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CULTURAL REFLECTIONS

Intertextuality and trivialisation in subcultural depictions of violence and criminality related to mental disorders: the case of Spanish punk music

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BJPsych Bulletin (2022) **46**, 324–330, doi:10.1192/bjb.2022.4

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First received 10 Oct 2021, final revision 8 Dec 2021, accepted 22 Dec 2021

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Summary Previous research remarks on the role of the mass media in shaping our world-view and values. It is relevant for the psychiatric field since the literature suggests that the media and artistic representations emphasise violent and criminal behaviours of people with mental disorders. In contrast to the study of other artistic manifestations, depictions in music are much less explored. This article examines the subcultural portrayals of psychiatry-related violent and criminal behaviours in Spanish popular music; particularly, the dimensions of intertextuality and trivialisation. These aspects are relevant since trivialisation may contribute to a distorted and oversimplified view of mental disorders, while intertextuality can play a role in the dissemination, amplification and reinforcement of social beliefs regarding psychiatric problems.

Keywords Content analysis; violence; criminality; mental disorder; popular music.

Public interest in violent crime is widely recognised^{1,2} and the associations between mental disorders and violence, crime or terror in popular culture are well-known. However, and in contrast to the study of the depictions portrayed in other media and artistic manifestations, descriptions in music are still a less-explored topic.

Various elements constitute lyrical-musical content, such as lived (or vicarious) experience, fantasised components, the dramatic/aesthetic/artistic potential of a given image and intertextuality.

Intertextuality alludes to the meanings accumulated in cultural baggage. It encompasses the descriptions

contained in other images and texts that work as ‘cross-references’.^{3,4} These references can be more or less explicit in their nods to other culturally prevailing representations, providing songs with an interdiscursive configuration. In literature, a widely used example is the Homeric parallel in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.⁵ Examples of intertextuality in Spanish rock music have been previously described.^{6,7} The evolution of the concept of intertextuality has been brilliantly addressed by Martínez⁸ and critically evaluated by Irwin.⁹

Trivialisation is the act of making something seem less important, serious or difficult than it really is. In medicine,

it denotes a conception of illness as easier to acquire, suffer or treat,¹⁰ de-emphasising its severity.¹¹

Previous findings in Spanish punk have identified references to criminality or violence as one of the main themes in songs with allusions to the terms ‘mad,’ ‘madness’ or other related colloquial terms.¹²

The pros of studying punk music as a subcultural manifestation have been reported previously.^{6,12} As highlighted in mental health studies from other musical subcultures,¹³ underrepresented communities have worse mental health outcomes, a higher risk of mental health problems and lower use of mental health resources. Additionally, stigma is common in underserved communities.¹⁴ Bias, discrimination and a lack of cultural competence among healthcare professionals potentially exacerbate these problems.^{13–18}

With these elements in mind, this article aims to address intertextuality and trivialisation in subcultural representations of psychiatry-related violent and criminal behaviours. These aspects are relevant since trivialisation may contribute to a distorted and oversimplified view of mental disorders (involving perceptions of decreased severity, mockery and stigmatisation). Intertextuality can play a role in the dissemination and amplification of content (misleading or not). Moreover, the portrayals of psychiatry and mental disorders in the media have an impact on the general population, patients and their families, as stigma and discrimination are the main barriers to treatment-seeking.^{19–22}

Method

A content analysis of the lyrics of Spanish punk songs recorded between 1981 and 2010 was conducted. After a purposive sampling guided by bibliographic, documentary and web sources,^{23–28} 7777 songs were listened to, identifying and transcribing all songs with references to psychiatry/mental disorders. Subsequently, two independent coders examined the song lyrics looking for references to aggression, violence, crime or imprisonment. This process resulted in the identification of 208 pieces. An initial approach to the data showed that imprisonment contents were not in line with the research question, lacking consistency with the rest of the material. Thus, 18 songs were excluded. All of the 190 remaining songs were analysed, reaching thematic saturation.

