Coffee, Energy Drinks, Caffeine Pills:

Reputations and Representations

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INTRODUCTION

In contrast to coffee, energy drinks and caffeine pills have a negative reputation due to the representations in the media. Consider the associations that one might make about caffeine. Of course, one may think of energy or perhaps the crash that comes after a particularly powerful rush. But also, assess the associations made towards specific products containing caffeine. Why is it that many individuals associate coffee with refined taste, morning ritual, or even romance, whereas products such as Monster Energy or Red Bull are often viewed as unhealthy, socially rebellious, or even dangerous? What are the associations made with caffeine pills, a product with markedly less advertisement? What are the effects of classifying caffeine as a performance altering substance in the realm of sports, and what effect does this have on public interpretations of the product? This paper aims to give a perspective that will answer these questions.

METHODS

The way that coffee is advertised was analyzed by taking note of a commercial that was aired, once in 1988 and again in 2009 by Folgers, to show the unchanging tropes that coffee advertisements have reused and held to. This is in contrast to the methods and trends used in advertisements about energy drinks where in this study, two adverts were compared: “the low orbit freefall” video for Red Bull, and the logo placement of Nos Energy on the suit of an extreme sports athlete. To address the media distortion of caffeine products, two articles from The New York Times, both on the topic of energy drink dangers but spaced a week apart from each other, were analyzed to assess the escalation of hype through news sources over time with variable to new information.

EVIDENCE/FINDINGS

Coffee
The most significant theme in the media is coffee’s recurring representation as a responsible drink. Coffee is often portrayed in a light that suggests that the drink is used as a “family drink” that is used to bring together families. One such commercial is a Folgers commercial in which a man comes home to his family for Christmas from being abroad, to be welcomed by his sister presenting him with a cup of Folgers coffee. The smell of coffee awakens the rest of the family, leading to a grand reunion of the family. Note that this advertisement is actually a remake of one from the 1980s, showing that even throughout the years; this concept of family coffee has been maintained by the coffee industry [Appendix 1][Folgers 2009].

In more modern years, coffee has been given significant attention as a “fair-trade” inclusive industry, where the individual growers get fair pay in return for their services. This is often expressed in advertising, whereas other caffeinated products are not as vocal about the origins of their caffeine. This idea of responsibility helps to dispel many of the associations that other caffeine sources may have by showing a lighter, safer, more worldly view of the product, despite the actual consumer tendencies to buy non-fair trade coffee. This is a way by which the media selectively tells a story that is most profitable, not necessarily the one which is most true. In reality, many coffee growers still do not receive equal treatment and pay for their services. [Pelsmacker 2005]

**Energy Drinks**

To address the connections that are made between energy drinks and “acts of the extreme”, we must assess how the content in their respective advertisements. The energy drink industry is known for its aggressive tactics that promote the idea that their product will induce a rush or a sense of arousal [Attwood 2012]. This is shown particularly in the collective industry sponsoring of extreme sports such as BMX, motocross, skateboarding, and
snowboarding. In one example of this, Red Bull recently gained attention for the sponsoring of Felix Baumgartner’s record breaking freefall from the edge of space, where the Red Bull logo is clearly visible on Baumgartner’s helmet. A similar example would be the placement of Nos Energy logos on the back of a speed skateboarder in a filmed race [Appendix 2]. It seems that one of the methods most preferred by these advertisers is to place the logo on athletes that do challenging real world tasks, rather than relying on constructed stories or staged events.

These dangerous displays of athleticism and vigor may be among of the contributing factors to the negative associations that energy drinks have, but another source of concern is from the media presence of medical scares. Energy drinks have also become associated with adverse health in adolescents, as medical cases of caffeine overdose stemming from energy drinks are very thoroughly covered by the media. Recently, an incident report from the FDA on Monster Energy revealed that in the past three years, five people may have died after drinking the beverage. The New York Times published a story on the findings of the FDA study as well as a report on a 14 year old that had died of a heart arrhythmia after consuming large quantities of Monster Energy Drink. The following Monday, the stock for Monster Energy dropped sharply by more than 14 percent [Meier 2012].

