

Understanding the Role of Corporate Social Responsibility Policies in the Unhealthy Sponsorship of WA Sports

Executive Summary

PHAIWA undertook a qualitative research project in the first half of 2017, aiming to identify the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies in the unhealthy sponsorship of sports in Western Australia. This project involved conducting interviews with representatives from unhealthy food and beverage, alcohol and gambling companies who sponsored major WA sports organisations and in addition, representatives from organisations who were sponsored by unhealthy industries. Interview transcripts and CSR documents were analysed to identify any recurring themes. Previous research has identified that sports sponsorship can cause children to view companies favourably and make them more likely to buy their products. Exposure to marketing for unhealthy food, alcohol, and gambling has been associated with an increased likelihood of consuming products from these industries.

The major findings from the project were:

- Unhealthy sponsorship is prevalent in major WA sports organisations. Twenty-nine of the 61 (47.5%) sports organisations included in the study had at least one unhealthy sponsor.
- Sports sponsorship is a strategy for unhealthy industries to offset negative associations with their products. It is also an effective form of marketing and a way to frame the debate around the causes of non-communicable diseases.
- Barriers to sports organisations seeking healthier sponsorship included the large amount of money unhealthy industries can dedicate to sponsorship; a perception that unhealthy food, alcohol, and gambling sponsorship is not an important health issue; a lack of negative feedback regarding unhealthy sponsors; and the appeal of unhealthy industries corporate social responsibility practices.
- Enablers to sports organisations accepting healthier sponsorship included a cognisance of how unhealthy sponsorship may impact children; concern for how unhealthy sponsors could affect their public image; and companies being able to sponsor sports with healthier brands in their product range.

The findings from this project will contribute to the growing body of evidence around how sports sponsorship is used as a tactic by unhealthy industries to improve their brand image and avoid regulation. Sport is associated with healthfulness and encouraging participation in sport represents a key component of public health programs both in Australia and overseas. This project will help to inform public health advocacy efforts against sports and clubs accepting sponsorship from unhealthy companies. Two fact sheets outlining the key findings are attached.



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