

Expert sources: Potent alcoholic beverages look like soda pop, target young drinkers

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It works every time? The marketing and rebranding efforts for the fruity flavored malt beverage "Blast by Colt 45," referred to as "binge in a can" by its critics, are "irresponsible" from a health perspective but admittedly effective, says Antonio Williams, a fitness and marketing expert in Indiana University's School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

"It looks like soda pop," Williams said of the beverage, which packs an [alcohol](#) concentration of 12 percent in its colorful 23.5-ounce cans. "It clearly looks like soda pop. Also the use of Snoop Dogg, a hugely successful hip-hop artist and music industry mogul, tells me where they're going." The brewing controversy surrounding the drink has made more people aware of it -- for better or for worse. Williams said Snoop Dogg's pitching brings to mind the successful campaigns in the 1980s that had actor Billy Dee Williams pitching Colt 45, with the slogan "It works every time." Those were controversial, too, because of their focus on urban African Americans. Snoop Dogg, says IU's Williams, will also appeal to urban [African Americans](#) but also taps white suburban hip-hop fans, making him an effective pitchman for the under 32 market. "We wouldn't be having this conversation if the branding wasn't so cleverly targeted to appeal to teens and young adults," Williams said. "If they were targeting adults over 25, or if it was a premium packaged champagne that had a higher than normal alcoholic content, for example, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

The issue isn't the alcohol percentage, but rather, the branding and image

of the product. Williams says the alcohol content and health risks should be clearly marked on the beverage cans and that store clerks need to be vigilant about checking IDs. Parents play the most important role in minimizing the risk to underage drinkers, he said, urging parents to become familiar with Blast and similar drinks. "I'm more afraid of parents not being aware," he said. "I can easily see it being passed as a soda pop -- a kid walking through the home with that in his hand and the parents not being aware."

Stronger restrictions on marketing to youth needed

Despite the widespread concern by public health authorities and even some state legislatures over the proliferation of 'alcopops,' -- brightly packaged beverages that combine high concentrations of alcohol with sweet flavors and are thought to target teen-agers -- the beverage and marketing trend seems far from subsiding. "These drinks are being marketed to younger consumers who may not be of legal drinking age. Some of these consumers might be under the impression that these drinks have less alcohol content and that the addition of caffeine makes them somehow safer. This can lead to increased consumption of alcohol with the perception that activities such as driving are safer than they actually are," said Courtney Stewart, research associate at the Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University's School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

The effects of mixing alcohol and energy drinks are not fully known due to a lack of research on the topic. High doses of caffeine can result in increased anxiety, panic attacks, rise in blood pressure, insomnia and bowel irritability. The herbal ingredients in these energy drinks have not been fully researched, either, and could be risky when mixed with alcohol. Energy drinks have caffeine as their primary ingredient as well as other stimulants such as guarana, an herbal stimulant which enhances the effect of caffeine. Sparks, Four Loko, Joose and Torque are

examples of caffeine drinks that are pre-mixed with alcohol. Blast, a new malt liquor beverage being marketed by Pabst Brewing Co., contains 12 percent alcohol by volume and is sold in 23.5-ounce cans.

Stewart said she is particularly concerned by the high [alcohol content](#) and the size of these drinks -- one can of Blast has as much alcohol as four 12-ounce bottles of beer. "There need to be stronger restrictions on the marketing of 'alcopops' and malt liquor beverages to youth," she said.

Provided by Indiana University

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