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Addiction and Rehabilitation in Autobiographical Books by Rock Artists, 1974–2010

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Abstract

Introduction and aims: This paper explores excessive appetites, addiction and rehabilitation as described in the autobiographies, memoirs and diaries of famous rock artists.

Design and methods: The data collection focused on autobiographical rock books (i.e. autobiographies, memoirs and diaries) written in English by internationally recognized rock artists before 2011. In total, 96 autobiographical books by rock artists were published between 1974 and 2010. The mean age of the authors was 50 and 17% of the books were by female authors. Data were encoded for 1) addiction, 2) the object of addiction, 3) personal addiction, 4) rehabilitation, 5) personal rehabilitation and 6) the type of recovery from the addiction.

Results: Of the books, 82% described addiction, 62% personal addiction, 57% rehabilitation and 40% personal participation in rehabilitation. The most commonly represented addictions were alcoholism, opiate addiction and cocaine addiction. Addicted rock stars described addictions differently from non-addicts. Of addicted rock artists, 51% recovered with the help of rehabilitation, 42% self-recovered and 7% continued the excess. The results showed that there has been an increase in the prevalence of addiction in autobiographical rock books over time. In addition, it was found that gender affected the type of recovery.

Discussion and conclusions: Autobiographical books by rock artists have been published in increasing numbers in the last two decades. The artists in question have described their personal experiences of addiction and rehabilitation and discussed the problems related to alcohol, drugs and excessive behaviour. The books do not glamorize addiction or excessive lifestyles. Rather, they indicate that attitudes towards drugs and alcohol are changing in the rock business.

Keywords: addiction, excessive appetites, treatment, rock music, popular culture

Introduction and aims

A recent study shows that North American and European rock and pop stars have significantly higher mortality than demographically matched populations, and their main causes of death have often been related to the use of alcohol and drugs [1]. The fall of addicted stars is closely monitored in the current media culture [2–3]. The deaths of Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston are two of the most recent cases of premature musician mortality.

This paper explores the role of addiction and rehabilitation in autobiographical books by internationally famous rock artists. Autobiographies and memoirs by rock artists have become bestsellers in Western countries. Many of them have been translated into several languages and they gain wide audiences through advertising in the media. Rock stars are ageing and they are now willing to reflect on some of the episodes in their lives. Audiences are intrigued by the first-person narrations of famous people, and publishing houses are keen to produce content which is as riveting as possible.

The study of cultural products such as rock music, rock books and rock lyrics has considerable social relevance because of their popularity. Rock music has long had an impact on drug-using cultures: amphetamine was associated with mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks; cannabis and LSD with hippies [4–6]. More recent studies have concentrated on rave and techno clubs [7–9], and some have addressed the question of musical preferences and substance abuse [10–13]. There are only a limited number of systematic studies on the references to alcohol and drugs in rock lyrics [14–16], however, and very few words have been written about rock biography and autobiography [17–19].

Different theoretical models have been applied to understand the phenomenon of addiction. Most of them underline that the key to addictions lies in reward-seeking behaviour that is out of control or otherwise harmful [20–22]. It is not only the substances to which we are at risk of becoming addicted, but rather the objects and activities in specific social settings. There are similarities between dependence based on alcohol and drugs and other forms of problem behaviour (e.g. gambling, hyper-sexuality, over-eating) [21]. Cultural beliefs, norms and values can alter perceptions of what is considered an addiction [20].

In this study, Jim Orford's theory of excessive appetites is used as a guideline for the definition of addiction. Orford's theory provides a suitable framework for judging when the use of alcohol, drugs or certain form of behaviour becomes problematic and could be considered excessive. Excessive appetites are habit-forming activities that are rewarding for the subject. Secondly, excessive appetites become costly for the subject. They may cause financial loss, disruption to close relationships and problems with the law. Thirdly, excessive appetites involve psychological and social conflicts resulting from the deleterious effects or costs. These serve to distinguish between a troublesome appetite and a relatively normal one [21].

The aim of this paper is to enhance our understanding of addictions represented in the products of popular culture. The key lies in how these books represent and construct reality. The books are approached with textual analysis and possible extra-textual elements are omitted from the analysis. The change in the prevalence of addiction and rehabilitation is studied over time. The article also puts emphasis on how a resolution to the conflict caused by addiction is sought in the books. Furthermore, the paper considers whether other factors, such as the age or gender of the author, affect the ways in which addictions are represented. The research questions are:

- 1) Are addiction and recovery prevalent themes in autobiographical books by rock artists?
- 2) What kinds of addictions are portrayed?
- 3) How are addictions coped with?
- 4) Are the age and gender of the author related to the aforementioned themes?
- 5) Has there been an increase in the prevalence of addiction and rehabilitation in autobiographical books by rock artists over time?

