

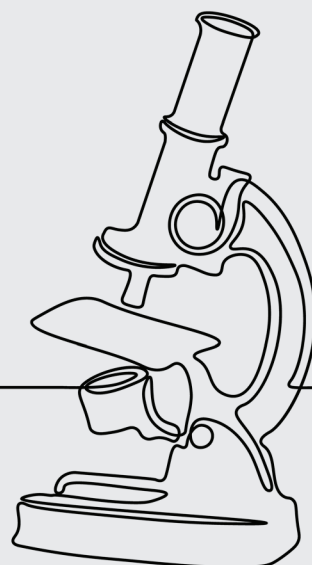
Energy Drinks

MEDIA ANALYSIS REPORT



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Introduction

This report analyses the media conversation around energy drinks. Our research sample consisted of 320 articles in the top-tier English-language publications from October 2018 to March 2020. We identified the main topics of the discussion, the most prominent messages within each topic, as well as the most often mentioned companies and spokespeople.

Energy drinks, which represent 92% of the energy market, frequently appear in headlines across the global mainstream media, mostly in a negative light, as their health effects are wrought with controversy.

Analysing the most prominent messages conveyed by high-profile publications, we discovered that the media's recent focus has been on the cardiac dangers energy drinks may present followed by concerns over high caffeine and sugar content.

The media conversation has also been concentrated on soft drinks giants such as Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, which have been pushing into energy drinks as their popularity steadily rises and consumer tastes shift away from fizzy sodas.



Main Topics

Energy drinks are among the most controversial products in the food and drink market, with the media regularly publishing stories about their health effects.

In order to get hold of the ongoing debate, we analysed a sample of 320 articles published in top-tier English-language outlets from October 2018 to March 2020.

We discovered that the media discussion could be broken down into **five main topics**:

Topics in the media conversation around energy drinks by number of articles



117

Health and
wellness



111

Market
developments



47

Product
launches



36

Regulation
and policy



26

Consumer
trends

Naturally, the **‘Health and wellness’** topic was central to the conversation, as most articles focused on the latest scientific findings or reported on people suffering from consuming large amounts of energy drinks. Journalists writing on this topic frequently cited the World Health Organization, according to which energy drinks “may pose danger to public health”, or the American Academy of Pediatrics, which cautions that children “should not consume” them.

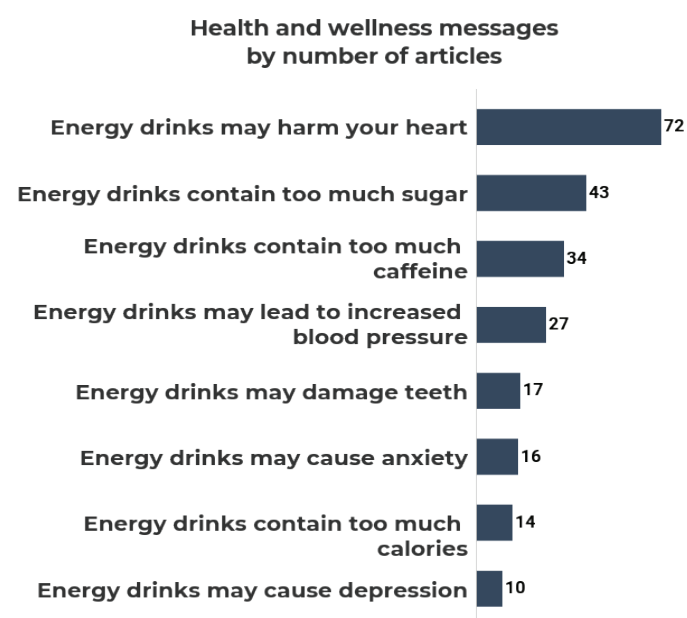
The **‘Market developments’** topic followed the dynamic business landscape which sees giants like **Coca-Cola** and **Pepsi** pushing into energy drinks as the consumption of their core products declines. In a similar manner, the **‘Product launches’** topic discussed how companies push their new goods into the lucrative market.

