



Title: Corporate sponsorship of physical activity promotion programmes: part of the solution or part of the problem?

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Corporate Sponsorship of Physical Activity Promotion Programmes: Part of the Solution or Part of the problem?

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Background

The prevalence of non-communicable disease (NCD) has increased across the world. While the precise relationship between inactivity, poor diet, obesity and disease is complex¹ and often contested^{2,3} calls to action emphasise the enablement of healthy food and physical activity “choices”^{4,5} by addressing both personal and environmental determinants⁶⁻⁸. From such a viewpoint it has been suggested that progressively optimised marketing strategies have contributed significantly to rising obesity rates^{9,10} and as such, Public Health advocates have taken a particular interest in the impact of targeted marketing on the diet and health of children¹¹⁻¹³, the effectiveness of methods of control¹⁴, and the importance of partnership work in achieving meaningful outcomes⁴. Policy initiatives such as the WHO Global Action Plan for non-communicable disease¹⁵ and the UK’s Public Health Responsibility Deal¹⁶ advocate for the formation of partnerships between public sector, academic, commercial and voluntary organisations. Such Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can take many forms¹⁷ and are said to have the potential to broaden the reach of health initiatives, foster collaboration, and create new knowledge¹⁸. Through such partnerships global food manufacturers have positioned themselves as ‘part of the solution’ to the NCD problem¹⁹ particularly through funding research on nutrition^{20,21} and exercise²² as well as physical activity promotion campaigns²³⁻²⁶ (See supplementary file A).

Naturally, profit is businesses *raison-d'être*, yet involvement in issues of health is often found in the guise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), defined by McWilliams and Siegel^{27(p117)} as, “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law.” Conflicting stakeholder motives, inappropriate governance, and inadequate evaluation have however, been cited as causes for concern regarding CSR strategies^{28,29} and as well-designed CSR strategies have been shown to be economically beneficial^{30,31} critics have suggested that profit not philanthropy is the central motivation^{24,32-36}. Public Health CSR strategies in particular have been shown to generate profit through increasing brand awareness in a target population, the creation of a health halo around a brand³⁷ and “constituency building”³⁸⁻⁴⁰ by recruiting allies and co-opting critics⁴¹. In terms of lifestyle-related health and NCDs there is also evidence that a strategic CSR campaign can contribute to shaping public discourse and public policy in relation to individual choice and responsibility⁴².

One such CSR programme, ParkLives, is funded by Coca-Cola GB and delivered across the UK in partnership with Local Authorities and with the support of ukactive and a range of

physical activity providers⁴³. ParkLives is aligned with the UK government's London 2012 Olympic Legacy pledge to inspire two million people to take up sport and physical activity⁴⁴ and Coca-Cola GB have committed £20m to the project aiming to support one million people in becoming active by 2020⁴³. Currently, evaluation of the scheme (conducted by Coca-Cola GB⁴⁵ and their partners UKActive⁴⁶) reports that more than 140,000 individuals had participated in the programme over the first two years and in 2015, 9000 hours of free activities were delivered. These outcomes notwithstanding, initial concerns about Coca-Cola GB becoming involved in a scheme that intended to engage with many thousands of children and young people⁴⁷ have yet to be explored.

The aim of this study was to examine twitter content related to a physical activity programme sponsored by Coca-Cola. Such analysis can provide new insight into our understanding of how global brands engage with the participants of health promotion programmes and how they seek to maximise their involvement in the wider public health agenda.

Method

Overview/Rationale

Existing publicity and evaluation material established that social media reach and impact was an important measure of success for the ParkLives programme^{45,46}, so to develop further insight into the potential impact of the scheme, content analysis of related social media output was deemed to be appropriate.

Sample

The data was collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) and by systematic sampling of posts that included the phrase “ParkLives” (with or without #) during two separate weeks of the programmes delivery (08/08/16-15/08/16 and 15/09/16-22/09/16). In accordance with Rose⁴⁸, who recommended that sampling should be representative, the sample weeks were chosen purposively to represent a week in the school vacation period and a week outside of that time. The second of these weeks was chosen as it included National Fitness Day, an event promoted by ukactive as a nationwide celebration of physical activity. The advanced search strategy capability of Twitter was utilised (<https://twitter.com/search-advanced>) to identify tweets meeting the inclusion criteria, each tweet was given a unique code to allow for effective analysis and reporting. No attempt was made to contact or interact with the users.

Ethics

This study made use of publically available content posted by users that were operating under the Twitter privacy policy (<https://twitter.com/privacy>) and as such institutional ethical approval was sought and received prior to collecting data. While user names and profile information was integral to the initial stages of analysis, all efforts were made to anonymise users’ information in reporting the findings.

Units of data collection

The unit of data collection was any post on Twitter that contained the word ParkLives either alone or preceded by a hashtag, “#”. Any tweets that included the search term but were deemed unrelated to the scheme were discarded.

