

Is Pop Music Turning Teens Into Alcoholics?

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A new study looks at the dark side of our love for Ke\$ha, Kanye, and co.

There's a long-simmering debate in America over whether or not alcohol references in popular media encourage teens to drink more. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than [20 percent](#) of high schoolers binge drink, and alcohol is behind the majority of teen deaths. So who's to blame? Neglectful parents? Forceful peers? Or Ke\$ha [bragging](#) about brushing her teeth with a bottle of Jack?

While there's no simple answer, a new [study](#) in *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* suggests alcohol brand-dropping musicians may be a lot more culpable than we'd expect. The study's authors polled 15- to 25-year-olds around the country about their musical preferences and drinking habits, and found a strong correlation between enjoying alcohol-reference-heavy jams and heavy drinking.

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During the interviews, participants were told the titles of radio hits from 2005 to 2007 and asked if they liked the songs and could name any alcohol brands mentioned in them. After their responses were controlled for factors including sex, race, socioeconomic status, and friends' and parents' alcohol use, participants who liked the songs and remembered a number of brands were up to twice as likely as others to have binged at least once. Even simply liking alcohol-referencing songs was associated with more drinking.

The study's major caveat, of course, is that these results don't make the case that pop music on its own *causes* kids across America to get hammered on weekends. “While it may be that alcohol mentions in songs prompt adolescents to form more favorable attitudes about alcohol,” the researchers note, “it is also highly plausible that music-oriented adolescents who develop favorable attitudes about drinking for other reasons could be drawn to genres that promote drinking and often mention brands.”

But these results still suggest pop music contributes to the complex web of influences driving teen drinking, the researchers argue. The study includes some eye-opening statistics: Each day, the average adolescent listens to 2.5 hours of music, which includes about 35 references to drinking, eight of them brand-specific.

“Youth tend to think that they are not influenced by media messages,” says University of Pittsburgh professor [Brian Primack](#), the study's lead author, in a [press release](#). “Interestingly, they will tend to say that other people their age are influenced, but they themselves are not. So, much of this influence may be subconscious.”

Education and policy efforts have been made to combat this type of influence, but those tend to hit a lot of roadblocks. Heavy-handed educational efforts sometimes backfire by making drinking seem more rebellious and appealing, Primack says. And musicians' close ties to alcohol companies—artists from [Pitbull](#) to [Bon Iver](#) have partnered with brands—discourage regulation of how drinking is

portrayed.

Primack suggests programs that bolster media literacy may help teens think more critically about the messages they receive from music and movies. But unless adults everywhere suddenly stop drinking and singing about drinking, it's hard to imagine kids are going to stop drinking anytime soon.