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Review article

Marketing Food and Beverages to Youth Through Sports

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ABSTRACT

Food and beverage marketing has been identified as a major driver of obesity yet sports sponsorship remains common practice and represents millions of dollars in advertising expenditures. Research shows that food and beverage products associated with sports (e.g., M&M's with National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing logo) generate positive feelings, excitement, and a positive self-image among adults and children. Despite this, self-regulatory pledges made by food companies to limit exposure of unhealthy products to children have not improved the nutritional quality of foods marketed to children. We reviewed the literature about sports-related food marketing, including food and beverage companies' use of sports sponsorships, athlete endorsements, and sports video games. This review demonstrates that sports sponsorships with food and beverage companies often promote energy-dense, nutrient-poor products and while many of these promotions do not explicitly target youth, sports-related marketing affects food perceptions and preferences among youth. Furthermore, endorsement of unhealthy products by professional athletes sends mixed messages; although athletes may promote physical activity, they simultaneously encourage consumption of unhealthy products that can lead to negative health outcomes. We argue that more athletes and sports organizations should stop promoting unhealthy foods and beverages and work with health experts to encourage healthy eating habits among youth.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Food companies use sports sponsorships to promote unhealthy food/beverage products and can influence false associations between energy-dense products and healthful behaviors. Findings can inform policies aimed to address food companies' marketing practices relevant to sports, athlete endorsements, and food product placement in advergames and video games.

Poor diet and obesity are significant public health challenges. Food marketing has been identified as a major driver of obesity [1], and policymakers in Norway, Quebec, Sweden, Finland, Australia, and the UK have imposed restrictions on child-targeted food marketing [2–5]. In the United States, few

policies exist to restrict food marketing to youth. Twenty-seven states restrict food and beverages sold in schools [6–11], but there are few restrictions on marketing in schools. Although wellness policies have been implemented in all school districts under the Healthy, Hunger Free Kid Act of 2010 [11], most do not address advertising. Maine is the only state that prohibits advertising certain foods and beverages in school settings (e.g., athletic scoreboards) [6,8]. More recently, several cities have either proposed or passed legislation to limit inclusion of toys in children's meals at fast food restaurants [12]. Although there has been growing interest in curbing child-targeted food marketing,

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the food industry's use of sports in product promotion has flown largely under the radar. Sports-related food marketing includes sponsorships (i.e., partnerships between food and beverage companies and professional, local, or youth sports organizations), athlete endorsements of food and beverages, and the use of food and beverage company logos and spokescharacters (e.g., "Red" the M&M) in sports video games. These partnerships are promoted through commercials, sporting events, in stores, and online, and food companies spend millions of dollars on these sports-related marketing tools.

Although food marketing can be used to promote healthy foods and beverages, the majority of food advertisements are for energy-dense, nutrient-poor products [13–15]. In the United States, food companies spend \$1.6 billion annually to reach youth through various avenues including television, the Internet, radio, packaging, in-store promotions, video games, and text messages [16]. Food companies are motivated to target youth because they collectively spend \$200 billion annually and indirectly influence \$200 billion in additional spending [1]. Children are viewed as integral to their business because they represent the next generation of consumers and because food and brand preferences can be shaped early.

A common claim made by the food industry is that consumers make the decision about what kinds of product categories they would like to buy and advertisements simply help to develop and sustain brand loyalty or entice consumers to switch brands [17]. But research shows that food advertisements can do much more. They can lead to increased food consumption, even when the food consumed differs from the advertised food [18–21]. An Institute of Medicine report on the effects of food marketing on youth concluded that the majority of advertised food is unhealthy and that food marketing influences children's preferences and purchases requests, short-term consumption, diet overall, and by extension, health problems [1]. Researchers hypothesize that food marketing themes may appeal to youth partly because they focus on the innate desires of adolescents, such as a desire for social status and value and a sense of independence, while highly palatable ingredients positively reinforce consumption [22,23].

