

Food For Thought: Understanding the extent and role of food marketing targeting children through junior sporting clubs in the Inner East of Melbourne

Overview –

Background

Poor quality diet among young people is an important public health concern due to its long-term association with poor health outcomes⁽¹⁾. Food and beverage sponsorship and marketing, (hereafter ‘food marketing’), predominantly promotes products detrimental to health (such as sugary drinks, chocolate and ‘fast food’ outlets), employing various strategies to appeal to young consumers^(2,3). This food marketing towards young consumers, including within sporting clubs, develops an increased preferences for these products⁽⁴⁾. Given that two-thirds of children engage in local sports, these clubs offer a strategic point for intervention⁽⁵⁾. Existing research focused on unhealthy sponsorships in sports clubs, and the children and parent’s perspectives to such marketing⁽⁶⁾. However, there is a notable gap in a place-based understanding of these dynamics specifically within junior sporting clubs and surrounding communities in Melbourne's Inner East.

Food For Thought

‘*Food For Thought*’ is a project by The Inner East Prevention Partnership (Access Health and Community, Link Health and Community and healthAbility) in collaboration with Swinburne University of Technology. *Food For Thought* aims to reduce children’s exposure to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages and aligns to the ‘Healthy Partnerships in Sport’ initiative by VicHealth, VicSport and Cancer Council Victoria. The initial stages of the *Food For Thought* project involved research aimed to determine the volume of, and perspectives on, unhealthy food and beverage sponsorship and marketing in junior sporting clubs in the Local Government Areas (LGA) of Manningham, Boroondara, Monash and Whitehorse.

Methods

This investigation used a mixed-methods design with three different data collection points including an online audit of sporting club web sites, a field audit of environmental advertising at sporting club venues and interviews with sporting club officials.

Online Audit

An online audit was conducted on junior sporting clubs' websites and social media within the four LGA's and in the eight most popular children's sports within Victoria (gymnastics, netball, football (AFL), tennis, cricket, basketball, athletics, and soccer)⁽⁵⁾. The online audit included food and beverage content displayed on club websites and social media platforms, such as brand logos and sponsorship pages, from the previous 12 months. Clubs that were found to have food and beverage sponsorship through the online audit, were eligible for the field audit.

Field audit

The field audit identified food marketing displayed in the sporting clubs' physical environment, such as boundary fences and scoreboards.

The Food Environment Score (FES)⁽⁷⁾, a validated tool, was used to classify food marketing found in both audits. FES uses a 20-point scoring system where -10 to -5 is unhealthy, -4 to +4 is less healthy and +5 to +10 is healthy⁽⁶⁾. For example, a greengrocer or butcher have a rating of +9 or +10 (healthy) whereas take-away franchises with products high in salt, fat and/or sugar have a rating of -8 to -10 (unhealthy).

Interviews

To contextualise the online and field audit data, a representative from clubs within the four LGA's, were invited to participate in an interview to investigate sports club officials' perception on the role and impact of sponsorship on children. The qualitative interview data was thematically analysed.

Results

Online and field audits

In total, 253 sporting clubs were included in the online audit. 116 clubs (46%) had online food marketing, of this 75% was categorised as 'unhealthy' or 'less healthy' as identified by the FES tool. The sporting codes with the highest percentage of food marketing online were AFL (81%), cricket (72%) and soccer (69%). The breakdown of FES categories for each LGA is shown in Figure 1.

