

Full-Length Article

## Social Representations of Psychiatry and Mental Disorders Examined Through the Analysis of Music as a Cultural Product

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### Abstract

Culture reflects and shapes the understanding of health and disease. We propose that the analysis of cultural products related to music, particularly song lyrics, can inform us about the social representations of psychiatry and mental illness. To support our proposal and engage in future research, we conducted a systematic review regarding social representations of mental illness and psychiatry in music. Findings suggest that this is an under explored topic within the medical literature. Substance use, psychoses, suicide and affective disorders are the most commonly portrayed psychopathology. Efforts to improve quality of studies in this field are needed and might subsequently serve as an important resource for practitioners of all disciplines.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Music and Psychiatry, Depictions of mental disorders, Social representations, Cultural Psychiatry*

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### Introduction

Culture reflects and molds the understanding of health and disease, in a way that cultural beliefs, norms and values can affect perceptions about what is considered to be a mental disorder [1]. In the same way, psychopathological constructs are influenced by the scientific and cultural paradigms of their time. The knowledge generated through the understanding of its relevance is integrated into the cultural background and it, in turn, continues its development by interacting with culture. Thus, ideas of mental illness and its treatment vary according to culture and the belief systems of a particular population in a set time [2,3]. Therefore, psychiatry is necessarily linked to historical and conceptual developments in society, since cultural beliefs, norms and values can shape perceptions of what is considered mental illness [4].

We propose that the bidirectional relationships between culture and medicine (psychiatry, in particular) can be traced

purposefully when we attend to artistic manifestations as ‘cultural fossils’ that portray the social viewings in a given time. Baxendale remarks how much can be learned about the contemporary stereotypes related to disease by studying its depictions in art [5]; while Oksanen puts focus on the social relevance of the study of cultural products, due to their popularity and the impact that they have in risk behaviors among subcultures (particularly, substance abuse) [1]. In a study about suicide and opera, Feggetter supports the view of this paper, by defending the pertinence of exploring popular attitudes related to suicide by studying the way in which it has been portrayed within a particular art form [6].

Relationships between diverse artistic manifestations (mostly films and literature) and mental disorders, psychiatry and medicine, have been explored from different angles [5,7–13]. However, despite the accessibility and ubiquitous character of popular music [14], depictions of psychiatry and mental disorders within creative fields are rarely studied [1,3,6]. This is so even though the importance of music in psychiatry has been well delineated in previous works [15,16].

The analysis of cultural products related to music, particularly song lyrics, can inform us about the social representations of psychiatry and mental disorders. Cultural products can provide meaningful clues about how the general population understands “mental illness” and the psychiatric scope of action. A focus on song lyrics, particularly because their expressive content is identifiable [17] and suitable for a

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reproducible analysis. We are aware of the limitations of this perspective when we are dealing with music: as Franz states (cited by Mori) “any study considering only the lyrics of a song, regardless of musical elements, is possible, but it will always be incomplete (...)” [18].

To our knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the cultural representations of psychiatry and mental illness as reflected in song lyrics. As a first step toward improving research in this area, we conducted a systematic review of the available literature to synthesize current knowledge in this area.

**Method**

A search of relevant literature was performed in March 2016 and repeated for new references in January 2017. We used PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, SciELO, LILACS, DART-Europe and TESEO databases to identify articles and theses between 1979 and 2017.

Search terms included ‘psychiatry’, ‘mental health’, ‘mental illness’, ‘mental disorder’, ‘madness’, ‘insanity’, ‘music’, ‘representations’, ‘depictions’, and ‘portrayals’.

A first extensive and sensitive review was performed in Pubmed by using multi-field search for: ‘music’ AND ‘psychiatry’ to assess the relevance of this issue in the medical literature, and the distribution of specific contents. A second search strategy in all databases included: (‘depiction’ OR ‘portrayal’ OR ‘representation’) AND (‘psychiatry’ OR ‘mental health’ OR ‘mental illness’ OR ‘mental disorder’ OR ‘madness’ OR ‘insanity’) AND ‘music’.

