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Lead by example: Should sport take a stand against brands of unhealthy consumption?

Stuart W. Flint,^{1,2} Rebecca Peake¹

¹Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Health and Wellbeing Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

²Centre for Sport and Exercise Science, Health and Wellbeing Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

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Correspondence address

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr Stuart Flint, A211 Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S10 2BP, United Kingdom, email:

S.Flint@shu.ac.uk.

Introduction

Previous literature has highlighted the link between unhealthy food and drink consumption with chronic illness such as obesity and diabetes.¹ However, unhealthy food and drink sponsorship in sport is common. Unhealthy food and drink is promoted through sport to encourage the formation of favourable attitudes towards unhealthy consumption. Thus, the counterintuitive association that sport, a generally healthy pursuit, has with brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption is a particular concern.

Psychological research has demonstrated the impacts of conditioning to gain a behavioural response and that through conditioning not only can this lead to attitude formation and maintenance, but also attitude change.^{2,3} There are a number of reasons that brands align themselves with sport, in particular, the positive and healthy image of sport, and the opportunity for brands to endorse their company and products globally to vast numbers of potential customers. Sponsorship can allow access to specific market segments of interest that may be difficult to penetrate otherwise. Additionally, by emotionally connecting consumers with brands, athlete endorsement can have a positive impact on the effectiveness of advertising and brand recognition, influencing favourable brand attitudes, purchase intentions and purchase behaviour.⁴ Furthermore, there is evidence to demonstrate that the food products endorsed by athletes are perceived to be healthier and that sponsorship is likely to influence product preferences and choices at both a conscious and non-conscious level.⁵

An Unhealthy Partnership

Sport sponsorship at both elite and club level has been found to influence children's attitudes towards unhealthy products. There are many examples of brands of unhealthy food and drink sponsorship at an elite level, such as the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil, whose sponsors included The Coca Cola Co. and McDonalds Corp. Moreover, many of the football players are sponsored by brands of unhealthy food and drink such as the Argentine striker and former world player of the year Lionel Messi who is sponsored by PepsiCo Inc. and England striker Daniel Sturridge who is sponsored by Subway Restaurants. The presence of these brands in sport is concerning given the link between food marketing and childhood obesity. Despite the World Health Organisation's⁶ food marketing and non-alcoholic beverages recommendations, that specifically states children should not be exposed to the marketing of "foods that are high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt" (p. 8), there is evidence that unhealthy food and drink continues to be marketed to children and that there has been limited if any

change in children's exposure. Sport sponsorship may be an effective means of targeting children with promotional messages. For children in particular, the association between sport and unhealthy food and drink consumption is likely to lead to unwanted confusion, deviating from the consistent health messages of consuming a healthy diet that are clearly warranted given the prevalence of health conditions such as obesity and diabetes that are caused by unhealthy consumption.⁵ Conceivably, repeated pairing of unhealthy food and drink with healthy activities such as sport, may have a contamination effect by causing individuals to incorrectly attribute healthy characteristics to unhealthy food and drink, and that consuming these as well as participating in sport is part of a 'balanced' lifestyle.

Sponsorship by brands of unhealthy food and drink is evident with all facets of sport sponsorship; athlete endorsement, within sport teams, broadcast and media, sport facility, and sport event or competition structure. For example, the English Football Association's (FA) recreational 'Kick About' programme Just Play, aims to increase participation for all ages and abilities and is sponsored by Mars. Sponsors may argue that children are an unintended target; however, the resulting association between unhealthy food and drink brands and sport should be scrutinised.⁵ Whilst Mars may claim its association with health is an unintended consequence, there is evidence to demonstrate that Mars's sponsorship is a direct attempt at influencing sport participants to consume their products and thus use sport as a vehicle to market unhealthy foods. For example, in a recent survey Mars Just Play 'Kick About' participants were asked to recall England Football Team Sponsors and state the likelihood of purchasing Mars products, based on the sponsorship of the England National Football Team and involvement with running Just Play events. For example as part of the survey, respondents were asked to rate the likelihood of purchasing Mars products based on knowing that Mars sponsor the England Football Teams and Just Play Sessions. Thus, this clearly indicates that Mars, like other brands of unhealthy food and drink, use sport to market their unhealthy products and that such partnerships are likely to influence people of all ages including children, to consume unhealthy food and drink.

Mars are not alone in the exploitation of sport and physical activity in the promotion of brands. The Coca Cola Co. explicitly exploits opportunities "sponsoring the Olympic Games to community soccer and athletics programs".⁷ What is of interest, is that The Coca Cola Co. state in both their Responsible Marketing Policy in 2014 and Position on Obesity in May 2013, that they will market responsibly and "not primarily target children under 12 anywhere

in the world".^{8,9} Despite this statement, The Coca Cola Co. state that "millions of young people and adults have participated in Coca Cola sponsored activities in their communities".⁹ Moreover, the company continue to sponsor events targeted at young people such as the 'Boys and Girls Club of America', which is an national organisation that specifically targets young people aged 6-18 years. Thus, The Coca Cola Co. do not appear to be adhering to their own Responsible Marketing Policy, and in September 2015 the 'Boys and Girls Club of America' and The Coca Cola Co. announced a new five year partnership.¹⁰

Conclusion

Whilst sponsorship is beneficial for sport, the marketing of unhealthy food and drink is likely to lead to the formation of favourable attitudes towards these brands and their products, increasing the likelihood of health risks such as obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure. Thus, it appears that greater restrictions are warranted in sport. Whilst endorsement deals with brands of unhealthy food and drink are financially beneficial for elite athletes who may be considered as role models, greater consideration of ethical and moral implications of such partnerships is needed. Since 2003, tobacco sponsorship of UK sporting events was been banned by HM Government. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that sports governing bodies such as FIFA or even the UK Government should act and prohibit sponsorship from brands of unhealthy food and drink. It should be noted that the association that brands of unhealthy food and drink forge with sport and physical activity, events, clubs, facilities and performers transcends all levels within the community. Whilst there are explicit examples of sponsorship targeting people of all ages, the association with virtuous behaviours is a conditioning strategy to improve brand image and is considered an effective marketing strategy.

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