



Drunk on Vodka and Marketing

Branding and advertising energy drinks as elixirs of sexual prowess and risk taking makes for a dangerous mixer with alcohol.

Results from a recent study lead us to question if regulators should look past what’s in new products, like energy drinks, and on to the messages used to sell them. Beliefs that people have about a product can be more important than the ingredients of the product itself, we find.

Drinking liquor mixed with Red Bull is phenomenally popular among **young people** – 73 percent of American students mix alcohol and energy drinks – but those who do have **double the risk** of committing sexual assault or seeking medical treatment compared to people who drink alcohol straight. Is mixing alcohol and energy drinks the cause of certain risky behaviours or are people who consume these drinks inherently risk seekers?

Bulls, monsters and marketing

We know expectation has a tremendous **impact on behaviour**. In this case, expectations are influenced by the marketing of energy drinks.

Energy drink brands market sexual prowess and adventure with scantily clad Monster Girls and Red Bull TV’s extreme sporting events. Advertising associated with risk taking and a lack of inhibition has a profound influence on the way young people believe they are intoxicated.

My co-author, Professor **Aradhna Krishna** from the Ross School of Business, explained, “Advertising from energy drinks companies – ‘gives you wings’ or ‘unleash the beast’ – sets up these expectancies in people that they will feel more intoxicated if they mix these drinks with alcohol.”

To study the effects of expectations when people drink alcohol mixed with energy drinks (AMED), we conducted a trial involving 154 young men at the **INSEAD-Sorbonne University Behavioural Lab**. The project was led by **Yann Cornil**, who was awarded a PhD in marketing from INSEAD and is now an Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia. Cornil, Krishna and I published the results in a paper, **“Does Red Bull Give Wings to Vodka? Placebo Effects of Marketing Labels on Perceived Intoxication and Risky Attitudes and Behaviors”**, forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

“Alcohol mixed with energy drinks was thought to mask the effects of liquor, leading consumers to drink more because they feel less drunk,” said Cornil. We found the opposite to be true. People drinking a cocktail described as a “vodka-Red Bull” believe themselves to be more intoxicated than those consuming the same drink labelled as a “vodka cocktail”.

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INSEAD funded this independent study entirely. Following a strict ethics protocol, we used a pre-screening phase to exclude anyone who had a problematic relationship with alcohol. Red Bull Silver Edition, now discontinued, went in our cocktails because, although the ingredients are the same as regular Red Bull, it didn't have the distinctive flavour of the original which people would have recognised immediately.

All participants were told at the beginning of the study that they would drink a cocktail with vodka, energy drink and fruit juice. During the course of the study we referred to their drinks with explicit labels that emphasised different words: a vodka and Red Bull cocktail, a fruit juice cocktail or a vodka cocktail.

We were frankly amazed by the results. For the measure of "How drunk do you feel?" merely emphasising the presence of the energy drink increased the participants' perceived intoxication by 51 percent. This effect was particularly strong among those who believe that energy drinks boost the effect of alcohol. Their previous drinking experience or lack thereof had no impact on their response.

Sex, gambling and reckless driving

Not only did we want to know how drunk they felt, we also wanted to know how disinhibited the participants felt once they believed they were drunk.

In a bar-like atmosphere, the participants, all heterosexual men, were shown photos of 15 women and were asked if they would flirt with them, or "chat them up". The belief that they had drunk AMED boosted their sexual self-confidence, increasing their intentions to flirt with the women and their belief that these women would "accept their advances". The belief that they were very drunk didn't make all potential partners more attractive; in fact, the participants remained very selective in their disinhibited state. But it's possible that self-confidence could be a factor in the association between AMED and either being the perpetrator or the victim of sexual assault.

To measure risk-taking behaviour, we gave the participants a gambling task that involved inflating a virtual balloon. The more they inflated the balloon, the more money they could win but it could "pop" at any time. Participants who had the drink labelled Red Bull and vodka were up to 10 percent more likely to take risks than other young men in the study. The effect was stronger among those who believe energy drinks boost the effect of alcohol and who believe that, when intoxicated, people act recklessly.

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There was an encouraging result in our study. Because the participants who drank the cocktail labelled Red Bull and vodka believed themselves quite intoxicated, they were more prudent about drunk driving; they waited 14 minutes longer than the other men before believing they could drive. This leans towards the idea that people who drive recklessly are the type who like to mix alcohol and energy drinks, but knowing that one had consumed AMED on its own does not make people engage in irresponsible driving.

We speculate that some young men in our study believed that it's OK when drunk to take risks and be pushy around women. Yet drunk driving is not something that young men want to "unleash". As Krishna pointed out, "One thing about our results is we've found that education about drunk driving has played its role well, the same kind of education could be drilled into people not to be sexually aggressive. Maybe that's one thing for policymakers to consider."

Taste of reality

Overall, we found that young men who were reminded that their cocktail contains Red Bull are more likely to feel intoxicated, take more risks in a gambling task and lose inhibitions quicker, compared to other young men who drank the exact same beverage without that label.

Our study shows for the first time that AMED has a causal effect on perceived intoxication and real behaviours, but it is driven by the expectation that energy drinks boost the effects of alcohol. Regulatory bodies should thus consider the psychological effects of energy drinks in addition to their pharmacological effects. They may also want to consider preventing energy drink marketers from emphasising the disinhibiting effect of their products.

Since Red Bull was **sued** for not "giving people wings" after all, perhaps modifying their risky marketing campaign will be cheaper for energy drinks companies in the long run. We hope that our study will contribute to the debate about what is a proper level for regulation for not only alcohol but AMED. "The question is can energy drinks marketers come up with something else that is exciting to people but doesn't make them feel like taking more socially harmful risks," Krishna said. "Can you be exciting without being risky?"

The power of belief

The way that marketing influences perception, especially the placebo effect, is a central part of INSEAD's research in the field of marketing. People read "placebo" and see "fake" but the marketing

placebo effect is a real psychological effect in which a brand influences consumers' expectations and, as a result, their behaviour.

My colleague Professor **Hilke Plassmann** has shown how the marketing placebo effect **works on the brain** when people are drinking wine. If people believed it was expensive, not only would they say the wine tasted better, the areas of the brain correlated with the perception of value showed more activation than when they drank the same wine but believed it was cheap.

The marketing placebo effect should be considered at another level. When new products – energy drinks, supplements, “study aids” – are introduced to the market, testing the pharmacological effects alone is not sufficient. The effect they have on people's beliefs must also be examined because those beliefs, in and of themselves, may cause some antisocial behaviours.

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