

Alcohol-energy drinks: Engaging young consumers in co-creation of alcohol-related harm

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Abstract

Alcohol-energy drinks are a relatively new entry to the alcohol market, but have rapidly gained popularity among young drinkers. Unfortunately, these products are also associated with higher levels of alcohol-related harm, including negative health effects and increased levels of aggression and violence. This paper reports on the social image functions served by these products, as perceived by university students; and suggests that there is a need to look beyond alcohol advertising to other factors that increase consumption – including pricing, distribution, use of social media, and consumer co-creation of brand image.

Keywords: attitude, behaviour, experience, perception, public health, responsibility, alcohol

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Introduction

The presence of both utilitarian and image motives in consumer purchasing decisions is well established (Mittal, 1990). Thus brands can offer intangible benefits that go beyond the functional benefits of a product (Schuiling and Moss, 2004), and differentiate an otherwise common product from functionally identical ones in the eyes of the consumer. High brand equity is evidenced by willingness to pay a price premium; brand loyalty and satisfaction; perceived quality; popularity in comparison to other brands; perceived value; organizational associations; brand awareness; market share; and market price (Aaker, 1996). An analysis of brand attitudes and expectations in the US found brand equity is the key driver of customer loyalty and youth aged 16-20 have higher brand expectations than the population in general (Passikoff, 2005).

The “image” motive for product purchase includes both the capacity to act in a way that is consistent with an individual’s self-concept and to express this self-concept to others (Sirgy, 1982). There is considerable evidence that brands are one of the tools that people use to create and communicate these self-concepts (Chaplin and Roedder, 2005), and that this is facilitated by the range of brands and differentiated brand images within product categories (Fournier, 1998). As young people develop self-concepts during adolescence, the role of brands in communicating self-image and group membership becomes increasingly important (Chaplin and Roedder, 2005). For example, the use and salience of brands has been noted as a principal factor in the adoption of fashion product and trends; particularly the importance of purchasing and wearing brands that are perceived by peers to be ‘cool’ (Grant & Stephen, 2005), with different brands conveying messages about self-image and social group identification (in Australia, for example, brands such as Roxy and Billabong). In a US study of over 1,000 high school students, Beaudoin, Lachance and Robitaille (2003) found that “brand sensitivity is an increasing function of fashion ‘adoptiveness’ among adolescents” (p23). Other studies have reported that this fashion/brand sensitivity is particularly evident among teenage girls with girls perceiving inherent ‘risks’ associated with making an incorrect fashion purchase decision (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002).

Alcohol energy drinks

Energy drinks first hit the market in the late 1990. Within two years of their introduction, energy drinks became a popular mixer for spirits (especially vodka), followed in 2000 with the introduction of pre-mixed alcohol-energy drinks (AEDs), which are packaged and marketed in a very similar style to non-alcoholic energy drinks (Australian examples include Pulse and Fairy Bomb). Recent studies on the effects of AEDs found they reduce *perceptions* of alcohol intoxication while having the same effect on actual intoxication as other alcohol products (Ferreira et al., 2006; Marcziński and Fillmore, 2006). The combination of alcohol with energy drinks has a number of potential negative effects, above those of alcohol alone, including increased toxicity, as both energy drinks and alcohol are dehydrating (American Medical Association, 2003); uncharacteristic aggressive behaviours and violence (MacDonald, 2007; Song, 2008); increased likelihood of driving while intoxicated (Song, 2008); being taken advantage of sexually (O'Brien *et al.*, 2008); and being physically injured (O'Brien *et al.*, 2008).

There is a need to further examine AED consumption, especially in an Australian context. The present study was designed to examine the use of pre-mixed AEDs (reported elsewhere); this paper focuses on unexpected findings in relation to brand associations and social perceptions regarding a specific energy drink (Red Bull®) and alcohol (vodka and Jägermeister®).

Method

We conducted a series of four focus groups with a convenience sample of 21 students aged 18 to 25 years at a large, regional university. Participants were recruited via advertising posters in the university bar, food court, and campus notice boards. This research was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

A consistent theme that emerged from the four focus groups was that alcohol energy drinks were not only consumed in pre-mixed cans and packages (which was the original focus of the project) but were also popular choices for young people to purchase over the bar at various clubs and pubs. The two 'products' that were mentioned in all of the focus groups were 'vodka and Red Bull®' and 'Jäger bombs' (a shot of Jägermeister dropped into a glass of Red Bull® with the drink being consumed immediately after the drop).

I work at a bar and the most popular drinks for, the younger, teenage crowd is definitely vodka Red Bulls (FG1)

Yeah. Like a Jäger bomb, like you'll have one or two of them a night because, because they are so potent. (FG3)

Focus group participants were aware of some of the health risks associated with (alcohol) energy drinks, with many of them spontaneously discussing negative effects they, or their friends, had experienced, particularly heart palpitations and severe hangovers. They were also consistent in their emphasis on the positive experiences with these particular drinks, which appeared to outweigh the potential negative effects. The perceived benefits included extending their night, having more energy to party with friends and because they are a 'fun' and 'cool' drink to have while out in a club.

