

Fueling Focus in a Burnt-Out Generation: Understanding Gen Z's Energy Fatigue

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Submitted by:

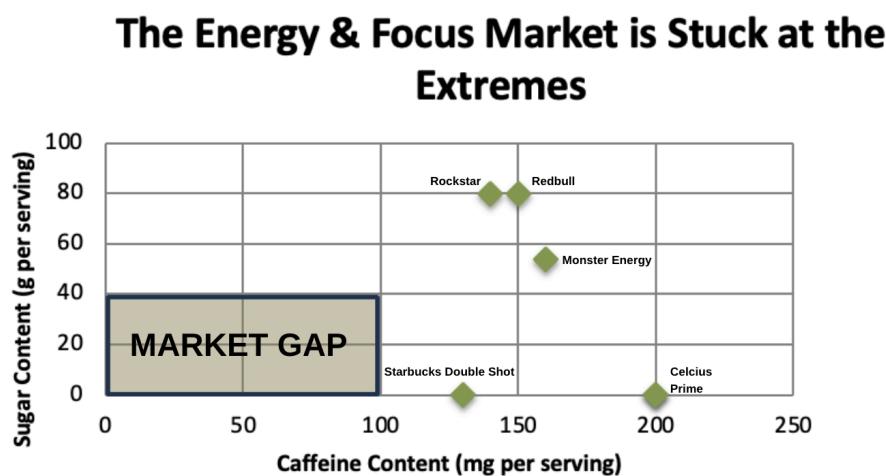
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Across college campuses, schools, and online communities, Gen Z is quietly feeling “cooked.” This term captures the exhaustion, mental fatigue, and overstimulation that define this generation. Despite being the most digitally connected generation in history, young adults report record levels of stress and cognitive fatigue. Traditional energy drinks continue to glorify hustle, intensity, and constant motion. This outdated narrative no longer reflects the mindset or needs of a generation searching for clarity and balance. The energy and focus beverage category is long overdue for disruption.

Research combining secondary sources with survey data from 100 Gen Z students and young adults reveals a widening gap between what Gen Z wants and what current products deliver. Today’s energy drinks provide short-term boosts but often cause anxiety, crashes, and overstimulation. Consumers describe these effects as “fake energy” that leaves them drained rather than productive. What Gen Z actually wants is sustained focus, mental clarity, and stability that supports both concentration and emotional well-being. This unmet need presents a clear opportunity to redefine how energy is experienced and communicated.

Our product “Calmē”, French for calm, directly addresses this gap. The formulation includes 50 mg of moderate natural caffeine, L-theanine, and B vitamins to provide steady cognitive support without the crashes or jittery side effects associated with leading brands. The differentiation comes not only from the formula but from the brand’s tone and identity. Inspired by how Liquid Death disrupted the water market through raw authenticity, this concept takes a similar cultural approach to energy. Instead of amplifying intensity, it embraces focus and self-awareness, positioning energy as something controlled rather than chaotic.

For over a decade, the energy and focus category has failed to evolve its messaging. Brands continue to equate energy with aggression, athleticism, or competition, ignoring the growing fatigue with hustle culture. By introducing a product built on balance, clarity, and cultural relevance, this concept challenges the status quo and modernizes the category. The consumer demand is evident, the market is stagnant, and the timing for disruption has never been stronger.



The energy and focus beverage industry has moved from high-sugar stimulants to fortified, cleaner formulations, but the messaging has largely remained unchanged. Brands like Red Bull

and Monster glorify intensity, competition, and high performance. Red Bull promotes adrenaline-fueled experiences with slogans such as “Gives You Wings,” and Monster uses a loud, hyper-intense persona. Newer brands such as Celsius and Prime focus on lifestyle positioning, fitness optimization, or social media influence. Energy is framed as a tool for performance or attention.

