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The Nature and Extent of Flavored Alcoholic Beverage Consumption among Underage Youth: Results of a National Brand-specific Survey

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Abstract

Background—Flavored alcoholic beverages are popular among underage drinkers. Existing studies that assessed flavored alcoholic beverage use among youth relied upon respondents to correctly classify the beverages they consume, without defining what alcohol brands belong to this category.

Objectives—To demonstrate a new method for analyzing the consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among youth on a brand-specific basis, without relying upon youth to correctly classify brands they consume.

Methods—Using a pre-recruited internet panel developed by Knowledge Networks, we measured the brands of alcohol consumed by a national sample of youth drinkers, ages 16-20 years, in the United States. The sample consisted of 108 youths who had consumed at least one drink of an alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days. We measured the brand-specific consumption of alcoholic beverages within the past 30 days, ascertaining the consumption of 380 alcohol brands, including 14 brands of flavored alcoholic beverages.

Results—Measuring the brand-specific consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages was feasible. Based on a brand-specific identification of flavored alcoholic beverages, nearly half of youth drinkers in the sample reported having consumed such beverages in the past 30 days. Flavored alcoholic beverage preference was concentrated among the top four brands, which accounted for nearly all of the consumption volume reported in our study.

Conclusions and Scientific Significance—These findings underscore the need to assess youth alcohol consumption at the brand level and the potential value of such data in better understanding underage youth drinking behavior and the factors that influence it.

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Keywords

alcohol; brand; flavored alcoholic beverages; surveillance; youth

Alcohol use among underage youth is a major public health problem (1-4). In 2009, 43.5% of twelfth-grade students reported consumption of alcohol in the past 30 days, and 27.4% reported having been drunk during that period (5). Surveillance of the types of alcohol that youths consume is critical to identify trends in drinking behavior, elucidate the factors that influence youth drinking, and develop appropriate interventions to combat the problem. One such trend is the emergence of flavored alcoholic beverages as a preferred alcoholic beverage among youth (6-14). In 2009, 27.4% of twelfth-grade students reported having consumed flavored alcoholic beverages in the past 30 days (5). To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has measured flavored alcoholic beverage use among youth at the brand level. Thus, although we know these beverages are popular, we have no idea what specific brands youth are drinking.

An important advantage of measuring flavored alcoholic beverage use at the brand level is that it allows for an assessment of the prevalence and nature of flavored alcoholic beverage use that does not rely upon respondents to correctly classify the beverages they consume. The accuracy of existing estimates of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption rely upon the assumption that youth know which alcohol brands belong to this category. However, there has been no definition of what is a flavored alcoholic beverage and what types of alcoholic drinks are included. A number of different terms have been used to describe these beverages, including “alcopops,” “malt beverages,” “designer drinks,” “ready-to-drink beverages (RTDs),” “malternatives,” “wine coolers,” “low alcohol coolers,” “flavored malt beverages,” and “low alcohol refreshers” (6,12). Moreover, national surveys have used different methods to assess alcohol consumption in this category. For example, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey considers wine coolers to be its own category apart from what it calls “malt beverages” (2). The Monitoring the Future Survey inquires about “flavored alcoholic beverages” as a single category but fails to define what is meant by the term and what brands are included (5). Additionally, confusion among youth may in part be attributed to the recent trend of alcohol companies creating brand extensions in the flavored alcoholic beverage market using the well-known brand names of their successful distilled spirit lines (15,16). For example, Smirnoff Ice is a flavored alcoholic beverage that shares a brand name with the distilled spirit – Smirnoff Vodka. Bacardi Silver shares the brand name of the distilled spirit – Bacardi Rum.

Due to the wide range of terms and definitions used, even among alcohol researchers, we would expect that youth would not have a clear conception of what alcohol brands are considered “flavored alcoholic beverages” and what brands are not. Therefore, it is possible that previous studies of flavored alcoholic beverage use may have overestimated or underestimated the prevalence of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption, since youth are not told what brands are included in this category. To solve this problem, one must ascertain youth alcohol consumption by brand, rather than relying upon youth to correctly classify the brands they drink.

In this paper, we report – for the first time – the consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among youth on a brand-specific basis. These data are derived from a pilot study in which we comprehensively measured the types and brands of alcohol consumed by a national sample of 108 underage youth ages 16-20 years, using a pre-recruited internet panel. The primary purposes of this paper are to: (1) examine the feasibility of measuring flavored alcoholic beverage consumption at the brand level; (2) demonstrate this new

method for measuring brand-specific flavored alcoholic beverage consumption; and (3) demonstrate the potential value of the resulting findings in helping to identify factors that might influence youth use of these beverages. Although this pilot has a relatively small sample size and did not recruit a representative sample, these findings provide the first national data on brand-specific consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among youth and are presented to demonstrate the feasibility and potential value of such data. It is not the intention of this paper to provide definitive estimates of the consumption of particular alcoholic beverages.

