

Letter to the Editor

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In response to ‘Are Big Food’s corporate social responsibility strategies valuable to communities? A qualitative study with parents and children’ by Richards and Phillipson

Madam

I read Richards and Phillipson’s article entitled ‘Are Big Food’s corporate social responsibility strategies valuable to communities? A qualitative study with parents and children’⁽¹⁾ with interest, particularly the findings indicating that parents and children question why Big Food companies support health initiatives that seem contrary to the primary aims of their brand, as well as the recognition of companies’ ‘questionable’ strategies targeting the settings of children. It is also of interest that Richards and Phillipson note the lack of government regulation for the marketing strategies of Big Food companies.

In the UK, the Coca-Cola Co. has a truck that visits a variety of locations where teams of representatives give out products from the company to children and adults, and attendees can have their photographs taken with the truck while the company’s ‘Holidays are coming jingle’ is played. On the side of the truck is a picture of Santa, a fictional character whose primary appeal is to children aged under 12 years, drinking a bottle of Coca-Cola. The Coca-Cola Co. Christmas truck advert, which returned to UK television in 2015, is considered by some of the public as the ‘official start of Christmas’⁽²⁾. The Coca-Cola Co. truck tour is a clear violation of the company’s own Responsible Marketing Policy. This specifically states, ‘We will not design our marketing communications in a way that directly appeals to children under 12’ – although ‘the exception of brand equity characters already in use’ is apparently a loophole that allows the use of images of Santa consuming Coke⁽³⁾. Even beyond the use of ‘brand equity characters’, however, associating the company with Christmas leads to positive attitudes among children towards the company and its products. This is a conditioning strategy to improve brand image which is well known as an effective marketing strategy⁽⁴⁾.

Intervening to prevent the Coca-Cola Co. truck from marketing to children and young people is achievable and aligned not only with the Coca-Cola Co.’s own Responsible Marketing Policy but also with the UK Government’s Childhood Obesity: A Plan of Action⁽⁵⁾, which was developed to ‘monitor action and assess progress, and take action where it is needed’. However, my petition to ban the Coca-Cola Co. truck from touring the UK at Christmas time was rejected, with correspondence from the UK Government and Parliament

informing me that ‘It’s about something that the UK Government or Parliament is not responsible for’⁽⁶⁾. More recently, however, the Public Health England chief executive has been critical of the Coca-Cola Co. truck tour of the UK, commenting ‘Big-name brands touring the country at Christmas to advertise their most sugary products to children and boost sales does nothing to help families make healthy choices and wider efforts to combat childhood obesity and rotten teeth’⁽⁷⁾.

The Government has a responsibility for the public’s health; intervening to limit marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks is within the remit and responsibility of UK Government. By no means is banning the Coca-Cola Co. truck the one and only answer to reducing consumption of high-sugar-based products. But this is one of many opportunities to intervene, contribute to lower sugar consumption, moderate the formation of positive attitudes towards unhealthy food and drink brands and products, and work towards supporting the health of our nation. Collectively and at many different levels, we should take these opportunities to make a stand against unhealthy food and drink brands, particularly where they are targeting young and vulnerable populations as part of their marketing campaigns.

Richards and Phillipson note the lack of evidence supporting ‘self-regulation of marketing strategies’ and the importance of ‘regulation and restriction’ of Big Food’s corporate social responsibility strategies⁽¹⁾. Regulation to ensure companies’ compliance with their own Responsible Marketing Policies is no different. The example of the Coca-Cola Co. Christmas truck is a clear call for the UK Government *not* to rely on Coca-Cola Co.’s ‘self-regulation’ and to take responsibility to act in line with the public health policies that it has developed.

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