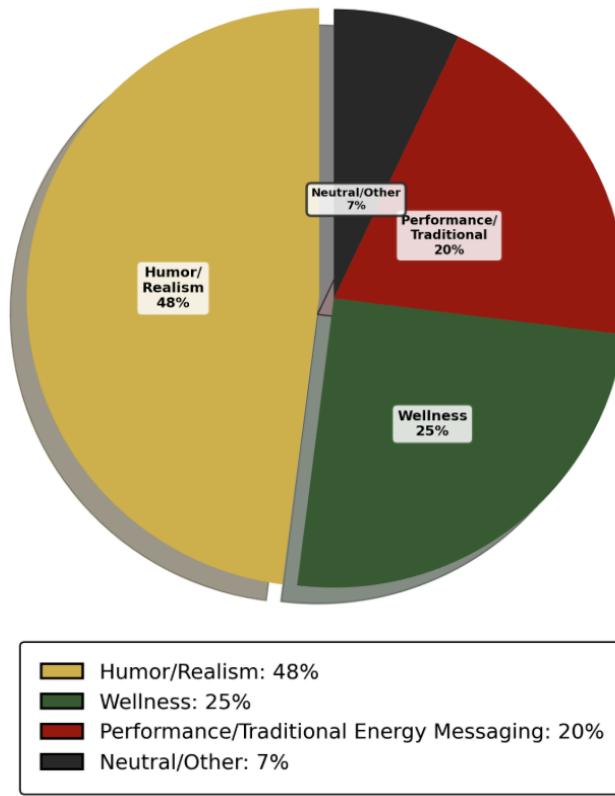
This messaging does not align with Gen Z’s experience. Many young consumers report feeling overstimulated, stressed, and searching for alternatives to the constant push for productivity. They fail to address the fact that young consumers want energy solutions that support focus without overstimulation or anxiety. This creates an opportunity for a functional beverage that balances energy, mental clarity, and emotional well-being.

Liquid Death provides a useful example of category disruption. Founded in 2018, the company reached approximately \$263 million in retail sales in 2023, expanded into over 113,000 retail doors in the US and UK, and was valued at around \$1.4 billion in a March 2024 funding round (Sacra, 2024). Liquid Death succeeded by turning water into a lifestyle brand, without adding any functional benefits to the water. The success came from bold branding, humor, and rebellion rather than the product itself (BeverageDaily, 2024). The brand extended beyond water to merchandise, social media content, and community engagement.

The success of Liquid Death demonstrates that a beverage brand can thrive by creating a strong cultural identity. We aim to do the same in the energy and focus category. Instead of promoting more caffeine or short-term stimulation, our product will focus on steady cognitive clarity. The brand will be authentic, self-aware, and humorous. The goal is to create a beverage that validates Gen Z’s need for balance and sustainable focus. By combining culturally resonant branding with functional benefits, this product can reshape the market similarly to how Liquid Death reshaped water.

Our Gen Z target audience is defined by both behavior and cultural values. Deloitte (2024) reports that 40 percent of Gen Z feel stressed or anxious all or most of the time, signaling chronic burnout. Gallup (2023) links chronic stress to lower engagement, reduced cognitive function, and diminished productivity. Our survey of 100 students and young adults shows how Gen Z uses energy beverages. Seventy-seven percent consume them at least monthly, primarily during late-night studying or high-focus sessions. Dissatisfaction stems from physiological effects: 38 percent reported crashes, 18 percent experienced jitters, and 12 percent were concerned about sugar content. Open-ended responses captured emotional reactions, with students describing “fake energy” or feeling anxious after drinking. These results highlight a functional gap—current beverages provide a short-term boost but fail to deliver stable, cognitive-focused energy aligned with mental health priorities. Gen Z’s values are shifting. Mental health, authenticity, and sustainable performance now matter more than constant ambition (McKinsey, 2025). Social media trends reinforce this, with hashtags like #overstimulated and viral phrases such as “need to go touch grass” illustrating fatigue with hustle culture. Quiet quitting and anti-hustle memes further show a rejection of overexertion. Our survey confirms that 48 percent of respondents prefer brands that use humor and realism rather than traditional wellness or performance messaging.

