

Research

## Exploring mental health through Kendrick Lamar's lyrics



**Kendrick Lamar's major-label debut album *good kid m.A.A.d. city*, released in October 2012, provides rich narratives relating to important mental health themes, including addiction, depression and stress resilience, according to the co-founders of HIP HOP PSYCH (<http://www.hiphoppsych.co.uk/index.html>) , a new initiative to tackle mental health issues through hip-hop.**

In an article online in the journal *Lancet Psychiatry*, the HIP HOP PSYCH co-founders explain how Kendrick Lamar's lyrics could help both those affected by mental health

*Kendrick Lamar's music paints a picture of how his characters*

issues and practitioners working in the field.

*are affected by and cope with mental health issues*

– Akeem Sule

“As Kendrick Lamar’s music paints a picture of how his characters are affected by and cope with mental health issues, we believe it might help mental health practitioners and other professionals to understand the day-to-day internal and external struggles of their patients,” says Akeem Sule, Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at South Essex Partnership Trust, and an Honorary Visiting Research Associate at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge.

“The lyrics could provide a valuable way for young people to understand and consider their own vulnerability and life choices, but in a way that is relevant and accessible. With this information to hand, they can start to look at their own situation and environment in order to make more informed and empowered choices,” adds Becky Inkster from the Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge.

One of the tracks on the album, ‘Swimming Pools’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5YNiCfWC3A>), is concerned with addiction. In the song, Kendrick’s character is among his peers in a social gathering where alcohol is freely available. From the very outset, he paints a picture of alcohol misuse with the repetitive use of key words: “...pass out, drank, wake up, drank, faded, drank, faded, drank”. His character describes the reasons people drink alcohol – because they like “...the way it feels”, and in order “...to kill their sorrows” or to “...fit in with the popular”.

The lyrics portray the character as being at a sensitive and vulnerable crossroads in which there is potential for him to develop later adult alcohol-dependence if he continues to follow this pattern of misuse – or in contrast, he may be experiencing changes in the brain that help build his resilience against alcohol dependence. Kendrick’s character’s prefrontal cortex – the area of the brain responsible for controlling our behaviour – even gets to speak a few lines, as the clear, penetrating voice of his conscience: “if you do not hear me then you will be history, Kendrick”.

The song also explores the genetic and environmental factors that affect an individual’s risk of developing alcohol addiction, referencing a history of alcohol misuse in the character’s family, specifically his grandfather who “had the golden flask”. The album cover of *good kid m.A.A.d. city* shows Kendrick’s grandfather and two uncles sitting at a table with the young Kendrick, a child

who is notably within reach of a 40 ounce bottle of malt liquor beer. Environmental factors such as early life exposure to alcohol and degree of parental monitoring of alcohol interact with genetic factors to influence the risk of alcohol misuse and dependence.

In the article Dr Sule and Dr Inkster also look at the songs '[u](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWqMyRw33Cs)' and '[i](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aShfolR6w8)' on Lamar's latest album *To Pimp A Butterfly*, released in March 2015, which in addition to exploring alcohol dependency also touch on the theme of depression vulnerability and resilience to stress and depression.

In the song 'u', Lamar's character appears to be drowning his sorrows, enhanced by the sound effects of clinking bottles. The setting for this track involves Kendrick's character, a successful hip-hop artist, who is alone in his hotel room, intoxicated with alcohol, and talking to himself in the mirror. He might be suffering with clinical depression, say the authors, and certainly describes key symptoms of low self-confidence and low mood: "The world don't need you...I know depression is restin' on your heart".

As well as ruminating on his condition, Kendrick's character describes hopeless and suicidal thoughts. There is also evidence of distortions in his thinking patterns – he has a tendency to magnify his failures – in this case, his absence at his dying friend's bedside – and minimise his successes ("You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her").

The polar opposite of 'u' comes later in the album through the song 'i'. His character displays evidence of resilience factors against stress, for example optimism ("One day at a time, sun gone shine") and translating stressful, negative, and depressing thoughts into more positive and beneficial alternatives, as well as a resolution to love himself irrespective of life's challenges. Kendrick's character reveals his belief in God has helped him overcome his personal traumatic experiences: "Trials, tribulations, but I know God" – interestingly, a study involving African American adults who had experienced trauma showed that a higher frequency of religious service attendance was a protective factor against psychiatric illness.

"Kendrick Lamar's rich narratives take his listeners on a complex journey, entrenched with conflict and social pressure, describing what life is like growing up as an inner city youth," say the authors. "His character's powerful ability to navigate his mind, body, and spirit through life's obstacles to

overcome environmental factors stacked up against his innocence has and will continue to inspire a generation.”

**Reference**

Akeem Sule and Becky Inkster. *Kendrick Lamar, street poet of mental health* (<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366%2815%2900216-3/fulltext>) . *Lancet Psychiatry*; 30 April 2015.

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