Commentary

A public health perspective on hip-hop’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences of illness, spread of misinformation, and mobilization of resources

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Hip-hop emerged in the early-to-mid 1970s in some of the poorest areas of New York City (NYC), U.S.A [1]. As this cultural movement evolved, many people within the hip-hop community expressed their artistry in different ways through what are known as the five elements of hip-hop: emceeing (i.e., lyrical expression/rapping), graffiti, deejaying, breakdancing, and knowledge [2]. These elements created different mediums for self-expression about hardships and fostering resilience within deprived communities. Five decades later, hip-hop culture is now a multi-billion-dollar industry with a global omnipresence that crosses boundaries of language, geography, ethnicity, age, gender, and socio-economic status. Messages contained within hip-hop lyrics can play an influential role on how people perceive the world around them.

In this commentary, we explore several themes that have emerged within the hip-hop community that are relevant to public health during the pandemic. Firstly, we provide examples of how hip-hop artists and the community are dealing with COVID-19-related deaths and experiences of illness. Secondly, we explore some examples of inaccurate information that has been disseminated about COVID-19 within the community. Thirdly, we highlight some of the strategies that have been implemented for offering resources and support.

Some tragic examples of pandemic-related deaths have included Fred The Godson, a USA-based rapper in his 30s, who passed away due to COVID-19-related complications [3] as well as the UK-based, Mercury prize-nominated rapper, Ty who passed away from pneumonia after contracting COVID-19 [4]. Fans and artists alike shared an outpouring of support on social media for both rappers. Furthermore, after losing relatives to COVID-19, the UK-based artist, Drill Minister, was inspired to write a song called ‘Ode to the NHS’, which he described was dedicated to all of the staff caring for sick people [5]. From the perspective of recovery, a prominent USA-based rapper named Scarface who was hospitalized with COVID-19 shared messages with the hip-hop community about his experiences on how severe the virus really is and how his recovery had been challenging (e.g., on a dialysis machine). For example, he states: “It’s serious, you could be going on with your life and then that very next moment you could lose everything. Kidney function, liver function, lung function, heart function – you can actually die from the Covid, it’s crazy. It can actually kill you.” [6].

While some artists have articulated the seriousness of the pandemic through their own experiences, there are examples where other artists have used their platform to disseminate inaccurate and potentially harmful misinformation, which can undermine public health responses, and could potentially fuel conspiracy theories, add uncertainty, denial etc.
An example of the spread of misinformation within the hip-hop community was illustrated during a radio interview with a well-known USA-based rapper who was asked whether he was concerned about being affected by the virus, to which his response was that the coronavirus was “fake” and that “…minorities can’t catch it” [7]. Firstly, such falsehoods as “…minorities can’t catch it” are potentially very harmful as there is a growing evidence-base indicating that BAME, African American, and African Caribbean communities are disproportionately at risk of COVID-19 infection and mortality [8]. For example, Black people in the UK are approximately four times more likely to have died of COVID-19 according to the Office of National Statistics [9]. Secondly, stating that the virus is “fake” is also very concerning in light of research showing that false news spreads more pervasively than true news (i.e., false news diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly) [10]. This occurrence also exemplifies the concept of ‘epistemic trespassing’ whereby “…non-experts move into an expert’s field, reject their judgements, and supplant the expert’s perspective with their own” [11]. Therefore, artists must be careful when delivering public health statements as fans might identify rappers as seemingly credible sources of information. This example also raises concerns about cultural cognition, which refers to “…the tendency of individuals to conform their beliefs about disputed matters of fact […] to values that define their cultural identities” [12].

Furthermore, the spread of misinformation might be particularly impactful on people with mental health problems. For example, a recent research study found that heightened emotionality was predictive of increased belief in fake news [13]. This is particularly concerning for ethnic minority groups who are disproportionately at risk for poorer mental health outcomes (e.g., lack of early access to services, cultural stigma of mental health care, racism etc.) [8].

Another example of the spread of misinformation occurred after a well-known actor announced on social media he had tested positive for the virus [14] to which a prominent hip-hop artist responded publicly alleging that he was getting paid to falsely say that he tested positive for the virus on social media, which the actor publicly denied afterwards [15].