Two thematic approaches were identified among the included songs: on the one hand, descriptions emphasising violence or criminality (in this group of songs, references

to mental symptoms or disorders were secondary allusions) and on the other, descriptions of mental disorders or their symptoms as main themes, with violence or criminality as their epiphenomena.

The units of analysis (hereafter named ‘references’) were the song phrases with contents related to our field of interest. The entire song was the context unit, containing one or more references. At a quantitative level, duplicated references (e.g. chorus or refrain) were counted once.

Coding ran alongside data collection. *In vivo* coding was used as a first approximation, followed by organisation of the data into discrete categories, which were refined by iteration. Additionally, open codification enabled the incorporation of new themes as they emerged from the text. The categories constructed on this basis included: violence and criminality, mental disorders/symptoms, trivialisation and intertextuality (Table 1).

Piloting was conducted until satisfactory codes were achieved. The iterative nature of the process served to enhance the methodological integrity. Cases of discrepancy were solved through discussion by the authors.

Ethical approval was not needed as this was a non-interventional study that used public data without identifiable personal private data.

Results and discussion

Of the 7777 songs in our sample, 190 (2.44%) dealt with violent or criminal behaviour related to mental symptoms. Among the references to psychiatric symptoms, syndromes or diagnoses, we found: substance misuse ($n = 84$); general terms alluding to ‘mental disturbance’ or similar ($n = 55$); psychopathic or antisocial personality traits ($n = 32$); paraphilias ($n = 20$); suicidal behaviour ($n = 9$); psychoses ($n = 8$); psychological distress ($n = 7$); impulse control disorders (pyromania and kleptomania; $n = 3$); trauma-related symptoms ($n = 2$); twilight states/dissociative symptoms ($n = 2$). Ten references showed overlapping between substance use and antisocial personality traits, and one reference alluded to LSD-induced psychotic symptoms.

Trivialisation and humour

Some of the hallmarks of punk include its critical and provocative nature. Although the focus of the media’s approach

Table 1 Categories and codes of content analysis of 190 Spanish punk songs (1981–2010) with references to psychiatric symptoms/disorders and violence or criminality

Category	Codes
Criminality and violence	Violence (vandalism, fighting and beatings), gender-based violence, multiple homicide, other homicidal behaviour (ideation, plans, death threats), sexual crimes, other crimes (robbery, drug or human trafficking, drug possession, elder abandonment, bombing, gaslighting, taking hostages, torture, handling of stolen goods, housebreaking, kidnapping, fraud, prison break, not specified)
Mental symptoms/disorders	Substance use, psychopathic/antisocial personality traits, psychosis, paraphilias, mental disorders not otherwise specified
Trivialisation	Light-hearted content, serious content
Intertextuality	Fictional (includes: films, comics, literature), non-fictional

Table 2 Examples of sarcasm and dark humour in light-hearted content related to criminal or violent behaviour in Spanish punk songs (1981–2010)

Verbatim (from the Spanish)	Song title, band	Crime or violent behaviour	Year
'I'm a normal human being; just sometimes I kill children. Just sometimes I slaughter other humans ...'	'Muerte a los vivos' ['Death to the living'], La askerosa de tu madre	Serial murder	1995
'He doesn't kill for pleasure. He is just a maniac who likes to sew'	'La máscara de carne' ['The meat mask'], Kante Pinrérico	Serial murder	2006
'I wasn't like that before, twisted and negative, but the world of work made me so vindictive'	'Señor juez' ['The honourable judge'], Gatillazo	Homicide	2008
'When I was a kid my mother noticed I was doing strange things, and she understood something [...] I loved to torture birds and kill puppies [...] my body was begging for blood [...] My mother had the solution to take advantage of my inclination: be a dentist!'	'Bonus 2', Franco ha muerto	Sadism	2008

to punk has been on the ideological or political level, humour is one of the essential features of punk,²⁹ and Spanish punk is not an exception. By exploring the tone of the songs, we found that 41% were light-hearted (funny, sarcastic, dark humour or provocation). Examples of sarcastic content can be found in Table 2.

