

Unhealthy product sponsorship of Australian national and state sports organisations

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Abstract

Issue addressed: Marketing of products harmful to the health of children has been found to be prolific, and occurs across multiple media platforms and in several settings, including organised sport, thus potentially undermining the health benefits inherent in sports participation. Through website audits, this study investigated the nature and extent of unhealthy food, beverage, alcohol and gambling sponsorship across peak Australian sporting organisations.

Methods: A structured survey tool identified and assessed sponsoring companies and products displayed on the websites of the 53 national and state/territory sport governing bodies in Australia receiving government funding. Identified products were categorised as healthy or unhealthy, based on criteria developed by health experts.

Results: There was a total of 413 websites operated by the 53 sports, with 1975 company or product sponsors identified. Overall, 39 sports had at least one unhealthy sponsor, and 10% of all sponsors were rated as unhealthy. Cricket had the highest percent of unhealthy sponsors (27%) and the highest number of unhealthy food and beverage sponsors ($n = 19$). Rugby Union ($n = 16$) and Australian Football ($n = 4$) had the highest numbers of alcohol and gambling sponsors respectively.

Conclusions: Sponsorship of Australian sport governing bodies by companies promoting unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol and gambling products is prevalent at the state/territory and national level.

So what? Regulatory guidelines should be established to limit such sponsorship and ensure that it is not translated into promotions that may reach and influence children.

Received 4 March 2014, accepted 22 December 2014, published online 7 April 2015

Introduction

Children's participation in organised sport makes a substantial contribution to their overall physical activity levels.^{1,2} Sixty percent of Australian children participate in organised sport.³ As well as physical activity, local sports clubs and organisations are an important setting for promoting a broader range of healthy behaviours, such as healthy eating and responsible alcohol consumption.^{4,5} Local sports clubs are typically governed, in a hierarchical structure, by National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) and state and territory Sporting Organisations (SSOs), as defined by the Federal Government Australian Sports Commission (ASC).⁶ Under government jurisdiction, NSOs and SSOs are charged with leading the development of sport, at both community and elite sporting levels, and supporting constituent clubs. The ASC also provides funding to recognised NSOs and SSOs for operational, event and athlete support.

In recent years, the presence of tobacco sponsorship and advertising in the sport setting has substantially abated, at least in Westernised

countries,⁷ through the adoption of policy and legislative measures. However, sport continues to attract sponsorship from companies whose products undermine positive health messages, thus contributing to sporting environments that are not wholly conducive to achieving a healthy lifestyle. This includes companies that manufacture or sell products that can have a damagingly addictive impact and/or are of public health concern such as alcohol, unhealthy food and beverage manufacturers and gambling providers. These sponsorship arrangements are typically negotiated and developed at NSO and/or SSO level.⁸ While industry regulation restricts the promotion of alcohol brands at junior sports events in Australia, professional and general community events are exempt from these policies.

There is evidence that Australian children can recall alcohol promotions in sport.^{9,10} Unhealthy food and beverage products are promoted at sports clubs at both the elite and the community club level, often through sponsorship.^{8,11} Evidence shows that, at least at

the local sports club level, sponsorship influences children's recall and impressions of these companies; they perceived food companies as 'cool', as well as being more likely to consider such sponsors when making food and beverage purchases.¹²

Parents and the junior sporting community have reported strong support for the introduction of policy interventions to limit unhealthy food and beverage company sponsorship of children's sport.^{13,14} There are no current national or statewide policies to that effect, although Healthway in Western Australia provides financial and other forms of support to community sporting organisations to eliminate reliance on unhealthy commercial sponsorship. Healthway's funding policies precludes co-sponsorship of sports with unhealthy products or organisations.

