Singing about Suicidal Behaviors: An analysis of Spanish Punk Music (1981-2010)

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Introduction.

Culture reflects and shapes the understanding of health and disease. In previous communications we have proposed that the analysis of cultural products related to music, particularly song lyrics, can inform us about the social representations of psychiatry and mental illness (1,2).

The exploration of popular attitudes to suicide by investigating their depictions in art has been defended in literature on the grounds that suicide is not simply “a medical problem”. The complex nature of suicide is deeply embedded and mirrored in social, cultural, and historical narratives. This study describes the frequency of references to suicidal behavior in the song lyrics of Spanish punk bands, between 1981-2010.

Methods.

Discographies of representative punk bands in Spain, between 1981 and 2010, were reviewed. Instrumental songs and those sung in languages other than Spanish were excluded. Contents of song lyrics were analyzed looking for references to suicidal behaviors, defined as: non-suicidal self-injuries, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and suicide. The main outcome measure was the frequency of references over the entire period.

Results.

Of 2,995 songs studied, 2.64% (n=79) alluded to suicide-related behaviors (distribution: 46.55% suicidal thoughts, 25.86% suicide attempts, 25.86% suicide, 1.73% non-suicidal self-injuries).

Discussion.

Depictions of suicide in music are scarcely studied (2).

Frequency of references to suicidal behaviors in lyrics of Spanish punk songs are far below those described in a previous study (3) addressing depictions of completed suicides, non fatal suicide and suicidal thoughts in 337 Western operas written between 1607 and 2006 (2.64% vs 33%).

Our understanding of the descriptions of suicide in music would be greatly facilitated by the replication of these studies to other musical genres and languages. This would allow for comparisons to illuminate common themes and nuanced differences between genres and languages. Future work with research methods such as thematic and narrative analysis will be useful to deepen the insight into the social meanings of suicide behaviors in the analyzed subculture.

References.

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