



Four alcohol brands dominate popular music lyrics

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A study shows four alcohol brands account for more than half alcohol mentions in lyrics. A connection that may contribute to underage drinking.



(Photo: HEATHER MORRISSEY XXX GNS)

Story Highlights

- Four brands of alcohol accounted for more than half of alcohol mentions in song lyrics.
- Clear correlation found between brands in lyrics and brands that African-American youth in particular are drinking.
- This is the first study to analyze alcohol brands specifically within pop music lyrics.

Four alcohol brands dominate popular music lyrics according to a new [study](#) by researchers at Boston University School of Public Health and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The four brands – Jack Daniel's whisky, Hennessy cognac, Grey Goose vodka and Patron tequila – accounted for more than half the alcohol brand-specific mentions in songs that reference alcohol on Billboard Magazine's year-end charts from 2009-2011.

The study also found that these references to alcohol often glamorized partying and underage drinking.

"The purpose of this line of research is to be used to start a discussion with students," says study co-author Michael Siegel, professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences at Boston University.

"On a brand level, [we want to] open up doors to young people so they start thinking about what social influences like pop culture have on their drinking decisions."

The infiltration of brand mentions into the music is a major element of alcohol marketing, Siegel says.

"There is a clear correlation between brands in lyrics and brands that African-American youth in particular are drinking," he says.

Successful marketing campaigns have proved that pop culture influences consumer preferences. Paid for advertisement in song lyrics or celebrity endorsements can boost a product in a consumer's mind, particular for those just coming of age.

"As a new consumer, you tend to look for what you have heard of," says Lauren Sarno, a senior at Wake Forest University. "Personally, if I had never been exposed to alcohol brands, and had heard of [a specific brand], I would buy that first to try it."

Sarno is a former intern at Voli Vodka, a low-calorie liquor that calls artists Pitbull and Fergie part-equity owners. In Pitbull's hit song "Timber" featuring Ke\$ha, he raps "club jumping like Lebron, now, Voli/Order me another round, homie."

"For my generation and younger, it might contribute to underage drinking as celebrities endorse it in music videos," Sarno says.

The study found that partying was the most common activity associated with brand-specific alcohol use.

"It therefore seems clear that popular music is largely portraying alcohol use as a fun part of youth lifestyle that is free of consequences," it says.

Siegel hopes that this study will help reduce underage alcohol use.

"If they can see how the alcohol company is seducing them, they might understand better," Siegel says.

Distilled Spirits Council Senior Vice President Frank Coleman says his organization opposes any use of products or brands they consider irresponsible and have guidelines in place their members must follow.

"The reality is that most instances of brand-name references in song lyrics are unsolicited. While the industry encourages those artists to use good judgment and taste, as the study's authors should know, that music is protected by the First Amendment and is not controlled by the companies," he said in a statement.

That statement also questions the study's conclusion.

"The study's conclusion that brand references are associated with increased underage drinking ignores Federal government statistics, which show that alcohol consumption and binge drinking rates among 8th, 10th and 12th graders have continued a significant long-term decline."

Some question whether the high price of the four brands might deter debt-ridden college kids or underage drinkers with little income.

"When I think of expensive vodka or tequila, I think Grey Goose or Patron," Sarno says. "But as a student, I would be deterred from buying them because of the price."

Siegel says that these brand-mentions are directed at African-American students.

"It's a race specific phenomenon," he says. "But brand image is important. Young adults are brand-sensitive."

Indeed, the majority of brand-specific mentions occurred most frequently in urban music.

The hit song "Blame it" by Jamie Foxx featuring T-Pain, which finished 16th on the 2009 year-end chart, mentions three of the top four brands specifically. The only brand missing is Jack Daniel's whisky, which was found most often in country and pop songs.

This is the first study to analyze alcohol brands specifically. Researchers are concerned that the heavy exposure of popular music to young adults will encourage underage drinking.

Siegel hopes that this will be the first of many studies that encourage "consumers to be media-savvy, to understand the marketing in order to make informed decisions."

[Annie Johnson](#) is a senior at Wake Forest University.