Codebook and coding scheme

A codebook was developed to define the measured variables through an iterative process of pilot-testing and consensus agreement between the coders (BJ, KG) whereby codes developed were intended to be exhaustive, exclusive, enlightening and replicable⁴⁸. The codebook (see Table 1) was then used to analyse all of the content in the sample weeks and then for units that resulted in inter-coder variation all points of disagreement were resolved through consensus coding. Where necessary, the original codebooks categories and definitions were updated and analyses revisited under aforementioned principles of consensus and constant comparison. Few studies report the demographics of twitter users⁴⁹ however part of the coding process was to assign users to specific categories with the intention of understanding more about the process, actors and discourse surrounding the programme.. All photographic, video and graphic images and accompanying text were analysed in a series of categories thus, a single tweet could be coded as having multiple images and categories of content. In addition to thematic content, coders assessed the presence of social and/or political endorsement and further reach in the form of retweets.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Data Analysis

Once coded the data were entered into a Microsoft Excel 2007 spreadsheet for analysis. Much of the analysis was the generation of frequency counts and descriptive in nature. In addition, text and images from sample tweets were selected to illustrate key themes (see supplementary file B)

Results

Over the two 7 day periods, advanced twitter searches for the hashtag #ParkLives returned 318 individual tweets from 100 unique accounts. In addition to this sample, 6 tweets were discarded from the initial search due to being judged unrelated to the project. The frequency of these tweets across the days of each week can be seen in Figure 1.

These accounts were assigned to nineteen categories that can be seen in table 2. Across the two week period 49.5% of the tweets came from the Local Authority Sports Development Units or the Local ParkLives Teams. The remainder came from members of the public, and other profiles that included community groups, local councils and Members of Parliament.

INSERT FIG 1 HERE

Image Content

Of 318 unique tweets, 147 contained one or more photographic images or videos, with a total of 216 images posted. Analysis found half (49.07%) of all images contained images of children participating in the programme. As anticipated, there was a significant difference between the two weeks, and this resulted in week A (August) having children present in 79% (79/100) of images and week B, 24.28% (27/116). With respect to brand exposure, across both weeks, 56.94% of photographic images showed the Coca-Cola logo present in sessions with the majority of these being on banners or staff t-shirts.

Text Content

A common theme was the use of the words “fun” or “good time” appearing in 24% of the tweets and words related to families or young people were present in 17% of the tweets. The words “health” or “healthy” were used explicitly five times across the two week period.

Constituency Building

This refers to the practice of establishing relationships with key opinion leaders, health organisations and policymakers⁴⁰ and 20.82% of all tweets across the two weeks were classified as having evidence of this within the text or images. The majority of these (93.94%) were present in week B when a joint event between ukactive and Coca-Cola took place outside the Houses of Parliament.

Additional tags and social endorsement

Of 318 unique tweets, 23.03% tagged @CocaColaGB directly in the message of those tweets, @CocaColaGB replied or retweeted 12.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Activities promoted within tweets

Content analysis of text, images, videos and promotional material published within the sample tweets outlined a wide range of activities that were organised and promoted as part of the ParkLives project. A number of these were traditional sporting activities such as football, rugby, cricket, rounders and volleyball. Many were less traditional and more physical activity or play focussed rather than sport. A sample of activities contained within the programme is outlined in table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Discussion

Main finding of this study

Our analysis demonstrates Coca-Cola's involvement with ParkLives increases the exposure of young people and their families to the Coca-Cola brand and such exposure occurs through heavily branded materials that includes staff clothing and banners. In doing so the ParkLives project also works to associate Coca-Cola with fun, healthy, family activities and promotes the importance of physical activity for health rather than promoting a reduction in calorific intake. Furthermore, ParkLives involvement in National Fitness day facilitates access to individuals and organisations involved in making health-related policy decisions. Therefore, ParkLives is indicative of a CSR project that aims to create a health halo around a brand and influence wider socio-ecological factors by guiding public discourse and directing opinion on the determinants of public health issues away from corporate influence and toward individual responsibility^{50,51}.

What is already known on this topic?

The mechanics of contemporary marketing communication can be explained by the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication^{55 56} whereby tactics tend to be "pluralistic and integrated"⁵⁶. The involvement of social media enables brands to access target populations through existing social connectedness, emotional appeal, and the co-creation of content⁵⁷. Within some integrated marketing strategies the use of sport as a vehicle for promoting a product is commonplace⁵⁸⁻⁶⁰ and not only allows companies access to desirable markets but also an opportunity to reinforce or mould the image of a brand in alignment with that of the sport, it's participants and audience⁶¹.

In response to concerns around marketing to children, the food industry has developed voluntary marketing regulations containing guidance on how and when children can be targeted⁵⁷. However, impact has been said to fall short of significant improvements in public health⁶². Threats of regulation have prompted a multifaceted response from the food industry^{32,63} including the development of influential partnerships³⁹, infiltration of the scientific community^{21,64-66}, and becoming significant actors in the health agenda in order to influence public discourse and policy^{35,41,67}. Such actions are reminiscent of tobacco industry tactics^{38,68,69} and evidence shows that such partnerships and voluntary regulation allow businesses meaningful access to policy formulation rather than changing behaviour to promote good health^{17 36,70}.