The **‘Regulation and policy’** topic focused on the latest efforts by governments around the world to address the dangers energy drinks may pose, following lobbying by advocacy groups and celebrities. Meanwhile, articles within the **‘Consumer trends’** topic painted an intriguing picture: energy drinks are steadily growing in popularity despite the oft-repeated warnings of health experts.

Key Messages

In order to present a more granular and thorough qualitative analysis of the media conversation, we extracted the most prominent messages within each topic, i. e. the prevailing pieces of information, ideas or judgments conveyed by each article in our sample.

For instance, while **‘Health and wellness’** is a very broad topic in the energy drinks conversation, we discovered that the media’s recent focus has been on **the cardiac dangers** these products may present:



Most articles conveying the **“Energy drinks may harm your heart”** message cited a 2019 study in the Journal of the American Heart Association which found that energy drinks altered the heart’s electrical activity and raised blood pressure. The study was reported to be especially worrying for people who take certain medications or have a specific type of heart condition as they could be at increased risk of fatal arrhythmia.

One of the main problems is that supplements and consumer products like energy drinks do not necessarily get tested for safety, unlike drugs, as study author Sachin Shah, a professor of pharmacy at the Thomas J. Long School of Pharmacy and

Health Sciences at the University of the Pacific, told the CNN. But the **American Beverage Association** highlighted that many of their ingredients are also found in common foods and have been rigorously studied.

Many journalists noted that this wasn’t the first time that questions have been raised about the effects of energy drinks on the heart, mentioning a 2016 study that found that energy drinks can raise blood pressure, increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke, while a 2017 research showed that they can also lead to heart rate problems.

The second most prominent message within the **‘Health and wellness’** topic concentrated on the high amount of **caffeine** found in energy drinks, with many health experts warning that they are a more dangerous choice than coffee, especially for young consumers. The message was expressed against the backdrop of growing concerns regarding the health effects of caffeine consumption among young people, as it has been linked to altered sleep patterns and mental health problems.

A strong coverage driver was a new report which found that energy drinks contain twice as much caffeine as an espresso. The study, carried out by Safefood, the Irish body responsible for raising consumer awareness of issues relating to food safety, also found that these beverages contain up to 17 spoons of **sugar** – another key message within the **‘Health and wellness’** topic. In this regard, there were also a number of articles stating that excessive quantities of sugar make children more violent and more likely to get drunk or smoke.

A study which found that energy drinks altered the heart’s electrical activity made the **“Energy drinks may harm your heart”** the main message within the **‘Health and wellness’** topic.

The concerns around sugar content also made their way in many media outlets because of a new UCL research which concluded that British Olympic and professional athletes, which are among the most active promoters and brand ambassadors of energy drinks, could be **damaging their teeth** with their regular consumption of energy products. Other issues around sugar in our sample focused on Ireland, where the Sugar Sweetened Drinks Tax was introduced in 2018 in a bid to tackle **obesity levels** in the country.

At a time when journalists, scholars, health campaigners and celebrity chefs have blamed energy drinks companies for contributing to global obesity, some food and drink players are keen to promote themselves as “part of the solution”.

In 2011, the International Food & Beverage Alliance (IFBA) – a coalition between giants such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nestlé, Mars, Unilever and others – wrote to the World Health Organisation (WHO): “We all recognise that non-communicable diseases and childhood obesity are major public health problems that require multi-stakeholder solutions. As a member of the private sector, we firmly believe that the food industry has a role to play as part of the solution, and have committed our time, expertise and resources to do our part.”

Meanwhile, the American Psychological Association claims that there are strong associations between increases in advertising for non-nutritious foods and rates of childhood obesity. Alarming, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that half of food and drink advertisements children see on television are for junk food and sugary drinks.

