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Psychiatry in music

'I just wanna' help in any way': mental health awareness and psychiatric themes in Santan Dave's 'Survivor's Guilt'

Alexander Smith  and Michael Liebrenz 

Headlining the 2022 Leeds and Reading music festivals, David Omoregie, stage-name Santan Dave, is one of the UK's most commercially successful contemporary artists, with two number-one albums. Informed by sociocultural perspectives, his lyrics often convey uncharacteristic motifs for conventional rap audiences, including pertinent mental health themes and psychiatric insights.

This is exemplified in his song 'Survivor's Guilt' (2021), which nominally references a classified symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder according to DSM-5 (guilt). Within the lyrics, the interlocutor openly exhibits their psychopathology; one can perceive symptom presentations common across various diagnostic domains. For instance: 'the highest of the highs/ Never last for as long as the lowest of lows', 'I got nights where it's light and I got days where it's dark', 'I feel the worst at my happiest', 'feel love for an hour, and then it gets to fade/Imagine what that does to your mental state', 'I wouldn't even trust my own shadow in a cabinet' and 'I'm managin' the weight of the past/I felt so much pain that I got favourite scars'.

Deconstructing rap's materialist and masculinised conventions, the protagonist describes their stressors: 'Let me show you behind the scene/Behind the glitz and the glamour and all the lights you see [...]/The truth is I got really bad anxiety/I'm on the motorway, cryin' in the driver's seat'. Moreover, we see a 'millionaire at a tender age' paying 'mortgage and rent', 'Tour life' giving way to 'nerves paralysing when you get to stage', and 'a gangster, but the stress gonna' take him apart'. Equally, the psychological pressures of celebrity status are emphasised: 'Fame comes with a price, you can't pay in advance/For six long years, I've been playin' my part/Like a freak in a circus when they're makin' them dance'. Throughout 'Survivor's Guilt' then, idealised portraits of Instagrammable fame are supplanted by relatable representations of deteriorating mental health: 'I see the Internet gossip and it wears on my heart'.

These depictions have psychocultural significance, illustrating the phenomenology of psychopathology within modern music. Further, they could also resonate with elements of Santan Dave's audience, offering an exemplar of symptom articulation in age groups and demographics where limited knowledge about psychiatric disorders, low health-seeking behaviours, and stigmatisation may traditionally endure. The protagonist affirms this intention ('Let me talk to the people like it's the mic in me'), simultaneously underlining prevalent negative conceptions about mental health conditions ('I'm seein' them laugh at me, cah [because] I'm vulnerable').

Amidst this milieu, for the interlocutor, 'it takes fallin' to your death/For a person to appreciate the gravity of the situation'. 'Survivor's Guilt' thereby provides an accessible medium for enhancing mental health awareness and seeks to reformulate discourse about stigmatisation across rap audiences and communities that may lack exposure to such issues. By accentuating these themes and empowering the protagonist to explicitly recount individual experiences of mental disorders, the song progresses psychiatric dialogues in contemporary popular culture.

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