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Commercial determinants of health and sport sponsorship

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Abstract

Tobacco, alcohol and food high in fat, salt and sugar generate much of the global burden of noncommunicable diseases. Understanding and potentially controlling how these products are promoted is therefore needed. Here we summarize the literature on the marketing of harmful products through sport, highlighting the rapid expansion and increasing complexity of these systems. While the advertising and promotion of tobacco products in sport has largely disappeared over the last two decades, sponsorship by the alcohol, unhealthy food and sugar-sweetened beverages industries remains, raising concerns for those considering the potential impact on the public's health. The sponsorship of sporting events such as the Olympic Games, the men's FIFA World Cup and the men's European Football Championships in 2016, has received some attention in recent years in the public health literature. Meanwhile, British football and the English Premier League have become global products that transnational companies are keen to associate with to promote their brands to international audiences. Despite its popularity worldwide, English Premier League and its marketing and sponsorship portfolio has received very little scrutiny from public health advocates. Here, we call for policy-makers and the public health community to discuss an approach to the advertising and sponsorship of sport which considers these public health concerns.

Introduction

Noncommunicable diseases, such as myocardial infarction, stroke, cancer and type 2 diabetes, cause 41 million deaths per year globally, of which 15 million occur between the ages of 30 to 70 years. However, most of the premature deaths, that is, before the age of 70 years, are avoidable and noncommunicable disease prevention is thus a global priority. The main prevention strategies are focusing on poor diet, tobacco, alcohol and physical

inactivity.¹ Having evolved our understanding of the social determinants of health, such as sex, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, we should also consider the commercial determinants of health when we develop prevention strategies.² In the discourse around noncommunicable disease prevention, an emphasis is often placed on lifestyles³ and personal responsibility for addressing risk factors for noncommunicable diseases. This approach ignores the limited control that many people have over their life circumstances and their exposure to the marketing activities of transnational corporations.⁴

Sport is often represented as providing opportunities for individuals and communities to lead more active, healthier lives. Yet, many sports have become closely entwined with products that harm health. Companies producing foods high in fat, sugar and salt, alcohol or sugar-sweetened beverages often sponsor and/or market themselves through professional sports leagues, competitions and events across the world.⁵ We know that these products contribute significantly to the global noncommunicable disease burden.⁶ We now need to better understand the role of corporate marketing and sponsorship strategies in their promotion of such products.

In this paper, we therefore apply a public health perspective to the commercial sponsorship of sport. We suggest that policy-makers who wish to reverse the noncommunicable disease burden should consider how sport has been commodified to market diverse products which harm health and whether regulation may be required to control this marketing.

Commercial determinants of health

Health is not only determined by the biological and genetic circumstances, but also by the wider socioeconomic context of people's lives, including income levels, educational standards and the activity of some transnational corporations.⁷

Corporate activity, such as marketing of harmful goods such as unhealthy foods, tobacco, sugar-sweetened beverages and alcohol, affects health.⁸ These corporate activities have been defined as “commercial determinants of health [which are] factors that influence health which stem from the profit motive.”⁹ Corporate activities shape our environments and determine the availability, promotion and pricing of their products.¹⁰

International sporting events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup provide transnational corporations with large platforms to market their products globally.¹¹ For example, despite a Brazilian law

adopted in 2003 prohibiting the sale of alcoholic drinks at sporting events, FIFA overruled the law for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil by stating that access to beer was non-negotiable.¹² Jérôme Valcke, FIFA's former Secretary General said that "alcoholic drinks are part of the FIFA World Cup, so we're going to have them. [...] The fact that we have the right to sell beer has to be part of the law."¹³ Budweiser® was, and remains, a sponsor of the FIFA World Cup, including the 2018 tournament in the Russian Federation, highlighting the robust and enduring association between the World Cup and beer.

Commercial sponsorships

During the last century commercial brands have increasingly been seen in sporting environments. The link between the Olympic Games and corporations can be traced back at least to the 1928 games in Amsterdam, where the organizers recognized the commercial potential of the event. Coca-Cola® kiosks were staffed by vendors displaying Coca-Cola® branding.¹⁴ By the 1970s, the then president of FIFA, was taking advantage of the World Cup's global television market to develop corporate sponsorship. This sponsorship was segmented by product type, including Coca-Cola® as the recognized sweetened beverage partner from 1978 and with Budweiser® as the official beer sponsor from 1986.¹⁵

However, public health professionals have rarely noted the ethical issues and conflicts of interest involved in the commercial sponsorship of the games until recent events like the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.¹⁶ Since then major sports events have begun to draw scrutiny from a health perspective. Assessing the food and drink provided and alcohol marketed at the 2016 UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) Championship, researchers noted that unhealthy food and drink products dominated inside the stadia and sponsors included companies such as Coca-Cola®, McDonald's and Carlsberg Group.¹⁷

