

WP 4c: Risk, Desire and Social Anxiety in the Marketing of Energy Drinks

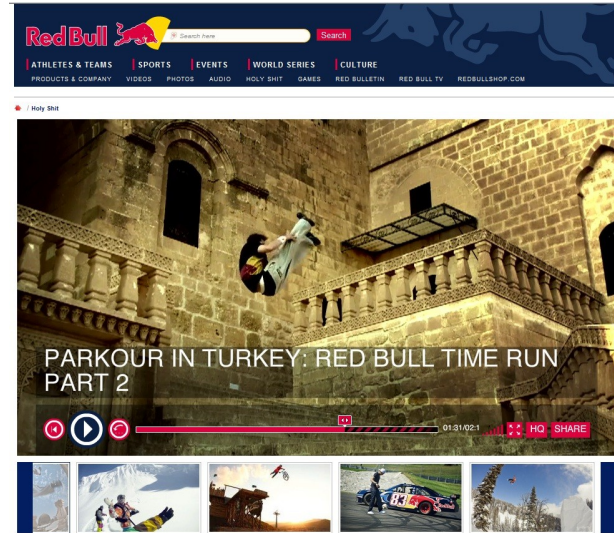
This study examines the way the marketing of certain consumables from the energy drink sector relates to ideas of risk and risk taking and to the construction of social anxiety.

Context

The aim of this study is to examine the way in which certain consumables from the “energy drink” segment in their marketing relate to risk, risk taking and to the construction of social anxieties.

In recent years, ‘energy drinks’ with high levels of caffeine and other stimulants have been marketed throughout Europe. Theoretically, the study builds on theories of the Risk societies (Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Iain Wilkinson) combined with affect theory (Brian Massumi, Adam Arvidsson). *Risk* is considered as modern societies’ ongoing identification of possible dangers, that recursively is fed back into society as a steering device. *Affect* is considered the way that the authorities prompt publics to act in order to avoid dangers that have been identified by risk assessment.

Methodologically, the study builds on fieldwork at branded events, at visual and aesthetic materials provided by commercial energy drink providers and on previous scholarly research in social and marketing theory.



Findings:

- **Risk-taking and danger** are common themes in the marketing of most energy drinks.
 - Risk and risk-taking is explicitly used as a theme by many companies at commercial websites as well as in aural and viral marketing practices.
 - The more established a given drink is, the less explicit the marketing company itself has to be in their references to risk-taking and danger.
 - The connection between the energy drink and risk is still there, but taken over by others; consumers and other users, media actors or participants at branded events.
- In their marketing, the specificity of energy drinks is expressed as a **“becoming extranormal”**.
 - However consumers are encouraged to use the energy drink as an everyday functional product, their specificity is constantly stressed as the breach of normalities.
 - This breach is visible at every level of marketing: at the discursive level, in the way commercial information is spread, and even in visual, aural, gustatory - and tacit sensual registers concerning both the drink itself and the commercial profile it is given.
- The way that these stimulants are marketed consists of a **“conversion” of social anxiety into desire**.

In conclusion, the way that energy drinks are marketed is bound up with the way that a “risk society” modulates public affect. Becoming extranormal depends on normality, and the aural and viral marketing practices depend partly on contrasting the normality of conventional mass media information channels. These marketing practices are prime examples of “advertising the underground” (Adam Arvidsson), marketing practices that attempts to exploit such areas that previously have been hard to reach for advertisers.



Photograph: © drinkcocaine.com

Key Publications:

Milne, R., Wenzer, J., Brembeck, H. and Brodin, M. (2011) Fraught Cuisine: Food Scares and the Modulation of Food Anxieties. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 12 (2): 177-192.