



Digital Promotion of Energy Drinks to Young Adults Is More Strongly Linked to Consumption Than Other Media

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine whether digital marketing strategies are more strongly associated with energy drink use than other marketing and whether Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) constructs mediated the effects of digital marketing on energy drink use.

Design: A cross-sectional online survey using the TPB was administered in 2016.

Setting: Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia.

Participants: A total of 359 young adults aged 18–24 years completed the survey. Participants were mainly students.

Main Outcome Measures: Relative impacts of digital and other marketing on energy drink use and the mediating effects of TPB constructs: attitudes, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.

Analysis: Stepwise regression analysis was employed to compare the effects on energy drink use from digital and other marketing. Mediation analysis was used to examine the mediating effects of the TPB constructs.

Results: Digital marketing was more strongly associated than other marketing with young adults' energy drink use. Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control mediated the effects of digital marketing on energy drink use.

Conclusions and Implications: The marketing of unhealthy food and beverages such as energy drink products on the Internet requires greater scrutiny. Future interventions may focus on strategies to attenuate young adults' attitudes toward energy drinks, denormalize energy drink use, and strengthening self-efficacy to reject energy drinks among this age group.

Key Words: digital marketing, energy drinks, Theory of Planned Behavior, unhealthy food marketing, young adults (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2018; 50:888–895.)

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INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing of unhealthy commodities, including the promotion of products through websites and social media,¹ has drawn the attention of health care professionals and policy makers because of its potential impacts on consumption behaviors.² A large body of research confirmed the negative influences of commercial marketing of food and beverages through other forms of marketing,

particularly traditional media platforms (ie, television), on children.^{3–5} Because of the ubiquitous, interactive, and 24/7 availability of digital technologies,⁶ digital marketing of unhealthy food and beverages may have greater effects relative to other forms of marketing.^{2,7} A systematic review of the effects of digital marketing of unhealthy commodities concluded that digital marketing enhanced young people's beliefs regarding these products and their

intended and actual consumption.⁸ Nevertheless, the relative impact of digital marketing compared with other media marketing is unknown.

The potential negative impacts on young adults of digital marketing of unhealthy products, particularly alcohol and tobacco products, were documented in previous literature.^{9–11} However, digital marketing effects of food and nonalcoholic beverage products have not been well explored. One experimental study demonstrated that online marketing enhanced young adults' interests, purchase, and consumption intentions toward an unhealthy beverage. This evidence refuted assertions that this age group has sufficient cognitive capabilities to oppose marketing persuasion.^{12,13} Young adults are a high-risk group; they have faster weight gain¹⁴ and greater consumption of unhealthy food and beverages than other age groups¹⁵

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and live much of their lives interacting on the Internet. In Australia, for example, 98% of young people aged 18–24 years are Internet users.¹⁶ Marketing strategies incorporating digital media are also likely to appeal to this age group: for instance, through peer-to-peer online interactions on social media. This refers to peer sharing of product information or promotions through active user engagement with social media platforms such as liking and sharing posts on Facebook.¹⁷

The researchers chose energy drinks as the focus of this study to examine the effects of digital food marketing on young adults. Energy drinks represent a new nonalcoholic product category, first introduced in 1987 (in Austria) by Red Bull.¹⁸ Although global sales of soft drinks are declining,¹⁹ the energy drink industry is booming, with global sales of 50 billion USD recorded in 2014.²⁰ These drinks are in high demand, especially among young adults,²¹ and have become a central part of partying and sporting culture.²² These drinks contain caffeine, taurine, vitamins, and other ingredients such as guarana and ginseng. They are commonly marketed to boost physical and mental performance,²³ and the popularity of these drinks has been fueled by these claims.²⁴ Consumption of energy drinks is a public health concern among children, adolescents, and young adults²⁴ because they may

cause dental problems,²⁵ cardiovascular and neurological issues,¹⁸ and in rare cases, death.²⁶

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)²⁷ proposes that an individual's likelihood of performing a behavior is based on his or her attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC), which ultimately leads to his or her behavior.²⁷ It is based on 3 constructs of behavior: attitudes, in which an individual has negatively or positively evaluated a behavior; subjective norms, the individual's perception of social norms that encourage or discourage engagement in the behavior; and PBC, the individual's perceived ease or difficulty in controlling the behavior.²⁷ Based on TPB, the effects of environmental factors (digital marketing) on behavior (energy drink use) would be mediated by these 3 constructs^{28,29} (Figure 1). This study tested the mediating effects of TPB constructs in the relationship between digital marketing and energy drink use. A theoretical understanding of digital marketing–induced unhealthy behaviors may elucidate guidance for more effective health interventions.

The researchers hypothesized that (1) digital marketing would be more strongly associated with young adults' energy drink use than other marketing, and (2) TPB constructs would mediate the effects of digital marketing on energy drink use.

METHODS

Recruitment

The researchers recruited young adults (aged 18–24 years) in 2016 through advertisements in lectures and on students' online learning platforms at 1 university in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia, and through flyers distributed at a local community college, library, youth center, community center, sports clubs, and a shopping center.

Participant information was included on the survey opening page and respondents indicated their consent to participate by continuing. Survey respondents remained anonymous. This study was approved by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (HE16/038).

Measures

The 44-item online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey.com, LLC, Palo Alto, CA) was pilot-tested with persons within the target group (n = 15) to check for an understanding of the items and to estimate the time required to complete the survey. Minor modifications were made to the question format and wording. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire included demographic questions on age, gender, work and education

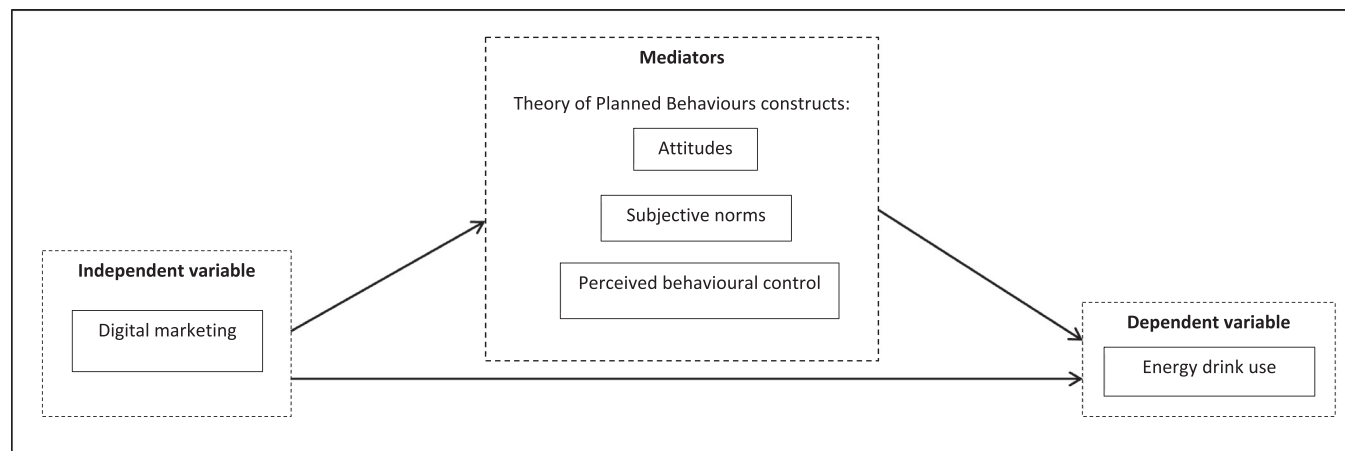


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of mediating effects of Theory of Planned Behavior Constructs in the relationship between digital marketing and energy drink use.

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