Gambling promotion has emerged in recent years as a prominent public health issue, particularly when it exposes children¹⁵ and young adult populations' to gambling messages. Epidemiological studies estimate around a 2% incidence of problem gambling among youth.^{16,17} Gambling promotion in association with sports has become widespread.¹⁸ This type of sponsorship and promotion is also largely unregulated in Australia; however, a recent parliamentary inquiry made recommendations to minimise the negative influences of gambling advertising and promotions in sport.¹⁹ The extent to which children are exposed to gambling sponsorship, and the impact of this exposure on children is not known; although, there are suggestions that it normalises gambling and has an impact on young adults.²⁰

A previous analysis of Australian sporting organisations' websites, at the national level and across four states and territories, of the nine most popular children's sports found a relatively high proportion of alcohol and unhealthy food and beverage sponsors featured.²¹ In order to expand on this work, in terms of geographical scope and the inclusion of additional health risk factors, this study undertook a website analysis of all NSOs and SSOs to determine the extent of unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol and gambling sponsorship.

Methods

Sampling

Data were collected from the websites of the 53 NSOs that received ASC funding in 2012 and represent single sports,⁶ as well as their corresponding SSOs from all eight states and territories.

Procedures

Data were collected by the lead author between February 2012 and February 2013. A sample of one NSO/SSO across each sport (12.5%) was cross-checked by the second author. No discrepancies in recording were found between the lead and second author in the number of sponsors identified or their classification as an unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol or gambling sponsor.

Measures

A structured coding tool was used to collect information from NSO and SSO websites regarding their corresponding sport and geographical location and the presence of individually named sponsors and their primary product or service. Sponsors were defined as a food and/or beverage company or product; alcohol company, product or vendor; or a gambling company. Companies that did not promote food and/or beverages, alcohol or gambling were collectively classified 'other sponsors', and included government, corporate agencies (e.g. insurance) and sporting goods. Food and beverage, and alcohol company sponsors were also assessed as health-promoting or not, using criteria developed from an earlier three-staged Delphi survey with a convenience sample of health experts that has been reported in detail elsewhere.²¹

The criteria for being classified as 'healthy' in this study comprised the:

- (1) extent that the nutritional quality of the *majority* of food and beverage products sold by the company are in-line with nutrition recommendations for children and are not detrimental to children's nutrition;
- (2) consistency between the overall company brand and practices and the broader health-promoting goals of sport (ostensibly to promote healthy lifestyles); and
- (3) exclusion of companies that sell alcohol and/or promote gambling.

Sponsors that did not meet these criteria were classified as unhealthy.

Analyses

Data were entered into SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive analyses counted the frequency of sponsorship arrangements across each sport which were categorised according to the type of sponsor. The number of times each company appeared as a sponsor overall, and the number of sports that it was found to sponsor, was also recorded.

Results

A total of 1975 website sponsors was identified across 53 NSO and 360 SSO websites. Fourteen (26.9%) sports were found to have only healthy sponsors on their NSO or SSO websites. Table 1 displays the frequency of unhealthy sponsorship by sport, ranked by proportion of unhealthy sponsors. The majority of food and beverage sponsors did not meet the health promotion criteria and were deemed unhealthy (63%). Examples of healthy food and beverage sponsors included companies promoting bottled water, Weetbix and pasta. Of the 39 sports found to have unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol or gambling sponsors, seven (cricket, Rugby League, Rugby Union, Australian Football, football (soccer), basketball, Surf Life Saving) had sponsorship across all three product/service categories.

Unhealthy sponsors were most commonly food and beverage companies (45.5%), followed by alcohol companies (38.9%) and

Table 1. Frequency of unhealthy sponsorship on Australian national and state sporting organisations' websites

