

Energy Drinks On College Campuses



Time-crunched students look to cans of caffeine for that extra boost, but unanticipated health risks may give them more than they bargained for.

Story by Shannon Curley •• Photos by Emily Apisa

In 1997, Red Bull, a highly caffeinated drink that claimed to increase energy, efficiency, and focus burst onto the U.S. market. Since then, so-called “energy drinks” have become ingrained in the fabric of everyday life, especially on college campuses.

Despite some research showing that the products do, in fact, increase energy up to a certain point, the drinks are controversial. Many of the drinks contain poten-

tially dangerous ingredients, such as extremely high levels of caffeine, as well as taurine—a steroid found in bull testes, which is where Red Bull gets its name.

According to a study published in *Nutrition Journal* by researchers from East Carolina University titled “A Survey of Energy Drink Consumption Patterns among College Students,” energy drinks are often specifically marketed towards college students.

It seems university students have taken the bait because energy drink consumption can be found in various aspects of life on college campuses.

The survey found that 51 percent of the students surveyed had consumed more than one energy drink a month over the course of a semester for various reasons. Of the students who did drink energy drinks, 67 percent claimed it was because of sleep deprivation.

Amanda Juscuk, a senior nursing major at La Salle University can relate to needing an energy boost.

Juscuk bartends several nights a week, goes to school full-time and participates in extracurricular activities. She drinks an average of four energy drinks per day.

"I'm a nursing student, and I feel like there's not enough time in the day. I feel like the drinks make me more efficient," said Juscuk. "I like Monster because it's low in calories. If I drank one of the high-sugar ones I would be drinking, like, 800 calories a day."

Caira Weeks, a senior sociology and Spanish double major, does not have the daily habit Juscuk does. However, she does occasionally consume energy drinks because the increased energy helps her in her studies. Weeks experienced the negative side-effects of energy drinks when she drank a can of Nos, an energy drink considerably larger than the Red Bulls she usually drinks.

"I only drink them when I need to get work done, and I need to stay awake," said Weeks. "I don't drink them regularly because of the side effects."

Weeks explained that one day she drank a grape-flavored Nos to stay awake because she had been up late writing a paper the night before. She soon experienced an increased heart rate and a headache that got progressively worse throughout the day.

"Part of the reason I had [those side effects] is because I only ate once that day," said Weeks. "I was having heart palpitations. I thought I was going to die."

There are now dozens of popular brands with names like Monster, Amp, RockStar and Cocaine.



This vending machine specializes in energy drinks and can be found in La Salle's Saint Katherine's dormitory.

However, the original energy drink, Red Bull, which claims to be "liquid stimulation for body and mind," is still the leader in sales.

Red Bull commercials have become something of a cultural phenomenon themselves. The commercials are roughly drawn cartoons of people in need of a quick boost of energy to accomplish anything from climbing Rapunzel's hair to studying for a test.

The slogan "Red Bull gives you wings" appears in most commercials and often the characters in the commercials sprout wings

and fly away from undesirable situations.

A YouTube search for "Red Bull commercial" yields close to 800 results. Some posts are legitimate Red Bull commercials from around the world, while others are re-enactments and skits posted by young people.

According to Kathleen Ward-Gaus, coordinator of La Salle University's Alcohol and Other Drugs Center, Red Bull's marketing strategy clearly targets young people, citing the ads in magazines typically read by young people as well

as the youthful commercials, and Red Bull's practice of driving up to a campus and distributing it late at night.

She is not surprised by the company's strategy, however, saying that it is partly due to research that shows that purchasing

over 100 times per minute.

"It wasn't good at all," said Juscuk, who spent the rest of the night vomiting and has since cut back on her energy drink intake.

According to Ward-Gaus, Juscuk's reaction was because the

and mind."

Commercials like these are the most worrisome to Ward-Gaus.

"I particularly have problems with the ads that portray sex and alcohol in combination with energy drinks. The combination of sex and alcohol ... almost never works out in favor of the woman."

The ads may not be as effective as Red Bull had hoped, though. Juscuk scoffed at the ad.

"Energy drinks don't make sex better. If they did, I would have given them to my ex-boyfriend."

Despite the dangers, controversies and increased use of energy drinks by a major subset of American society, there have been very few comprehensive studies done on the effects of energy drinks on young people or on the effects of energy-drink marketing on the young consumer. Even less research has gone into analyzing the effects of energy drink use combined with other substances such as alcohol.

According to Kathleen Ward-Gaus, coordinator of the Alcohol and Other Drug Center for La Salle University, the survey the center uses to determine trends of at-risk behavior does not even have a question on it regarding energy drink consumption.

"54% of people who consume energy drinks do so while mixing them with alcohol."

habits developed in one's youth will often carry on throughout life. This means that if a person starts buying Red Bull at 18, he or she will be more likely to continue to purchase Red Bull over competitors.

"Lots of industries have capitalized on this," said Ward-Gaus. "They call it branding for a reason."

Ward-Gaus is also concerned that, aside from using it to increase study time, college students have taken to using energy drinks as a mixer for alcohol.

According to the study from the *Nutrition Journal*, 54 percent of people who consume energy drinks do so while mixing them with alcohol. The most popular is easily Red Bull and vodka.

While Weeks' strong response to the Nos she drank did not involve alcohol, nursing student Juscuk's negative experience with Red Bull did. Juscuk's friend recommended trying a Red Bull and vodka one night while Juscuk was at a bar. Juscuk consumed a pint glass of the mix.

"I felt like my heart was going to rip out of my chest," said Juscuk, saying that she knew she was experiencing tachycardia, which is when the heart beats

combination of alcohol, which is a depressant, and the high levels of caffeine, which speed up the metabolism and increase the heart rate, confuses the body.

Aside from offsetting exhaustion, Red Bull commercials also assert that it can enhance other areas of students' lives.

For example, in one commercial that clearly targets college students and alludes to sex, a young cartoon man is lying in bed reading a textbook for school. "College is the best time of your life. Yeah right! I have my final exam in biology tomorrow and I still have no clue," the cartoon student complains. A young cartoon woman is sitting in front of him on the bed and suggestively

"I felt like my heart was going to rip out of my chest."

says "Biology? No problem. Come here and I'll teach you that."

The young man laments that he does not have the time to learn about both the theory of biochemistry and its practice. The woman assures him that he can surely do both in one night and offers him a Red Bull, saying, "It vitalizes body

Representatives at the University of Pennsylvania reported that no one on their faculty had done anything in the way of research into this topic. It is still a largely under-studied area.

Questions directed to Red Bull representatives were unanswered at time of printing.