However, it could be interpreted that this negative reaction was largely due to the way that the media represented it. It was headlined that the 14 year old girl had died from heart arrhythmia after drinking Monster Energy, which is true, but the media is of course more discreet in mentioning that the girl in question also already had an existing heart condition that was perhaps simply exacerbated by the drink. In fact, in the reports from the FDA, the influence of factors such as alcohol consumption and other drug use were not made clear, which means that we cannot say for certain that it was solely the energy drink that caused the
deaths as the simple presence of the product does not necessarily mean that it was the causative factor. [Meier 2012]

However, to address the uproar over the deaths attributed to energy drinks, we must give consideration to the existing trend of mixing caffeinated beverages with alcohol. The effects of alcohol and caffeine respectively are well known by many, but when consumed together they produce an effect that is sometimes referred as “wide-awake drunk”, which is the impairment and depressant effect of alcohol and the stimulating effect of caffeine. This can lead to consumers underestimating their consumption/impairment, leading to a higher chance of alcohol overdose. This trend is notably significant amongst younger consumers that may be seeking to imitate the perceived “high” that popular energy drink advertisements often show. Due to this dangerous mix, a few countries such as Canada and Mexico have already placed restrictions on the sales of caffeinated alcohol [Attwood 2012]. Though the consumption of caffeinated alcohol does appear to have a medical basis for concern, it is not the energy drink itself that is at fault. As with all products that are based around the expectation of consumer moderation, the product itself is not at fault, it is the judgment of the consumer.

**Caffeine Pills**

This product tends to have less attention in the media from advertising, but that does not mean that it has no media representations. One of the largest ways that it is portrayed is through the news, where it is sometimes mentioned as an attempt to induce weight loss, or it is abused by sports athletes to give them a quick rush pre-game. Unfortunately for the industry, this means that a significant amount of their view in the public is negative, due to the connection that they make with the product and the concept of “weight loss gimmicks” and performance altering substances.
The International Olympic Committee introduced an anti-doping program that included caffeine, beginning with the 1984 Olympics. This has evolved into the modern standard of allowing a maximum of 12 µg·mL⁻¹ urinary concentration caffeine for athletic events. However, this can be seen as ineffective, as the threshold of intake for performance enhancement can be well below the limit. As well, the practice of measuring caffeine in urine is imprecise, as concentrations can vary depending on a number of factors independent from consumption quantity. This could result in the misrepresentation of caffeine pills to be as dangerous as many other substance offences in sports, such as steroid or amphetamine abuse. [Burke 2008]

Another significant representation of caffeine pills is the actual use by many college students. A study was performed on students in Germany to analyze the awareness of college students of the trend of using caffeine pills as a cognitive enhancer. This study revealed that 88.11% of those studied were aware that caffeine was used as a cognitive enhancer, and that 10.47% admitted to regularly using caffeine pills for that purpose. Paradoxically, students with worse grades showed significantly higher use of caffeine tablets in months recent to the study. This would suggest that despite their reputation to the contrary, using caffeine pills as a cognitive enhancer does not necessarily result in better grades or higher scores. [Franke et. al. 2011]
Summary

Much if the reputation that the public has built about non-coffee caffeine products is a direct result of the way that the media represents them. Coffee is represented as safe in advertisements and promoted as a family drink, as opposed to energy drinks that are advertised in situations with adrenaline and action which invokes an association of danger. Energy drinks in particular have a reputation for medical concerns due to the coverage of incidents involving deaths or injuries of those that consume heavily, but the media chooses to omit much important information for the sake of making a story. Caffeine pills are also given a negative reputation by the news coverage of them, as they are commonly linked to substance abuse in sports, as well as trendy weight loss diet plans. It is also associated with the dangerous habit of students to use them to pull all night study sessions. The lack of advertising and information on their safe consumption, however, causes a generally negative reception due to assumptions and misinformation caused by the representations in the media. A further study might include analysis of why caffeine pills do not have much advertisement to counteract negative representations, or to consider why caffeine sources other than coffee are not as vocal about the sources of their caffeine (fair-trade coffee, tea extracts, guarana plants, ect.)
Bibliography


Appendix 1

A scene from a 2009 Folgers commercial about the reunion of a family for the holidays.

A scene from the same commercial, but as it was shot in 1988.
Appendix 2

A screenshot of Felix Baumgartner’s record breaking 39,045 meter freefall, endorsed by Red Bull.

A screenshot of a video portraying downhill speed skateboarding, where “NOS Energy Drink” is clearly visible.