

National survey links teen binge drinking and alcohol-brand references in pop music

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Binge drinking by teenagers and young adults is strongly associated with liking, owning and correctly identifying music that references alcohol by brand name, according to a study by the University of Pittsburgh and Norris Cotton Cancer Center.

Based on a national, randomized survey of more than 2,500 people ages 15 to 23, the findings suggest that policy and designed to limit the influence of alcohol-brand references in could be important in reducing alcohol consumption in teens and . The results are published online in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*.

"Every year, the average adolescent is exposed to about 3,000 references to alcohol brands while listening to music," said lead author Brian A. Primack, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of medicine and pediatrics and director of the Program for Research on Media and Health in Pitt's School of Medicine. "It is important that we understand the impact of these references in an age group that can be negatively affected by ."

Alcohol is considered the third-leading, lifestyle-related cause of death in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Brand references may serve as advertising, even if they are not paid for by the industry," said senior author James D. Sargent, M.D., co-director of the Cancer Control Research Program at Norris Cotton Cancer Center in New Hampshire and professor of pediatrics in the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College. "This is why it is useful to examine the influence of brand mentions."

Of the 2,541 participants who completed the survey, 1,488, or 59 percent, reported having had a complete alcoholic drink, defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor at one time. Of those, 18 percent reported bingeing—or drinking heavily over a short period of time—at least monthly, and 37 percent reported having had problems, such as injuries, due to alcohol.

In the survey, which could be completed either online or on paper, participants were given the titles of popular songs that include alcohol mentions and asked if they liked or owned the song. They also were tested to determine if they could spontaneously recall what brand of alcohol was mentioned in the lyrics.

Survey participants who could correctly recall alcohol brands in songs had more than twice the odds of having had a complete alcoholic drink, compared to those who could not recall the brand, even after adjusting for factors including age, socioeconomic status, and alcohol use by friends or parents. The participants who could identify the alcohol brands in songs also had greater odds of having ever binged on alcohol.

"A surprising result of our analysis was that the association between recalling alcohol brands in popular music and in adolescents was as strong as the influence of parental and peer drinking and an adolescent's tendency toward sensation-seeking," said Dr. Primack. "This may illustrate the value that this age group places on the perceived opinions and actions of music stars."

Dr. Primack said that one possible solution could be to empower adolescents with critical thinking skills. "Media literacy is a growing educational methodology that may be successful in helping young people make healthier decisions," he said. "In the case of alcohol, it may be valuable to help them understand how alcohol-brand references in music may manipulate their thoughts and emotions to sell them a product."

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