

(SP) SPONSORSHIP OF SPORTING EVENTS: IS FAST FOOD ANY BETTER OR WORSE THAN TOBACCO OR ALCOHOL?

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Introduction

Conflicting debate surrounds tobacco and alcohol sponsorship. Many people, including health advocates, are opposed to tobacco sponsorship of sporting events because it appears hypocritical to use a product that is detrimental to one's health to promote an activity that exemplifies a healthy and fit lifestyle (Danylchuk, 2000; Dewhirst, 2004; Turco, 1999). Similarly, many people are opposed to alcohol sponsorship due to the same hypocrisy, even though there is documentation of the benefits of moderate consumption of alcohol (Crompton, 1993). For both tobacco and alcohol opponents, there is an added concern that youth are often exposed to the sponsorship promotions, thereby providing a link between exposure and consumption (Danylchuk, 2000; Sparks, 1997). In contrast, sport event organizers relish this type of sponsorship because positive association with powerful brands brings attention to their event. As well, they argue that the banning of this type of sponsorship will lead to the loss of these events and the economic benefits derived (Danylchuk, 2000; Sparks, 1997). The tobacco and alcohol industry see value in associating themselves with sporting events for a multitude of reasons, such as their huge potential media exposure, potential for increased sales, brand awareness through signage and logo usage, brand positioning, and corporate responsibility.

Considerable research has been done on the tobacco issue (e.g., Crompton, 1993; Danylchuk, 2000; Dewhirst, 2004; Sparks, 1997; Turco, 1999), especially in light of fairly recent tobacco legislation in many countries. In some countries (e.g., Canada), tobacco companies have discontinued sponsoring sporting events due to legislated restrictions (Bill C-71). Although the connection between alcohol sponsorship and sport is as old as the connection between tobacco sponsorship and sport, tobacco is the most commonly restricted sponsor category, followed by spirits companies and then beer/wine sponsors (International Events Group, 1992). It is rare to find any sporting event organizers opposed to food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsors.

While previous research has examined public opinion toward tobacco and alcohol sponsorship, no research to date has examined public opinion toward food sponsorship of sporting events; in particular, fast food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship. Research of this nature is particularly timely in light of the current obesity issue, which the World Health Organization has called a global epidemic. Two years ago, fat became the "new tobacco" and health officials are warning that obesity threatens to produce a crisis in terms of heart disease and stroke (Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare public opinion towards tobacco, alcohol, food, and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship of sporting events, with a particular focus on food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship.

Method

University students, fitness club members, and older adults at an activity centre (N = 253) in a Canadian city were administered a written survey consisting of two parts. The first part asked the participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1” (strongly agree) to “5” (strongly disagree) their opinions towards statements outlining various categories of sport sponsorship, namely tobacco, alcohol (i.e., beer, liquor, wine), food (i.e., fast food and snack food), and non-alcoholic beverages (i.e., soft drink, juice, tea/coffee, sport drink, water). They were also asked whether government should make laws to prevent tobacco, alcohol, food, and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship. The second part of the survey contained some general demographic questions--gender, age, educational background--as well as smoking, eating, and exercise habits. Data were assessed for frequencies and percentages on each item. Factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA) were employed to test the differences in opinion concerning the tobacco, alcohol, food, and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship between groups of subjects differentiated according to the demographic variables.

Results

Overall, attitudes toward food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorships of sporting events were more favorable than alcohol sponsorships, followed by tobacco sponsorships. Specifically, the products considered the most appropriate were water, sport drinks, cereal and energy bars, juice, tea and coffee, and soft drinks/colas. The products considered the least appropriate were tobacco, wine, liquor, fast food (e.g., hamburger, pizza, chocolate bars, potato chips), and beer. Participants were not in favor of government laws to prevent alcohol and less healthy food and beverage companies (i.e., fast food, soft drink) from sponsoring sporting events. When all possible sporting event sponsors were compared, participants rated sporting goods as the most appropriate sponsorship product, followed by sport drinks, water, and healthier-type foods (e.g., cereal, yogurt). Tobacco, liquor, and fast food were rated the least appropriate overall.

Both smokers and non-smokers agreed that tobacco companies are not appropriate sponsors for sporting events. Alcohol consumers had more favorable attitudes toward alcohol sponsorship of sporting events than non-consumers. Furthermore, the greater the consumption habits, the more favorable the attitudes. The same held true for fast food consumers. That is, the greater the consumption habits, the more favorable the attitudes toward this type of sponsorship. The attitudes toward tobacco, alcohol, fast food, and non-alcoholic beverage sponsors were very similar regardless of exercise habits.

Females and older participants tended to have less favorable attitudes towards the various forms of sponsorship than males and younger participants, respectively. The higher the educational level, the less favorable the attitudes towards the various forms of sponsorship.

Discussion

This study confirmed previous research that alcohol sponsorship is viewed more favorably than tobacco sponsorship because alcohol consumption is perceived as being more socially acceptable than smoking (e.g., L’Huillier & Hirons, 1997; McAllister, 1995). Food and non-alcoholic beverage sponsorship was viewed more favorably than alcohol and tobacco sponsorship. This finding seems to support the contention that food and non-alcoholic beverages provide a better fit with sport sponsorship than alcohol and tobacco. Furthermore, attitudes towards food and non-alcoholic beverage products that

are perceived to be healthy (e.g., cereal and energy bars, sport drinks, juice, water) were more favorable than those perceived to be less healthy (e.g., hamburger, pizza, chocolate bars, potato chips, soft drinks, tea, coffee). In spite of the appearance that people possess the knowledge to distinguish between healthy and less healthy choices, the current obesity statistics lead one to wonder whether this knowledge is having any effect.

The opinion of the primary consumer of any sporting event, that is, the spectator, should not be ignored. Therefore, the results of this study imply that sport organizers should pay close attention to the type and fit of their sponsors, especially in light of the ethical dilemma of using tobacco, alcohol, and fast food sponsorship. Realistically, however, one might argue that it is difficult for them to disassociate themselves from less “appropriate” sponsors that are willing to contribute significant sponsorship support.

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