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If a rapper rhymes about Patrón Téquila, is it advertising?

That's the question being raised by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine in a study released today in the journal *Addiction*.

The researchers parsed 793 songs on Billboard Magazine's top 100 lists from 2005-2007 and found that 21.3 per cent of them referred explicitly to alcohol and of those, 24.3 per cent referred to alcohol by brand.

The brands mentioned most often were Patrón Téquila, Grey Goose Vodka, Hennessy Cognac and Cristal Champagne.

"Brand appearances are important to assess because they may function as advertising, whether or not they are paid for or sanctioned by the alcohol industry," according to the researchers, led by Dr. Brian Primack, assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine

Developing brand recognition is a crucial step in the marketing of any product, and companies strive to create buzz for their brands by paying for product placement in movies and television and increasingly – music, says Dr. Primack.

And rappers are influential taste-makers.

In 2002, Busta Rhymes and P. Diddy's hit *Pass the Courvoisier* was released. The next year, sales of the cognac jumped 18.9 per cent and Courvoisier's parent company, France's Allied Domecq, struck a promotional deal with Busta and P. Diddy's management company, Violator, according to the study.

In 2002, Jay-Z purchased a large stake in, and became the face of, Armadale Vodka, featuring it in the video and lyrics of the song *All I need*. In 2008, Snoop Dogg became the face of Landy Cognac, featuring it in his single *Luv Drunk*.

In 2010, 50 Cent and Tony Yayo collaborated on the single *Pass the Patron*.

Greg Cohen, director of corporate communications for Patrón Téquila, said the company has never solicited or paid for mention in any song.

"To us it proves that we have a product that people enjoy enough that they want to share with others that they're loyal to the brand.

"If an artist chooses to include us in their song, that's their doing. In our view, it's not advertising, because we don't pay for it, we don't solicit it," said Cohen.

Associations between alcohol and music aren't limited to rap artists. In 2002, Willie Nelson released a bourbon called "Old Whiskey River." Mariah Carey launched her own "Angel" champagne in 2010.

But Nelson's market isn't teenagers, and the most popular songs among teenagers are rap songs, according to the study.

Dr. Primack says it's not really known whether embedded advertising like product placement is more effective than typical ads.



Rapper 50 Cent performs. A new study finds some rappers promote name-brand alcohol to young fans.

"There are theoretical reasons to believe it is. People, when they see an ad, have their guard up a little bit more. But when they see something thrown in there, it seems more natural, more like reality," says Dr. Primack.

It is illegal to direct advertising at anyone under the legal drinking age of 21 in the U.S., says Dr. Primack. He says the music industry and regulators in the U.S. need to consider the issue.

He said he'd like to see more artists use their lyrics to send the message that abusing alcohol has tragic consequences, citing *Runaway Love* by Ludacris and Mary J. Blige. The song is about children whose lives are ruined by their parents' addictions.

In Canada, alcohol must not be marketed to underage drinkers, and that age varies between provinces. It is 19 in Ontario.

"It's not something that we hear about here in terms of consumer complaints," said Janet Feasby, vice-president standards, Advertising Standards Canada, which administers the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards and the consumer complaints process.

"It's not likely to be considered paid advertising if it's just mentioned."

Will Strickland, president of the Urban Music Association of Canada (UMAC), says Frank Sinatra used to croon about alcohol, and no one accused him of advertising.

"There's the thinking that this rap stuff is a monolith. But like everything else, it is a multifaceted and complex and complicated entity," says Strickland, who created and taught the world's first university accredited course on hip hop culture at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1998.