METHODS

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, we tried to be as inclusive as possible in defining flavored alcoholic beverages. We therefore defined flavored alcoholic beverages to include brands under each of the terms that has been used to describe this category, including the following: “alcopops,” “malt beverages,” “designer drinks,” “ready-to-drink beverages (RTDs),” “malternatives,” “wine coolers,” “low alcohol coolers,” “flavored malt beverages,” and “low alcohol refreshers.” We excluded from this category flavored beverages that fell clearly into another alcoholic beverage category, such as flavored rum (e.g., Bacardi Limon Flavored Rum), flavored vodka (e.g., Smirnoff Raspberry Twist Vodka), or flavored beer (e.g., Bud Light Lime).

In categorizing brands as flavored alcoholic beverages, we followed the definition of “flavored malt beverages” put forward by the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) (17). According to the TTB, the key characteristic of a flavored malt beverage is that the alcohol in them “is derived primarily from the distilled spirits component of the added flavors rather than from the fermentation of malt and other materials” (17, p. 14293).

Background

A major reason why previous studies have not ascertained the specific brands of alcohol that youth consume is that researchers have assumed that it would take too long to collect these data, making such a study costly and impracticable. However, we developed a new internet-based survey instrument that can measure the use of each of 380 alcohol brands in a reasonable time frame. We accomplished this by using a combination of carefully crafted skip patterns, piping questions (using responses from previous questions on brand use to elicit more detailed information on alcohol consumption patterns for the identified brands), and internet forms that include lists of brands with check boxes. This pilot study was designed to determine our ability to administer our new survey to a national sample of underage youth using a pre-recruited internet panel and obtain a valid assessment of their alcohol consumption.

Design

To conduct our survey, we utilized a pre-recruited internet panel developed by Knowledge Networks, the only U.S. company that maintains an internet panel (the Knowledge Panel®) that was created using a national probability sample. The company recruited households to its Knowledge Panel® sample through a combination of random digit dialing (RDD) and address-based sampling (ABS), which involves probability sampling of addresses from the U.S. Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File (18).

The Knowledge Networks internet youth panel provides high survey completion rates because of the ongoing relationship between the youth and the panel staff. To ensure

adequate participation across levels of socioeconomic status, subjects agreeing to participate in the panel who do not have internet access are given WebTV and internet access and training for free.

Previous research has validated the alcohol data derived from adults in the Knowledge Networks internet panel. Heeren *et al.* (19) compared the results of an alcohol survey conducted through Knowledge Networks with results from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC). Estimates of current drinking were similar to those from NESARC, demonstrating that the Knowledge Networks panel is a less expensive, viable alternative to telephone and in-person surveys for assessing drinking behavior.

Sample

Knowledge Networks recruited 108 youth ages 16-20 from its existing internet panel to participate in the study by sending an email invitation. The invitation did not disclose that the survey was related to alcohol consumption. Respondents who had consumed at least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days were provided with an online consent form. Participants who provided informed consent completed the internet-based questionnaire, which ascertained the alcoholic beverage brands they consumed within the past 30 days. After completion of the survey, a \$25 gift was credited to the panel member's account. The protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Boston University Medical Center.

A total of 1,028 email invitations were sent out to a random sample of Knowledge Networks panel members ages 16-20. Because this was a pilot study, with funding for surveys of only about 100 subjects, we used a consecutive sampling process, enrolling the first 100 adolescents who responded to the email invitation and were found to be eligible after they completed the screening questionnaire. It took just one week to recruit the desired sample. During that week, 360 respondents (35% of those to whom invitations were sent) completed the screening questionnaire: 108 were qualified (i.e., had consumed at least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days) and completed the survey.

Survey Instrument

Rather than relying on youth to correctly classify alcohol brands, we simply listed each of 380 alcohol brands and allowed respondents to check each brand they had consumed in the past 30 days and to list any additional brands not on our list. The survey instrument included 66 brands of beer, 81 brands of wine or champagne, 14 brands of flavored alcoholic beverages, 35 types of mixed drinks, 38 brands of alcoholic energy drinks, 14 brands of bourbon, 3 brands of brandy, 8 brands of cognac, 9 brands of gin, 19 brands of rum, 15 brands of scotch, 13 brands of tequila, 30 brands of vodka, 8 brands of whiskey, and 27 brands of cordials and liqueurs.

