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Positive portrayal of energy drinks on TikTok

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Children are very susceptible to toxic effects of excessive consumption of energy drinks, with high levels of caffeine and sugar, and other additives such as taurine, ginseng and guarana.(1) Australian energy drink labels must contain advisory statements that they are not suitable for consumption by children, however industry marketing utilises social media channels used by, and attractive to, children and adolescents.(2) TikTok is a social media platform featuring user-generated short videos, including paid or sponsored product promotion, with no restrictions on the advertising or promotion of energy drinks. The aim of this study was to examine the portrayal of energy drinks on TikTok. The top four energy drink related hashtags on TikTok were investigated. Within each hashtag, the 50 most viewed videos were downloaded and independently coded by three researchers for engagement, content, and sentiment variables. Engagement variables for videos included counts of views, likes, shares, comments and followers; in addition to the user verification details ('Blue tick' status) and disclosure of paid advertising or sponsorship. Content variables included the predominant age and gender of primary actors, the use of music, and presence of sexual elements. The presence and consumption of energy drinks was recorded. Sentiment towards energy drinks was coded as negative (e.g., warning viewers) or positive (e.g., encouraging consumption); with videos coded to neutral sentiment where there was no opinion expressed or intimated. The top hashtags identified were one generic (#energydrink) and three brand-related (#bang, #redbull, and #monster). Three videos were excluded as their content was unrelated to energy drinks, with over 70 million combined views of the remaining 197 videos analysed. Almost one quarter (22%) of videos portrayed a child or adolescent, and 29% disclosed brand sponsorship or endorsement. Consumption of energy drinks occurred in 46% of all videos, with hazardous consumption (i.e., excessive or rapid consumption) in one third of these videos. The majority (67%) of videos portrayed energy drinks positively. Less than 10% of videos posted with each of the brand-related hashtags (#bang, 4%; #monster, 2%; #redbull, 8%) were coded as portraying a negative sentiment. Over half of videos (53%) posted with the hashtag #bang used only male actors and almost half (47%) contained sexual elements. Children engaging with TikTok may be exposed to videos positively portraying the consumption, including hazardous consumption, of energy drinks. The short video format encourages mimetic behaviour and social learning and may result in enhanced purchase intentions or more frequent consumption, particularly in adolescents.(3) To protect children from the harmful effects of energy drinks, regulation of the promotion of energy drinks on TikTok is warranted. Increased understanding of marketing tactics will allow public health professionals to use TikTok for education and counter-advertising.

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