Words used to describe alcohol intoxication may give clues to drinking habits

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People have always used different words to describe the inebriating effects of alcohol, from 'blotto' in the 1920s to 'honkers' in the 1950s. Now, new Penn State research suggests the language young adults use to

describe the effects they feel from drinking may give insight into their drinking habits.

A team of researchers led by Ashley Linden-Carmichael, assistant research professor, examined the language young adults use to describe different levels of inebriation. The team was able to not only discover the language young people are using, but also discovered four distinct 'classes' of drinkers: happy drinkers, relaxed drinkers, buzzed drinkers and multi-experience drinkers.

Linden-Carmichael said the results—recently published in the journal *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology*—can not only give insight into the drinking habits of young adults, but could also help researchers and clinicians fine-tune their language during interventions and research studies.

"We're finding that young adults have a wide range of vocabulary they use around drinking, and we should make sure we're using words that they are using instead of more clinical terms like 'intoxicated,'" Linden-Carmichael said. "Even the word 'drunk' may not be seen as the highest level of drinking. As researchers or clinicians, we need to incorporate contemporary language into our work."

According to the researchers, the young adult age range from 18 to 25 is a high-risk period for dangerous alcohol use, with about 37% of young adults reporting binge drinking—typically defined as five or more drinks in two hours for men or four or more for women—at least once in the past month and 10% reporting binge drinking on five or more days in the past month.

Linden-Carmichael said that understanding the drinking habits of young adults is critical to intervention efforts, and that some recent research suggests that how drunk someone feels may be a better predictor of risky

behavior than an objective measure of how drunk they actually are, like blood alcohol content (BAC).

"If a young adult is particularly risk-prone and is considering driving home after a night of drinking, are they going to do the math of how many drinks they've had over a certain number of hours or are they going to ask themselves how they feel?" Linden-Carmichael said. "How drunk someone feels is subjective, but understanding how to measure that could be helpful in preventing risky behavior."

For the study, the researchers recruited 323 young adults who reported having at least two heavy episodes of drinking in the previous month. The participants filled out a 10-minute survey during which they provided words they typically used to describe how they feel while drinking. They also answered questions about their typical drinking habits.

"We wanted to get a good representation of language used across the whole United States," Linden-Carmichael said. "We used Amazon's Mechanical Turk as a crowd-sourcing platform to reach young adults from across the country and to have them generate words to describe light, moderate and heavy drinking episodes."

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that most of the participants could be sorted into four categories, each with their own vocabulary and habits.

The largest group was happy drinkers, who made up 31% of participants and who mostly reported feeling happy when drinking. The next group, at 24%, were relaxed drinkers, who reported feeling happy, relaxed, and buzzed. Buzzed drinkers made up 18% of participants and reported feeling buzzed and dizzy. Relaxed drinkers tended to report heavier alcohol use and buzzed drinkers tended to report drinking less often.

"Finally we had the group that we called the 'multi-experience [drinker](link) class,' which made up 27% of our participants," Linden-Carmichael said. "They reported feeling buzzed, tipsy, drunk, and were also the only group to report 'wasted' as a common word to describe how they feel while drinking. So this group might be the one most likely to drink for the purpose of getting drunk."

Linden-Carmichael added that studying these language differences may help give insight into people's motivations for drinking, and that those motivations may give further clues about how much someone is drinking and how often.

"When interventionists are working with young adults who are struggling to reduce their [drinking](link), they might benefit from using the same language that their participants are using," Linden-Carmichael said. "For example, the word 'intoxicated' isn't commonly used and may be associated with winding up in the hospital because of alcohol poisoning. So they could benefit from being sensitive to differences in the way people use different words."

  More information: Linden-Carmichael, A. N., Allen, H. K., & Lanza, S. T. (2020). The language of subjective alcohol effects: Do young adults vary in their feelings of intoxication? *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology*. Advance online publication. doi.org/10.1037/pha0000416

Ashley N. Linden-Carmichael et al, "Buzzwords": Crowd-sourcing and quantifying U.S. young adult terminology for subjective effects of alcohol and marijuana use., *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology* (2020). DOI: 10.1037/pha0000344

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