

Alcohol sponsorship of community football clubs: the current situation

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Introduction

The viability of community sports clubs are dependent, in part, on support through sponsorship. While a variety of individuals, local businesses and organisations provide sponsorship, a common source of sponsorship for clubs is from entities involved in the sale or supply of alcohol.¹ Like alcohol advertising, alcohol industry sponsorship of sports clubs through cash contributions, naming rights or advertising space at venues or on player uniforms has been consistently found to be associated with increased alcohol consumption and related harms.²⁻⁶ This association is evident for both individual player and club level sponsorship, as well as sponsorship among amateur and elite athletes.^{3,7} As such, the Australian Government has recently announced an initiative to reduce community sports club dependency on alcohol sponsorship.⁸

While there is accumulating evidence demonstrating a positive association between alcohol industry sponsorship and alcohol-related harm, little is known about the extent of alcohol industry sponsorship of community sport clubs in Australia. Given a high prevalence of excessive alcohol consumption among contact team sports participants and among young male sports people,^{6,9-11} and the access such settings provide to large numbers of adults

(approximately 4.5 million adult Australians each year),¹² community sporting clubs are recognised as a promising setting for the implementation of health promotion initiatives to reduce excessive alcohol consumption.^{13,14} Identifying the characteristics of clubs associated with alcohol sponsorship will assist health promotion practitioners to develop targeted interventions to reduce club reliance on such sponsorship and its influence on the alcohol consumption of club members.

The aim of this study was to explore the association between community football club characteristics (based on football code, size, location and socioeconomic descriptors) and: i) alcohol industry sponsorship; and ii) type of alcohol sponsorship (money or free or discounted alcohol).

Methods

Design and setting

A cross-sectional survey of community football clubs was conducted in the state of New South Wales, Australia, as a component of an intervention study in this setting. The study area comprised the Hunter, New England and Sydney Metropolitan regions.

Abstract

Issue addressed: There is accumulating evidence supporting a link between alcohol industry sponsorship and alcohol-related problems in both community and elite-level sports. Little is known, however, about the current status of such sponsorship, particularly of community sport. This study aimed to assess associations between alcohol industry sponsorship and different community football clubs in Australia.

Methods: The study involved 101 community football clubs across New South Wales, Australia. One representative from each club took part in a cross-sectional telephone survey designed to assess club (football code, number of players, socioeconomic and geographic descriptors) and alcohol industry sponsorship (money, equipment, free alcohol or discounted alcohol) characteristics. Chi-square analysis was used to test associations between club characteristics, and: i) any alcohol industry sponsorship; and ii) type of sponsorship.

Results: Eighty-eight per cent of clubs reported receiving sponsorship from the alcohol industry, and most clubs (82%) were sponsored by a licensed premises. There were no significant associations between club characteristics and source of alcohol industry sponsorship. However, small clubs were found to be significantly more likely to receive free or discounted alcohol sponsorship than larger clubs ($p=0.05$).

Conclusions: This exploratory study suggests a significant presence of alcohol industry sponsorship among community football clubs in Australia.

Key words: sport, sports club, sponsorship, healthy environments, alcohol consumption

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So what?

Forgoing alcohol industry sponsorship is likely to represent a considerable challenge to community sports clubs given the existing level of support. Health promotion practitioners and policy makers need to ensure that any interventions to reduce such sponsorship consider issues of club viability.

Sample and procedures

Community, non-elite football clubs from the four main football codes in Australia (Rugby League, Rugby Union, Soccer/European football and Australian Rules [AFL]) were identified from a database compiled from sports associations, local government websites and web searches. Football codes were selected, given the particularly high prevalence of excessive alcohol consumption among participants and members of such clubs.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ The study utilises baseline data collected from a larger randomised trial.¹⁸ Consistent with this trial, clubs were eligible for the study if they: had players 18 years of age and over; had more than 40 members; sold or supplied alcohol; did not hold a registered club or hotel liquor licence; and were not involved in an existing program to reduce alcohol-related harm. All clubs included in the database were contacted by mail and telephone to confirm eligibility and were subsequently invited to participate in the intervention study. Computer-assisted telephone surveys¹⁹ were conducted with the club president or a nominated representative by trained interviewers during the 2009 playing season (May – September).

Measures

Club characteristics:

The football code of each club was obtained from the relevant association website. During the survey, club respondents were asked to report the number of registered players and the postcode of the club's sporting fixture.

Alcohol industry sponsorship:

Club respondents were asked if their club received sponsorship from the alcohol industry (yes/no) and, if yes, the specific source of such sponsorship (e.g. hotel/pub, brewer or liquor store), and type of sponsorship received (e.g. money, equipment, free alcohol or discounted alcohol). The value of cash sponsorship was also assessed. Hotels/pubs, registered clubs and nightclubs were defined as on-licensed premises.