Gen Z Brand Messaging Preferences



Students are also experimenting on their own, mixing beverages or ingredients to create personalized energy solutions that avoid crashes, jitters, or overstimulation. This behavior demonstrates that Gen Z is aware of their energy needs and actively manages them. A commercially available product offering these benefits safely and reliably would meet this demand. Overall, Gen Z wants energy that is stable, supports focus, and aligns with their values. They want cognitive support without overstimulation, effort validated without glorifying exhaustion, and brands that are self-aware, humorous, and authentic.

Our beverage, Calmē, addresses both functional and cultural gaps in the energy and focus market. Formulated with moderate natural caffeine for alertness, L-theanine to smooth energy release, and B vitamins to support cognitive performance, Calmē delivers sustained focus without the crashes, jitters, or overstimulation common in traditional energy drinks. This makes it a functional choice for those seeking mental clarity alongside steady energy. Calmē primarily targets stressed students who rely on beverages during late-night study sessions or looming project deadlines but are sensitive to the negative effects of overstimulation. By addressing both functional needs and cultural preferences, Calm creates a new category of balanced focus beverages.

A central part of our strategy draws inspiration from Liquid Death, which disrupted the bottled water market not by altering the product but through culturally resonant, bold messaging. Its irreverent and humorous tone turned a commodity into a lifestyle brand. Calmē seeks to apply this lesson in the Energy & Focus category with a completely opposite positioning. Instead of promoting extreme intensity or adrenaline-fueled performance, Calmē embraces an anti-hustle mindset. The brand tone is calm, authentic, and confident, celebrating focus, clarity, and balance.

The packaging reflects this personality. It is minimal and approachable, with a clean color palette and subtle bold typography. Messaging communicates the brand promise succinctly: “Focus, without the crash.” This approach allows Calmē to stand out in a market dominated by high-energy messaging while remaining culturally relevant, trustworthy, and aspirational. By combining a thoughtfully crafted formulation with culturally attuned branding, Calmē fills a clear gap in the Energy & Focus category. It provides a functional solution for sustained energy and cognitive performance while aligning with Gen Z’s values of authenticity, balance, and humor.



Figure 1: Calmē Energy Drink - Front and Back Design The minimalist packaging reflects Calmē’s core philosophy: balance, focus, and clarity. The front emphasizes calm energy, while the back communicates transparency in ingredients and functional benefits for sustained mental performance.

The evidence supporting the market opportunity rests on three pillars: our primary research findings, broader cultural trends, and secondary market reports. Our survey conducted of 100 students and young adults falling under Gen Z, confirmed high dissatisfaction with existing energy products, with participants citing crashes, jitters, and anxiety (feeling “so wired I couldn’t even focus”). This data highlights a clear functional gap, where current products provide short-term energy but do not deliver steady cognitive support. Cultural data reinforces these functional insights. TikTok hashtags such as #overstimulated, #burnout (5B+ views), and #quietquitting (890M+ views) (Source: TikTok, retrieved October 2025) shows a generational awareness of the drawbacks of overexertion. Phrases like “need to go touch grass” reflect a desire to step back from hustle culture.

Consumer self-experimentation further validates demand. Students describe mixing beverages or ingredients to create personalized energy solutions that avoid crashes and overstimulation. These behaviors demonstrate that Gen Z understands what works for their minds and bodies and actively seeks ways to maintain focus safely. A branded product offering these benefits in a reliable, accessible form would directly meet this demand.

Secondary research from market authorities validates this opportunity. Deloitte (2024) reports that 91 percent of Gen Z feel stressed weekly, and 40 percent report chronic burnout. Gallup (2023) links this stress to reduced engagement, impaired decision-making, and lower overall productivity. McKinsey (2025) notes that wellness spending is growing among Gen Z, particularly for products emphasizing cognitive support and mental well-being. Mintel (2025) observes that younger consumers drive demand for functional beverages that combine performance and wellness, especially when brands communicate transparency and authenticity. This aligns with a documented shift in consumer preference away from traditional supplements and toward functional foods and beverages (The Food Institute, 2025). This evidence strongly supports the potential success of a product positioned as calm, authentic, and anti-hustle.

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