Design and methods

Data collection

The data were collected between 2007 and 2011 by trawling internet, library and bookstore databases with the words “autobiography”, “biography”, “memoir”, “diary”, “music” and “rock” in different combinations. Some books were tracked down by intertextual references made in other books. Furthermore, the members of the most important bands in rock history were searched in the database. All titles included in the data met the following selection criteria:

- 1) Published before 2011
- 2) Published in English
- 3) By well-known international rock artists
- 4) Artists marked as first authors of their books
- 5) Autobiographical, i.e. they are first-person narrations by musicians and are, for example, autobiographies, memoirs or diaries

96 books published before 2011 by internationally recognized rock artists were identified during the data collection period 2007–2011 (see Appendix 1). The first books were published in 1974. Only 13 titles were published before 1990. Since this article concentrates on books by internationally famous artists, publications dating back even further are usually traceable. Most of these are available online via global second-hand booksellers.

Table 1 summarizes the data (30,079 pages) and shows that autobiographical rock books have been published in increasing numbers during the last 10 years. Over half of the data were published in 2004–2010. The highest frequency of books per year was in 2010 (13 books, 14% of the total data). The writers were on average 50 years old when their books were published. Youngest author was 27 when the book was written and the oldest was 71.

Most of the books are by British or American artists who have had a major impact on rock music worldwide. The authors include members of the most influential rock groups of previous decades, such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Doors, The Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Aerosmith, The Sex Pistols, Guns N’ Roses and Red Hot Chili Peppers (see Appendix 1). Of the books, 17% (n=16) were by female rock stars. Few books are by bands. The latter contain the autobiographies of each member of the band from birth to the present day.

Coding

Jim Orford’s concept of *excessive appetite* is used as a guideline for the coding. For practical reasons addiction is used as a synonym for excessive appetite. The following coding strategy was used:

- 1) *Addiction* (yes/no): Whether the books described excessive appetites in any form. It should be stressed that the consumption of alcohol or even the strongest drugs does not in itself qualify as excessive. The user has to suffer high costs as a result of their use, as well as a conflict.
- 2) *Personal addiction* (yes/no): Whether the author (or authors in the case of the books by bands) describes his or her own substance use or behaviour as excessive.
- 3) *Rehabilitation* (yes/no): Whether some kind of alcohol/drug/addiction treatment or mutual aid group meetings, such as AA, were mentioned in the books.
- 4) *Personal rehabilitation* (yes/no): Whether the author or authors have participated in treatment or mutual aid group meetings.
- 5) *Coping* (i.e. how the author or authors have recovered from the addiction): A) *Self-recovery* includes those stating that they have recovered from the addiction on their own; B) *rehab* includes those who

recovered via treatment or mutual aid group meetings; C) *continued excess* includes those who continue in their excesses.

- 6) *Object of addiction* refers to the most common objects of addiction described in the books. Usually the authors described many substances or forms of behaviour as being excessive. The following groups were categorized (yes/no): A) *alcohol*, B) *opiates*, C) *cocaine*, D) *tranquillizers* (a miscellaneous category that includes barbiturates, benzodiazepines, analgesics, and sedative-hypnotic drugs either prescribed by a doctor or purchased on the illegal markets), E) *amphetamines*, F) *behaviour* (e.g. sex, eating disorders), G) *cannabis*, H) *tobacco* and I) *LSD*

The analysis is based on frequency tables and cross-tabulations, and statistical tests are used. Qualitative notions contextualize and exemplify the findings where necessary. They are based on the thematic analysis conducted during the data coding process.

Results

Prevalence of addiction and rehabilitation in rock books

Many of the books include lengthy discussions on the consumption of alcohol and drugs. Some give detailed accounts of different methods of taking drugs such as heroin and the process of becoming addicted. Ginger Baker, the drummer of Cream, for example, describes his use of heroin in the early 1960s: “Unfortunately the die of addiction was cast and I often found myself wishing that I could do a jack before a gig.” [p. 47] Gradually, his use of heroin led to problems. Similarly, other books portray the high costs and serious conflicts caused by the excessive use of drugs and alcohol. These involve health and career-related problems, brushes with the law, and the loss of human life.