Statistical analyses

SAS version 9.2 was used for all analyses. Based on postcode, the location of clubs was scored on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia scale (ARIA) and classified as 'major city' or 'regional',²⁰ as

well as on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas scale (SEIFA) and dichotomised as either high or low socioeconomic status based on the median score on the index for the state (NSW).²¹ Chi-square tests were generated to check for statistically significant associations between sponsorship practices and club characteristics.

Results

Sample

Three hundred and twenty-eight football clubs were contacted, 100 were considered ineligible (14 had too few members, 85 did not sell alcohol and one was a junior club), and 101 (44%) agreed to participate. One third of participating clubs were rugby league clubs (33%), approximately half had 150 or more players (55%), the majority of clubs were located in a major city (79%), and almost two-thirds were in areas of high socioeconomic status (61%). Consenting clubs did not differ significantly from non-consenting clubs in terms of football code ($p=0.08$), geographic location ($p=0.66$) or socioeconomic area of club location ($p=0.32$).

Alcohol industry sponsorship

Eighty-four per cent of all clubs reported receiving sponsorship from the alcohol industry and most clubs (82%) were sponsored by an on-licensed premises. There were no significant differences in whether clubs received alcohol industry sponsorship between clubs of different codes, size, location, or socioeconomic area ($p=0.07-0.26$).

Seventy-eight per cent of clubs indicated that at least part of the support they received from an alcohol industry sponsor was in a monetary form and 20% of clubs reported that they received free or discounted alcohol as part of a sponsorship deal. The median total value of alcohol industry sponsorship was \$7,000. There was some variability in receiving free/discounted alcohol by sporting code, with only 8% of soccer clubs receiving this form of sponsorship compared to 43% of AFL clubs (Table 1). However, this result was not statistically significant. A significant association ($p=0.05$) between club size and receiving free/discounted alcohol was found, with small clubs (clubs with fewer than 150 players) significantly more likely to receive this form of sponsorship than larger clubs (Table 1).

Table 1: Type of community football club sponsorship by club characteristics.

Predictor variable	Clubs receiving money as part of their sponsorship agreement (n=83) n (%)	Chi square p value	Club receiving free or discounted alcohol as part of their sponsorship agreement (n = 20) n (%)	Chi square p value
Football code		0.17		0.07
AFL	14 (100%)		6 (43%)	
Rugby Union	23 (79%)		5 (17%)	
Rugby League	24 (73%)		7 (21%)	
Soccer	18 (72%)		2 (8%)	
Number of players		0.99		0.05*
Less than 150	36 (78%)		13 (28%)	
150 or more	43 (78%)		7 (13%)	
Geographical location		0.55		0.12
Regional	18 (86%)		7 (33%)	
Major cities	61 (76%)		13 (16%)	
Socio-economic status		0.11		0.45
Lower	32 (86%)		6 (16%)	
Higher	45 (73%)		14 (23%)	

* $p<0.05$

Discussion

This exploratory study suggests a significant presence of alcohol industry sponsorship of community football clubs in Australia. Given the increased risk of alcohol-related harm when sport is sponsored by the alcohol industry, addressing such a presence represents a potential opportunity to reduce the prevalence of risky alcohol consumption in the community.^{3,7} Significant differences in the presence of sponsorship were not found across a number of club characteristics, providing little basis for prioritising health promotion efforts to reduce club reliance on alcohol industry support. Some football codes (AFL) and smaller clubs, however, appeared more likely to receive sponsorship in the form of free or discounted alcohol. As alcohol discounting, and pricing generally, is associated with the risk of alcohol-related harm,^{1,22} discouraging free or discounted alcohol as a form of sponsorship may represent one means of reducing alcohol-related harm, particularly among members of such clubs.

Forgoing alcohol sponsorship is likely to represent a considerable challenge for community sports clubs. A Commonwealth government initiative to provide community sports clubs and cultural organisations with alternatives to alcohol sponsorship may represent an effective strategy in the short term.⁸ Alcohol sponsorship, however, represents only one form of possible revenue for clubs. Evaluation of the Good Sports program, which aims to create family-friendly sports environments through responsible alcohol management policies and practices of sports clubs (including reducing alcohol sponsorship), suggest that such changes in clubs can increase the value of non-alcohol sponsorship and enhance club revenue through increasing spectators and gate takings.²³ Health promotion practitioners could therefore consider providing similar support to clubs as a means of reducing excessive alcohol consumption and ensuring more long-term club viability.

A number of limitations of the study warrant mention. The study sample was relatively small, the eligibility criteria based on entry to a randomised intervention trial, and measures of alcohol sponsorship were based on the report of club representatives. Such limitations are likely to compromise the internal and external validity of the study findings. Further research addressing such limitations and extending the scope of the investigation across a broader range of sporting codes and clubs, including both junior and senior teams, is therefore warranted. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides useful information for health promotion policy makers and practitioners regarding alcohol sponsorship of Australian community football clubs.

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