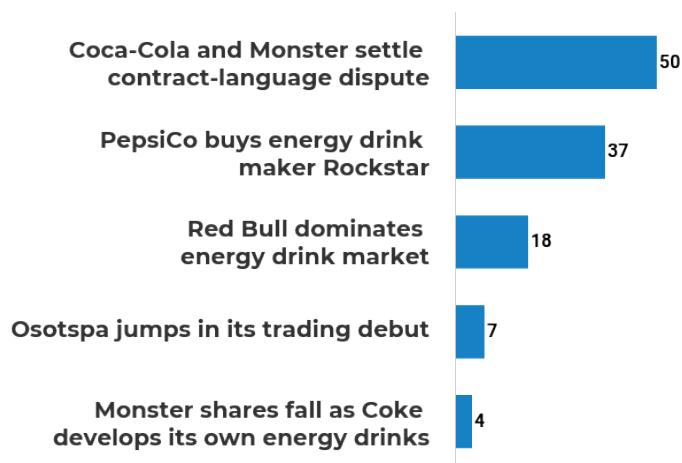
Apart from physiological damage, some articles highlighted the mental health consequences of energy drink consumption, most notably **anxiety and depression**.

Such concerns come at a time when the level of public awareness of mental health issues is markedly rising, mainly due to the higher number of celebrities and influencers who have opened up about their own struggles, including Kendall Jenner, Adele, Beyoncé, Emma Stone, the late Carrie Fisher, Selena Gomez and so on. Some have even started campaigns – for instance, Prince William, Kate Middleton and Prince Harry launched **Heads Together** to raise the profile of mental health.

For more on this topic, read our analysis [“Pharma and Mental Health: Reputation Challenges”](#)

The most prominent messages within the ‘**Market developments**’ topic focused on soft drinks giant **Coca-Cola** and its rival **PepsiCo**, which have been pushing into energy drinks as consumer tastes shift away from fizzy sodas. The two companies have tried to capitalise on the significant rise in the number of people switching from carbonated drinks to energy drinks.

Market developments messages
by number of articles



For more on this topic, read our analysis [“Understanding the sugar debate – award-winning work with the International Diabetes Federation”](#).

The main message around **Coca-Cola** was about its arbitration case with **Monster Beverage** over the launch of Coca-Cola Energy, which would have allegedly put the company in direct competition with Monster and violate their partnership agreement struck in 2015.

After months of arbitration, **Coca-Cola** won the case as the tribunal ruled it could sell its brand-name line of energy drinks globally under the terms of the contract. Coca-Cola actually holds a stake of nearly 19% in Monster which it acquired to sample at a distance the market in which it had a small presence with its NOS and Full throttle brands.

The main message around **PepsiCo** was about its acquisition of **Rockstar Energy Drinks** in a \$3.85 billion deal, first reported by the *Wall Street Journal*. The deal would be **PepsiCo CEO Ramon Laguarta's** first big move since his appointment in 2018. He said that the company would “work to be more consumer-centric and capitalise on rising demand in the functional beverage space”.

According to some commentators, the acquisition will allow the soft drink maker to do more with its struggling **Mountain Dew** energy drink brands.

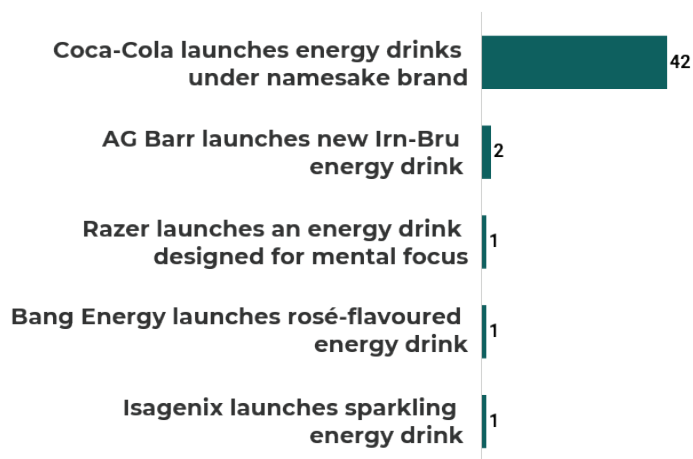
Coca-Cola's own energy drink dominated the ‘**Product launches**’ topic:

Coca-Cola has previously taken a cautious approach to energy drinks with its NOS and Full throttle brands but its new product was interpreted as an intensifying effort to break away from its traditional fizzy soft drinks and shift to health-focused trends. The Coca-Cola Energy is promoted as containing naturally-derived caffeine, guarana extract, B vitamins and no taurine – a stimulant often found in energy drinks.

