

Alcohol leaving the UK charts with a hangover

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Are we allowing alcohol marketing to children and teens via the music they love? As many as one in five songs in the UK top ten today include references to alcohol—a figure rising partly due to US-imported songs. What impact is this having on the youth of today? Experts warn that fresh evidence demonstrates that public health messages on alcohol may no longer be audible over the louder message from some sections of the music industry.

Researchers from Liverpool John Moores University, UK led by Katherine Hardcastle discuss their findings in: "Trends in [alcohol](#) portrayal in popular music: A longitudinal analysis of the UK charts" in the current issue of the journal *Psychology of Music*.

Older children and teens listen to over two hours of music every day. Researchers in the United States have documented a rise in alcohol references, including mention of specific brands, in popular music. But until now, little data was available on comparable UK trends. Hardcastle's team selected four focal years for analysis, comparing music charts across four decades. They found a significant jump in the number of times alcohol was mentioned.

Songs charting in 1981 contained relatively few references to alcohol, with the number declining further in 1991. Rave culture was popular in this period; a music scene linked more to Ecstasy than alcohol. But the alcohol was back in music by 2001, featuring in eight percent of popular hits. This figure continues to climb, more than doubling by 2011, with

almost one in five (18.5%) top 10 songs featuring alcohol-related lyrics. This pattern is consistent with US trends, although UK charts still have fewer alcohol mentions than their US counterparts.

Alcohol-related song lyrics are associated with urban song genres and US artists, with lyrics generally putting a positive spin on alcohol consumption. Drinking is linked to confidence, gregariousness or physical attractiveness, as well as outcomes such as wealth, success, or sex. Chart-topping singers voice the negative effects of alcohol on health and wellbeing far less frequently.

Lyrics have an impact beyond the US and UK, Hardcastle suggests, pointing out that US and British songs often have global appeal. For example, US artist Katy Perry's 2011 single "Last Friday Night" detailing excessive drinking and risky, antisocial behavior, achieved a top 10 position not only in the US and the UK, but also in Australia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Slovakia, Spain and Venezuela.

What do these alcohol references mean for [young people](#)? It is highly likely that we underestimate the true extent of exposure to pro-alcohol messages young people hear, says Hardcastle:

"Public health concerns are already focused on the impacts of alcohol advertising on the drinking behaviours of young people, yet the growing reference to alcohol in popular music could mean that alcohol promoting messages are reaching much larger audiences; regardless of restrictions (e.g. age) on direct advertising."

The study concludes that:

"The exposure of young people to alcohol in the media is a major

concern given its potential impact on drinking behaviours [...] A greater understanding of the impacts of alcohol-related popular music content on young listeners is urgently needed. Health and other professionals should be vigilant for increases in alcohol-related lyrics and work to ensure that [popular music](#) does not become a medium for reinforcing and extending cultures of intoxication and alcohol-related harm."

More information: "Trends in alcohol portrayal in popular music: A longitudinal analysis of the UK charts," by Katherine A. Hardcastle, Karen Hughes, Olivia Sharples and Mark A. Bellis, published September 30th, 2013, in *Psychology of Music*.

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