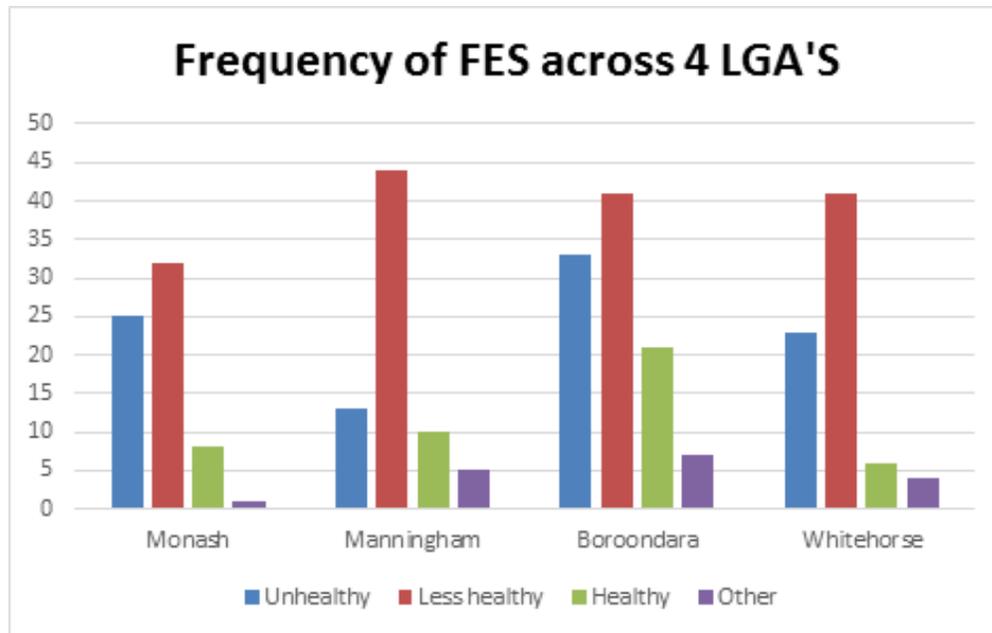


Figure 1: Frequency of online marketing by FES category for each individual LGA in Inner East Melbourne.

Out of the 116 clubs that had online marketing, 102 also had marketing within their physical environment and were included in the field audit. There local clubs contained 374 sponsors and marketing materials in the physical environment, 19% of which was food and beverage related. Boundary fences displayed 90% of marketing materials. Sporting codes with the highest percentage of food marketing were cricket (33%), basketball (18%), soccer (16%) and AFL (15%).

The four LGA's had FES scores ranging from -10 to +3.5. Combined, the four LGA's had a score of -3 (less healthy) and -1.7 (less healthy) in the field and online audits respectfully. The average field and online FES scores for all and each LGA are shown in Figure 2.

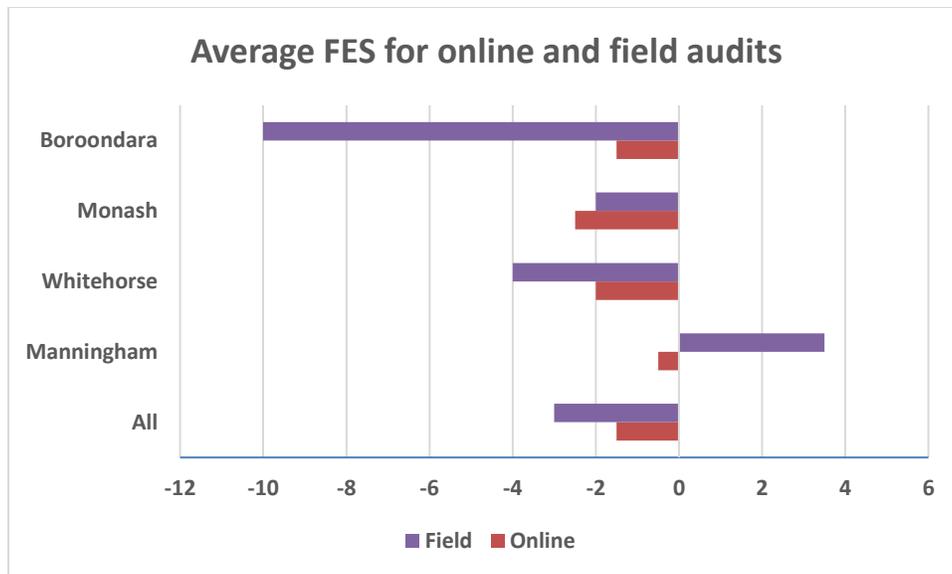


Figure 2: Average FES for online and field audit for each LGA as well as all LGA’s collectively.

Interviews

Representatives from seven clubs were interviewed; six common themes were identified.