The aim of this article was to identify and describe food and beverage industries' use of sports in marketing and describe the psychology of how food advertisements influence the perception and behaviors of children and adolescents. We also aim to provide guidance on how public health experts and policymakers should address the issue. In this article, we focus on three sports marketing strategies that each industry engages in: sponsorships, athlete endorsements, and sports video games.

Theoretical Framework for Understanding Food and Beverage Marketing

A variety of psychological principles contribute to scientific understanding of the way advertising influences consumer perceptions and behavior. Cue reactivity is one concept that suggests that exposure to stimuli (e.g., cigarette and food) can influence a physiological response and a specific craving that can lead to a specific behavior (e.g., smoking and eating unhealthy foods) [24]. For example, one study found that food-branded advergames increased consumption of both healthy and unhealthy snack foods among children [25], while other studies demonstrate that cue reactivity can lead children and adults to increase food intake in short-term periods [26,27]. Similarly, exposure to television

segments featuring individuals drinking alcohol can prime alcohol consumption among viewers [28], with similar effects found for viewing aggression and behaving aggressively [29]. One review of prospective cohort studies concluded that there is an association between alcohol advertising and subsequent alcohol consumption in youth [30]. In addition, one study found that familiarity with songs that mention alcohol brands was linked to self-reported alcohol consumption in youth [31].

Food Companies' Use of Sports Sponsorships, Athlete Endorsements, and Video Game Product Placement

Three major ways food and beverage companies engage in child-targeted, sports-related marketing are sports sponsorship, athlete endorsements, and video game product placement. Sponsorship is one form of sports-linked marketing and has been described as "indirect marketing" [32]. Sponsorship began gaining traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is now a \$37 billion industry worldwide [33]. Food companies engage in sports-related sponsorships in the United States and international sports communities. McDonald's logos often line the field of major Fédération Internationale de Football Association soccer matches and National Hockey League hockey games, while Coca-Cola's logo can be found on chairs in National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball games or alongside Olympic rings. Coca-Cola, particularly, has been a top sponsor of the Olympic Games since 1928. Between the years of 2012 and 2016, investments made by Coca-Cola in the Brazilian market reached \$7.6 billion [34]. Recently, Coca-Cola built a hangout space with Coca-Cola products where teens could take photos with the Olympic torch in Rio [35]. At the same time, obesity and diabetes rates have increased in low- and middle-income countries, with the prevalence of overweight and obesity rising from 8.1% in 1980 to 12.9% in 2013 for boys and from 8.4% to 13.4% in girls during those years [36]. This is especially alarming given that Coca-Cola has also pledged \$5 billion in expenditures to develop new plants and sales networks in India, while also committing \$17 billion by 2020 to raise its presence throughout Africa [37,38]. Other examples of partnerships include the #That'sGold campaign in which television commercials featured past successful Olympic athletes with a Coca-Cola beverage [39]. Another longtime sponsor of the Olympic Games, McDonald's has been committed to this worldwide event since 1968. For the past 10 years, including the most recent games in Rio, McDonald's has fed participating athletes as the "Official Restaurant of the Olympic Games" [40]. However, McDonald's recently ended their Olympic sponsorship early amid growing public criticism of the unhealthy sponsorship of sports, rising Olympic sponsorship costs, and declining Olympic television ratings [41]. Table 1 provides additional examples of food company sponsorships with sports organizations.

Becoming the official sponsor of a major sports organization requires immense financial resources, which may be the primary reason smaller companies that sell healthier products are not found in sponsorship arenas. McDonald's and Coca Cola have consistently topped lists for "The World's Biggest Public Companies" in the categories of restaurants and beverages, respectively [47]. Indeed, Coca-Cola reported aiming to spend \$1 billion on advertising in 2016, and McDonald's spent close to \$1 billion on ads in 2012, even though the entire restaurant industry spends nearly \$6 billion collectively [48–50]. These expenditures translate to increased brand awareness among consumers,

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