The high proportion of trivialisation of such serious topics as violence or crime is remarkable; however, this type of content was not distributed equally among different forms of criminal behaviour or mental disorder (Fig. 1). As can be noted, the most frequently trivialised topics were murder and violence; the least, gender-based violence and sexual crimes. Regarding mental disorders, substance misuse was more seriously covered than psychoses. Possibly, the ideological undercurrents of the subculture determine to a certain extent what the limits are for punk mockery and provocation. It results in some topics being more susceptible to trivialisation than others. On the other hand, a more earnest approach could be the result of increased awareness regarding specific issues. It may be due to exposure to more frequent events (e.g. sexual abuse, legal complications resulting from substance use) or specific policies (e.g. awareness campaigns on gender violence). It would partially

explain the higher trivialisation of less common phenomena (and therefore less likely to be encountered on a day-to-day basis), such as multiple homicide or, regarding mental disorders, psychosis. In the absence of 'real-world contact', such themes are more suitable to be made banal, and the inter-textual component becomes relevant.

Music results from the interplay of political, commercial, aesthetic and institutional processes,³⁰ which influence its content and it is exhibited. The norms that punk challenges are produced and reinforced by the dominant culture. Thus, 'madness' and violence (and, in its extreme, crime) serve punk's otherness and opposition to socially accepted patterns. Through provocative behaviour and language, punks proclaim themselves as a challenge to normality and order.

Thus, it is impossible to deal with trivialisation in punk music without considering identity affirmation, transgression and otherness. In this sense, a previous study of Spanish punk songs showed that the attributes of 'madness' that are socially seen as negative were susceptible to being positively valued at a subcultural level.³¹

In our sample, the light-hearted songs about aggressors trivialised crime, mental illness or both. Almost all songs

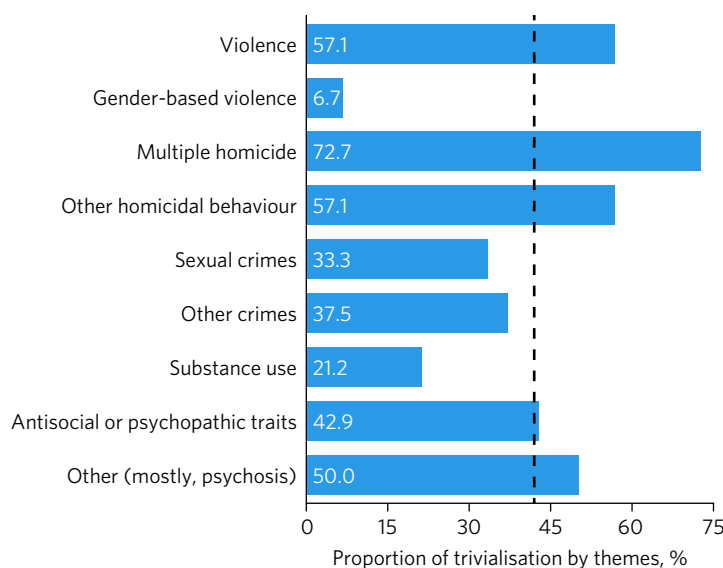


Fig. 1 Trivialisation in 190 Spanish punk songs related to violent and criminal behaviour, by themes. The dotted line indicates the mean of light-hearted songs in the entire sample.

