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## Red Bull or Load of Bull? the unconventional (Issue 2)

Students are leaving behind their familiar coffee cups and springing down these high-powered masterpieces of caffeine chemistry. Are energy drinks worth the hype? What's in an energy drink, anyway?



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Wake up and smell the... ephedrine, guarana, and taurine. In an age when coffee has been replaced by a frightening array of energy drinks as the college student's pick-me-up of choice, caffeine's got a brand new bag, or can, of tricks.

What spurs us to lay down \$3.00 for a can of something that tastes enticingly of carbonated Robitussin? The inescapable onslaught of finals and term papers will soon descend upon us and bring with it a plague of all-nighters. Yet when the nocturnal procrastinator needs their pick-me-up to become a keep-me-up, coffee alone can't seem to handle the pressure.

Like the aging Steve Nash, your average cup of joe kicks off with a strong initial jolt of energy, but it loses its legs after an hour and comes up short in the clutch. Meanwhile, promises of "giving you wings" and "partying like a Rockstar" combined with mysterious elixirs of stimulants make succumbing to the energy drink fad seem inevitable.

Due to a set of healthy priorities that forced me to watch the Mavs game the night before a midterm rather than studying, the opportunity to test these promises presented itself all too soon. Stumbling into the nearest convenience store in preparation for a long night, I made a beeline for the cans of salvation pulsating behind the cool glass.

Claw marks, flames, streaks of lightning, and blinding colors bombarded my vision. Half of the appeal of these caffeine concoctions comes with a formidable can design and ludicrous names. Who wants to be caught with something as socially crippling as water when they can chug a can of Diablo, Crunk, Full Throttle, Whoop Ass, or, my personal favorite, PimpJuice.

Scanning the shelves, I found what I was looking for. "WARNING: This product contains high levels of Caffeine." Jackpot. Warning labels are always promising. "Glucuronolactone." Perfect. The less able I am to pronounce the ingredients, the better. Apparently size does matter in the energy drink industry, as I cradled my newly purchased can, or rather, tankard of destruction, back to my room.

As it turns out, I was kept alert enough to appreciate the irony of studying the negative effects of sleep deprivation at 5 in the godforsaken morning (or of needing an energy drink to meet deadline for an article on the damned things, as it were). However, I shouldn't have been surprised. The Jolt that I polished off contained 72 mg of caffeine per 12 oz. – the maximum permitted by the FDA, but still a manageable amount. Except for the tiny detail that the can I had was actually 24 oz. With brands furiously ratcheting up both caffeine content and can size to maintain a competitive edge, drinkers are left with racing pulses and unanswered questions.

What exactly lies within those menacing cans? Aside from a whopping hit of caffeine, energy drinks boast of herbal extracts, vitamins, and other supplements. Ginseng and B vitamins are meant to intensify caffeine's effects, while the herb guarana is a natural source of caffeine. Caffeine's sidekick in most energy drinks, taurine, is a naturally occurring amino acid not extracted from bull testicles like the popular myth claims. Which is a good thing, considering the name Bawls is already taken. Yet some experts say that most of these ingredients are unnecessary, leaving their effectiveness up in the air.

All the megadoses of these stimulants stewing together hint at some interesting health ramifications. Reported side effects include anxiety, tingling in the hands, heart palpitations, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and, on the rare occasion, vibrating nipples (not just a party trick). But what do these titillating experiences entail as far as short and long-term health effects? The fact remains that very little research has been conducted on the consequences of these substances taken together or in excess, which has raised some concern with the FDA.

Assuming most people have better judgment than I and refrain from chugging the unholy Trinity of Bawls, Monster, and coffee in one night, energy drinks taken in moderation don't seem too harmful. The danger, however, lies in mixing these drinks with alcohol. While it might seem brilliant at the time to knock back a Red Bull and vodka to delay the effects of drinking, combining a stimulant and depressant can lead to no good. Though you may not feel drunk, BAC remains high, and coordination and reaction time are just as impaired. Not to be confused with Gatorade, energy drinks contain enough of the diuretic caffeine that they actually dehydrate the body, which can increase toxicity of the alcohol or strain the heart during exercise.

One of the major ingredients of energy drinks remains a hefty dose of hype. A phenomenon that began with Red Bull has since spawned legions of competing brands and a swiftly burgeoning industry that skyrocketed by 80% last year. Big name companies like Coca-Cola, Pepsico, and Anheuser-Busch have elbowed their way into the crowd, joining smaller brands that thrive on guerilla marketing techniques. When the beast that is known as Steven Seagal has released his own energy drink, you know there must be some stiff competition. Let's just hope this sufficiently distracts him from the movie industry.

In the end, energy drinks have carved their way into the marketing niche of college campuses and will thrive within it as long as the scourge of procrastination exists. So when the late-night cramming begins, go ahead. Grab a can and decide for yourself -- Red bull, or load of bull.

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