By marketing its drink in such a way, **Coca-Cola** has aimed to address the common concerns around energy drinks and to appeal to a health-conscious young demographic. The rise of the health-conscious consumer has lead to brands trying to promote their product ranges as the healthiest in the market. Companies aim to distinguish themselves by highlighting their sourcing practices, with the idea that the best way to reach a health-conscious audience is through a clear idea about the values that define a certain brand – these consumers are not simply buying products, they are making lifestyle statements.

Messages around Coca-Cola dominated both the ‘Market developments’ and the ‘Product launches’ topics.

Product launches messages
by number of articles



By accenting on its naturally-derived caffeine, **Coca-Cola** also became one of the many brands increasingly tapping into consumers' perception of the "naturalness" of food and drinks, which has evolved from a focus on sanitation to added ingredients like preservatives, flavours and sweeteners. The ever-increasing health awareness among consumers, coupled with the rise of the organic food industry, has put the notion of "naturalness" in the centre of many media debates around the food and drink sector.

For example, many consumers perceive GMO food as "unnatural" because they perceive genetic engineering as meddling with naturally occurring biological processes. The line of argument is that if the food is "unnatural", it must be bad for our health or at least not as healthy as "natural" food. In the US, this view has been reinforced by organisations such as the Organic Consumers Association, Greenpeace and Union of Concerned Scientists.

For more on the GMO debate, read our analysis

["GMOs in the Media: The Genetics of a Spicy Debate"](#)

The **'Regulation and policy'** topic was dominated by news about Zambia's decision to ban the Power Natural High Energy Drink SX after it was shown to have been adulterated with **Viagra**:



The ban followed a complaint from the country's medicine regulator, while the Uganda National Drug Authority said it made similar findings after a customer complained of sweating and a six-hour erection.

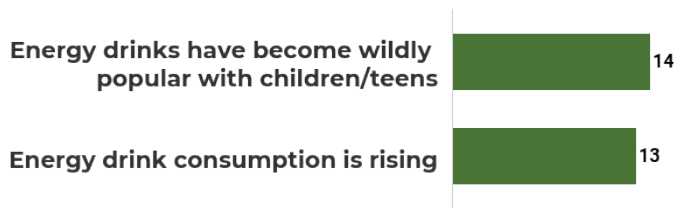
Other regulation messages focused on the UK, where young people are the biggest consumers of energy drinks in Europe for their age group. Following years of lobbying by advocacy groups and celebrities who have spoken about "the energy drink crisis in the UK", the UK government decided to ban energy drinks from sale to children under the age of 16. Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt stated there was a "vital need to tackle childhood obesity" by focusing government efforts on the sale of high sugar drinks like **Red Bull** and **Monster**.

The move has been backed by celebrity chef **Jamie Oliver**, who has spent more than three years campaigning for young children to be banned from purchasing energy drinks with his campaign #NotForChildren. Oliver even conducted a study which found 13% of UK kids were consuming 14 shots of caffeine in energy drinks every day. "The industry is saying, 'We don't market to kids', but the kids say they do with their colours, their branding, their names and the things they give you when you buy them," he said.

However, the debate hasn't been clear-cut: experts advising the government have said there is not enough scientific evidence to warrant a ban on the sale of energy drinks to children, as it wasn't clear whether children's consumption habits are significantly different for energy drinks than for other caffeine-containing goods like tea or coffee.

Such issues were also mentioned in articles falling under the topic **'Consumer trends'**, where the main messages focused on the growing popularity of energy drinks:

Consumer trends messages by number of articles



For more on this topic, read our analysis [“Beer in the Media: A Tale of Shifting Consumer Tastes”](#)

A strong coverage driver behind these messages was new survey data showing that Americans are consuming more energy drinks, with a notable increase among young adults. While the general consumption of soft drinks has fallen in recent years, energy drinks have increased steadily since 2006, with male consumers being more likely than female to drink higher amounts.

This trend is especially interesting since young people, particularly millennials and Gen Zers, are normally perceived to be more health-conscious and to take a more proactive approach to healthy eating and drinking, influenced by viral trends on Instagram and YouTube.

