
Have the Simpsons made another prediction? Codeine-containing cough syrups as the recipe for happiness

Cosimo Sidoti, *University of Kent*

<p>“When the weight of the world has got you down And you wanna end your life Bills to pay, a dead-end job, and problems with a wife But don't throw in towel 'Cause there's a place right down the block Where you can drink your misery away At Flaming Moe's (Let's all go to Flaming) (Let's all go to Flaming Moe's) when liquor in a mug Can warm you like a hug (Flaming Moe's) And happiness is just a Flaming Moe away Happiness is just a Flaming Moe away” (the Simpsons, Flaming Moe's, 1991)</p>	<p>“(Ah, ah) I'm pouring syrup into the cup (uoh, uoh, uoh) I watch as every bubble bursts (Uoh, uoh, uoh, uoh) I don't hear the voices of these blabbers (Bla), bla (Bla) Snitches and bitches always go in pairs (Buu-bu, buu) I'm eating in the back of a Benz (Skrrt, skrrt) Milan is the home of the bad guys, You can't cross my lane (Crrah, crrah) I use weed and toseina¹ (Crrah, crrah), syrup as medicine” (Shiva, <i>Syrup</i>, 2023)</p>	<p>“I don't give a Toseina, I'll pour a whole half-set in the litre Bells in my cup, bells in my nina (Bap bap) I can't talk right now, I fill lean up She said I'm lyin' and called me a cheater (Called me a what?) If I'm an animal, I ain't a cat, I am an ape, Ceaser I ain't a follower, I am a leader, leader (Woi, woi) She don't trust me, that's fuckery, but I don't trust me either (Either)” (Digga D, <i>Tender, Love and Care [TLC]</i>, 2023)</p>
---	--	---

What do the Simpsons'¹ Cheers parody “Flaming Moe's” released alongside an episode in 1991 and two very recent songs by well-known artists from the Italian trap and UK drill scenes have in common? Just as Moe stumbled upon a recipe for happiness thanks to Homer, Shiva and Digga D have discovered their version by using the same secret ingredient: cough syrup. Unlike Moe's drink, the Flaming Moe's, which combined cough syrup with liquor, Shiva and Digga D have opted to mix it with Sprite. This concoction is often known as 'lean', 'purple drank,' or simply 'syrup'. While the Simpsons' version may not have contained psychoactive elements (except for alcohol), the cough syrups used in making 'lean' typically contain codeine, a mild opioid known for its pain-relieving and cough-suppressing properties, albeit with a high potential for addiction.

Moving on from the Simpsons, this article explores an overlooked phenomenon with substantial relevance to contemporary debates on youth culture, the glocalisation of cultural drug practices, drug commodification, the role of social media, and the global opioid crisis. It starts by tracing the historical origins of 'lean' culture and its gradual diffusion across geographical and cultural boundaries. This global context provides the foundation for a comparative analysis of consumption patterns and motivations related to 'lean' use among diverse youth cultures in various global contexts, shedding light on both the differences and commonalities that emerge. In doing so, the forthcoming sections unravel the multifaceted

¹ The Simpsons is one of the most popular and long-running American animated sitcoms that started in 1989.

layers of 'lean' culture, offering a deeper understanding of its origins, impact, and implications within the evolving landscape of contemporary society and emerging youth drug trends.

The origin and global spread of 'lean' culture

'Lean' – a mixture of codeine-containing cough syrups (hereafter CCCSs) and fizzy soft drinks – was once considered a US-based subcultural phenomenon, restricted to economically disadvantaged black youth in the American South (Peters et al., 2003). Its origin and prominence are primarily attributed to DJ Screw, a renowned artist hailing from Houston, who pioneered a distinctive subgenre of Hip-Hop known as 'Chopped and Screwed' throughout the 1990s. His musical style was characterised by remixing techniques involving the deliberate slowing down of tempo and skilled deejaying. For those involved in the production and consumption of this Hip-Hop subgenre, 'lean' held a particular allure due to its ability to induce a slowing effect on the brain, attributable to the sedative properties of opioids.

However, the recreational use of CCCSs extends further back to the 1960s and is not confined solely to Houston or even the United States. In the 1960s, the famous Houston writer Lance Scott Walker (2022) documented evidence of blues musicians in Houston blending Robitussin AC² with beer. Whereas outside Texas, the earliest documented academic literature on CCCS in the United States dates back to the early 1960s and 1970s and is primarily based on the East Coast (New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky). First reports of the harm caused by ingesting CCCSs and overdose cases started to circulate in the medical community during that period. Cough syrups were described as dangerous (Winek, 1969), fatal (Winek et al., 1970), euphoric (Shamoian & Shapiro, 1969), exhilarant (Younes, 1969), and addictive (Rosenwald & Russell, 1961).

Moreover, other studies in the 1990s revealed evidence of such use outside the U.S., particularly in various Asian countries such as India (Mattoo et al., 1997), China (Lam et al., 1996), Nepal (Chatterjee et al., 1996), and Japan (Ishigooka et al., 1991).

