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### Numbing the Pain of Success

Since the era of The Beastie Boys, Slick Rick and De La Soul, rap music has contained lyrics pertaining to drug and alcohol use. Throughout the 2000s, lyrics have incorporated mention of opioids more than any other drug. One can surmise that this rise in opioid references is a reflection of the current opioid epidemic that killed more than 64,000 people in America just last year (CDC). Some of the most frequently rapped about drugs are Percocet<sup>1</sup>, Xanax<sup>2</sup> and Lean, a drink containing promethazine<sup>3</sup>, Sprite and Jolly Ranchers. References to this trio of high powered and highly-addictive pain medications are not only a window into a world of masked pain but also one in which opioid use is glorified. Despite the music's popularity, it underscores the existence of mental illnesses, especially addiction and depression. Unlike earlier rap music about drug dealing and getting high, the abundant references to opioid abuse illustrate the toxic relationship between those drugs and mental health issues that these artists grapple with.

Mental illness isn't a new phenomenon in the rap industry. Rappers of past generations including Tupac, Notorious B.I.G, Nas, Geto Boys and Kanye West have spoken about suicide and mental health issues in their music. Unfortunately, mental health issues have become even more prevalent in this era of rap, especially in light of almost 50,000 Americans committing

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<sup>1</sup> Percocet is used to manage moderate or severe pain

<sup>2</sup> Xanax are used to "treat anxiety disorders, panic disorders, and anxiety caused by depression."

<sup>3</sup> Promethazine is an opioid found in cough syrup that can be used for a list of things including allergies, sleep aid, hives, nausea and blocks post surgery pain.

suicide per year (CDC). Rappers have evolved from speaking out on their own mental health issues to talking about numbing their illnesses with opioids. Lil Uzi Vert, a 23-year-old rapper from Philly, raps in his song 'Xo Tour Llif3', "She say I'm insane, yeah, I might blow my brains out, xanny<sup>4</sup> numb the pain, yeah, please xanny make it go away". In Solange's song 'Mad', Lil Wayne, an avid Lean drinker, raps "When I attempted suicide, I didn't die, I remember how mad I was on that day,...". Possibly the youngest victim to publicly suffer from mental illness was 19-year-old Capital Steez. He was an up-and-coming New York rapper who formed the rap collective Pro Era, which fostered the careers of Joey Badass, CJ Fly and Kirk Knight. Steez struggled with schizophrenia which was heightened by his drug use. On Christmas Eve of 2012, Steez jumped off the roof of his recording label's building to his death.

So, why is it that people who make tons of money and are adored by millions would even consider suicide? In an interview with Rap Radar, Jay-Z explained that being a famous performer is "not normal" and that it's unhealthy to have "10,000, 20,000 people screaming at you". He continues saying "you gotta start masking your pain because you can't let all of your fans see what you're going through". He then makes a point that it's hard for artists to talk to their families about their mental health, let alone the world. This depression that many artists face is cultivated through the abnormal lifestyle of a performer. The amount of access that the public has to people's lives doesn't allow artists the freedom that people are entitled to. They are swamped by hordes of people everywhere they go including media outlets who have a constant need for new information about the artist. Outlets like TMZ and E! News are constantly producing everything from an artist's romantic life to daily activities to even what they're

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'xanny' is a nickname for the opioid Xanax

wearing on a given day. The constant invasion of privacy and the inability for an artist to be themselves causes serious depression and instability. Top that depression off with a traumatic experience and the artist could be headed down a path that ends with drug addiction and possibly death. Up and coming rapper Famous Dex, has experienced this vicious cycle first hand.

Famous Dex is known for his eccentric rapping style, insane work ethic and, unfortunately, as one of the hardest drug abusers in rap. Dex started sipping Lean in 2014, the year his mother, Pamela Winters, died of breast cancer. In a 2016 interview Dex, who was sipping Lean while being interviewed, admitted that in total he'd spent over \$100,000 dollars on the drug. Dex proclaimed "I really can't go a day without no Lean" and "If I don't have it bro, I be getting pissed off". Since that interview, Famous Dex has released over 35 music videos that either feature him using opioids or feature lyrics that display his opioid abuse. In another interview a year later, he desperately tried to explain, "I'm really slowing down on Lean," as he sat in front of two separate cups of it. The loss of Famous Dex's mother, and other challenging events, has triggered an intense addiction that he has had trouble coming to terms with. His inability to come to terms with his addiction is displayed frequently in his music. In his song 'Broke My Back For You' he raps, "Yeah, I put my heart out for you, And they wasn't comfortable, I'm poppin' pills and now I'm not comfortable,". However on the song 'Intro' featuring rappers Rich the Kid and Jay Critch, he denies his indulgence opioids rapping, "Off the flex, I don't do no xans, Fifty-thousand for a show in Japan". Dex's inability to admit what his addiction is doing to him is causing him to become more dependant on opioids and lose opportunities that could better his life. In September of 2016, Dex was caught on video assaulting his then ex-girlfriend. It is likely that he was high on lean while he assaulted his

girlfriend. This inference can be made because he released the video for his song “Switch It Up” on September 18th which featured scenes where he sipped lean while in a house. That house was owned by Tish Hyman, an R&B singer who rented the place to Dex and his girlfriend for an alleged two weeks. The news that he assaulted his girlfriend was reported just three days after the video was uploaded to Youtube and the video captured the assault in Hyman’s hallway. The singer even explained that he was clearly high when he paid the rent for his stay and that the rapper held multiple parties where drugs were allegedly taken. The video caused him to get taken out of consideration for the 2017 XXL Freshman Cover that has helped launch the careers of some of the biggest names in rap including Kendrick Lamar, Chance the Rapper, Lil Uzi Vert and Travis Scott. Editor in Chief of XXL Magazine, Vanessa Satten explained that the video was the only reason that Dex didn’t make the freshman cover.

The glorification of opioids in rap is toxic for the rappers and the listeners. These rappers rely on drugs to take their pain away while promoting the activity to the world. In fact, of the 36 rap songs on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts for the week of September 18th, nine of the artists are avid users of opioids. They are promoting the message that indulging in opioids will allow the listener to become cool and just like the artists. The use of opioids pervasive in rap lyrics end up being advertisements for how to mask pain instead of illustrations of people’s lives.

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