79 books (82%) discuss in detail or at least mention addiction to alcohol, drugs or certain forms of behaviour. 59 books (62%) describe the author’s own personal addiction problems. Those 20 books that address addictions other than personal ones contain notions about the lives of addicted fellow musicians or people on the music scene. Some books mention addicted parents, spouses and friends. The results indicate that addictions are an integral theme in autobiographical rock books.

In addition to addiction, many of the autobiographical rock books describe efforts to recover from its grip. 55 books (57%) mention, or discuss in detail, someone entering into alcohol, drug or addiction treatment or a mutual aid group (e.g. AA). 38 books describe how the authors themselves had undergone treatment or attended mutual aid groups (40%). Some books read more like accounts of surviving addiction than stories about life on the music scene. The authors write in detail about the process of becoming addicted and the subsequent long process of recovery. The first page of the autobiography of heavy metal guitarist Dave Mustaine summarizes the content of his book: “Alcoholism, drug addiction, homelessness? Check, check, check. (...) Rehab? Check (seventeen times, give or take).”

A comparison of younger and older artists yielded no statistically significant results. Younger artists write about addiction and rehab as often as the old. For example, Iggy Pop wrote about his problems at the age 35 in 1982, Marilyn Manson at the age of 29 and, perhaps most famously, the diary of Kurt Cobain includes statements about his struggle against heroin addiction just before his suicide at the age of 27. Gender differences were equally small and insignificant. However, female authors (56%) portray more personal participation in rehabilitation than male authors (36%) (ns, $p=0.135$).

Figure 1 shows that the most common addictive substance in the 79 books portraying addiction is alcohol. After alcohol (79%) come opiates (65%) and cocaine (57%), tranquillizers (34%) and amphetamines (27%). Behavioural addictions, which are most commonly sex addiction and eating disorders, are also mentioned (27%). None of the books portray gambling as an excessive appetite.

Few books mention cannabis (17%), tobacco (11%) or LSD (10%) as the cause of an addiction. The use of LSD per se, for example, is usually portrayed in books by artists who had embarked on their careers in the 1960s. These descriptions, however, do not necessarily contain any negative aspects. Hence, they do not fulfil the criteria for addiction or excessive appetite. However, in contrast, Dave Davies (the Kinks), for example, notes: "I stopped doing acid and all other hallucinogens. I finally realized that the body can only take so much before things go wrong" (p. 155).

Figure 1 illustrates how artists who write about their personal problems (n=59, addicts) differ from those who do not express personal addiction, but write about someone else's addiction instead (n=20, non-addicts). Non-addicts include significantly less often descriptions of addiction to cocaine ($p<0.05$), tranquillizers ($p<0.001$) and certain types of behaviour ($p<0.001$). Non-addicts write mostly about the alcohol and opiate problems of the people they know. These are perhaps better acknowledged causes of addiction for non-users than, say, tranquillizers. Age was also tested, but it proved insignificant. A further finding was that male authors wrote more about opiate addiction ($p=0,061$).

59 books address personal addiction and sometimes the whole narrative of a book is grounded in the representation of how the artists coped with their problems. For most of the rock stars (51%), treatment or mutual aid groups constitute the method of coping. 25 books (42%) portray self-recovery. Only four books (7%) do not portray a recovery, but instead describe the continuation of the addiction. The age of the author is insignificant, but male and female authors adopt different coping strategies in their narratives ($p<0.05$). Almost all of the female authors (8 out of 9, 89%) who write about their personal addiction say that they have recovered with the help of treatment or mutual aid groups. In contrast, 44% of the male authors self-recovered, while 8% continued their excess.

Change in the prevalence of addiction and rehabilitation over the decades

Autobiographies, memoirs and diaries by rock artists have become increasingly popular over the years. Figure 2 shows the change in frequency per decade. Titles including the theme of addiction have increased dramatically within the last 20 years. The results indicate that addiction and rehabilitation have become culturally relevant themes, which are discussed openly. Relatively few books were written before the 1990s.

Only four autobiographies in the 1970s and 1980s portrayed personal addiction. As early as 1974 Johnny Cash wrote about his addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates. Another example is the autobiography of David Crosby from 1988. It centres on Crosby's drug career, including periods in treatment and prison. The other two authors are Iggy Pop and Cherie Currie, singer with the all-girl rock band The Runaways. It is likely that at this phase publishing houses and authors were practising self-censorship and did not want to talk about alcohol and drug problems, except in the most obvious cases.