Sport and tobacco

Since the 1960s, the awareness of the harms caused by tobacco has been growing resulting in increasingly restrictive legislation on direct tobacco advertising. Sport sponsorship provided an opportunity for cigarette companies to achieve brand exposure across a range of sports worldwide while circumventing this legislation.¹⁸ The cigarette manufacturing company Philip Morris used the women's tennis tour to promote their Virginia Slims brand throughout the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁹ Motor sports were strongly associated with tobacco sponsorship from 1968;²⁰ motor sport's adventurous image matched tobacco companies' objectives and brands targeted young adult male urban smokers.¹⁸ The tobacco industry's sponsorship strategy

seemed effective, as a study of a tobacco company's sponsorship of the India-New Zealand cricket series in 1996 showed the likelihood of Indian children experimenting with tobacco almost doubled as a result of watching the matches on television.²¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) attacked tobacco sponsorship when the organization launched a Tobacco Free Sports campaign in 2002, stating that tobacco was a communicable disease, which was communicated through advertising and sponsorship.²² On 21 May 2003, WHO Member States endorsed the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and the endorsement is seen as a crucial step in controlling the use of tobacco.²³ Article 13 of the FCTC enacts a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship including through sport.

Public health practitioners reference tobacco control regulation as a success story in driving down cigarette consumption and thus directly reducing noncommunicable disease prevalence in many countries.²⁴ Much can be learnt from this story, because the strategies initially used by the tobacco industry to try to delay or prevent regulation are now being used by other industries such as food and alcohol companies. These strategies include: heaping money on politicians and journalists; attacking public health champions; recruiting commercial allies; misinformation via propaganda and poorly conducted science; and substituting strong interventions with weak ones.²⁵ Increasing evidence is showing that food, drink and alcohol corporations are using similar strategies as the tobacco industry.⁷ For example, the relationship between Coca-Cola® and the Global Energy Balance Network has raised concerns about food and beverage corporations' involvement with scientific organizations where they may be seen to promote business interests. Emails sent by Coca-Cola® are reported as suggesting they could "change the conversation about obesity" despite the evidence.²⁶

Relationships with industries

Although food and non-alcoholic beverage companies now invest huge sums on professional sports sponsorships,²⁷ the potential impacts on noncommunicable diseases have seldom been studied. However, the research has shown sport sponsorship is dominated by unhealthy products including food high in fat, salt and sugar and sugar-sweetened beverage.²⁸ A systematic review of food and beverage marketing to children through sports settings showed that although there is clear evidence that food marketing influences children's choices, literature exploring this type of marketing in sport is limited.⁵ The risk of children being exposed to high amounts of unhealthy food advertising on television was acknowledged and

partly addressed by a British ban on advertising foods high in fat, sugar and salt during broadcasting of children's television programmes. However, substantial loopholes need to be addressed since this ban is only implemented on programmes mainly appealing to children aged 4–15 years.²⁹ Sports programmes do not fall under this programme categorization and are thus not included in these regulations. Other countries, such as Australia, France and Norway, have also addressed advertising on children's television through various regulatory approaches.

Research from Australia shows that children easily identify unhealthy food and alcohol brands from sponsorship of sporting events, and this recognition influences children's behaviour.³⁰ Furthermore, researchers have documented the tactics employed by industry to use sports sponsorship to appeal to children,³⁰ and the ways that such promotions make young people associating sport with these products from an early age.³¹ In United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, researchers have noted overloading television broadcasting of English Premier League football with advertisements for gambling and other so-called risky products, such as alcohol and hyperpalatable foods.³²

Alcohol has also been associated with sport for a long time. In France, the national law *Loi Évin*, passed by the government in 1991, restricted tobacco and alcohol advertising. Despite this law, alcohol brands were unwilling to abandon French sport as they saw sports fans as a key demographic.³³ Research on alcohol marketing during the UEFA Euro 2016 football tournament held in France,³⁴ showed that despite the *Loi Évin* the tournament sponsor, Carlsberg Group, was able to achieve a substantial number of alcohol marketing references per televised match. Most references were indirect and used the phrases “probably” or “the best in the world.” The colour of the text was white on a green background, which is associated with Carlsberg beer. This so-called alibi marketing has previously been used by the tobacco industry to circumvent advertising regulation in which, although a brand is not directly mentioned, brand association can be achieved through textual or visual referencing. For example, the Ferrari Formula 1 car had a red, black and white barcode and when the car drove fast around the track, the barcode blurred, becoming very suggestive of the logo of the cigarette brand Marlboro.