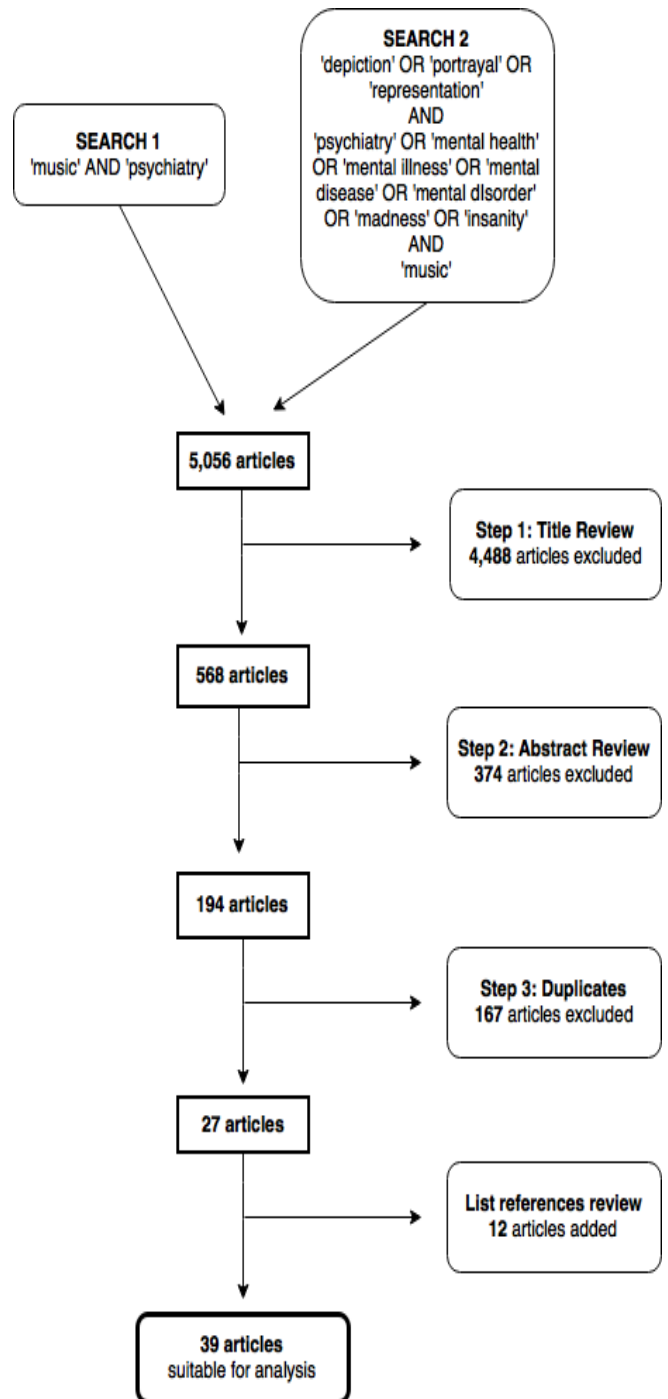
The search terms were used for all fields (including title, abstract, keywords and full text), except for Google Scholar, where only terms in title were used in order to refine the search, due to the low specificity of this search engine in “text complete” mode (and the enormous volume of spurious data retrieved). In SciELO and LILACS databases search terms were introduced in English and Spanish languages.

Original articles, literature reviews, opinion articles and theses reporting depictions of psychiatry or mental disorders in music, were included. All musical genres and formats (musical videos, lyrics of songs, names of bands, performance) were considered suitable for inclusion. Books and book reviews were not included. Studies not focused on depictions of psychiatry or mental disorders in music were excluded (e.g. psychopathobiographies or mental disorders in musicians, connections between musical creativity and mental disorders, effects of music in mental health, uses of music in medical education, music therapy, theoretical issues, neurobiological basis of musical experience, among others). Studies published in English, Spanish or Portuguese were included.

The process of searching is summarized in Figure 1. Titles of retrieved articles from all search strategies were reviewed by two independent raters to confirm their pertinence (step 1). Subsequently, abstracts were assessed for eligibility (step 2) in

