

Alice Greenberg

Professor Baillargeon

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Alcohol in Music: Changes over the Past Decade

The last time I visited home, several disturbing things happened. Firstly, I was told by my 11-year-old sister, Joanna, that I don't party enough. She insisted that college was for "having fun," and that she was certain I was not having enough of it. Secondly, I overheard Joanna and her friends use the word "drunk" to explain how they were feeling, as if they had some understanding of what being in that state entailed. And thirdly, I realized that Joanna listens to the same music I do when I go to parties, which mentions alcohol, drugs, and sexual behavior frequently. My first thought was that the third occurrence had to be related to the first two. Joanna's self-perceived knowledge of alcohol use had to stem from the media she was absorbing.

After realizing what kinds of music Joanna listens to, I thought about the music I listened to in elementary school. It seemed to me that representations of alcohol in popular music had changed drastically. I returned to college with this thought in my mind and had a long discussion with my friends, who all agreed that popular music is not what it used to be. One friend told me about how she was shocked when a band used the word "damn" in a song when we were younger. Today almost every song has to have a clean version made.

After doing a content analysis of the Year-End Hot 100 songs of 2000 and 2010, as compiled by *Billboard* magazine, my suspicions were confirmed. Alcohol was mentioned much more frequently in the songs of 2010. The song "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)" by Katy Perry, which has recently placed very highly on the charts of *Billboard* magazine, is a perfect example

of how alcohol use is being framed in popular music today. This trend is troubling because studies have shown that media plays a very important role in the development and behavior of youths like my sister Joanna. References to alcohol use in popular music have become both more frequent and more positive, giving youths an unrealistic and dangerous view of normal drinking habits.

The Hot 100 list of *Billboard* magazine has been widely accepted as the best representation of the popularity of songs for several decades. This list is formed by factoring in “radio airplay audience impressions as measured by Nielsen [Broadcast Data Systems], sales data as compiled by Nielsen SoundScan and streaming activity data provided by online music sources” (“Best of 2010”). The Year-End Hot 100 charts are formed using the same method and represent the most popular songs of that year. Therefore, examining the Year-End Hot 100 charts of 2000 and 2010 provides insight into the music that youths are most likely to have heard in those years. Content analysis of these charts shows that alcohol use is referenced more frequently in 2010. The total number of songs that mention alcohol use increased from 8% in 2000 to 24% in 2010. Clearly alcohol use has become a more popular topic over the past decade.

The number of songs that broach the subject of alcohol use more than once also increased. Only 37.5% of the songs that cite alcohol use brought it up more than once in 2000, but in 2010, 54.2% of the songs that referred to alcohol use indicated it more than once. Therefore, not only was alcohol use becoming a more popular topic throughout the decade, it had also become more dominant in the songs that employed it. This is also shown in the increase of songs that use alcohol consumption as a major theme, meaning it is mentioned in three or more distinct lyrics or in the chorus. No such songs exist in the Year-End Hot 100 songs of 2000, but

16.7% of the songs that illustrate alcohol in the Year-End Hot 100 of 2010 had alcohol use as a major theme. Songs portray and focus on alcohol use more today than they did a decade ago.

The types of alcohol that the songs depicted also changed. Of the songs from 2000, most (62.5%) do not mention a specific type of alcohol, and the only specific types of alcohol that are designated are brandy, champagne, and beer. While most (58.3%) of the references to alcohol use are also nonspecific among the songs of 2010, most (57.1%) of these songs also mention a specific type in a separate lyric. The types of alcohol that popular music details has become much more diverse, expanding to wine, whiskey, gin, and vodka. This points to the general increase in alcohol use within popular music.

Beer and the hard alcohols are brought up in reference to getting drunk or being in a club, but wine and champagne are represented as status symbols. For instance, in the song “Say Aah” by Trey Songz featuring Fabulous from 2010, one lyric says “we pop champagne ‘cause we got that dough,” connecting drinking champagne to wealth. Now not only can alcohol use represent having a good time at a club, it can also be a sign of wealth. Also, all of the songs from 2000 and most of the songs from 2010 only reference one kind of alcohol, but 16.7% of the songs from 2010 that mention alcohol bring up more than one kind of alcohol. While the artists in these songs make mixing drinks seem fun, in reality doing so causes the sugar in your bloodstream to rise and fall, which can make you sick (“Party Goer Checklist”). This is one example of how the popular music of 2010 advocates unhealthy alcohol consumption. These artists are making this practice seem cool and typical, but in reality it should be avoided.