Barrier of change – clubs value independence and autonomy, therefore club traditions, social norms, convenience, and financial incentives from unhealthy sponsorship can be barriers to sourcing alternative sponsorships.

“We do not like being told what to do”

Facilitators for change - there are existing policies and frameworks that can be used as a leverage point for implementation of desired changes.

“We have a policy on sponsorships and that's more around fitting the culture and values of our club.”

Awareness - varying levels of food literacy among members impact the understanding of sponsorship's influence on club food environments.

“In terms of food, I don’t think that we push. I mean, kids love a hot dog after the game, and that is not the worst thing in the world.”

Community attitudes – broader community attitudes and opinions can impact club decisions.

“On the tennis court on the far side, we put a 1m sign up for Glennie Maccas and that it was 5 minutes away and there was a complaint on the Facebook community page”

Responsibility - clubs acknowledge shared responsibility to promote a healthy and safe environment for children but defer to parents over children's food choices.

“But really, the kids are going to want to go to McDonalds anyway, let's have some parental control”

Sport characteristics – sporting codes and individual clubs differ in resource needs, impacting their susceptibility to sponsorship influence.

“Cricket, you know, as opposed to many other sports, is expensive.”

Discussion

There was more than double the proportion of clubs with online compared to on-site food marketing (46% vs 22.3%). The increased use and accessibility of online platforms as an avenue to share and promote information may explain the reason for a higher percentage found online.

The average FES scores for all four LGAs combined was in the less healthy category for both online (-1.7) and on-site (-3) food marketing. This indicates that most marketing materials, both online and physically, is unhealthy, which has the potential to negatively influence dietary habits of children accessing these clubs⁽⁸⁾.

AFL, cricket, soccer, and basketball clubs had the highest number of food marketing in their online and physical environments. Sporting codes such as athletics, netball, and tennis, featured fewer online food marketing, but did not have any food marketing in the physical environment. Considering AFL, cricket and soccer have prominent levels of exposure within Australia, due to being regularly televised, may provide greater opportunities for sponsorship standards to filter down to local clubs, particularly as elite sporting leagues have high levels of unhealthy sponsorships. It is also important to note the pressure on clubs to seek revenue from sponsorships after COVID-19 lockdowns and the financial strain it placed on clubs over the past couple of years.

Although 75% of clubs interviewed acknowledge their responsibility to foster a safe and health-promoting environment for junior members, the primary focus of clubs is on areas such as maintaining the physical grounds and providing adequate equipment. This emphasis tends to overshadow considerations about the food environment and the role sporting clubs can play in influencing health behaviours, outside of physical activity. This highlights a need for education regarding the broader impact of environmental factors and marketing on food preferences and consumption habits. Leveraging existing 'facilitators for change' within clubs could prove beneficial with access to appropriate information and resources. Club officials did not feel the amount of marketing they display would have a significant impact on junior members when it came to food and beverage choices, what is happening on a larger scale, for example AFL on television was more likely to have a larger impact on children's food preferences. This is reflected in the online and field audit considering the higher percentage of food and beverage marketing found with sports that are highly viewed on television. Although this may be the case, we can take responsibility at a local level to influence exposure, and reduce marketing within the system, which is continuing to contribute to the consumption of these products over time.

Conclusion

Local community sporting clubs are accessed by a significant portion of children and young people. They provide opportunities to be physically active, but also promote unhealthy food marketing (and therefore consumption). There is a need to reduce unhealthy food marketing at all levels of sport, as elite sport sponsorship influences the culture, online and physical food marketing environments at a local level. Local club officials (usually volunteer) have many demands to deliver community sport, but also have a responsibility and opportunity to improve the health promoting environment for the children, young people and families who are part of their club community. This research provides the context to understand the change that is needed. The change will require a multifaceted and partnership approach that is co-designed with clubs across codes, supporting autonomy and varying demands across codes. The health promoting approach may include education, volunteer capability building, cultural change building on community attitudes, options for sustainability of revenue (healthy sponsorship), policy.

In Victoria, local Government play an integral part in designing and implementing local community infrastructure and policies. They are therefore a key partner to support the facilitation of this change within community sport clubs, in addition to Community Health Services, Cancer Council and VicSport.

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