

# Social media turns its back on Japan's beloved strong alcoholic beverages

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Everyone has a friend who likes to darken the mood when others are simply trying to have a good time. Dr. Toshihiko Matsumoto took on this mantle over the new year, killing the buzz for a number of people on social media just hours before the new decade started.

Matsumoto published a post on Facebook on Dec. 31 focusing on Strong Zero, a 9 percent alcoholic beverage produced by drinks maker Suntory that has become something of a convenience store staple.

The doctor, though, was asking whether the beverage should be treated more like an illegal drug than a legal alcoholic product. He reported seeing people who had polished off a few cans of Strong Zero behaving worse than anyone using hard drugs, and he also felt the fact that it was relatively easy to drink presented more of a risk for people.

Although he failed to offer any practical solution to the Strong Zero scourge, Matsumoto did suggest that raising the tax levied on alcohol — which he refers to as “one of the worst drugs in history” — might help curb the problem, but that’s as far as he went.

He’s hardly the first person to wonder whether Strong Zero (as well as the myriad imitators that flooded the market once it became clear that consumers love an expedient way of getting smashed) is a health risk for the general public. Nevertheless, Matsumoto’s post went viral. While it performed well on Facebook, it gained the most momentum on Twitter.

User @bewizyou1 uploaded an image taken from a computer of Matsumoto’s Facebook post, which has since been retweeted more than 31,000 times.

Some social media users produced charts to demonstrate the ills of alcohol, while others shared a screenshot from a nightly news show on TV that suggested that a 500-milliliter can of Strong Zero was the equivalent of nearly four shots of tequila. History buffs summoned 18th-century British pro-beer art to illustrate what the beverage does to those who drink it.

What makes all of this online hoopla over the drink is how it presents somewhat of a pivot away from Strong Zero’s status online in Japan as something closer to meme than societal menace. It wasn’t long before Matsumoto’s post that Twitter users were posting photos of stuffed animals “passed out” next to crushed cans, or posting cat figurines sipping from tiny containers of the beverage. You can find rap songs devoted to the

drink, as well as animated manga posted on YouTube wondering what happens if someone keeps drinking the beverage endlessly (although what could have been a warning becomes something of a joke at the end).

Some of the online memes surrounding Strong Zero are pretty harmless, such as a Twitter hashtag from a few years ago under which users created “Strong Zero literature” by riffing on famous passages but replacing certain phrases with references to the drink. One of the less satisfying manifestations of this light-hearted attitude toward the beverage, though, has come via YouTubers, who have downed large quantities of Strong Zero mixed with Red Bull, mixed Strong Zero with yakisoba and cooked shabu shabu using Strong Zero as a broth.

While none of the above sounds particularly appetizing, Strong Zero has become a tool of soft power for Japan, especially with a content-hungry West lurking in the background. “These drinks will f— you up,” reads the opening text of Red Duck Post’s Facebook clip devoted to the drink, one of the first pieces of viral video from an English-language creator introducing the item. YouTubers have reviewed it while sitting in Ueno Park, and writers have zeroed in on the legend around it. Even Japanese sites geared toward tourists have embraced the idea of Strong Zero as a hook, labeling it as a “crazy Japanese drink.”

Seeing netizens turn against something — or at least raise a more critical eye to a liver-punishing go-to — they once loved isn’t altogether shocking. The internet is a fickle place, and a key component of online culture anywhere in 2020 is seeing something that was once loved suddenly being dismissed. Yet the turn against Strong Zero inspired by Matsumoto stands out, seeing as just how ingrained the drink was as a joke (a joke?) in Japanese internet culture. Then again, people already knew this drink was bad — all you have to do is read the information on the can itself — it just needed that information to travel on the platforms they use to really understand it.