I have a friend that used to drink them, not pre-mixed ones but just like vodka and Red Bull from the bar. She didn't go out that much so when she did go out if she felt herself starting to sort of go downhill she was always, like, no, I have to have a good night, and then she'd have a couple 'cause she felt like it would make sure that she was able to enjoy herself more. (FG1)

If you have more than, more than one, like 'cause I drink energy drinks anyway every day, so yeah, I, I don't really go to a club and drink energy, if I do, like, if I'm very tired I might have a Red Bull with vodka or something but, yeah, it's only to pick me up. (FG2)

However, the primary emphasis – and focus of discussion – was the social nature of these drink choices, particularly 'Jäger bombs.' Participants reported that they are consumed in groups of friends and used as a group bonding experience to heighten the night's overall level of fun. This attitude was consistent across each focus group and it was clear that these were the most popular alcohol energy drink among these university students.

I think it sounds kind of lame but Jäger bombs are kind of fun to do in a way. It just kind of gets everyone up there and just more of a fun thing. It tastes good as well but it's not, I don't know if I really go for the effect of it, like, I go up there and I just do it 'cause it's fun...(FG2)

But I don't see many people ever ordering just a single Jäger bomb, like it's always usually [P: In a shout, yeah.] in a group [P: Yeah.] activity. (FG3)

It's exactly like shots where everyone sort of does it [P: Mmm, exactly.] together. That's what, that's what Jäger bomb is. (FG4)

Yeah, it is. Who, like, sits at the bar by themselves and like has a Jäger bomb [P And goes, yeah, drop it.] yeah. Like it's all about doing it together, who gets it down fastest. (FG4)

Participants stated that the majority of these drinking sessions occurred while at a club or pub. However, when they were consumed in a house setting, the amount of alcohol they were drinking increased to dangerous levels.

I think [P: Everyone's been] with the Jäger bombs, I know like, I've made my own Jäger bombs and [I: Uh-huh.] you kind of, you kind of over pour [I: Yeah.] so you might end up with a little bit more when you mix it yourself. (FG1)

Yeah, I went to a party once in Canberra and we were doing Jäger bombs and, yeah, they didn't have a shot glass so it was pour something and then tip the Jäger and, oh that looks like about it [P: We didn't have a shot glass.....] and chug that back [P:so we used egg cups and that was obviously a bit bigger than shot glasses.] (FG1)

Participants also expressed the view that group Jäger bombs were apart of young peoples drinking culture and there was simply no way to avoid having a Jäger bomb if you were with a group of friends who were drinking them.

I think it also depends on like what your other friends are drinking. Like, if you're with a massive group of 10 or whatever and someone just goes, oh what are you having, vodka and Red Bull, all right we'll get 10 of them, and so everyone just drinks that for the rest of the night. So it has a lot to do with peer pressure, I suppose you'd want to call it. (FG4)

We always get the ones, like, oh you know for example like, lets have a Jäger bomb. You know even if you say no you still end up with, with one in front of you, so it's sort of like [P: Yeah.] the, the culture of it, of going out and drinking all together and getting really drunk all together, you might be more inclined to do the pre-mixed, like the, not the ready to drink ones, the mix it yourself ones so you can sort of do it all together. (FG4)

The marketing and advertising of alcohol energy drinks

In pubs and clubs, alcohol energy drinks that can be served over the counter (Red Bull® and vodka/ Jäger bomb) were also the drinks that participants reported were consistently 'on special' which made them even more appealing to younger people. Participants were able to recall the price of these drinks at specific venues (and even what nights they were 'on special'), with price points set in a way that appeared to increase consumption.

OK. 'Cause I was just thinking we're talking about bars. But yeah, like as well they're usually the ones that are on special, like the, the ones that do have energy drinks in them. When I go out, like that'll, like usually be on special for kids and stuff. (FG1)

Yeah, especially what we were saying before, like the places that have the promotions like [P: Yeah.] I think I even saw one where it was cheaper to buy three Jäger bombs than two and like you know having five, five bucks and stuff like that. (FG4)

Yeah, even they have actually started to become a cheaper option as well, I've just remembered. At, on Wednesday nights you have places like Glasshouse and Ivory [local nightclubs] and they do, I think it's \$5.00 Red Bull® and vodka and so that, that's [P: \$5.00 Jäger bombs.] that's easily comparable to a bourbon and Coke. In some cases, like it might be, even be cheaper, you know, \$5.00 for a Red Bull® and vodka. You might pay, \$9.00 at another bar, at another pub for that so yeah. And I like the taste of it as well, so if it's on offer for \$5.00 then I'll buy it. (FG4)

Participants were familiar with various types of alcohol energy drinks, both in the bar-mixed variety (e.g., Jäger bombs, vodka and Red Bull®, the reverse Jäger) and the pre-mixed variety (Pulse, Elevate, Smirnoff, Cougar, Fairy Bomb [absinthe energy drink]). They were able to recall little, if any, advertising in the mainstream media but recalled various promotions in clubs/pubs that directly targeted young people at the popular venues themselves.