More recently, epidemiological research into the prevalence and patterns of use of codeine-containing cough syrups has predominantly emerged from West and South African countries, particularly Nigeria and South Africa. The first national drug use survey in Nigeria in 2017 revealed that CCCSs were the third most commonly used illicit drug among 2.4 million users, following cannabis (10.6 million) and opioids (4.6 million) (UNODC, 2019). In comparison to the U.S. and Europe, the usage patterns of CCCSs in Africa differ significantly from 'lean'. Existing literature shows a type of use where cough syrups are consumed directly from bottles, especially within extremely impoverished communities, or mixed with Coca-Cola or malt drinks. This latter method is most akin to 'lean' and is also known in Africa as the 'codeine diet' (Dumbili et al., 2020).

In the European context, studies on the consumption of CCCSs remain notably scarce, despite compelling evidence that codeine is the most frequently used opioid analgesic in countries like France, Germany, and the UK (Morley et al., 2017). Some European scholars from 2015

² One of the main CCCSs used at the time recreationally in the United States. This product is still on the market and used today.

onwards, including myself, have found evidence of 'lean' in countries such as Ireland (Van Hout et al., 2017), France (Jouanjus et al., 2018), Switzerland (Quednow et al., 2022), Spain (Folgar & Horcujadas, 2022), and Italy (Sidoti, 2021). In the UK, 'lean' has only been documented in news articles (Garcia & Onapa, 2021) and, significantly, by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) itself. The MHRA has recently initiated a public consultation to propose the reclassification of Codeine Linctus as a prescription-only medicine. As stated in the official document, this decision was prompted by an increase in reports from law enforcement agencies and within the supply chain, with up to three referrals per month since 2018, indicating that "*use in the UK community is widespread and increasing*" (2023, p. 10).

Patterns of use and motivations across different youth cultures

In the present day, 'lean' has expanded internationally and evolved into a prominent cultural phenomenon, captivating the imagination of contemporary youth cultures in many parts of the world. The forces of glocalisation and transatlantic crossings have propelled 'lean' beyond its initial boundaries by disseminating this commodified product and adapting its patterns of use to suit the preferences and practices of users in various local markets. For instance, in the United States and Europe, 'lean' is closely associated with contemporary Hip-Hop genres, such as Trap and Drill. It serves as a significant component of street capital for young individuals as a signal of conspicuous consumption to display on social media symbolising the consumption of expensive commodities. This includes a distinct focus on sourcing specific cough syrup brands, such as Toseina mentioned by Shiva and Digga D, as well as other essential commodities required for the experience of 'lean', like particular fizzy soft drinks and the cups used to serve the cocktail.

Conversely, in West and South African countries, the 'codeine diet' represents a more discreet form of drug use within street cultures. In these regions, the combination of cough syrups with beverages like Coca-Cola or malt drinks serves to evade social discrimination and law enforcement agencies. The use of darker-coloured drinks, in contrast to the transparent Sprite usually used in 'lean', conceals the consumption from the public eye, reflecting the distinctive dynamics of this practice in these cultural contexts.

Despite the differing consumption practices observed among young people within their respective youth cultures, depending on their geographical and cultural context, a common thread emerges when examining the motivations behind the use of CCCSs. Particularly intriguing are the sentiments expressed by two users, one from South Africa and another from Ireland, who describe codeine as their "companion" (Van Hout et al., 2018) and "helper" (Van Hout et al., 2017). This emotional attachment to the substance is also evident in numerous contemporary Hip-Hop lyrics referencing 'lean', such as the one by Shiva (2023)³ where "syrup as a medicine" is mentioned not for its cough-suppressing properties but for its ability to make life's problems disappear. In a similar vein, Digga D's latest song (2023)⁴ invokes the use of 'lean' to cope with his problems, seeking some tender, love, and care (TLC) and yearning to escape to "*a place where nobody knows his [my] face or name*". As one of my previous

³ Shiva. (2023). *Syrup*. Sony Music.

⁴ Digga D. (2023). *TLC*. Black Money Records.

participants in trap culture in Italy expressed through a tattoo, “codeine is my best friend”. These sentiments underscore the profound connection that users often have with codeine-based cough syrups, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries.

Ph.D Research and Conclusions

My Ph.D. research is a multifaceted exploration of the use of ‘lean’ in Italy, the UK, and Nigeria. On one hand, it focuses on the glocalisation and transatlantic crossings of cultural drugs within contemporary youth cultures specifically looking at how ‘lean’ culture in a niche demographic in the Southern US has spread to Italian trap, UK drill, and Nigerian youth communities. In addition, it delves into the profound implications of conspicuous consumerism and the role of social media platforms not only in disseminating new types of cultural drugs in different contexts but also in their relevance in shaping and redefining contemporary drug trends.