When regulation is inconsistent industry may argue that they are placed at a commercial disadvantage. For example, some people argued that the *Loi Évin* is putting French football clubs at a disadvantage in comparison to some clubs in neighbouring countries. The researchers noted that as well as sponsoring revenues, the estimated sale of

beer was 40 million euros per year for the football clubs in the German Bundesliga.³⁵ Indeed, when profits are at risk, the advertising and alcohol industries may seek to frame policy debates in a way that may impact negatively on public health, as illustrated by how the *Loi Évin* alcohol strategy was described by the British media and parliament.³⁶

Digital media provide new opportunities to market and sell products and may also provide a way of evading the regulation of marketing through other promotional avenues. For example, a digital overlay technique applied to perimeter advertising boards in sports stadia allow virtual brand messages to be inserted during ongoing live broadcasting and these messages are visible only to the television broadcasting audience in targeted territories.³⁷ Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, also bring opportunities in developing social media strategies, including advertisement by corporate brands, for sport clubs who have established a broad base of followers.³⁸ For example, in February 2019 Manchester United had 18.8 million followers on Twitter and its Facebook page had 73.3 million likes. However, aggressive marketing by corporate brands may not be acceptable to fans. Fans' relationships with their clubs is critical for all sports and some fans are beginning to push back against the perceived commercialization of the game. This push back may create an issue for club revenue and for those corporations who wish to use sport for their brand advertisement.³⁹

Football and global community

Many sporting events have a global reach and these events need to reflect on the marketing and incitements they help place into public spheres across diverse countries. For example, football is the most popular spectator sport and the English Premier League, the richest league in the football world, is broadcasted across the world, attracting approximately 4.7 billion views per season and its clubs are some of the richest in Europe.⁴⁰ By sponsoring football teams and advertising at matches and during commercial breaks, companies can achieve huge exposure for their products and brands.

Business organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate a greater commitment and contribution to society through social and environmental activities, which have become characterized as corporate social responsibility. Sport industry with its role in society and, as a member of the global community, has also started addressing its wider social responsibilities.⁴¹ Football clubs have approached this responsibility by founding charities that work for the benefit of their local communities. However, the impact of such football charities on the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases in the United Kingdom

may be limited when their host football clubs are separate businesses who very clearly separate community concerns from their everyday work while having official alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverage sponsors.⁴² There are other governance models of corporate social responsibility in Europe, such as VfL Wolfsburg in the German Bundesliga which sees the club as directly socially responsible in all of its dealings and manages a range of community projects.⁴³

Given concerns about noncommunicable diseases, and, obesity in particular, public health organizations and academics are starting to question and challenge the commercial relationships within the English Premier League. In 2018, Sugar Smart and the European Healthy Stadia Network wrote to football associations in Ireland and the United Kingdom asking that football associations, leagues and clubs do not enter into new partnership deals with companies producing foods high in fat, sugar and salt as a commitment to protect children's health.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in Australia, a report published by Cancer Research Council NSW, called for action to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink and alcohol marketing through sponsorship of community and professional sport.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Professional sport represents a profitable global entertainment industry. Multinational corporations use the visibility and widespread appeal of sports to promote their brands and products to mass audiences. Yet, public health professionals rarely discuss about the nature of this sponsorship in professional sport and how global corporations use the most popular sporting events, leagues and clubs to sell products harmful to health. This paper has focused on football as the world's most popular sport and the English Premier League in particular. However, other sports in other countries also have large numbers of spectators, such as the American National Football League and the National Basketball Association, and sponsors for these sports include the beer company Anheuser-Busch InBev, the restaurant chain Pizza Hut⁴⁶ and the whiskey company Jack Daniel's.⁴⁷ Similarly, cricket in Australia is strongly associated with sponsorship by food and alcohol companies.⁴⁸

The successful approach in outlawing the tobacco industry's sports sponsorship may inform other public health advocacy. Stakeholders wishing to adapt a similar approach to regulate other commercial industries should keep in mind that the tobacco industry developed considerable expertise in using tactics to circumvent regulation for as long as possible and these tactics may be favoured by other commercial industries.

There is clear scope for action by policy-makers to reduce the impact of commercial interests, expanded through sport, on population health. WHO's Independent High-Level Commission on Noncommunicable Diseases delivered its report *Time to deliver* in June 2018.⁴⁹ As others have commented,⁵⁰ the report is surprising in that it encourages governments to engage constructively with the private sector (except the tobacco industry). In Recommendation 4 (c), the commission proposes governments should work with "...the leisure and sports industries to promote physical activity;..." while in 4 (d) the commission states "Governments should give priority to restricting the marketing of unhealthy products (those containing excessive amounts of sugars, sodium, saturated fats and trans fats) to children. WHO should explore the possibility of establishing an international code of conduct on this issue,..."⁴⁹ These two recommendations should perhaps be considered in tandem. As we discuss here, whilst professional sport has the potential to encourage healthier lifestyles, it is regularly used to sell us products which may impact negatively on our health. Perhaps WHO should consider a modern equivalent of its successful Tobacco Free Sports campaign²² and initiate calls for controls of marketing of products within sport which may contribute to the global burden of noncommunicable diseases.

We encourage research and documentation of the relationships between sport and its commercial sponsors, notably the companies producing alcohol, food high in fat, salt and sugar and sugar-sweetened beverages, as well as the gambling industries. All these industries present substantial challenges to public health. We suggest that the sports industry should embrace a new and socially responsible approach to commercial sponsorship and advertising, an approach which is predicated less on profit, and more on the future health of sports' fans, families and communities.

Competing interests:

None declared.

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