Like, on television, like you don't see them advertised but at bars or wherever they do say, Jäger bombs, five bucks [I: Uh-huh.] and things like that. (FG1)

They had a promotion where they gave out hats and stuff. It was only if you bought Jägermeister but of course you're going to get Jägermeister with Red Bull® [I: Uh-huh.] so yeah, there was hats and shirts and yeah, everything so. (FG1)

Interestingly, many of the participants felt that alcohol energy drinks did not need mainstream promotion/advertising, as word of mouth (particularly for Jäger bombs, and vodka and Red Bull®) and their close association with regular energy drinks influences young people to try and buy alcohol energy drinks.

I don't know, it's sort of self advertising, I suppose. If someone, like in big, like shouting rounds like that where you all just go, all go for one round each sort of thing. (FG3)

Yeah, it's all, it's pretty well known already like it [P: Mmm.] doesn't really warrant, I think it doesn't really warrant, you don't need to (FG3)

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate university students' perceptions of, and experiences with, pre-mixed (RTD) alcohol energy drinks, a product category which is marketed through a range of mainstream advertising, sales promotion, and point-of-sale strategies. However, participants in all groups spontaneously raised two bar-mixed drinks: 'Jäger bombs' and 'vodka and Red Bull®'. It is important to note these particular products are associated with high levels of alcohol-related harms, primarily aggression and violence, to the extent that they have been banned in some communities. For example, Newcastle Council banned 'bomb' beverages in late night venues in the CBD to discourage 'drunken louts' after several incidents of violent anti-social behaviour by young people (Keene, 2007).

The consumption of both of these drinks was associated with a range of social and image factors, particularly social bonding and being part of the group. It appears that these two products have developed an 'image' benefit that goes well beyond their utilitarian benefits

(which could be obtained from a range of functionally similar products). As identified by Mittal (1990), “Image benefits are artifacts of cultural symbols associated with the possession and/or consumption of an object. They become so associated through social communication or through advertising and other elements of the marketing mix (e.g., the exclusivity of the distribution outlets) that simulate the intended associations” (p. 210). It is interesting to note that this image association appears to be facilitated, rather than hindered, by the absence of mainstream advertising; with participants noting that such advertising was unnecessary due to both word-of-mouth and the known in-venue promotions which were seen to be targeted at their peer group. Further, their perception that the advertising for Red Bull (the soft drink) actually conveys a message about Jäger bombs that is understood by their social group is supported by the German name for this cocktail *Fliegender Hirsch* (Flying Stag) “where “Flying” is derived from the slogan “Red Bull gives you wings” and “Hirsch” means “stag” (the Jägermeister logo) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/jagerbomb>). We also note that ‘Jäger bomb’ has its own FaceBook page, where aficionados can share information such as the prices at different venues, and stories of the ‘most’ and ‘strongest’ Jäger bombs they have consumed. The stated ‘mission’ of ‘Jäger bomb’ on this page is: “To drink those bombs and PARTY HARD!” and as at 06 July 2009 ‘Jäger bomb’ had 128,807 friends.

Limitations: This research was conducted with a small group of young people in one regional town in New South Wales, thus the results may not be generalisable to the wider population (although the popularity of ‘Jager bomb’ on Facebook and reports of harm from other geographic regions suggests that this is not a localized phenomenon)

Implications: It is important to note that we are not suggesting that these two branded products are unique, or that prohibiting their sale would in itself prevent harmful alcohol consumption. Rather, we are suggesting that the current role of these products in the social lives and identities of young people is indicative of the way that young people engage with (alcohol) brands. While many would argue that this has always been the case – for example, beer has long been seen as part of the Australian male culture and ‘Passion Pop’ part of the teen drinking identity – what has changed is the nature, potency and availability of alcohol products. The combination of energy drinks and alcohol is associated with far greater harm than the consumption of alcohol alone; access to alcohol is increasing due to the increase in venues and extension of opening hours; and social and demographic changes mean that young people have more money to spend on alcohol.

The findings reported in this paper suggest that alcohol marketers are finding more effective (and less observable) ways of communicating with young people; once marketers have ‘primed the pump’ with advertising, the target group become co-creators of both the advertising and the product image. This has several important implications for addressing alcohol-related harms associated in this target group. First, we need to re-examine the role of mainstream advertising in creating and maintaining new trends, rather than seeing the advertising as an end in itself. Second, we need to understand how these trends are adopted and diffused, with the advent of new media and the increased opportunities for cross-promotion suggesting that existing diffusion theories may not be applicable. Third, there is a need for new research directions and paradigms to understand how marketing is perceived, used and co-created by young people. Fourth, the fact that these young people report having experienced the negative effects of these products suggests that fear-based social marketing campaigns designed to reduce consumption by persuading them of these harms will be ineffective. Finally, then, if we are to address the high levels of harm associated with products such as these, there is a need to consider other elements of the marketing mix which *are* visible and controllable, such as price and availability.

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