While it is important to mitigate the potential harms caused by the spread of mis- and/or dis-information, the hip-hop community has also produced many supportive resources that help to raise awareness and to raise funds to help promote healthy behaviours during the pandemic. For example, the 18-year-old UK-based rapper, Psychs, created a song called “Spreadin’” about COVID-19 [16], which contains lyrics promoting healthy behaviours in socially and culturally competent ways using social media, language, and gestures to reach out to youth in a familiar way. When interviewed by a newspaper, he stated: “My generation are not going to be reading articles, they’re not going to be reading newspapers. The main form of anything for them is social media. So I know if I [made the song], then people will start to realise it’s actually a thing now … it’s to be taken seriously” [17]. In his song, he advocates for physical distancing and being careful when greeting others, especially given that in hip-hop culture greetings often have close contact: “We can make a handshake using our feet. We can make a handshake using elbows, knees. I ain’t tryna catch a disease”. In his chorus he repeats the positive phrasing: “…let’s take this ting serious. Please stay safe and don’t get infected. Love to the families who’ve been affected”. The British rapper, Lady Leshurr, released a music video about COVID-19 called “Quarantine Speech” in April 2020 sharing messages on the importance of washing your hands in a light-hearted delivery but with a sober undertone message of staying safe, as she states: “…on a serious one though. We need to wash our hands more you know, Spread love not viruses…” [18].

During a period of self-isolation, DJ D Nice hosted an Instagram Live party, attended by over 100,000 people including Michelle Obama, Drake, and Mark Zuckerberg. DJ D Nice wanted “…people to feel good”, “the experience to be lifted by music” and he received comments on how the event created feelings of “…connection in that moment through the chatroom” [19]. There have also been other Versus battles on Instagram (e.g., Ludakris vs Nelly, Swiss beats vs Timbaland etc.) that have created powerful digital spaces for connection amongst artists and listeners in the community.

The Grammy-nominated rapper, Tory Lanez, leveraged the viral success of his “Quarantine Radio” to set up the Tory Lanez Dream City Fund to support COVID-19 relief efforts to help underserved families and other communities during the pandemic [20]. For example, Lanez pledged to pay for 50,000 diapers (i.e., “nappies”), which was matched by Amazon Music [20]. Another hip-hop event organised by Universal Hip Hop Museum and Mass Appeal raised funds to give a donation to a network of over 2500 healthcare providers called the SOMOS Community Care and The Bronx Community Relief Effort [21]. Many famous rappers were involved in the event (e.g., Chuck D, Nas, Kurtis Blow), and shared positive, empowering messages, such as rapper Ice-T saying: “We can turn the tide in our community” and Vinnie Brown from Naughty By Nature remarking: “I do see our community mobilizing right now. Everyone’s talking about health regimens. Everyone’s talking about changing their diets. Everyone is talking about just changing for the better” [22]. To support COVID-19 relief efforts within correctional facilities, Meek Mills and Jay Z’s criminal justice organization called REFORM Alliance partnered with Twitter to donate 10 million surgical masks and other protective equipment for those living and working inside prison environments in the USA [23]. This is an important public health initiative as there is a critical need to improve connections between health care services and prison surroundings in order to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 outbreaks (e.g., due to overcrowding, lack of empathy for prisoners etc.) [24].

COVID-19 is disproportionally affecting ethnic minorities and marginalised communities [8,24]. One possible way to provide public health messages to such communities is through the globally accessible and popular culture of hip-hop. Hip-hop culture could play an important role in disseminating messages through hip-hop ambassadors to empower and protect people against misinformation. Countering the spread of misinformation will require many strategies [25–28]. While fact-checking is an effective approach, serious issues remain around scalability and trust in institutions, which hip-hop can potentially address. Given hip-hop’s global cultural dominance and powerful influence on social media, one strategy to help discredit myths could be for particular trusted individuals (e.g., hip-hop artists, bloggers, radio personalities, journalists etc) to partner with credible medical experts to leverage social media and engage with millions of followers. Furthermore, given that hip-hop culture strongly embraces the notion of community, another strategy for countering misinformation could be fan-based community crowdsourcing to detect misinformation (i.e., the ‘wisdom of crowds’ approach). For example, one study suggested that scaling fact-checking on social media is possible and demonstrated that a crowd of 20 laypeople who were only given the headline and lede of articles were able to match the performance of fact-checkers who examined the full article [29]. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation “…tends to be driven by emotions, especially fear, and it is very difficult to combat emotions using facts” [30]. However, throughout the genre’s history, hip-hop has shown repeatedly that emotions and facts can be merged, which puts hip-hop in a distinctive position to help tackle medical misinformation in innovative ways.

While some hip-hop artists might ascribe to conspiracy theories that promote the spread of harmful messages to a population already at risk, many other hip-hop artists and the community have helped to raise awareness about the virus, have created a sense of community and belonging after a series of events, and have raised funds to help promote healthy behaviours in culturally competent ways. Such messages and decisive actions are helping people to feel safer and to understand the importance of taking action in reducing the harms and spread of COVID-19.

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