Neither the songs from 2000 nor the songs from 2010 mention drinking with a limit. However, 25% of the songs from 2010 that convey alcohol use express purposefully drinking without a limit or nonstop drinking. None of the songs from 2000 assert such unsafe drinking

habits. Lyrics like “keep downing drinks like there’s no tomorrow” from Usher’s song “DJ Got Us Fallin’ In Love” and “can’t stop now more shots let’s go” from Flo Rida’s song “Club Can’t Handle Me” encourage extreme drinking. Overdrinking can lead to consequences such as alcohol poisoning, which if not treated can cause hypothermia, irregular heartbeats, a stopping of or irregular breathing, low blood sugar (which leads to seizures), severe dehydration, or death (“Signs of Alcohol Poisoning”). Popular songs today glamorize overdrinking, but in reality it is incredibly harmful. Popular music is making dangerous alcohol use seem not only safe and normal, but also necessary to have a good time. It is often portrayed as a way to relax and forget about the stress of the rest of your life. However, alcohol is a depressant and will amplify feelings of stress, anger, or depression (“Party Goer Checklist”). Relying on alcohol to relax or solve emotional problems is risky because it could lead to more and more frequent excessive and hazardous alcohol use as advocated by these artists.

A perfect example of how popular music praises unhealthy drinking habits is the song “Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)” by Katy Perry. In the week of July 16, 2011, the song reached number 4 on the Hot 100, number 8 on Radio Songs (the week’s most popular songs according to “radio airplay audience impressions determined by Nielsen BDS”), number 2 on Digital Songs (the week’s most downloaded songs), and number 1 on Yahoo Video (the week’s most watched video clips on Yahoo! Music) according to *Billboard* magazine (“Last Friday Night”). Clearly, this song has been very popular and heard by a large number of youths. This song is problematic because it illustrates several negative consequences to drinking, but frames them in a positive light.

Katy Perry describes the physical effects of unhealthy alcohol use throughout her song, framing them in an unrealistic and positive light. To start, she refers to blacking out in 4 separate

lines. Blackouts occur when you drink too quickly, and their cause lies in alcohol's disruption of the brain's long term memory function, potentially inducing deep seizures or psychological depression. Not only is it not healthy to blackout, but it is also distressing to wake up and not know what happened. Despite being harmful, Katy Perry sings "I'm pretty sure it ruled," representing a blackout as an indication that she had an awesome night. Katy Perry opens the song "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)" with a list of the conditions that a night of alcohol use has left her with, one being "DJ passed out in the yard." Passing out is a sign that a person has reached an extremely hazardous level of intoxication and could slip into a coma. This is a grave indication of abnormal and damaging drinking habits and should be taken very seriously. She also describes feeling hungover with the lyrics, "there's a pounding in my head/. . ./think I need a ginger ale" (Katy Perry). Hangovers are "evidence of the body's withdrawal symptoms from alcohol use and the body's reaction to the toxicity of alcohol" and are caused by overdrinking ("Hangovers"). Blacking out, passing out, and having a hangover are clear warnings of a night of excessive and injurious alcohol use. However, Katy Perry sings "do it all again," ignoring these signs and giving the impression that they are not actually serious.

Katy Perry also describes making several bad decisions on this supposedly average and enjoyable night on the town. This includes breaking the law, breaking the chandelier in her house, tearing her clothes, and maxing out her credit cards. She acknowledges that these acts are lamentable with the line "I'm screwed," but quickly follows with "oh well," acting as if they are not serious matters (Katy Perry). Another common effect of drinking is impaired judgment and decision making skills. This can lead to unplanned sexual activity and the regrettable actions that Katy Perry lists. Despite the fact that all of the consequences she enumerates are clearly undesirable and should be avoided, Katy Perry again answers with "do it all again." Throughout

this song, Katy Perry is describing the negative costs of alcohol use and overdrinking, but does so in a way that makes them seem like normal occurrences during a night of fun. Instead of taking the opportunity to educate her listeners about the downsides of drinking and the dangers of overdrinking, she portrays them as typical and necessary to enjoy oneself, diminishing the importance of moderation in alcohol use.

In step with the upward trend of mentioning alcohol use in music, the amount of media that youths are consuming has increased over the past decade. Between 1999 and 2009, the amount of time that youths between the ages eight and eighteen spent consuming media on a typical day increased by an hour and nineteen minutes (Rideout 2). Today, music makes up two hours and nineteen minutes of this total media use, and has remained the second most popular form of media since 1999. Despite the fact that youths spend more time watching TV, more youths own an iPod or an MP3 player than a cell phone, handheld video game player, laptop, or portable CD/tape player (Rideout 10). Media in general, as well as music specifically, has become increasingly important in the lives of youths. Unfortunately, this coincides with the increase of alcohol use portrayals in popular music. As youths have spent more and more time listening to music, they have heard more and more positive representations of excessive alcohol use. Research has shown that media influences youths' behavior, so these concurring trends could lead to young people having an impression of excessive alcohol use as a safe, expected behavior.