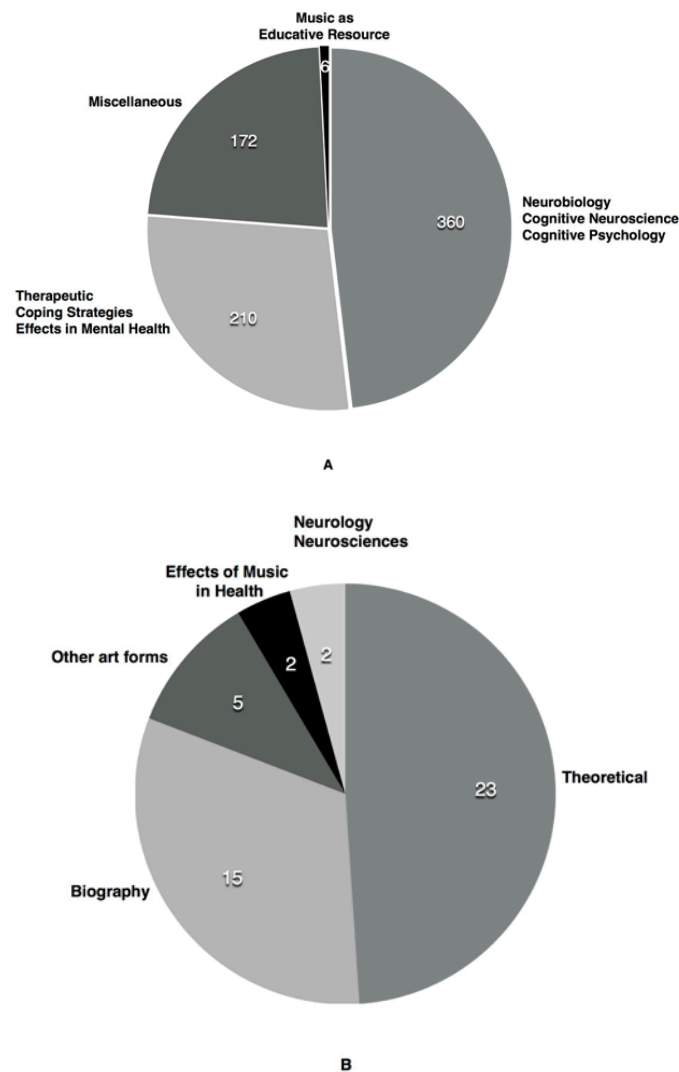
order to generate a preliminary list of studies, and then duplicates were removed (step 3). We scanned the reference lists from each of the articles selected, to further identify relevant papers (step 4) and complete the final list of studies suitable for a full text review. Discrepancies were solved by consensus. Descriptive statistics to communicate our findings were used.

Figure 1. Flow diagram to summarize the stages of the review



**Findings**

Within the medical literature, the analysis of social representations of mental illness and psychiatry through cultural products is anecdotal. The first search strategy (in Pubmed) retrieved 807 articles and only ten (1,24%) were suitable for inclusion (748 studies were excluded in the first step and 47 in the second). Moreover, most published articles retrieved do not exhibit a rigorous research methodology (9 essay or opinion articles and 1 case study). Boolean search in Pubmed with the terms ‘psychiatry’ AND ‘music’ retrieved studies mostly related to neurobiology, cognitive neuroscience and cognitive psychology, as well as therapeutic issues linked to musical experience (the distribution of contents of the excluded articles is shown in **Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.** Boolean search in Pubmed (‘Psychiatry’ AND ‘Music’): A) Number of articles related to music that were excluded in the first step (title review),

*distributed by content. B) Number of articles related to music that were excluded in the second step (abstract review), distributed by content.*

5,056 articles were retrieved by combination of all search strategies (3,484 from Psycinfo, 1,153 from Pubmed, 243 from SciELO and LILACS, 171 from Google Scholar, five from DART-Europe, and none from TESEO). After removing duplicate articles and excluding those not related to our scope of interest (by review of title and abstract), twenty-seven articles were suitable for a full text review. The reference lists from each of the articles selected added twelve new eligible articles (**Figure 1**). The thirty-nine studies that were finally analyzed are listed in the **Appendix**.

Methods identified in the studies analyzed were heterogeneous and are shown in **Figure 3**. From the twenty qualitative studies identified, thirteen used content analysis as research strategy (twelve addressing substance use topics, and one, mixed topics) (**Appendix**).

Most of studies (71,79%; n=28) addressed song lyrics. The representation of studies addressing song lyrics increased to 84,62% (n=33) when we included opera (lyrics, libretto and scenic representation).

English language was the most frequent in popular music (n=25). Only two studies addressed song lyrics in Portuguese language [19,20]; and one [21], in all languages (but search terms in English and Portuguese were used in this study, and we can not firmly establish what languages were finally included because it is not specified in the article). A careful review allowed us to identify, at least, songs sung in English, Portuguese and Spanish. However, we cannot rule out other languages, since the authors described songs from bands of Germany, Italy, Finland and Canada, in addition to Spain, Latin America, and English speaking countries.

Among the studies included, the most explored musical genres were rock/subgenres, [3,22–27,21,28–30] rap/hip-hop, [31–35] opera, [2,6,36–38] and country [39,40]. In the studies that included multiple genres of popular music (opera excluded), the two first listed above were usually included [41–50].