For each brand of alcohol consumed, the respondents reported the number of days during the past 30 that they had consumed each brand and how many drinks of each brand they usually had on a day when they drank that brand. A drink was defined as a 12-ounce can or bottle of beer; a 5-ounce glass of wine or champagne; an 8.5-ounce flavored malt beverage; an 8-ounce alcohol energy drink; a 12-ounce wine cooler; 8.5 ounces of malt liquor; 1.5 ounces of liquor (spirits or hard alcohol), whether in a mixed drink or as a shot; and 2.5 ounces of cordials or liqueurs, whether in a mixed drink, a coffee drink, or consumed on their own.

The list of assessed flavored alcoholic beverage brands was generated using two main sources. The first source was the complete list of alcohol brands measured by GfK Mediamark Research & Intelligence (GfKMRI) in its Survey of the Adult Consumer, a

written survey of a representative sample of approximately 10,000 U.S. adults. GfK MRI's survey, which ascertains the prevalence of use of various consumer products, inquires about the past six-month and past 30-day consumption of 17 flavored alcoholic beverage brands.

The second source was a list generated by TNS Media Intelligence, which is an advertising industry standard source that monitors advertising occurrences and expenditures in more than 300 national periodicals. The survey instrument included every flavored alcoholic beverage brand advertised in the magazines during any of the years 2001-2006.

The development and validation of the survey instrument and implementation methods are described in more detail elsewhere (20,21).

Analysis

In estimating the prevalence of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption, Knowledge Networks incorporated sampling weights that accounted for the different selection probabilities associated with the RDD- and ABS-based samples, the oversampling of minority communities, non-response to panel recruitment, and panel attrition. In addition, survey-specific weights were employed to attempt to account for non-response. Post-stratification adjustments were based on demographic distributions from the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

We estimated the overall market share by volume for each alcohol brand by dividing the total number of drinks consumed during the past 30 days for that brand by the total number of drinks of all brands consumed during the past 30 days. The number of drinks of a brand consumed during the past 30 days was estimated by multiplying the number of days that brand was consumed by the usual number of drinks for that brand on days when it was consumed.

RESULTS

Description of Sample

The sample was slightly over-representative of males (55.6%) and equally representative of high school-aged versus college-age youth (age 16-18: 49.1%; age 19-20: 50.9%). By race/ethnicity, 66.7% of respondents were non-Hispanic white, 22.2% were Hispanic, 8.3% were non-Hispanic Black, and 2.8% non-Hispanic other. The mean number of days in the past month on which alcohol was consumed was 4.9. The proportion of respondents who consumed five or more drinks in a row during the past 30 days was 61.1%.

Prevalence of Flavored Alcoholic Beverage Consumption

Of the 108 youth drinkers in our sample, 44 (40.7%) had consumed a flavored alcoholic beverage (according to the definition articulated in the methods section) in the past 30 days. The weighted prevalence of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption was 46.7% (95% confidence interval (CI), 33.8%-59.6%) (Table 1).

Brand-specific Flavored Alcoholic Beverage Consumption

Flavored alcoholic beverage brand preference was highly concentrated among the top three brands, which were Smirnoff Malt Beverages (26.2%), Mike's (13.6%), and Bacardi Silver Malt Beverages (8.2%) (Table 2). These three brands alone accounted for 92.2% of the total market share by volume within the flavored alcoholic beverage category and the top four brands alone accounted for 98.0% of the total market share by volume.

Characterization of Flavored Alcoholic Beverage Brands Consumed by Youth

Among the flavored alcoholic beverage brands that were consumed by one or more youth in our sample, eight were in the malt beverage category and one was a wine cooler (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have demonstrated a new methodology to ascertain youth consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages on a brand level. By inquiring about respondents' use of each of 380 alcohol brands and not relying on youth's classification of those brands, we were able to derive what may be a more accurate picture of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption among underage youth than is provided by previous research.

Based on the brand-specific ascertainment of flavored alcoholic beverage consumption, we found that nearly half of 16-20 year-old drinkers in our sample consumed such a beverage within the past 30 days. The high prevalence of consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among underage youth is striking given the TTB's estimate that the overall U.S. market share for flavored malt beverages is only about 5% (19).

We found that, despite the large number of malt beverages, malt liquors, alcopops, pre-mixed cocktails, and wine coolers on the market, the use of flavored alcoholic beverages among older adolescents is concentrated in a small number of brands. In our sample, four brands alone accounted for 98% of the total volume of flavored alcoholic beverages consumed during the past 30 days.

The most recent report from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth on televised alcohol advertising indicates that two flavored alcoholic beverage brands are among the top nine liquor/spirits brands in terms of overexposing youth relative to adults in 2007: Smirnoff Ice Malt Beverages and Mike's Beverages (22). These are the top two flavored alcoholic beverages among the youth in our study, accounting for 82.5% of the flavored alcoholic beverage market share by volume. While this correlation does not establish a causal relationship, it suggests that brand-specific research could illuminate the relationship between alcohol advertising and youth alcohol consumption.

