristic of a specific song, rather than also addressing that others, like the “ sound” of the music or the associated broader cultural factors, can have obvious and powerful effects on how one interprets its meaning (Ter Bogt et al., 2012). For example, listeners preferring a particular genre often do not just listen to the music itself, rather than also have an understanding for the reputation of those genres and show familiarity regarding the lifestyles of musicians within them. As Ter Bogt et al. (2012) noted, given that an individual's development is shaped by the observation of others,

relevant behaviors portrayed by high-status people such as rock stars, may encourage adolescents to mimic it. However, due to the fact that numerous musicians have had encounters with the law over their drug/alcohol use and many even have died because of it, claiming that specific music genres only glamorize or encourage drug use/abuse seems like a biased representation. How true this is can be seen when taking a closer look at the history of music lyrics, particular those of rock/hard rock/metal/heavy metal bands. According to Dodge (2004), rock songs of the 80s were party anthems with a positive attitude towards the motto sex, drugs, and rock n roll. However, during the 90s rock music lyrics became more critical. Exaggeratedly spoken, most of the music sounded whiny/moaning and the lyrics contained messages about how bad everything was (Dodge, 2004). Today, according to Dodge (2004), the dark elements still exist, but a new wave of album oriented/melodic rock and heavy metal bands has emerged.

On the other hand, heavy metal emerged during the late 60s, yet, according to Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine (2012), did not establish itself as a separate genre until the late 70s/early 80s when bands like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden set forth basic metal characteristics (distorted guitars, aggressive vocals, dark clothing, etc.) that are present to this day.

Throughout the following decades (90s until today), metal has followed increasingly diverse musical pathways and has created numerous influential bands. And although the central concept for producing rock/hard rock/metal/heavy metal songs remains the same, a shift of song themes and in which kind of way they are communicated to the listener can be seen. According to Dodge (2009), drug reference in rock/metal songs have always

been numerous and recurrent. However, according to Markert (2001), this does not mean that such songs praise or encourage the exploitation of drugs. Most drug representations, particularly those of more recent rock/metal tracks, are rather negative and these songs often do not instruct, lecture or admonish the listener, according to Dodge (2009), rather than they inform about possible results, rely on personal responsibility, and leave it up to the individual to make their own decisions. Moreover, since songs about drug use/abuse are again and again associated with a particular time frame and/or social group, they do not just reflect the principles of that group rather than also operate as a socializing instrument by suggesting how listeners should interpret their social surroundings (Markert, 2001).

The truthfulness of this view can be seen when either rock/hard rock/metal/heavy metal songs of different decades are compared with each other or when the lyrics/themes of the more recent ones are compared with other genres. Many themes of the older rock/metal songs (1960s – 1990s), with all sub- and hybrid genres considered, concentrated on the usage and the effects of drugs, while notions of caution or resulting negative consequences were rarely mentioned. For example, during the 60s songs like “ Heroin” by The Velvet Underground (1967) or “ Mothers little Helper” by The Rolling Stones (1966), told the listener how drugs alter emotional states and claimed that the end result – with an overall positive notion – was to either be able to not care about anything anymore: “ Cause it makes me feel like I’m a man/when I put a spike into my vein...Cause when the smack begins to flow/And I really don’t care anymore/Ah, when that heroin is in my blood/And that blood is in my head/Then thank God that I’m as good as dead/And thank

your God that I'm not aware/And thank God that I just don't care..." or manage everyday's tasks: " Mother needs something today to calm her down/And though she's not really ill/There's a little yellow pill/She goes running for the shelter of a mother's little helper/And it helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day."

In the 70s, a similar trend could be seen, where songs about drugs yet again mainly describe the addictive properties of drugs or even glorify them. In his song " For Your Life" Led Zeppelin (1976), for example, illustrates how a drug user surrenders to his/her addiction: " You said I was the only.../Exhibition is your habit, Emotion second hand/Had to pull away to save me, Maybe next time around/And she said, don't you want it?/Don't you want coca-coca-cocaine?/Hadn't planned to, could not stand to try it..." and in their song " Snowblind" the Band Black Sabbath goes even further in glorifying the use of cocaine: " Feeling happy in my vein/Icicles within my brain (cocaine)/...Makes me happy, makes me cold...Don't you think I know what I'm doing/Don't tell me that it's doing me wrong/You're the one who's really a loser/This is where I feel I belong." In the 80s, however, some bands began to question

In the past decade, most singer/songwriters in the rock/hard rock/metal/heavy metal genre have shifted their attention to not just on expressing how bad the usage of harmful/illegal substances is, rather than also their negative consequences. For example, in their song " Adios," the band Rammstein (2009) did not just describe how a person injects a substance in their veins (" He lays the needle in the vein, asks the music to come inside") and how this person feels while the substance travels through

his entire body (“ a battle rages in his blood, an army marches through his bowel”), rather than also address their often fatal attributes by closing the song with the words: “ He takes the needle from the vein, the melody travels out of the skin, violins burn with shrieking, harps cut the flesh, he has opened his eyes, but he did not wake up.”

A similar, yet less obvious approach to remind the listener about the highly destructive attributes of illegal substances, has been taken by the band Slipknot, who in their 2014 released song “ Killpop” describe how a women injects something into her skin (“ she is sticking needles in her skin”) recently the song Habits (Stay High) has topped the charts, where the singer Tove Lo (2012) argues that dealing with emotional pain can only be achieved via a continuing high to not be missing a lost love (→ “ Spend my days locked in a haze, trying to forget you babe...Got to stay high all my life, to forget I’m missing you”). Other examples include: “ We can’t stop” by Miley Cyrus (2013), where she sings → “ we like to party, dancing with Molly (which is a reference to the drug MDMA), doing whatever we want;” “ Rehab” by Amy Winehouse (2007), in which she states that → “ they tried to make me go to rehab but I said: no, no, no, yes, I’ve been black but when I come back you’ll know, know, know,..., he’s tried to make me go to rehab but I won’t go, go, go;” or “ Diamonds” by Rihanna (2012), where she clearly downplays the destructive properties of alcohol (moonshine) and drugs (molly, which is a street name for MDMA and ecstasy) when she sings “ we’ll never die” → “ you’re a shooting star I see, a vision of ecstasy”...” Palms rise to the universe, as we moonshine and molly, feel the warmth, we’ll never die, we’re like diamonds in the sky.”

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