Sport	Sponsor type (n)				% 'Unhealthy'
	Unhealthy food & beverage	Alcohol	Gambling	Other	
Cricket	19	10	1	82	26.8
Rugby League	5	9	3	64	21.0
Weightlifting	0	0	1	4	20.0
Golf	4	3	1	31	17.9
Football	9	2	1	67	15.2
Rugby Union	7	16	2	139	15.2
Australian Football	10	5	4	109	14.8
Lacrosse	1	1	0	13	13.3
Baseball	5	2	0	49	12.5
Skate	0	0	1	7	12.5
Basketball	4	1	1	45	11.8
Boxing	0	2	0	15	11.8
Athletics	6	0	0	47	11.3
Badminton	0	1	1	18	10.0
Judo	0	0	1	9	10.0
Water Polo	2	0	1	28	9.7
Surfing	1	7	0	77	9.4
Netball	3	6	0	99	8.3
Tennis	3	2	0	55	8.3
Hockey	6	4	0	116	7.9
Diving	1	0	0	12	7.7
Bicycle Motocross	1	0	0	14	6.7
Bowls	0	2	1	48	5.9
Polocrosse	0	0	1	16	5.9
Swimming	3	0	0	48	5.9
Touch Football	1	2	0	49	5.8
Water Skiing	0	1	0	17	5.6
Surf Life Saving	3	2	1	110	5.2
Motorcycling	0	0	1	25	3.8
Volleyball	1	0	1	52	3.7
Gymnastics	0	0	1	27	3.6
Squash	1	0	0	28	3.4
Cycling	0	1	1	59	3.3
Orienteering	0	0	1	30	3.2
Sailing	0	0	1	30	3.2
Canoeing	0	0	1	31	3.1
Softball	1	0	0	45	2.2
Triathlon	0	0	1	55	1.8
Total	97	79	29	1770	10.0

gambling providers/services (14.6%). Cricket had the highest proportion of overall unhealthy sponsors at 26.8%, and also had the highest number of unhealthy food and beverage sponsors ($n = 19$). Rugby Union had the highest number of alcohol sponsors ($n = 16$) and Australian Football had the highest number of gambling sponsors ($n = 4$). For 15 of the 53 sports, at least 10% of their sponsors were classified as unhealthy.

The frequency that specific companies sponsored Australian NSO and SSO is presented in Table 2, grouped according to sponsor categories. Coca-Cola had the highest number of identified sponsorship arrangements. Overall, 34 (45.9%) of the identified unhealthy food and beverage sponsorship arrangements were Coca-Cola; who also sponsored the greatest number of different sports. The most common alcohol sponsor was Victoria Bitter (VB), contributing

to 10 sponsorship arrangements (23.3%) across three different sports. Other common alcohol sponsors were Hahn and Lion, which both sponsored five different sports each. Lottery West was the most frequently observed gambling sponsor, contributing to 15 occurrences of the total gambling sponsorship arrangements across the sample (60%).

Discussion

Our study extends earlier research on food and alcohol sponsorship of popular children's sports in Australia^{21,22} by assessing a comprehensive range of sports across all national and state/territory jurisdictions. It gives a snapshot of the extent and pattern of unhealthy sponsorship of sport in Australia, as identified from websites of sporting organisations. Overall, more than one in four

Table 2. Unhealthy sponsorships on 413 Australian National and State Sporting Organisations' websites by company

Sponsor company	Website sponsorships (N)	Number of different sports sponsored by the company (N)
Unhealthy food and beverage		
Coca-cola	34	14
Schwepps	14	9
McDonalds	9	8
Streets	4	4
Gatorade	4	4
Balfours	4	4
KFC	3	2
Cadbury	2	2
Alcohol		
VB	10	3
Carlton	7	4
Lion	6	5
Hahn	5	5
Bundaberg	4	2
XXXX	3	3
Jim Beam	2	2
James Boags	2	2
Southern Cross Clubs	2	2
Diageo	2	2
Gambling		
Lottery West	15	15
Betfair	3	3
TAB Sportsbet	3	3
Tote	2	2
Crown casino	2	2

sponsors, or associated companies, comprised products deemed to be unhealthy and not consistent with the health-promoting goals or image of sport.