Popular music abounds in references to substances use [24,27,30,33,34,39,41–51,19,52], psychoses or ‘madness’ [2,20,23,25,36,38,53] and suicide or affective disorders [6,23,29,31,32,37,40]. Insanity and mania, are usually portrayed as a metaphor of altered mental states (by chemical substances or romantic experiences) [22]. Five senses of ‘madness’ in Brazilian songs are delineated by Pereira & Bessa [20]: deep introspection, positive experiences of getting lost in passionate love, mystical access to truth, opposition to reason, and pathology.

With regards music genres, opera is prolific in allusions to suicide and ‘madness’ [2,6,36,37]; while rap is frequently linked to substance use allusions [33,34,48]. Country music has been related to alcohol abuse and suicide [39,40], and

links between heavy metal music and suicide are trends explored in literature [29].

Many musicians have chosen psychiatric diagnoses, or psychopathological terms, to name their bands [21]. In addition, we can find references to psychiatry and mental disorders in numerous songs from a wide variety of musical genres [2,22,24,31,54]. Lyrics inspired by shocking images of psychiatry (padded cells, psychosurgery, asylums, and a distorted view of electroconvulsive therapy) are displayed in musical genres like punk and heavy metal [22]. In a similar way, Spelman identifies links between the anti-psychiatry movement and representations of madness in popular music of the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting the ability of popular culture to question general suppositions about this issue [3].

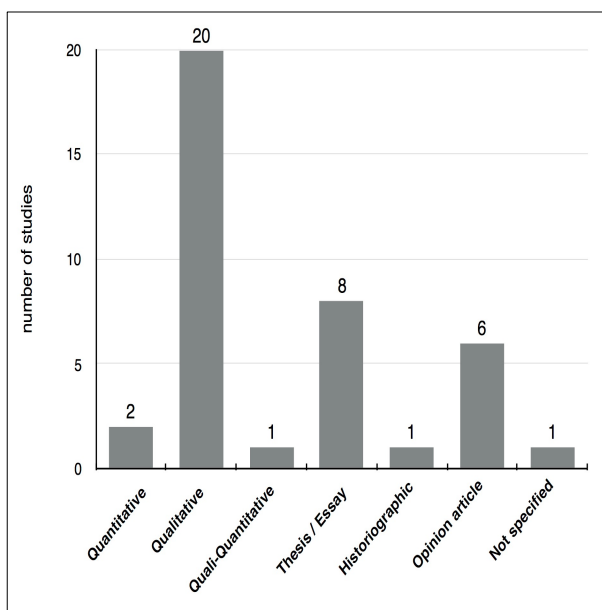


Figure 3. Distribution of the included studies, by type of article

## Discussion

With regard to music, it is not surprising that studies in medical literature are mostly related to neurobiology (including cognitive neurosciences) and therapeutics. However, if we compare music with other artistic manifestations (e.g. films), the small number of studies related to the social representations of psychiatry and mental illness in music shows a remarkable result. The ubiquitous and accessible character of popular music, provides for an interesting way to access illness narratives, experiences of stigma and stereotypes associated with mental disorders. Thus, considering the impact of music in everyday life [14], and the communicational dimension of the language so often contained in the songs, we expected a greater interest for social meanings expressed through musical activity.

Between the studies included, the frequency of depictions of substance use is an expected finding since substance use has

been a sign of identity in some musical genres, as rap and rock (the latter with its famous slogan: “sex, drugs and rock and roll”). Similarly, the artistic interest in “madness” is well known. It is not restricted to the contents, but also affects the structure and form of certain artistic manifestations. In opera, Romantic music can be considered as “anticlassical” as it develops away from structure and form. Thus, loss of structure and lack of integration of different stimuli resembles the mental illness [2]. Avant-garde influenced rock music in 60’s and 70’s in the same way, by searching of “madness” and “irrationality” atmospheres through extreme recordings and unfinished music [55]. In those years, the Utopian promise of “creative madness” linked to overcoming personal alienation was frequently associated with the use of psychedelic drugs [55], thus establishing new relationships between madness and substance use. We think that connections between “madness” and drugs are not unusual in contemporaneous popular music, since it often alludes to “madness” and drugs indistinctly. Thus, the term “madness” can be used to express altered mental states by substance use. In addition, we speculate about the overlapping of some senses between depictions of “madness” [20] and substance use in music (e.g. deep introspection, mystical access to truth, and -in a more general way- positive experiences of getting lost). Finally, senses of ‘madness’ in Brazilian songs [20] can be universal, so it would be very interesting to compare them with senses in music of other regions.