Table 3 Factual and fictional references in Spanish punk songs alluding to violent or criminal behaviour in mental disorders, in chronological order

Song title (band, year)	Reference	Violent or criminal behaviour depicted in the song
'Un día en Texas' ['A day in Texas'] (Parálisis Permanente, 1984)	Film: <i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1974)	Serial murder
'Luz de gas' ['Gas light'] (Los Vegetales, 1985)	Film: <i>Gas Light</i> (1944) ^a	Psychological abuse: Gaslighting
'Revuelta en el frenopático' ['Revolt in the insane asylum'] (Kortatu, 1985)	Comic: <i>Don Vito & Co</i> (Montesol, 1976-1982)	Homicide
'La naranja no es mecánica' ['The orange isn't clockwork'] (Los Nikis, 1986)	Film: <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1971) ^a	Violence / Psychopathic traits
'Arropiero' (Electroputos, 1987)	Infamous murderer (Manuel Delgado Villegas)	Serial murder
'Kién mató a Mary Jean' ['Who killed Mary Jean'] (Putakaska, 1987)	Infamous murderer (Jack the Ripper)	Serial murder
'Sid Vicious' (Nuevo Ejército de Salvación, 1989)	Infamous murder (celebrities)	Homicide
'Mirando el abismo' ['Looking into the abyss'] (Vómito, 1990)	Comic: <i>Watchmen</i> (Moore & Gibbons, 1986)	Homicide
'La sierra es la familia' ['The saw is family'] (Siniestro Total, 1993)	Film: <i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2</i> (1986) and 3 (1990)	Serial murder
'Harry lo hace por ti' ['Harry does it for you'] (La Polla Records, 1994)	Film: <i>Dirty Harry</i> (1971)	Hitmen
'Familia de subnormales todos locos' ['Family of all crazy subnormals'] (Airbag, 1998)	Film: <i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1974)	Serial murder
'George Oswel' (Segismundo Toxicómano, 1998)	Infamous murders (the Manson family)	Serial murder
'Tu día de furia' ['Your day of fury'] (Ni por favor ni ostias, 2001)	Film: <i>Falling Down</i> (1993)	Attempted mass murder
'La máscara de carne' ['The meat mask'] (Kante Pinrónico, 2006)	Film: <i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1974)	Serial murder

a. Some references lead to other sources: *Gas Light*, theatre play by Patrick Hamilton, 1938; *Gas Light*, film by Thorold Dickinson, 1940; *A Clockwork Orange*, novel by Anthony Burgess, 1962.

were purely invective and provocation, with only two exceptions showing a more specific social critique.

Intertextuality: songs, film, literature and the media

Intertextuality is an essential component of creative activity.³² In the analysed punk songs, we found, on the one hand, fictional intertextual references (predominantly comics, films and literature) and on the other, allusions to infamous crimes (and criminals), principally in the sphere of serial murder (Table 3). In this sense, Jarvis points out the blurring between 'historical' (factual) serial killers and 'their cinematic counterparts' (fictional) in the popular imagination.³³

In the realm of fiction, the film series *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (T. Hooper, 1974) was particularly influential on the analysed songs across decades (1984, 1993, 1998, and 2006) (Table 3). In the films, the iconic murderer Leatherface exhibited traits of intellectual disability and cannibalistic behaviour. The fictional character was inspired mainly by the real murderer Edward Gein.

Although films were predominant, references to comics also appeared. In 'A un paso de la locura' ['A step away from madness'] (1990), the punk band Vómito tacitly evokes the character Rorschach from *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibbons, 1986) to describe the relationship between trauma and 'madness'.

Also in the field of comics, the stigmatising images that connect psychosis and violence portrayed by 'Revuelta en el frenopático' ['Revolt in the insane asylum'] (Kortatu, 1985) reflect the band's interpretation of the comic strips of Javier Montesol, *Don Vito & Co.*, a Spanish comic drawn between 1976 and 1982. The main character of this comic is Don Vito, an anarchist confined in a mental institution after he fought in the Spanish Civil War. The action takes place, especially in the first period of the comic, in an asylum as a metaphor for the dictatorial confinement in Francoist Spain.