These generations also take a more proactive approach to healthy eating, taking the time to research before they eat out. A recent report by Nielsen showed that 41% of Generation Z and 32% of Millennials would “pay premium for sustainably sourced ingredients”, leading to the popularity of the ‘better for you’ brands.

In addition, young consumers are conscious of avoiding binge drinking. A sizeable percentage of young people in the US and UK are generally drinking less because of calorie counts and health concerns: a recent study conducted by Bank of America Merrill Lynch made headlines for revealing that 31% of millennials said they are drinking less, up from 21% in 2018.

Although it’s hard to pinpoint the exact reason young people still consume energy drinks, some observers think that apart from taste and the need for an energy boost, advertising and brand loyalty play an important role. A recent study found that energy-drink companies had been pioneers in using social media to market their products, with **Red Bull** and **Monster Energy** being the fifth and 12th most popular brands on Facebook.

Promotion through sports sponsorships has also been identified as a major reason, as athlete tie-ins remain effective tools for energy drinks manufacturers to build brand awareness. They also sponsor many popular events, providing free samples, which has been an extremely effective marketing strategy.

We could also suggest that energy drinks manufacturers have managed to capitalise on young people’s desire to be healthy and fit by successfully positioning their products as **sports-performance enhancers**. As millennials and Gen Z-ers try to embrace active lifestyles, the consumption of energy drinks might seem to them a good way to maintain their vitality.

Despite increased awareness of the health risks, energy drinks continue to grow in popularity.

Companies and Spokespeople

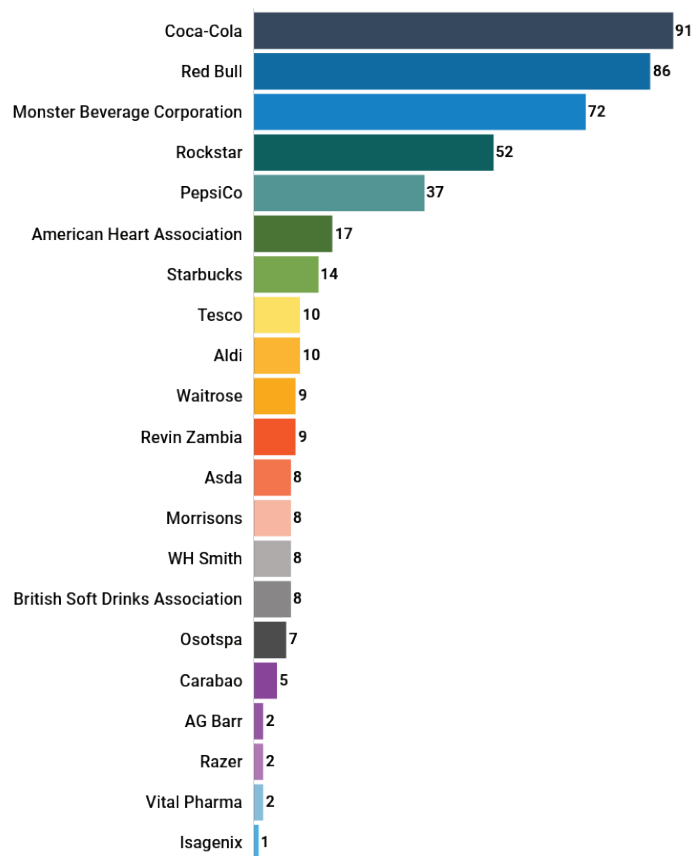
The news about the launch of its own energy drink and the arbitration case with Monster made **Coca-Cola** the most often mentioned company in our sample:

Red Bull, on the other hand, was mentioned that often not because of any specific news stories but because it's commonly used as a synonym for an energy drink: many articles used the term "a can of Red Bull" in lieu of "an energy drink".