Cherie Currie's two autobiographies exemplify the cultural change. The original 1989 title was a warning tale for teenagers. The new updated and expanded 2010 autobiography is an adult book, claiming to be the full story. It portrays not only her drug problems, but also different traumatic events connected with the abuse of drugs, including sexual exploitation and rape. In effect, autobiographies published in the 2000s have been more explicit and daring in terms of content. They more readily expose the misfortunes of the artists and place different problems caused by drugs and alcohol at the centre of the narratives.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of books representing addiction, personal addiction, rehabilitation and personal rehabilitation in each decade and in the year 2010. It indicates the rise of prevalence of addiction, personal addiction and rehabilitation from the 1970s to 2000s. In contrast, prevalence of personal rehabilitation has remained constant over the decades. However, in 2010 69% of the books portrayed a personal engagement with treatment or mutual aid groups. It is too early to make predictions about the whole of 2010.

There have been some notable changes concerning the ways in which the addicted cope with their addictions. In the books published in the 1970s and 1980s rehabilitation is the only way to combat addiction. In the 1990s, however, two-thirds of the artists say that they have self-recovered. Most of the self-recovered were in their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s and were part of the hippie generation. These narratives are often quite individualistic tales of triumph. This situation changes in the books published in the 2000s and 2010. Many of them underline rehabilitation as method of coping.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper explored the role of addiction and rehabilitation in 96 autobiographical books by internationally recognized rock stars. The analysis showed that addiction and rehabilitation are commonly discussed themes. The excessive appetites described in the books vary from alcoholism and drug addiction to behavioural addictions. The most common addiction is to alcohol, followed by opiates and cocaine. Many of the books devote most of their content to detailed descriptions of the descent into addiction and survival after hardships.

Although some narratives of surviving addiction were written in the 1970s and 1980s, the number of books on the topic has risen since the 1990s. Most of the books were published in the 2000s, with 2010 witnessing the most titles on addiction and rehabilitation. This study concurs with earlier studies suggesting that addiction has become a culturally discussed and debated phenomenon [2].

The rising interest among rock stars to write about their lives may be due to the fact that some of them are ageing, since the mean age of authors has risen. It is perhaps more likely that readers prefer autobiographies and memoirs by different rock stars, which encourages publishing houses to publish them in increasing numbers. The rock autobiography boom can also be seen as part of a general autobiographical writing trend. It is estimated that English language books categorized as autobiography or memoir have at least tripled from the 1940s to the 1990s [23].

This study did not analyse the reception of rock star autobiographies and there is no precise information available on their readership. It is safe to say that many people who follow rock music read these books. It is remarkable that so many rock stars have decided to write confessional memoirs about their alcohol and drug problems. This might have some impact on public health attitudes, since rock stars are followed closely in the media and their statements and writings might resonate with audiences who would be likely to ignore the advice of health experts, for example.

Despite the fact that many autobiographical rock books concentrate on the recovery from addiction, they also reveal many details about the previous drug and alcohol use of the stars. Most of them do not glamorize drug use, but they link rock stars to the excessive use of drugs and alcohol – and often to excessive lifestyles. It is also possible that some authors are even willing to exaggerate their life stories in order to make the books sell.

Future studies could analyse the same phenomenon in other music genres such as jazz and hip-hop. Research could also focus on a small sample of books by rock stars and analyse them further according to different qualitative themes and categories. For example, the role of treatment could be analysed. Studies on the reception of autobiographical books on addiction might likewise be needed in order to ascertain whether such books could be used as examples in drug and alcohol treatment.

This article shows that attitudes towards alcohol and drugs may have changed in the mainstream rock business. Some rock artists might exaggerate their autobiographical claims, but in general many books constitute a serious attempt to understand the phenomenon of addiction. Most of the rock stars do not celebrate their transgressions via alcohol and drugs but, on the contrary, lament the negative consequences of each for their health. Understanding such tragic consequences may encourage rock fans to emulate their heroes in search of healthier ways of living.

