

Branded by booze

At the tender age of 16, I excitedly unwrapped a parcel that had come all the way from Lynchburg, Tennessee. Inside was the key to rock-and-roll rebellion: a Jack Daniel's T-shirt, just like the one worn by the lord-of-mayhem lead guitarist with Guns N' Roses.

Fortunately, my fondness for that T-shirt has long expired, and I never really got the taste for Mr Danie's whiskey. But is it mere coincidence that my seventeenth year also saw the beginning of a long and fruitful campaign of social drinking?

Researchers from the Dartmouth Medical School in Lebanon, New Hampshire, suggest that such 'alcohol-branded merchandise' (ABM) could have triggered my slide into intemperance.

First sip

Auden McClure and her colleagues found a group of more than 2,000 10-14 year-olds from New England who had never drunk alcohol, and then waited a few years. At the end, 357 kids confessed to having taken a drink without their parents' knowledge. And the kids who admitted to owning an ABM, usually a T-shirt or cap, were about 1.5 times more likely to be in this group than the kids without such merchandise¹.

The funny thing is that the researchers conclude that mere ownership of an ABM might be what sent these kids on the path to tipple. "Parents should be discouraged from allowing ABM items in their homes, and schools should be encouraged to restrict the display of ABM among students," they say.

But the study provides no evidence that one causes the other - they say so themselves. It could be that kids who are rebellious are both more likely to buy Bud T-shirts and start drinking, without one triggering the other at all.

Does one thing lead to another?

McClure tells me that previous studies have confirmed a strong causal link between tobacco-branded merchandise and teens taking up smoking. The association they found for booze suggests that wearing ABM could be a similar trigger, she says, so why take the chance?

And let's not forget, we are talking about an illegal activity. In the United States the legal age for unsupervised drinking is 21. With the Western world experiencing an epidemic of drink-related health problems, it is hard to argue against keeping a lid on teen drinking.

But the study didn't find a causal link between ABMs and drinking (or even look for one). Nor did it look at whether these teens were hitting the bottle regularly, or just once, or at whether they went on to be problem drinkers.

Easy target

Robin Room, director of the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, tells me he is sceptical. "Whoever starts drinking early already has other problems," he says, such as a miserable homelife. Surely it makes more sense to address those if your aim is to stop irresponsible drinking.

True, says McClure. But it's so much easier to stop them wearing beery clothes.

Personally, I think that banning ABMs will only make booze seem more dangerous and attractive. Could denying the kids beer T-shirts actually create a causal link between ABMs and drinking that didn't exist before?

But McClure is insistent. "If we had found causality we'd be out there in Washington lobbying for the ban of these items," she says. She seems confident that her current nationwide study will succeed in finding that causal link, so you can expect to hear more this autumn, when her project ends.

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References

1. McClure A. C, *et al.* Am. J. Prev. Med, 30 : 277 - 283 (2006).