Implicit or explicit allusions to infamous serial murderers were also found. The song 'Arropiero' (Electroputos, 1987) alluded to the biggest serial killer in the history of Spain: Manuel Delgado Villegas, known as El Arropiero, who between 1964 and 1971 murdered 48 people. In the song, El Arropiero is defined as 'the king of the asylum', depicting substance use and psychopathic traits. Although it is a light-hearted piece that does not reproduce authentic details of his modus operandi or his crimes, it exemplifies how such infamous personalities are included in the popular cultural repertoire, in the same way as other serial killers in other countries.

In songs related to serial homicides, the narratives were mainly from the perspective of the killer or an external observer. For this reason, the song 'Kién mató a Mary Jean' ['Who killed Mary Jean?'] (Putakaska, 1987) is

unusual. It is told by a person whom the homicide detectives ask to identify a corpse. The references included in the lyrics are probably influenced by the fifth in a series of murders attributed to the infamous unidentified serial murderer 'Jack the Ripper'. 'Mary Jean' is not a Spanish name, which places the crime in a foreign country. Its similarity to 'Mary Jane' or 'Mary Jeannette' is also indicative. Mary Jane Kelly is believed to have been one of Jack the Ripper's victims in 1888. The song also contains implicit references to the victim's prostitution as the context for her relationship with the speaker. Finally, the narrative focusing on the perspective of the one who had to identify the corpse brings us to Joseph Barnett, who was close to Mary Jane Kelly and had the distressing task of identifying the practically unrecognisable remains of the victim.

In 'George Oswell' (1998), Segismundo Toxicómano mentions the Manson family, dealing in a general way with the figure of the serial killer and his infamous celebrity. The lyrics emphasise the dynamics of searching for power and recognition as drivers of criminal behaviour. Thus, this song not only criticises the mythification of serial killers and their cultural construction; it also portrays the narcissistic dynamics of comparison and competition underlying serial killing.

The influence of true crime stories is also apparent in some lyrics alluding to mass murder, particularly in the songs 'Nadie' ['Nobody'] (by Soziedad Alkohólíka) and 'Fuego y miedo' (by Ska-P), both released in 2008. Presumably, events such as the massacres at Virginia Tech in the USA and Jokela High School in Finland (both in 2007) may have been influential. Likewise, the song 'Johnny coge el subfusil' [Johnny takes the submachine gun] (by Comando 9mm), recorded in 1986, bears a striking similarity to the events at a San Diego (California) McDonald's restaurant in 1984.

Final reflections

The depictions found are closely related to the connotations expected in the general population and the literature on the representation of crime in the media. Thus, we found a preference for violent crimes and frequent allusions to the perpetrator as mentally disturbed. However, it is possible that in the analysed punk subculture, and contrary to the apprehensions derived from its categorisation as 'problem music',³⁴ references to violence and criminality of people with mental disorders are less frequent than the prevailing mainstream representations, as will be discussed below.

Frequency of depictions of violence/criminality

It is difficult to speculate on the significance that 2.44% of songs referred to violence or criminality in mental disorders throughout three decades of Spanish punk. However, it does not seem insignificant considering that it is a very niche topic. To the best of our knowledge, not even in films (extensively studied regarding psychiatric content) are there any data on the overall frequency of this type of content, and it is not easy to guess what it would be if it were contextualised to an entire film production over 30 years.

In the field of popular music, there has been no quantitative examination as extensive as we report. Unfortunately, few

studies systematically address representations of mental disorders or psychiatry in music.³⁵ This aspect complicates conclusions regarding the frequency of songs dealing with mental disorders and criminality/violence, as there are no previous data to compare. Moreover, comparisons with the results of media studies or other cultural manifestations are also problematic since there are differences in the objectives of the studies (production, representation or reception); the dimensions that are evaluated; how they are defined, selected and measured; and what are the comparators.

As far as we are aware, the only study that reports the analysis of a complete filmography included 40 Disney feature films.³⁶ However, violence and criminality are more subtle in children's films and television series. Moreover, the terms addressed were unspecific and did not allow for comparisons.