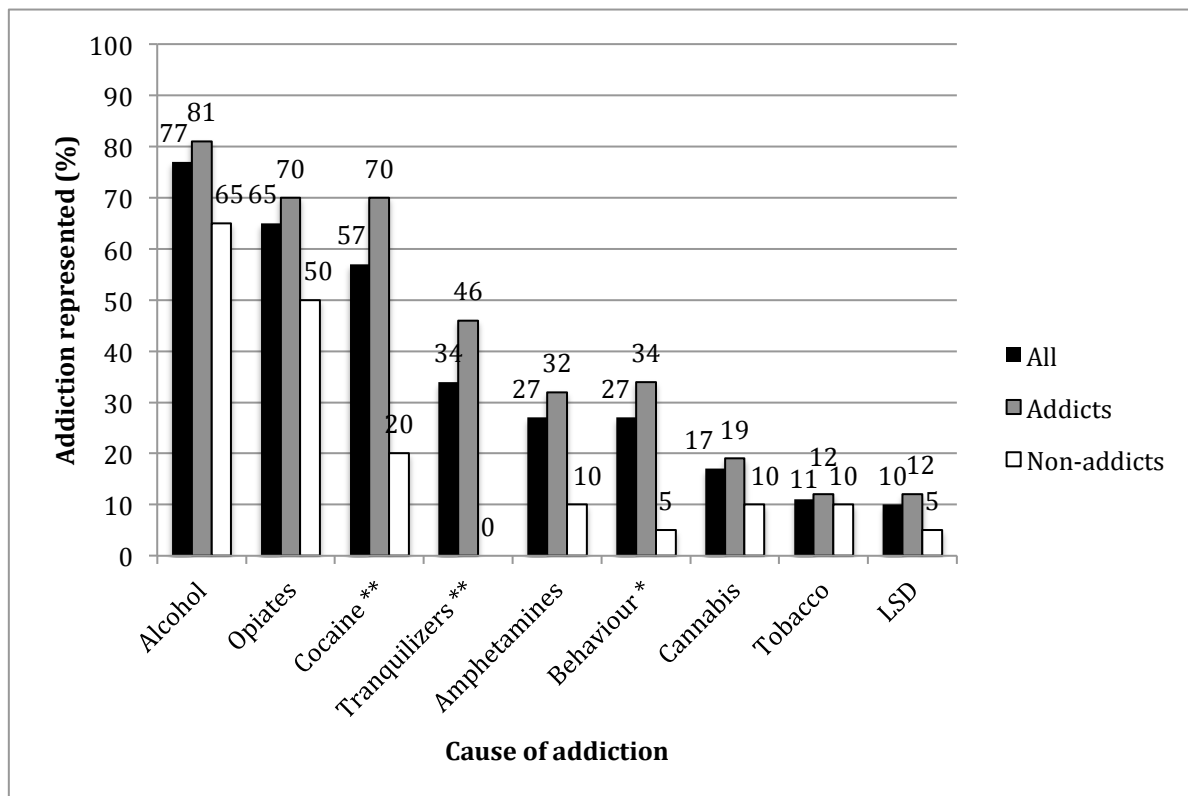
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Tables and figures

Table 1: Overview of the data

Decade	Number of books	Pages	Mean age of the authors
1970s	3	622	38
1980s	10	2909	43
1990s	21	6933	48
2000s	49	15610	53
2010	13	4005	53
Total	96	30079	50



* $p < 0.05$ (2-sided Pearson chi-square)

** $p < 0.001$ (2-sided Pearson chi-square)

Behaviour refers to sex addiction and eating disorders

Figure 1: Causes of addiction in autobiographical rock books describing addiction (All 79 books portraying addiction, 59 books by authors who portray personal addiction [addicts] and 20 books that do not portray personal addiction [non-addicts])