On the other hand, ‘lean’ culture is contextualised within the ongoing global opioid crisis in which neoliberalism and anti-prohibitionist drug policies shape the drug experiences of young people across the globe. These broader social and political structures have given rise to a collective sense of depression, vividly evoked in many Hip-Hop contemporary lyrics, among young people which they momentarily alleviate through the consumption of prescription opioids like CCCSs. Through a multi-sited on- and off-line fieldwork, this research seeks to empirically investigate these complex dynamics, shedding light on the interplay between cultural drug adoption and the broader socio-political context in the lives of contemporary youth cultures.

References

- Chatterjee, A., Uprety, L., Chapagain, M., & Kafle, K. (1996). Drug Abuse in Nepal: A Rapid Assessment Study. *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 48, 11–33.
- Dumbili, E. W., Ezekwe, E., & Ogochukwu Odeigah. (2020). From “Codeine Diet” to “Gutter Water”: Polydrug use among Nigerian young adults. *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, 22(2), 95–107.
- Folgar, M. I., & Horcajadas, F. A. (2022). Una aproximación al panorama actual de las nuevas formas de consumo de drogas. *Adicciones*, 34(1).
- Garcia, F., & Onapa, E. (2021, August 27). The Worrying Rise of Lean in the UK. *Vice UK*. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93yj33/lean-purple-drunk-abuse-uk>
- Garcin, L., Le Roch, M., Agbessi, C.-A., Lobut, J.-B., Lecoœur, A., & Benoist, G. (2016). Purple drank: Un dangereux cocktail à connaître. *Archives de Pédiatrie*, 23(11), 1165–1168.
- Ishigooka, J., Yoshida, Y., & Murasaki, M. (1991). Abuse of ‘Bron’: A Japanese OTC Cough Suppressant Solution Containing Methylephedrine, Codeine, Caffeine and Clorpheniramine. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry*, 15(4), 513–521.
- Jouanjus, E., Falcou, A., Deheul, S., Roussin, A., & Lapeyre-Mestre, M. (2018). Detecting the diverted use of psychoactive drugs by adolescents and young adults: A pilot study. *Pharmacoepidemiology and Drug Safety*, 27(11), 1286–1292.
- Lam, L. C. W., Lee, D. T. S., Shum, P. P. S., & Chen, C. N. (1996). Cough mixture misuse in Hong Kong—An emerging psychiatric problem? *Addiction*, 91(9), 1375–1378.
- Martin, J. (1991). *Flaming Moe’s*. Tcf Music Publishing Inc.
- Mattoo, S. K., Basu, D., Sharma, A., Balaji, M., & Malhotra, A. (1997). Abuse of Codeine-Containing Cough Syrups: A Report from India. *Addiction*, 92(12), 1783–1787.
- MHRA. (2023). *Public Consultation on proposal to make Codeine linctus and Codeine Oral Solutions available as a prescription only medicine (POM)*. Medicines & Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.
- Morley, K. I., Ferris, J. A., Winstock, A. R., & Lynskey, M. T. (2017). Polysubstance use and misuse or abuse of prescription opioid analgesics: A multi-level analysis of international data. *Pain*, 158(6), 1138–1144.

- Quednow, B. B., Steinhoff, A., Bechtiger, L., Ribeaud, D., Eisner, M., & Shanahan, L. (2022). High Prevalence and Early Onsets: Legal and Illegal Substance Use in an Urban Cohort of Young Adults in Switzerland. *European Addiction Research, 28*(3), 186–198.
- Rosenwald, R. J., & Russell, D. H. (1961). Cough-Syrup Addiction. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 264*(18), 927.
- Shamoian, C. A., & Shapiro, A. K. (1969). Abuse of an Euphoretic Combination. *JAMA, 207*(10), 1919.
- Sidoti, C. (2021). *'Not All that Glitters is Gold': An exploratory research on the meanings of crime in Italian trap culture*. LAP Publishing.
- UNODC. (2019). Drugs in the Nigerian population: Availability, use, consequences and policy implications. In *Bulletin on Narcotics* (Vol. 62, pp. 1–8). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- Van Hout, M. C., Horan, A., Santlal, K., Rich, E., & Bergin, M. (2018). 'Codeine is my companion': Misuse and dependence on codeine containing medicines in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, 35*(4), 275–288. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2015.60>
- Van Hout, M. C., Rich, E., Dada, S., & Bergin, M. (2017). "Codeine Is My Helper": Misuse of and Dependence on Codeine-Containing Medicines in South Africa. *Qualitative Health Research, 27*(3), 341–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315613764>
- Wairagkar, S., Das, J., Kumar, S., Mahanta, J., Satyanarayana, K., Phukan, R. K., Chetia, M., & Goswami, S. K. (1994). Codeine Containing Cough Syrup Addiction in Assam and Nagaland. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 36*(3), 129–132.
- Winek, C. L. (1969). Dangerous Cough Syrups. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 840*.
- Winek, C. L., Collom, W. D., & Wecht, C. H. (1970). Codeine Fatality from Cough Syrup. *Clinical Toxicology, 3*(1), 97–100. <https://doi.org/10.3109/15563657008990104>
- Younes, R. P. (1969). Exhilarant Cough Remedies. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 280*(7), 391.
-