On the other hand, representations of suicide are particularly recurrent in opera, presumably because of their high dramatic potential. Besides, some depictions of suicide in opera are in line with our initial proposal, since they engage with social discussions, by rescuing the notion that suicide does not invariably occur in the setting of mental disorder. In this way, they are good examples of how cultural products provide or reproduce insights and points of view that are useful to our profession.

Portrayals of mental illness and psychiatry have been studied in popular music sung in English and Portuguese (mainly the former). Contrasting this, we only found a minor reference to Spanish language music [21], one of the most spoken languages in the world [56]. It could be partially explained by trends in music consumption and Music Industry. On the other hand, studies of vocal music in languages other than English could be excluded from publications by considering them non-relevant or local issues. However, we think that publication bias is not relevant to explain our findings, because it was controlled by searching in electronic databases including Spanish language (LILACs, SciELO). Finally, the small number of studies addressing this field makes us think that, as the number of studies increases, more diversity will emerge, as it has happened in films [57, 58].

Finally, heterogeneity across reviewed studies could be explained by authors’ motivations. Most of the best designed

studies used content analysis, and their aims were founded on epidemiological concerns (most of them, exposition to references to substance use) which guided the choice of themes and musical genre. On the other hand, many studies were based in opinions and narrative descriptions. We hypothesize that, in those cases, musical genre choice and themes were mainly determined by the individual musical taste and experiences of the authors.

## Conclusions

Songs can be seen as discursive practices: “the ways through which people create sense and take position in the social relations of everyday life” [20]. Thus, the analysis of these cultural products is a contribution to the understanding of the meanings inhabiting the social imaginary regarding health and disease in a given social-historical context.

Many social agents argue that a cultural approach to science can help us to understand it better. Music and science are two not mutually exclusive ways to access knowledge. Actually, we argue that they could be synergistic. Research can inform both music and psychiatric science.

Within psychiatry, different authors advocate for the clinical importance of music both for its role in therapeutics and for the possibilities it opens to the narratives of mental illness [8]. Contemporary narratives of patients have special importance because they offer valuable critics to various aspects of current psychiatric care and treatment. In addition to music therapy and neurocognitive sciences, some other current trends in research are: relationships between mental illness and creativity [16,59]; risk behaviors linked to musical preferences or song contents [60–63]; and music as a resource in medical education [64].

Music, within the broader frame of popular cultural discourses, is able to create “representations, myths and symbols” [18]. Through music, people can use a theoretical framework (in our case, psychiatry’s epistemology) and reinterpret or refine aspects of understanding in order to construct narratives about the relationship of these themes (in our case, mental illness and psychiatry) with the individuals and society. In this way, cultural products, in the form of music, provide the audience with a concrete material from which they can interpret and validate their own conditions and social situations.

Cultural products related to popular music can provide valuable insights about the perception of different subcultures regarding mental disorders, mental health providers and institutions; as well as spontaneous ways (positive or not) to deal with negative emotions, symptoms, and adversity. These artistic manifestations reflect a wide variety of topics: general observations; clinical, therapeutic and social issues; new meanings ascribed to psychiatry or emergent themes; as well as an apparently stochastic use of psychiatric concepts (i.e.

focusing on rhythmic or other music element, instead of meaning at the level of discourse); among others.

In summary, we suggest that the analysis of cultural products can be a source of additional knowledge that connects us with the social representations of our profession and its scope of practice, favoring a better understanding of what psychiatry and “mental illness” means for our patients and general population.

Future research is needed and efforts are required in order to overcome the anecdotal character of this issue in the medical literature. Also, it is necessary to improve the quality of the studies in this field. Qualitative methodology (e.g. content analysis, thematic analysis or discourse analysis) [65,66] is a promising strategy to achieve these objectives. In the present review, we found studies that used qualitative methods to address the research question [19,20,23,27,29,30,33,34,39–46,49,50]. As any method, this approximation has limitations: while internal consistency can be optimized by using independent coders, the external consistency is limited by the specificity of the object of analysis. Despite this, qualitative methods are relevant in the development of hypotheses that can be later verified by other research designs.

To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review of the literature addressing depictions of psychiatry and mental disorders in music. Our future work is orientated to the study of representations of mental illness and psychiatry in Spain society by analyzing the products of popular music. We hope to generate knowledge about the meanings of mental illness and psychiatry, by identifying circulating ideas, images and senses, and the historical conditions of their production.

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