There are several theories that explain the influence of media. One such theory is the Socialization Theory, which states that repeated exposure to socializing factors such as media over time teaches the rules, standards, and values of our culture (Kirsh 25). The Cultivation Perspective agrees that media's impact occurs over time. This theory states that media gives all

viewers the beliefs and attitudes it displays (Kirsh 28). Because media's power requires time, the strongest effect is on those who are exposed to it most often. This part of the Cultivation Perspective has been proven by multiple studies. One such study has shown that adolescents who watch more sexual content on TV are more likely to approve of casual sex, think of unusual sexual behavior as normal, and be more dissatisfied with being a virgin (Kirsh 29). While these two theories agree that media's sway takes time, they disagree on its uniformity. The Cultivation Perspective states that media's impact on its viewers is uniform, but the Socialization Theory says that youths learn culture through a variety of factors, which are not the same for everyone, and therefore what they learn cannot be the same. The Social Cognitive Theory agrees with the Socialization Theory that media works with other factors to guide how youths learn behaviors.

Two other theories, The Social Cognitive Theory, and the Script Theory, also explain media's influence. The Social Cognitive Theory asserts that media is just one of the many influences on behavior, which include the behaviors a person already learned and a person's "expectations, beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, desires, and intentions" (Kirsh 34). All of these factors interact to influence human behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. One acquires and preserves behavior through control over thoughts, feelings, incentives, and goal achievement (Kirsh 34). While this theory states that people are too complex to be influenced by media uniformly, it still maintains that media plays a role in a person's cognitions and behaviors. The Script Theory claims that through observational learning and direct experience, a person learns cognitive scripts which tell the person what will happen next in a given situation and what is appropriate for that situation. Media influence these scripts (Kirsh 35). In all of these theories, the common thread is that the media plays some role in determining a person's thoughts and behaviors.

Research focused on substance use in media has shown that media affects perceptions of cigarette, alcohol, and drug use. One study showed that pro-smoking messages influence smoking susceptibility in adolescents both directly and indirectly. The indirect effects occurred through perceived peer exposure to the same material. The adolescents thought that their peers were exposed to the same pro-smoking media content, and assumed that they were smoking more (Gunther 60). Higher perceived prevalence of smoking among peers is significantly connected to “more favorable personal attitudes toward smoking which in turn predicted greater susceptibility” (Gunther 61). Therefore, pro-smoking messages made youths believe their peers were smoking, which made them more likely to smoke. Clearly media, both directly and through imagined social pressure, affects adolescents’ views of substance use. This extends to alcohol use. In media, alcohol use is associated with “immediate gratification, excitement, and elevated social status, all of which are important to teenagers” (Kirsh 170). Media influences adolescents through such associations with alcohol use both directly and indirectly, making them more likely to drink because of perceived social pressure.

Youths younger than adolescents are also vulnerable to media. I performed two surveys, one addressed to college students about their drinking habits, and one to my little sister Joanna about her perceptions of college students’ drinking habits. One question asked the college students, “Usually, when you drink alcoholic beverages, how drunk do you get?” and gave the options, “not affected, buzzed, tipsy, drunk, wasted, and passing out.” Joanna was asked the question, “Usually, when college students drink alcoholic beverages, how drunk do you think they get?” and was provided the same answer choices. While Joanna selected “wasted,” 42.9% of the college students responded that they got drunk, 28.6% chose tipsy, and only 14.3% indicated that they usually got wasted. Joanna perceived a higher level of intoxication than most

college students normally reach. Joanna also expected college students to lose control more often than they say that they do. When the college students answered the question, “When drinking alcoholic beverages, how often do you drink more than you meant to,” and were given the choices “never, rarely, sometimes, half the time, usually, always,” the most selected answer was “rarely.” Joanna expected them to choose “half the time.” Joanna expected the college students to lose control and drink heavily more often than they actually do. Joanna as a representative of her peers shows that youths hold inaccurate views of normal drinking habits.

This can be connected to Joanna’s music consumption. Joanna indicated that she listened to rap/hip-hop and rock when directed to select what genres of music she listened to from rap/hip-hop, rock, pop, country, electronic, and none of the above. Rap and rock music contain the highest levels of alcohol use references (Kirsh 162). Joanna’s misconceptions about normal drinking habits stem from the music she listens to. Past research has shown that media influences youths, and this is further proof. The excessive alcohol use portrayed in the popular music of today is influencing youths’ expectations of normal drinking.

Two important trends over the past decade have become clear. Youths are consuming more media, and media is referencing irresponsible alcohol use more and more. With studies proving that media influences youths’ perceptions, these trends are undeniably dangerous when paired. Media is giving youths unrealistic views of normal alcohol consumption and putting them at risk for serious injury. However, music is protected by free speech, and capitalism requires little government influence on consumers, so there is not much that can be done to stop these two trends. Although the messages in music cannot be changed, youths can be educated about the dangers of alcohol use and importance of responsibility when drinking. The same study that showed that pro-smoking messages make youths more likely to smoke, showed that anti-

smoking messages did their job and reduced the likelihood (Gunther 60). Clearly, with some attention, today's youths can be taught about the risks of excessive alcohol use. Despite the fact that media is glamorizing alcohol use more and more, adolescents can be taught to not believe everything they hear.

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