Trash Those Cans.

At first, energy drinks may have seemed like a harmless passing fad; a short-lived obsession of the teenager trying to look cool. However, since the introduction of energy drinks, consumption has rocketed, leaving many youths hooked on these drinks. As they return from their lunch-break on an energy high, is it the job of the teacher to stop them bouncing off the walls? No, the responsibility lies with the large multi-million pound corporations that produce the drinks and their sellers. Blatant consumer manipulation, marketing and brand image prey upon teenagers following trends. The selling of energy drinks to young people should be banned for health reasons.

A survey by the European Food Safety Authority in 2013 revealed that 10 to 18 year olds make up 68% of the energy drink market. This is shocking, but not surprising. Despite the warning on the can ‘not recommended for children’ (defined as anyone under sixteen) the advertisers know exactly their target market and aim to exploit it.

Teenagers are vulnerable. We like to think we are indestructible but the reality is that perhaps we are more naïve and susceptible to the influence of others than we’d like to admit. Following trends is the ‘norm’: fashion, brands, image and celebrities. It is because of this vulnerability that the teenage consumer market is a soft target for companies selling an image. Catchy product branding grabs young people’s attention whilst simultaneously averting eyes from the mandatory health warning on the can. *Monster Energy* for example, is black and neon-green with scratched nail horror movie font and slogans written in slang and ‘gangsta’ speak. These features are inarguably aimed at teenagers, contradictory to their recommendations. The iconic packaging helps create a brand that targets youngsters to buy the product despite it not being good for them.

Other clever marketing strategies employed by various Energy drink brands take advantage of the image conscious teenager who looks for a performance enhancer in class and exams. The energy high advertisement campaigns of base-jumping and mountain biking stimulate the imaginations of the teenage consumer. What they see the stuntmen doing is ‘cool’ and they idolise them. Whilst adults may see past the flashy advertisements, teenagers are more inclined to take them literally making them more susceptible to the energetic campaigns. Watching an attractive adrenaline-junkie take a swig of *Red Bull* before diving off a cliff in a video builds a strong brand association with enhanced performance as the teenage audience is directed to assume that the swig was what made the difference between a good and a bad freefall. These build strong, yet false, links to improved performance. In reality, true athletes are unlikely ever to consume ‘energy drinks’ as part of their regime, and certainly never before they perform.

This type of marketing of energy drinks is not assisting susceptible adolescents in making healthy lifestyle decisions. Therefore, help must come from elsewhere and must be strong enough to stand up against the constant torrent of subliminal messages teenagers are receiving in this media driven world. Teenagers should receive guidance from parents about drinking these dangerous concoctions and schools should go out of their way to advise against their consumption in school and at home. A school near Manchester saw the number of detentions fall by one third after banning energy drinks completely. If Scottish schools were to restrict them coming in from elsewhere and live up to the illusive ‘Health Promoting’ title, then behavioural issues would most certainly improve.

Along with an improvement in behaviour, banning energy drinks would also support the health of teenagers. The implications of consuming energy drinks are not necessarily clear to the adolescent target market. A survey revealed that one in twenty teenagers substitute breakfast for energy drinks. With the main ingredients being caffeine and sugar there is no real sustenance in them: there is a difference between energy and stimulation. A sugar buzz does not fill a stomach. A good meal will last for several hours, as it is full of carbohydrates but energy drinks are often low calorie and do not nourish you. *Monster Energy* contains 55g of sugar per can; that is half the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of sugar for a teenage boy. Frequently, more that one can is consumed per day. It is the instant sugar ‘buzz’ and the lasting effects of caffeine that teens become addicted to. Too much sugar is not a balanced diet and will result in spots and bad teeth, at the very least, the last thing any image conscious teenager would want! These implications worsen with regular consumption. Health guidelines are given for a reason: to keep our bodies functioning properly. They shouldn’t be ignored.

Another culprit at work within the drinks is caffeine, an addictive stimulant that can take effect within minutes but can also last hours, keeping youngsters up late. Perhaps great for last minute essay submissions but not for the dark purple bags under drooping eyes the next day! Caffeine also causes restlessness, irritability and increased heart rate. It is crucial that teenagers understand the health risks that the ingredients of energy drinks contain. In serious cases of addiction, youths as young as fourteen have suffered cardiac arrest, resulting in hospitalisation and even death. Long-term effects of caffeine are proven to stunt growth in youngsters. Addiction is a form of chemical dependency and is not only unhealthy but potentially life threatening. It is illegal for youths to buy cigarettes and alcohol because of the associated health risks and to help prevent life-long addiction so, why are energy drinks, which are arguably just as unhealthy, not currently subject to the same regulation and legislation?

Some (typically) defiant teenagers might passionately declare that it is their choice what they consume and to some extent they are correct. Teenagers are notorious for being rebellious and will not always listen to guidance but, legally and morally: children (under the age of sixteen) are the responsibility of their parents. These parents have a moral responsibility to protect the health of their children, educate and, where possible, limit the consumption of these harmful products. Action must be taken to stop shops selling these hazardous energy drinks to children in order to prevent increasing addiction levels in youngsters. Regulation would help to prevent teens defying advice from parents and help redress situations of dysfunctional families where parents do not necessarily prioritise the health of their children.

The responsibility of youths consuming energy drinks lies with everyone. Society as a whole must realise that the drinks such as *Monster Energy* are not cool to be seen drinking and have grievous health risks. It is essential that in a just and modern society the energy drink industry changes their marketing strategies; deceptive imagery must not be used to exploit the naive teenager. The energy drink industry must rethink their morals as manufacturers; it is unacceptable to entice an age group that should not consume their product. Unfortunately, we, the consumer, may have to boycott the drinks industry and lobby in order to apply pressure on legislators to bring into force laws so that shopkeepers cannot sell addictive products to young people who are blind in the face of a brand. This movement against energy drinks must happen to help improve the future health of today’s youth. Yet, most importantly, society has a shared responsibility to dissuade susceptible teens from buying these dangerous cans of chemicals.

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