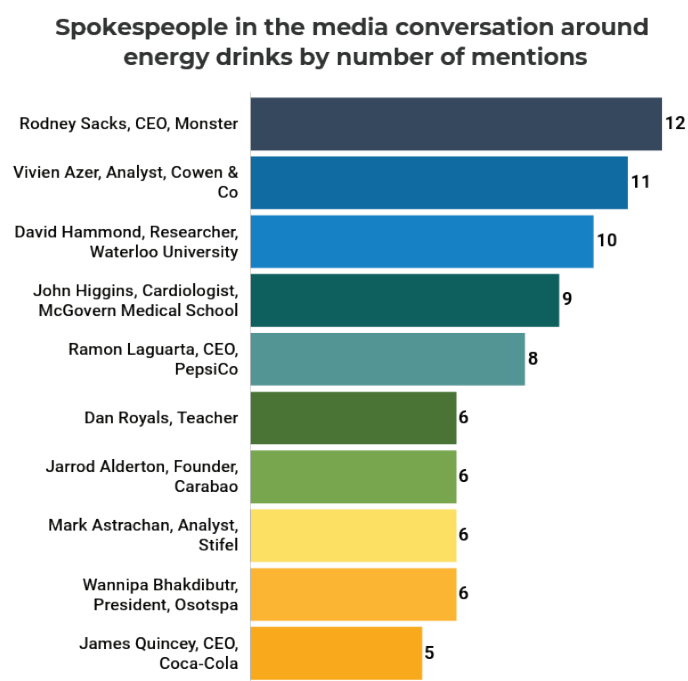
Red Bull also was present in many market reports about other companies, with reporters noting: "The global energy drinks market is dominated by Austria's Red Bull." The company was also credited for actually creating the energy drink category and for continuing to innovate and adapt its communication strategy. Its marketing approach is not based on promoting its products per se but rather has been focused on building a brand that communicates an active and exciting lifestyle, mostly revolving around sports.

In this way, the company has tapped into functional health by investing in lifestyle and extreme sports advertising, while maintaining a sense of uniqueness to its product range and fostering an emotional connection with consumers.

Companies in the media conversation around energy drinks by number of mentions



Meanwhile, **Monster CEO Rodney Sacks** was the most often quoted spokesman in our sample:



Sacks has been one of the most vocal defenders of the energy drink industry's products and marketing practices. He remarked that a 16-ounce can of Monster Energy contains 160 mg of caffeine, while the equivalent amount of **Starbucks** coffee has more than twice as much. These sentiments were echoed by the head of public affairs for Red Bull North America, **Joseph Luppino**, who argued that there is no scientific justification to regulate energy drinks differently than other caffeine beverages like coffee or tea.

The second most often quoted spokesperson, **Cowen & Co analyst Vivien Azer**, commented on Coca-Cola's energy drink launch, saying that while the company certainly has the distribution muscle to push new offerings, "we question the fit of an energy drink under the Coca-Cola trademark". Other analysts were also sceptical whether consumers would take to Coke's energy drinks under a brand mainly associated with fizzy sodas – for instance, **Stifel analyst Mark Astrachan** said he did not think Coke's new line of beverages would gain meaningful market share as consumers of energy drinks opt for something edgier.

Like their peers from the fast food industry, energy drinks spokespeople have often stated that there are no good or bad foods, but there are good or bad diets instead, underlining that consumers are entirely responsible for what they eat. Such messages are most effective in the US, where personal responsibility and freedom are historically central values.

But critics have compared energy drink marketing practices with those of 20th-century cigarette companies, with a recent University of Waterloo study finding a close relationship between them.



Such parallels have also been drawn between fast food and tobacco – an empirical and historical analysis, published in healthcare journal Milbank Quarterly, claimed that there are similarities between the tobacco and food industry in terms of the practices, messages and strategies to influence public opinion, legislation and regulation. In particular, there are significant similarities in the actions that these two industries have taken in response to the concerns that their products cause harm.

In the 1950s, when several retrospective studies showed a link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, the tobacco sector tried to avert shifts in public opinion that would harm profits. The researchers claim that the messages conveyed by Big Tobacco resemble the messages by the fast food industry. Spokespeople have focused on personal consumer tastes as the cause of unhealthy lifestyles while raising fears that stricter government regulations undermine freedom of choice.

For more on this topic, read our analysis
[“Fast Food in the Media: The Rise of the Health-Conscious Consumer”](#)

Energy drinks manufacturers have capitalised on young people’s desire to be healthy and fit by successfully positioning their products as sports-performance enhancers.



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