What this study adds

Content analysis suggested ParkLives concomitantly provides opportunities for members of the community to be active *and* a channel for Coca-Cola brand promotion to children and young people. Our findings are supported by ParkLives own evaluation where 34.5% of attendees at its largest site were aged 6-15⁴⁵ and as reported, ParkLives attendance fell significantly in September given the “return to school”^{46(p17)}. Analysis highlighted behaviour apparently in contrast to Coca-Cola’s own Responsible Marketing Charter⁷¹ whereby Coca-Cola, “respect the role of parents and therefore do not target the marketing of any of our drinks to children under the age of 12”. Evidence demonstrates children are particularly vulnerable to targeted marketing^{11,13} and the type of activities included in ParkLives, the amount of children present, and the exposure to brand that they experience all suggest a significant degree of brand engagement. Analysis also suggests that Parklives is a CSR campaign designed to influence the broader socio-ecological environment. It is interesting in itself that there were only five instances of the words, “health” or “healthy” related to a scheme designed to increase physical activity yet the content analysis still demonstrates efforts to create a health halo around the brand through a strong association with fun, healthy, family activities. Furthermore, stressing physical activity as a personal choice works to direct opinion on the determinants of public health issues away from corporate influence toward individual responsibility^{51,72}.

Partnering with local authorities and a national representative body, ukactive, is recognisable as a tactic from the “corporate playbook”^{73,74} in line with a strategy designed to recruit allies and co-opt critics. ukactive were commissioned as the independent evaluators of ParkLives in 2014. In 2015 Coca-Cola became one of ukactive’s eight inaugural membership council members⁷⁵, a position of influence with the potential for guiding and supporting the lobbying of government on physical activity and health issues. This relationship between a company whose products have been shown to be detrimental to health⁷⁶ and ukactive who state that they are “committed to improving the health of the nation”⁷⁷ can be seen as a conflict of interest and while such accusations have previously been acknowledged⁷⁸, continued ties between the two organisations and the findings of our research suggest they have not been resolved. Analysis of ParkLives social media content demonstrated a relationship between the two organisations that afforded Coca-Cola access to senior government policy makers otherwise unavailable.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the need for independent evaluation of PPPs and the challenge of evaluating complex health relationships⁷⁹. The aetiology of many NCDs is complex and the timescales required to clearly establish causation can create uncertainty which in turn can lead to a degree of inaction in terms of policy making⁸⁰. Due to the pervasive nature of food marketing in society, the establishment of clear causal links between specific marketing activities and future behaviour is also a considerable challenge¹¹ that can create uncertainty for policy makers and opportunities for businesses to continue their work. A situation made worse when large corporations have a history of “manufacturing uncertainty” in the evidence base⁸¹.

The generous philanthropy of global corporations presents a dilemma for those interested in promoting good public health. Such dilemmas are redoubled when reduction in state funding means provision of events requires private contribution⁸², creating potential for the “corporate capture of health”⁸³. Despite the lack of any negative comments in the data, Local Authorities need to consider the net result of allowing global food and drink brands significant access to their communities. While comprehensive independent evaluation of PPPs is required, as is a more thorough understanding of the perceived responsibilities of local authority sport and activity providers and the environment in which they operate, such evaluations are methodologically challenging and often too slow for policy makers and practitioners. Therefore, those responsible for community health and wellbeing should fully consider the implications of partnership with a business whose products are detrimental to health. They should engage with the various recommendations for assessing the ethics of such a partnership (e.g.^{17,28,84,85}) and in the absence of evidence identifying definitive causal links, give due consideration to adopting a precautionary principle in favour of improved public health^{28,86}.

Limitations of this study

Despite highlighting participant demography and exposure to Coca-Cola branding, the complex nature of the food environment means we are unable to conclude how exposure will affect future dietary behaviour. Visual judgements of age are difficult, especially near exclusion criteria so our judgements were made with caution. As others have suggested however, it is naïve to assume maturation of cognitive abilities at a specific age, therefore it is reasonable to assume our method captures meaningful data^{12,52}. We believe reported exposure to Coca-Cola branding is conservative given coding inclusion criteria required branding to be clearly identifiable/legible in the image. Further, given staff all appeared to

wear branded t-shirts and the use of branded banners was widespread, our analysis supports the idea that Coca-Cola seek to optimise brand exposure via ParkLives.

A number of studies have used larger datasets for analysing social media content^{53,54} however this study made use of both text and image content analysis which is more labour intensive. Facebook was considered for inclusion in this study however when data was being collected the social algorithm used to customise the user experience on this platform did not allow for temporally stable or what was felt to be an accurate portrayal of the various users social media output. This is an issue that would benefit from further examination when making use of social media for research.

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