

## **The Rising Red Bull? Energy Drink Culture Constructed through Media in Japan**

**Muneo Kaigo (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences)**

**Yuuta Umeda (Doctoral Student at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences)**

Energy drinks such as Red Bull first appeared in April 1987 but were only introduced and imported into the Japanese market in December 2005 (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, December 2005). The recognition of this category of beverages among the Japanese population has been comparatively slow, as the term “energy drink” was added quite recently to the Japanese dictionary, in 2012. Mainstream media in Japan rarely advertises these products so this study investigates how mainstream mass media has transmitted information about energy drinks and how “energy drink culture” is being constructed among its consumers through marketing via newer media, such as social media in Japan and other channels. This study also examines how new social media marketing can combine negative agenda setting by mass media to contribute to a positive perception of marketed consumer goods and a product based subculture.

A content analysis of the Asahi Shimbun and Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Nikkei) from January 2000 to December 2015 of the newspaper articles that deal with energy drinks conducted through this study has revealed that mainstream media has mainly contributed to the dissemination of information of energy drinks in relation to its health hazards. The content analysis results were also compared with all 83 articles in the New York Times that are in relation to energy drinks. A noteworthy article in November 2, 2000 reported how energy drinks were already being mixed into alcoholic cocktails at dance clubs and parties among youth, and more recently in May 19, 2015, an article covered how youth were using energy drink powders for “gaming fuel” and were exposing the health hazards. Approximately seven months later, an Asahi Shimbun article in December 22, 2015 describes how a Japanese man combined caffeine pills with energy drinks and later died due to such abuse. Although a portion of the New York Times articles also cover the energy drink business and its competitive marketing, the problems accompanying energy drinks such as its health hazards are prominent in the Asahi Shimbun.

In contrast, energy drinks have been mainly absent from commercials on Japanese mainstream mass media. Red Bull does appear in the mass media, however

only through its sponsorship on motor sports and other forms of stealth marketing. Instead of traditional commercials, they have targeted their consumer base through social media in Japan. On Facebook for example, Red Bull now has over 45 million likes and its competitor, Monster Energy has 24 million. Energy drink companies distribute free samples near train stations by universities and metropolitan business districts.

Through the consequence of the combination of negative mainstream media coverage and marketing through new media and other tactics, energy drinks have created a positive and attractive culture. Our survey hypothesis among Japanese university students examine how on one hand, energy drinks appear on Japanese news as “dangerous” new products that result in death through abuse, and on the other hand, marketing of energy drinks has exploited their “dangerous” image and have combined the cognitive map of energy drinks with other dimensions such as “speed”, “concentration” and “glamour” through its motor sports sponsorship and tactics employed in social media. This study also compares the perception of these energy drinks with the older generation of “eiyou” [nutritional] drinks that have existed in Japan since the 1960s and examine the differences of media strategy and clients in Japan.