The research on American prime-time television shows^{37,38} suggests that 1.28% (1994) to 2.16% (1969–1985) of adult characters portray violent behaviour linked to mental disorders. However, the proportions of characters (unit of analysis) and songs (context unit) are not comparable. Moreover, the violent behaviour, as defined in Signorielli's study,³⁷ did not include other types of criminal behaviour which were positively explored in our sample. Thus, it is predictable that the 2.16% indicated above underestimates the representation of criminality associated with mental disorders. On the other hand, the data from Diefenbach's study³⁸ allow us to infer that at least 3.45% of television programmes (context unit) would have references to the binomial mental disorder–criminality (maximum 30%; mean 16.73%); in any case, a higher proportion than that present in our data-set.

Use of humour

Regarding humour, there is usually a serious message behind a joke. Although usually critical, it can also sometimes be reactionary, serving to maintain power relations (superiority humour) or prejudices (disparagement humour).³⁹ Even so, the subversive potential of humour was not ignored by punks as a means of provoking and questioning positions of authority and power.²⁹

Humour is self-affirmation, an effect and an event of struggle, and a form of symbolic violence.⁴⁰ In punk music, humour is often the venting of nervous energy by breaking taboos and moral or ethical codes.²⁹ Through irony, satire, hyperbole, invective and profanity, punk's black humour was present in our set of songs.

The purpose of violent and psychopathic content

Violent content, particularly serial murder, seemed to be serving the provocative nature of punk music rather than an aesthetic enjoyment of depictions of the crime, unlike other cultural manifestations such as crime-related TV series. In the latter, the dynamics of consumption, compulsion or spectator's 'complicity' become more evident than might be expected in the audience of a musical style. Thus, the figure of the killer (mainly the serial killer) is not necessarily a cult character but rather an instrument for punk provocation and transgression. This point may explain the high percentage of trivialisation in the content related to homicide. As Bestley

points out, there is a risk of misunderstanding songs that use intensely ironic positions.²⁹ For that author, the savagery and violence in many punk lyrics are intended to shock and amuse rather than promote direct conflict or violence.²⁹

To some extent, the figure of the psychopath bears similarities to outlaw narratives, sharing the same ambivalent space for audiences, that of sympathy with the transgression. Thus, the postmodern cultural representation of the serial killer and the psychopath resembles the ambivalent outlaw's status as both criminal and hero.⁴¹

Intertextuality

The 'composite sketch' of the serial killer delineated by Spanish punk is nourished by cultural developments coming mainly from foreign experiences. This tendency recurred in the realm of intertextuality, with only one allusion to local productions. In the fictional arena, cinema was the most notorious influence.

As Nairn et al remark, intertextuality can shape how items are understood while limiting the extent to which we rely on subjective information.⁴ Regarding mental health, intertextuality is based on a 'common sense' understanding of 'madness', which, in turn, is subsequently presented as apparently confirmed by the intertextual media accounts themselves. The potential involvement of mental health professionals in this circular process through their interaction with the media is an area that should not be overlooked.

Thus, this kind of research is relevant in understanding the sources from which ideas about violence and mental disorders are nourished, how they are expressed and disseminated. The impact on audiences is an open area for research, including the impact of humorous and minimising content and the role of intertextuality in perpetuating the stigmatising representations of mental illness.

Most studies have focused on the negative aspects of cultural representations of mental disorders. However, music and other artistic manifestations can be a means to stimulate discussions at the societal level, challenge prejudices and improve public awareness.⁴² As previously highlighted, artistic and cultural manifestations are helpful to get access to the views and representations present in hard-to-reach groups,⁴³ their motivations, and strategies of accommodation, struggle and resistance.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author contributions

F.P. was responsible for the conceptualisation, project administration, methodology, data collection, data analysis and writing. E.S. contributed to the

data collection, data analysis and writing (review and editing). P.M. was responsible for the project administration and writing (review and editing).

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of interest

None.

ICMJE forms are in the supplementary material, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2022.4>.

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