

1-1-2018

A thematic content analysis of how marketers promote energy drinks on digital platforms to young Australians

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Recommended Citation

Buchanan, Limin; Yeatman, Heather; Kelly, Bridget; and Kariippanon, Kishan A., "A thematic content analysis of how marketers promote energy drinks on digital platforms to young Australians" (2018).

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers. 4215.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4215>

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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to explore the nature and extent of, and level of user-engagement with, appealing strategies used by the food industry to promote energy drinks on digital platforms. **Methods:** Thematic content analysis was employed to code the textual and visual elements of the data that were extracted from the online media pages of nine energy drinks, including posts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and content of websites and advergames. **Results:** Four main themes were derived from the 624 textual and visual elements of digital marketing content of energy drink brands, including online social connectivity, desired social identity, enhancement of performance and enhancement of mood. **Conclusions:** Energy drinks were popular on digital platforms, as evidenced by the large volume of user-engagement (e.g. 'likes' and 'comments') especially on social networking sites. Energy drink brands appear to target young people, given that the marketing appeals are likely attuned with young people's desires or aspirations. **Implications for public health:** To counter the effects of digital marketing on young people's health, regulations are needed to safeguard adolescents and young adults, as well as younger children, and consideration should be given to including all forms of marketing communication platforms, including the internet.

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Buchanan, L., Yeatman, H., Kelly, B. & Kariippanon, K. (2018). A thematic content analysis of how marketers promote energy drinks on digital platforms to young Australians. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 42 (6), 530-531.

A thematic content analysis of how marketers promote energy drinks on digital platforms to young Australians

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High exposure to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages has been identified as one of the key contributors to global overweight and obesity.¹ Research attention has primarily focused on the effect of this marketing on young children, particularly through television advertising.² Less research evidence is available on such effect through digital media platforms, and on adolescents or young adults, hereby collectively referred to as 'young people'. There is evidence that marketing campaigns are increasingly moving online.³ Given that young people spend much of their time using the internet,⁴ and are reported to have the poorest diets and gain weight faster than the other age groups,⁵ it is important to explore how marketers appeal to young people on digital platforms. Energy drinks are a relatively new non-alcoholic product category that is widely promoted on the internet and is popular among young people.⁶ These drinks were selected as an example in this study. Energy drinks have been marketed to improve alertness and stamina;⁷ however, their claimed functionality remains inconclusive. Furthermore, ingredients of these drinks such as caffeine and sugar have been linked to health issues including anxiety and adverse cardiovascular events.⁸ This study conducted a thematic content analysis to examine the nature and extent of, and level of user-engagement with, the appealing strategies used by digital marketers to promote energy drinks to young people.

Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to explore the nature and extent of, and level of user-engagement with, appealing strategies used by the food industry to promote energy drinks on digital platforms.

Methods: Thematic content analysis was employed to code the textual and visual elements of the data that were extracted from the online media pages of nine energy drinks, including posts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and content of websites and advergimes.

Results: Four main themes were derived from the 624 textual and visual elements of digital marketing content of energy drink brands, including online social connectivity, desired social identity, enhancement of performance and enhancement of mood.

Conclusions: Energy drinks were popular on digital platforms, as evidenced by the large volume of user-engagement (e.g. 'likes' and 'comments') especially on social networking sites. Energy drink brands appear to target young people, given that the marketing appeals are likely attuned with young people's desires or aspirations.

Implications for public health: To counter the effects of digital marketing on young people's health, regulations are needed to safeguard adolescents and young adults, as well as younger children, and consideration should be given to including all forms of marketing communication platforms, including the internet.

Key words: digital marketing, energy drinks, young people, beverage advertising, food advertising

Methods

Digital platforms including the three most popular social networking sites (SNS), Facebook, Twitter and YouTube;⁹ advergimes identified on the websites of nine common energy drink brands in Australia (brands that were available in the two largest Australian retailers and service stations); and the brands' official websites were selected for investigation. All textual and visual content created by the brands on the identified digital platforms was captured in June 2015, over a

one-month period. Website and advergimes content was captured over two days in July 2015. A coding tool was developed based on past content analyses of food and beverage companies' marketing tactics.¹⁰ The marketing strategies were coded for the prevalence of different promotional appeals. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were used to provide descriptive statistics of prevalence of techniques and a thematic analysis of messages contained in the marketing content, respectively.