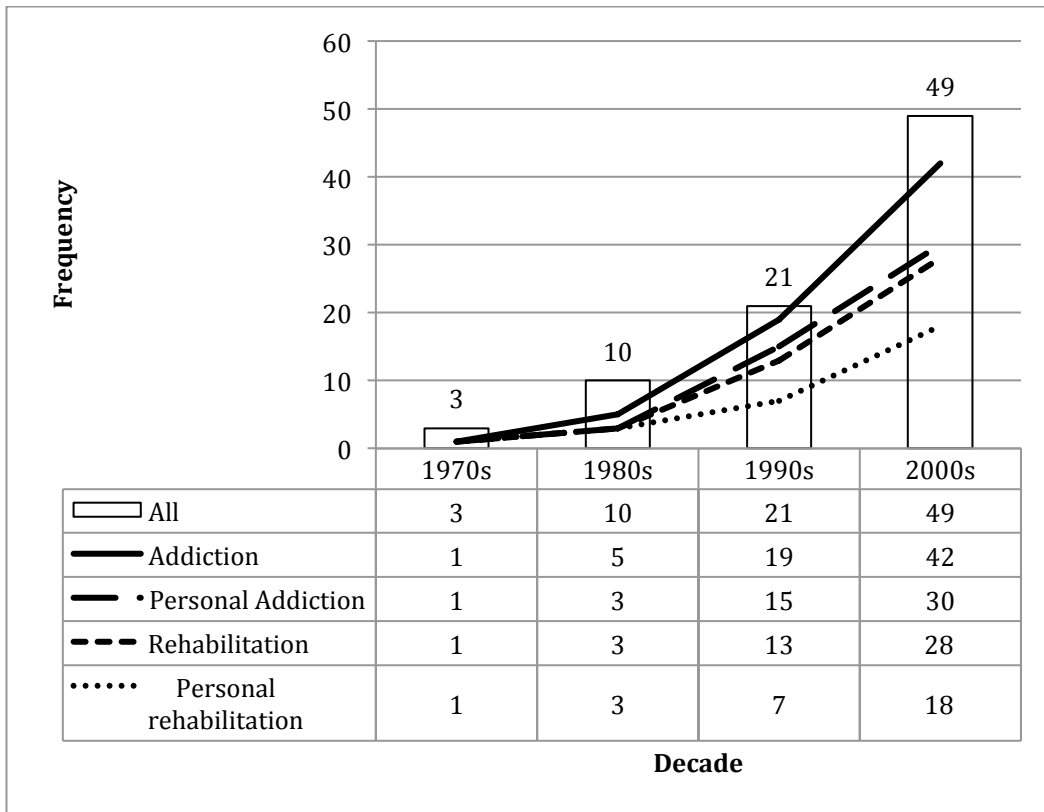
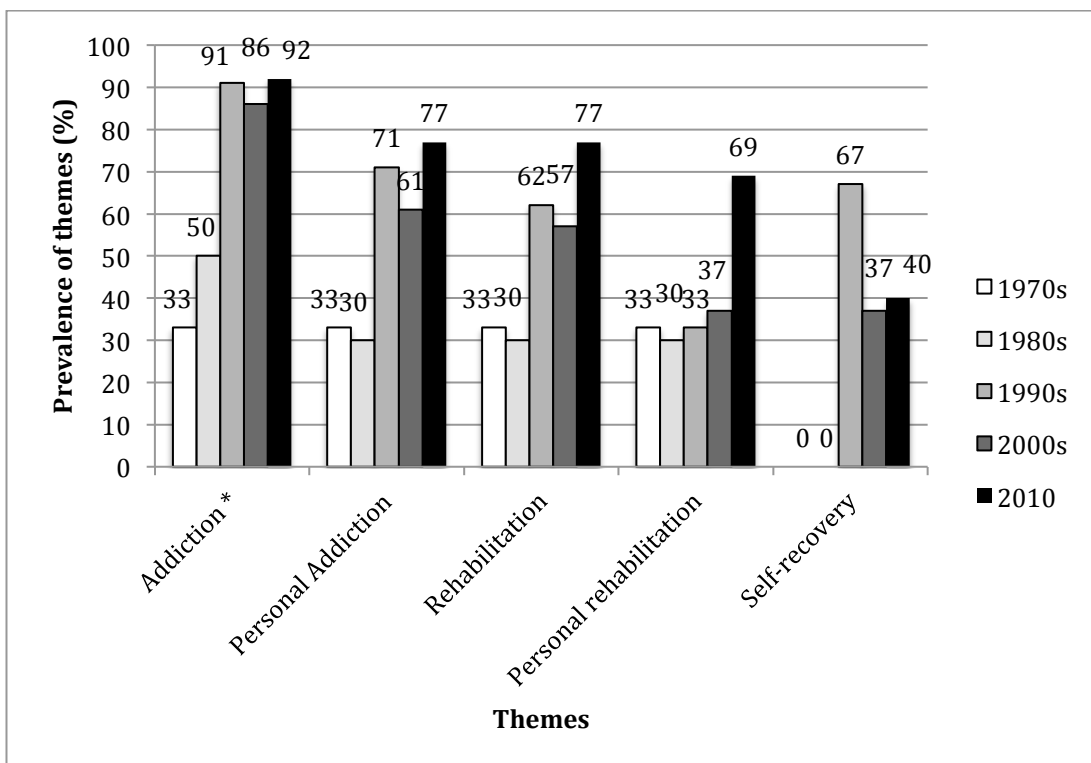


Figure 2: Frequency of autobiographical rock books (all, books on addiction, personal addiction, rehab and personal rehab) by decade



* $p < 0.01$ (2-sided Pearson chi-square)

Figure 3: Prevalence of addiction, rehabilitation and self-recovery as coping strategy in autobiographical rock books (n=96) by decade