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Are we selling our soles? Novel aspects of the presence in academic conferences of brands linked to ill health

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There is evidence linking unhealthy food and drink consumption to ill health such as diabetes.[1-3] Counterintuitively, research demonstrating these links have been presented at national and international health promotion conferences sponsored by brands of unhealthy food and drink; primarily conferences related to public health, sport and exercise, nutrition and dietetics.[4-5] For example, Flint⁴ reported the presence of The Coca Cola Co. at the European College of Sport Sciences (ECSS) conference in 2014, whilst in the same year Hérick de Sá[5] also noted that they were a sponsor at the Fifth International Congress on Physical Activity and Public Health. The Coca Cola Co. have also been a yearly sponsor of the National Conference on Health Disparities in the USA. It seems unfathomable that the brands of unhealthy food and drink were present at health-related conference where, for example, the ECSS mission statement specifies that the application of sport science knowledge to improving health and wellbeing[6], and much of the research presented at the conference aimed to improve health and wellbeing; The Coca Cola Co. were a Gold sponsor, an exhibitor and sponsored three streams of oral presentations at ECSS 2014. Likewise, McDonalds Corp. and other food companies have a history of sponsoring nutrition research and conferences. For example, in 2014 McDonalds Corp was a Gold sponsor at the California Dietetics Association conference in Pomona, USA. Furthermore, food and drink companies that produce unhealthy products such as McDonalds Corp. and The Coca Cola Co. have been major sponsors of sports events such as the Olympics. More recently, these companies have become increasingly seen in academic circles to promote a more positive image of the brands since links to ill health have been established. On a conscious and non-conscious level, these brands are attempting to influence public opinion as well as reach a wider consumer pool.

Undermining health-related research

The question is why are brands of unhealthy food and drink aligning themselves with health conferences? The direct impact of sponsoring conferences is an unlikely reason, as these partnerships will not lead to greater product sales. The more likely indirect reason for aligning their brand with health-related conferences is to improve brand image. The accumulation of empirical evidence and greater restrictions on the marketing of such brands due to the association with ill health has led to the development of policies for responsible marketing such as The Coca Cola Co.'s Responsible Marketing Policy in 2014. Concomitantly, the increasing presence at health-related conferences and sponsorship of health-related research such as research relating to exercise, nutrition and obesity by leading researchers, is likely to be an attempt at reducing the growing concern around the detrimental health impacts that has become associated with brands of unhealthy food and drink. Thus, sponsorship of health-related research and conferences appears to be a vehicle for these brands to reduce and in some instances modify the growing public awareness that products of these brands increase the likelihood of ill health. For example, a partnership was formed in 2009 between the American Academy of Family Physicians and The Coca Cola Co. to educate consumers about healthy food and drink consumption including products from the company.[7] Recent figures released by The Coca Cola Co. since 2010, demonstrate that the company have spent over \$100M sponsoring health-related research, partnerships and

community programmes.[8] This includes a \$100k sponsorship of an ‘Active Living and Sports Dietetics Program’ at Purdue University in 2013, \$300k gift for a ‘health active lifestyles and energetics endowed research fund’, \$100k to Auburn University Foundation for an ‘obesity prevention’ partnership in 2010, and a \$200k partnership with the University of South Carolina for a ‘school-based program to promote physical activity and good nutrition’. Whilst these partnerships appear to have become more evident in recent years, historically partnerships between industry and the scientific and medical community have existed[9-10].

The food and drink industry is big business and through continued links to academic institutions, experts and politicians, companies play a major role in policy development.[11] Indeed, brands of unhealthy food and drink linked to obesity and ill health, have been reported to fund public health experts, and Government funded organisations and campaigns.[11] For example, the UK Government Department of Health’s Public Health Responsibility Deal[12] has been scrutinised for engaging with companies of unhealthy food and drink that have been linked with ill-health such as The Coca Cola Co. who became a partner in 2012. These counterintuitive partnerships, where the primary objectives are not aligned may represent a conflict of interest which needs to be monitored and reviewed overtime. Consequently, and in line with concerns raised by Gilmore and Colleagues [13], it is pertinent to ask why brands of unhealthy food and drink are permitted to have a top seat at the public health policy making table when they represent vectors of disease? Since the New Responsibility Deal [12], partnerships and involvement of unhealthy food and drink brands in health promotion activities such as funding and sponsorship of health-related initiatives, research and conferences, and community events has become increasingly evident [4, 8, 11, 13, 14].

Ethically, it appears that many health-related researchers and conference organisers need to re-consider their inclusion/exclusion criteria for sponsors and exhibitors. It is preposterous to think that health-related researchers and conference organisers believe it is acceptable to have brands attend, sponsor and exhibit their products when they are a major cause of ill health. For researchers who do not align themselves with brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption but present at conferences sponsored by such brands, organisers are performing a disservice to researchers who are striving to improve awareness, treatment, management and prevention of ill health linked to unhealthy consumption, by aligning themselves with these companies. Thus, admirable work is being undermined by researchers and conference organisers that appear to sell out to these brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Brands of unhealthy food and drink should be prevented from sponsoring any event that promotes good health. Positive steps have been taken in society to remove the presence of

brands of unhealthy food and drink from television programmes targeting children and from sponsoring football teams in Europe. However, this is insufficient and greater action is warranted to remove a health-risk (disease) that is spreading to various aspects of our society. The presence of these brands may go beyond manipulation of public opinion, where research themes and policy become influenced. It should be noted that academic conferences and research are part of a myriad of sources that contribute to knowledge generation and dissemination, and that the tactics used by food and drink brands is more widespread. These tactics, that are designed to influence public opinion, enhance public relations and to distort science, have been observed and it is pertinent to intervene to prevent poor awareness and distorted understanding that ultimately may influence healthy consumption.

Like any business, the primary goal of brands of unhealthy food and drink is to increase or in some instances maintain sales. Health-related researchers and conference organisers should not be so naïve and should be aware that their actions are likely to contribute to improved public opinion of brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption as well as undermine pioneering empirical research by academics who present their research at these events. This increasing unethical partnership is a growing concern amongst the academic community. The presence of brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption is contradictory to the mission statements of many health-related conferences and professional society events. Consequently, the values that provide the foundation of health-related conferences and events are a risk if the presence of brands of unhealthy food and drink continues. Thus, should brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption be prevented from participating in conferences that in many instances are providing the platform to present evidence of the links between products of these brands with ill health? Should health-related researchers consider their allegiance with academic conferences, societies and professional bodies that are seen to be a partner of brands of unhealthy food and drink consumption? It might be argued that these hypocritical actions may serve to devalue and impact the credibility of health-related research.

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