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Submitted: May 2018; Revision requested: July 2018; Accepted: August 2018

The authors have stated they have no conflict of interest.

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Aust NZ J Public Health. 2018; 42:530-2; doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12840

Frequencies were tabulated for each code. Accumulated 'likes' or 'shares' were tabulated to indicate user-engagement. A validity check was undertaken by having 10% of the data coded by a second independent coder. There was 98% agreement between coders across all variables/codes. An inductive approach was employed to identify frequently occurring themes and categories emerging from the content. Codes underlying broad themes were developed before they were categorised into finer, more specific themes.

Results

Overall, 624 textual and visual elements were extracted from 134 posts on Facebook, 96 tweets on Twitter, and 82 videos on YouTube. Each post/tweet/video produced one textual and one visual element, since one post comprised a photo or video as well as a caption. Textual and visual elements were separately coded for the most relevant promotional appeal. Seven of the nine identified energy drink brands had an official website. Fifteen advergames were identified from the websites.

The highest level of user-engagement found on the investigated SNS was on Facebook, with more than 45 million 'likes', while more than 160,000 'shares' accumulated on the identified Facebook page. The promotional appeals derived from the three SNS are presented in Figure 1. Strategies were thrill-seeking elements (27%), characters' attribute promotional appeal (25%), success or accomplishment elements (19%), and brand community building (16%). Other identified marketing appeals included humour, product promotion, sexual suggestiveness (e.g. female ambassadors in revealing outfits), and music.

The most prominent appealing strategies derived from the websites and advergames were aligned with the strategies found on SNS.

Thematic content analysis revealed four main themes from the energy drinks digital marketing contents: i) *online social connectivity* – a large number of SNS posts were not obvious about the brand itself or product promotion; instead, these posts seemed more like a conversation directed at online users to stimulate user-engagement; ii) *desired social identity* – brand imagery or the images that young people desire to be associated with were frequently depicted in the online contents, particularly sports celebrities; iii) *enhancement of performance* – relationships between consumption of these drinks and accomplishments were implied in the identified posts, and; iv) *enhancement of mood* – emotional appeals such as humour and thrill-seeking were commonly used in the online interactions with users.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that energy drink marketers engage with potential consumers through digital media; particularly Facebook, as evidenced by the large volume of user-engagements (i.e. 'likes' and 'shares'). This demonstrated the potential influential power of digital marketing on young people's food-related attitudes and behaviours. An experimental study conducted by marketing researchers demonstrated that SNS were an effective marketing channel in enhancing users' intentions to spread the electronic word-of-mouth about the marketed product, especially among users who are highly connected on the internet.¹¹

Energy drink marketers used digital platforms, and especially SNS, to create and reinforce online social connectivity and desired social identity among users. Online social connectivity has been identified as an important success element by marketers.¹¹ Social interaction has become an important motive for many online users who are drawn to platforms that enable interactions with other people.¹¹ SNS practices have also been associated with young people's construction of desired identities. As revealed in a qualitative study on SNS alcohol marketing, young people reported to have carefully engaged ('liked' or 'shared') brand content to reflect their desired social identities among their peers.¹² A recent study found that energy drink users tended to engage in problematic behaviours including alcohol, tobacco and drug use.¹³ This is a concern when considering that energy drinks are often marketed as aiding positive traits such as enhanced performance and mood.

Regulatory approaches and strategies to counter the effects of unhealthy food and beverage marketing on the internet are essential. Currently, regulatory approaches to protect young people from digital marketing are close to non-existent. However, a number of regulatory measures are in place or approved in some countries for restricting unhealthy digital food and beverage marketing towards children, which may provide some insights for possible regulations to guard adolescents or young adults against negative effects of such marketing. For example, the UK and South Korea both have regulations to restrict unhealthy food marketing to children and adolescents through any form of marketing communication, including the internet.¹⁴ These types of regulatory measures could potentially be expanded to cover young adults, particularly when considering the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25),¹⁵ where the right to health is not qualified by an age limit. Other potential strategies to counter the effects of unhealthy food and beverage digital marketing include the adoption of applications to block advertisements on the internet and SNS (e.g. Adblock Plus) and counter-marketing interventions to enhance digital food marketing literacy among young people.² Restrictions on the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages, including energy drinks on the digital media, may improve health behaviours of young people.

Figure 1: Prominent appeal strategies on energy drinks' social networking sites.