The widespread extent of unhealthy sponsorship of peak sporting bodies observed poses significant ethical issues, as children participating in community-level sport may be exposed to, or influenced by, this sponsorship. A recent New Zealand study found similar rates of unhealthy sponsorship with 10 of the 36 (28%) food company sponsors present on 74 national and regional sporting organisations' websites classified as unhealthy.²³ A further New Zealand study²² found unhealthy product sponsorship was more than twice as prevalent as healthy product sponsorship, with gambling the most common type of sponsorship and contributing almost 19%, followed by alcohol at 11%.

Unhealthy sponsorship through peak body websites serves as an endorsement of brands and products to a wide range of community members, and sporting participants and spectators. Sponsorship generally translates into promotional opportunities and practices, and studies measuring the effects of such exposure have reported a link between marketing and subsequent product consumption.¹²

Cricket was found to have the largest proportion of overall unhealthy sponsors and also the highest overall number of unhealthy food and beverage sponsors. A previous study that had identified unhealthy food sponsor logos were visible for between 44% and 74% of the

game time for televised matches of elite cricket²⁴ also demonstrates the widespread presence of unhealthy sponsorship of cricket. Overall we found team sports tended to have higher levels of unhealthy sponsorship. In particular, Rugby Union and Australian Football had the highest number of alcohol sponsors and gambling sponsors, respectively. This higher prevalence of unhealthy sponsorship in team sports appears consistent across sports media with a recent study of advertising during a televised three-stage Rugby League series finding several thousand incidences of marketing for alcoholic beverages, gambling products and unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages.²⁰ Previous research has shown that athletes who play team sports are more likely to be accepting of junk food and alcohol advertising in sport, compared with individual athletes, and also have higher rates of smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.¹¹ Encouraging players to champion healthy behaviours through media campaigns and to refrain from associating themselves with unhealthy products and brands could reduce the opportunities for unhealthy sports sponsorship, thus achieving future desired reductions in its prevalence. However, this must be coupled with support and action from key sport and policy decision makers.

Of all the sponsoring companies, Coca-Cola – with the highest number of overall sponsorship arrangements and the greatest number of sports that it sponsors – is a key contributor to unhealthy sponsorship practices and their effects. This is consistent with Coca-Cola's presence in the sports industry for over two decades.^{25,26} Lottery West was the most common gambling sponsor. The listing of Lottery West on Western Australian SSO websites was likely due to the statutory requirement for gambling companies to provide 5% of profits to the Western Australia Department of Sport and Recreation,²⁷ which appears to be concomitant with branding presence. While resourcing of sport and recreation programs to such a magnitude is desirable, any associated advertising is not desirable. Further this provides another example of the entrenched association between sport and an industry responsible for public harm.

Clearly, sport is a very attractive avenue for companies to reach people and promote products and brands. Associating brands with the positive aspects of sport is an effective form of marketing, it reinforces positive brand image through association, thus normalising unhealthy products and undermining the health benefits of sport.

Strengths and limitations

Our study provides an analysis of unhealthy sponsorship of Australian sport at the national and state level, as identified through organisations' websites. While most previous studies have only examined food and non-alcoholic beverages and/or alcohol, this study examined the range of unhealthy product types promoted through sport. However, this is a descriptive study only and future

studies are required to assess the influence of such sponsorship on subsequent population health behaviours. Further, this study focused solely on sponsorships indicated on websites, yet advancing technologies have led to multiple new electronic avenues for advertisements such as social media and mobile applications. The emerging presence of unhealthy sponsorship in these media is evident, highlighting an important future area of study in measuring the extent of such exposure in relation to food, beverage and gambling products.

Conclusions

This study found that sponsorship of peak sporting organisations by unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol and gambling products and companies is prevalent in Australia at both the state/territory and national level. Given the harmful effects of unhealthy promotions on children's health behaviours, regulatory guidelines should be established to limit or remove promotional activities associated with such sponsorship and ensure they are not translated into visible marketing opportunities.

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