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size, resulting in less precise prevalence estimates and the non-representative nature of the consecutive sample. Therefore, our estimates of brand-specific consumption should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates the need for future research to assess youth alcohol use at the brand level. Because we found that youth alcohol use is heavily concentrated in a small number of brands, it may be feasible to conduct surveillance of youth alcohol use at the level of the sub-brand. This line of research is important because it will help us to better understand youth drinking behavior, identify factors – such as price and advertising – that may be contributing to this behavior, and thereby identify effective interventions to reduce youth drinking and its consequences.

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TABLE 1

Prevalence of past 30-day consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among 16-20 year-old drinkers.

	Percent	95% Confidence Limits for Percent
Total	46.7	33.8 - 59.6
Gender		
Male	40.5	23.5 – 57.6
Female	54.4	33.6 – 75.1
Age		
16 - 18	59.1 *	43.9 – 74.3
19 - 20	38.3 *	20.0 – 56.5
Age by Gender		
Male		
16 - 18	47.5	25.4 – 69.5
19 - 20	36.4	12.0 – 60.8
Female		
16 - 18	71.4 *	52.1 – 90.7
19 - 20	40.9 *	11.6 – 70.1

* Difference between groups is significant at the 0.10 level.

TABLE 2

Prevalence of past 30-day brand-specific consumption of flavored alcoholic beverages among 16-20 year-old drinkers.¹

Brand	Prevalence	95% Confidence Interval	Percent Market Share by Volume in FAB Category ²
Smirnoff Malt Beverages	26.2	15.6 - 36.7	43.0
Mike's	13.6	3.3 - 24.0	39.5
Bacardi Silver Malt Beverage	8.2	2.1 - 14.4	9.7
Seagrams Smooth Malt Beverage	2.4	0.0 - 7.2	5.8
Skyy Blue Malt	1.9	0.0 - 5.7	0.3
Bartles & Jaymes	1.4	0.0 - 3.5	0.3
Parrot Bay	1.4	0.0 - 3.5	0.4
Zima XXX	0.7	0.0 - 2.2	0.7
Sparks Malt	0.6	0.0 - 1.7	0.3
Doc Otis Hard Lemon	-	-	0
Peels	-	-	0
Ricks Spiked Lemonade	-	-	0
St. Ides	-	-	0
Twisted Tea	-	-	0

¹Data weighted to reflect sampling probabilities.

²Total number of drinks of brand in the past 30 days divided by the total number of drinks of all FAB brands in the past 30 days.

TABLE 3

Characterization of flavored alcoholic beverage brands consumed by 16-20 year-old drinkers.

Brand	Sub-brands and flavors	Description
Smirnoff Malt Beverages	Smirnoff Ice: original, pineapple, wild grape, raspberry, strawberry, passion fruit, mango, green apple	Malt beverage
	Premium Malt Mixed Drinks: classic lemonade, blueberry & lemonade, cranberry & lime	
	Mike's Hard Lemonade: lemonade, light lemonade, cranberry, light cranberry, lime, black cherry, pomegranate, pink lemonade	
Mike's	Mike's Harder Lemonade: lemonade, cranberry	Malt beverage
	The Classic Margarita: lime, raspberry, peach	
	Mike's Hard Punch: mango, pomegranate Mike's Hard Tea	
	Mike's Premium Malt Cocktails: margarita, crantini, pomegranate martini, lemon drop, screwdriver, mojito	
Bacardi Silver Malt Beverages	Bacardi Silver: raspberry, strawberry, watermelon	Malt beverage
	Bacardi Silver Mojito: original, pomegranate, mango	
	Bacardi Silver Signature: lemonade, sangria	
Seagram's Smooth Malt Beverage	Seagram's Escapes: lime melonade, calypso colada, bahama mama, stawberry daiquiri, Jamaican me happy, cherry fizz, margarita, fuzzy navel, wild berries	Malt beverage
Sky Blue Malt		Malt beverage
Bartles & Jaymes	Blue Hawaiian, classic original, exotic berry, fuzzy navel, mojito, pina colada, pomegranate raspberry, sangria, strawberry daiquiri, stawberry margarita	Wine cooler
Parrot Bay	Captain Morgan Parrot Bay Tropical Malt Beverages: wave runner, sunset surf, matava blue Long Island Ice Tea	Malt beverage
Zima XXX	Zima XXX: Hard punch, black cherry, green apple	Malt beverage, alcopop
	Zima Citrus: citrus, tangerine, pineapple citrus	
Sparks Malt	Sparks, Sparks plus, Sparks lemon, Sparks red (berry and cherry)	Malt beverage