



# **UNHEALTHY PROMOTION IN ELITE SPORT: WHEN BURGERS AREN'T BETTER**

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Unhealthy promotion in elite sport: when burgers aren't better.

Junk food, alcohol, and gambling sponsorship in elite Western Australian sporting teams.

Cancer Council Western Australia

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**Contact**

Obesity Prevention Team  
Cancer Council Western Australia  
420 Bagot Road, Subiaco, WA 6008  
E: [ObesityPolicy@cancerwa.asn.au](mailto:ObesityPolicy@cancerwa.asn.au)

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## Acknowledgements

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## Every fourth Instagram post by elite sporting teams promotes unhealthy behaviours.

A snapshot of the sponsorship and promotional content of elite Western Australian sporting teams' Instagram accounts.

### Key Findings

- Over a 2-month period, seven elite Western Australian sporting teams posted at total of 1,122 times on Instagram. 271 of these posts contained junk food, alcohol and/or gambling promotions. This equates to 28% of posts, or every fourth post.
- Of the teams investigated, the Perth Wildcats had the highest frequency of junk food sponsors, with 69% of posts containing a junk food sponsor, due to the NBL's association with a major junk food sponsor. This was followed by the West Coast Eagles Men's team with 65% of posts containing a junk food sponsor.
- 9% of posts on the Fremantle Dockers men's account contained alcohol promotion.
- 10% of posts on the West Coast Eagles men's account contained gambling promotion.
- 64% of posts on West Coast Fever's account contained pro-health promotional material.

## About Cancer Council Western Australia

Cancer Council Western Australia (Cancer Council WA) was established in 1958 and is a non-government, community supported charity that envisages achieving a cancer free future for the community of WA. Cancer Council WA works with the community to reduce both the incidence and impact of cancer and this is done through four domains; advocacy, prevention, research and support.

## About the Rapid Obesity Policy Translation Program

Cancer Council WA has partnered with the Telethon Kids Institute to establish the Rapid Obesity Policy Translation Program. This program is funded by Healthway and aims to put WA at the forefront of obesity policy reform by:

- undertaking time-sensitive research
- supporting this research with media campaigns to generate community support and gain the attention of decision makers
- translating this evidence and community and political will directly into policy development.

The program began in 2019, following the release of the WA Sustainable Health Review and the WA Preventative Health Summit which highlighted the need for action in obesity policy reform. This project forms part of that work.

## Background to this project

Sporting organisations provide an ideal setting for the promotion of healthy messages including physical activity, healthy eating and ways to minimise alcohol-related risk (Crisp & Swerissen, 2003). The reach and popularity of sports however, makes it an appealing setting for all marketers. This is a concern to public health as many harmful industries (including junk food companies, alcohol manufacturers and gambling providers) use sport as a platform to push their products (Macniven et al., 2015). The aim of this research was to examine the Instagram pages of elite Western Australian sports teams and quantify the prevalence of junk food, alcohol and gambling promotion.

These harmful products have a huge impact on public health, and specifically cancer risk. Alcohol is a type-one carcinogen and its use contributes to 3.3% of the cancer burden (AIHW, 2019). Poor nutrition (including the excessive consumption of junk foods) and being above a healthy weight is associated with a range of chronic illnesses, including at least 13 types of cancer (WCRF, 2018). Gambling, whilst not a carcinogen, is a social and health equity issue and therefore relevant to the work of Cancer Council WA. The financial impact of gambling can put people into a cycle of disadvantage and can have negative consequences across the whole cancer spectrum, from prevention, diagnosis, treatment, access to support services and palliative care. The gambling industry uses the same advertising playbook as the junk food, alcohol and tobacco industries and the lack of regulation is similarly disturbing.

Of particular concern, is the effect of this harmful industry marketing on children. Voluntary restrictions apply to alcohol advertisements on free-to-air television during children's viewing

times, but junk food and alcohol advertisements amongst live sports broadcasts are exempt from these voluntary codes (White et al., 2017; Cancer Council Victoria, 2020). Social media is largely unregulated compared to television, making it an ideal platform to target children (Baldwin et al., 2018).

## **The landscape**

Older studies highlighted that television advertising once played a huge part in children's exposure to advertising, with one study showing children were exposed to over 40,000 television commercials per year (Wilcox, 2004). More recently children are exposed to an enormous number of junk food promotions in their day, not just from watching television, but through social media advertising, print, outdoor and broadcast advertising, online gaming and sports marketing and sponsorship (Hickey et al, 2021). This exposure has a profound impact and is associated with earlier onset and higher consumption of alcohol, and the request and purchasing of junk food products (Kelly, 2011; Grunseit et al., 2012; Kingsland et al., 2017).

Instagram pages are largely unregulated and can be accessed at any time of the day, resulting in the opportunity for constant engagement with children (Baldwin et al., 2018). In 2017, 24% of 8-12 year olds and 70% of 13-17 year olds were using Instagram (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018). Research has shown that children who engage and interact on social media with food brands are more likely to consume junk food (Baldwin et al., 2018).

## **Advertising in sports**

Across 413 Australian national, state and territory level sport governing body websites, junk food sponsors were the most common industry partner, followed by the alcohol and gambling industries (Macniven et al., 2015). In 2018, corporate sponsorship to the AFL was valued at AU\$188 million (Sartori et al., 2018). In the same year, of the 18 AFL clubs, 16 were affiliated with a junk food company, 15 were affiliated with an alcohol company, and 8 were affiliated with a gambling or casino enterprise (Sartori et al., 2018).

One of the most viewed sporting broadcasts in Australia is the AFL Grand Final. In 2017, unhealthy marketing advertisements occupied 47 minutes and 17 seconds of screen time, while pro-health marketing episodes occupied less than three minutes (Nuss et al., 2019). Given that over 2.7 million Australians, including 322,000 children under 15 years of age viewed the AFL Grand Final broadcast, and the known effectiveness of advertisement in driving attitudes and behaviours, the extensive unhealthy marketing has a potentially devastating impact (Nuss et al., 2019).

## **Project methodology**

A content analysis of the Instagram pages of select elite sporting teams in Western Australia was undertaken to identify the exposure of junk food, alcohol and gambling marketing to followers. Seven teams were selected based on their playing schedules, social media presence, and to provide a mix of men's and women's teams:

- AFL – West Coast Eagles Women (WCE women)
- AFL – West Coast Eagles Men (WCE men)
- AFL – Fremantle Dockers Women (FD women)
- AFL – Fremantle Dockers Men (FD men)

- Netball – West Coast Fever Women (West Coast Fever)
- Basketball – Perth Wildcats Men (Wildcats)
- Soccer – Perth Glory Men (Glory)

Two months' worth of Instagram posts were analysed and included the one month prior to commencing the most recent playing season and the first month of the playing season over 2020 - 2021. A sponsor was recorded if 50% or greater of its logo, name or slogan was visible and identifiable in the post. A sponsor was counted only once if it was seen multiple times in the same post. Sponsorship of a post was classified in the following categories, based on the literature and consultation with expert stakeholders:

- Junk food
- Alcohol
- Gambling
- Pro-health
- Nutritious food
- Retail
- Other

## Results

A total of 1,122 Instagram posts were analysed.

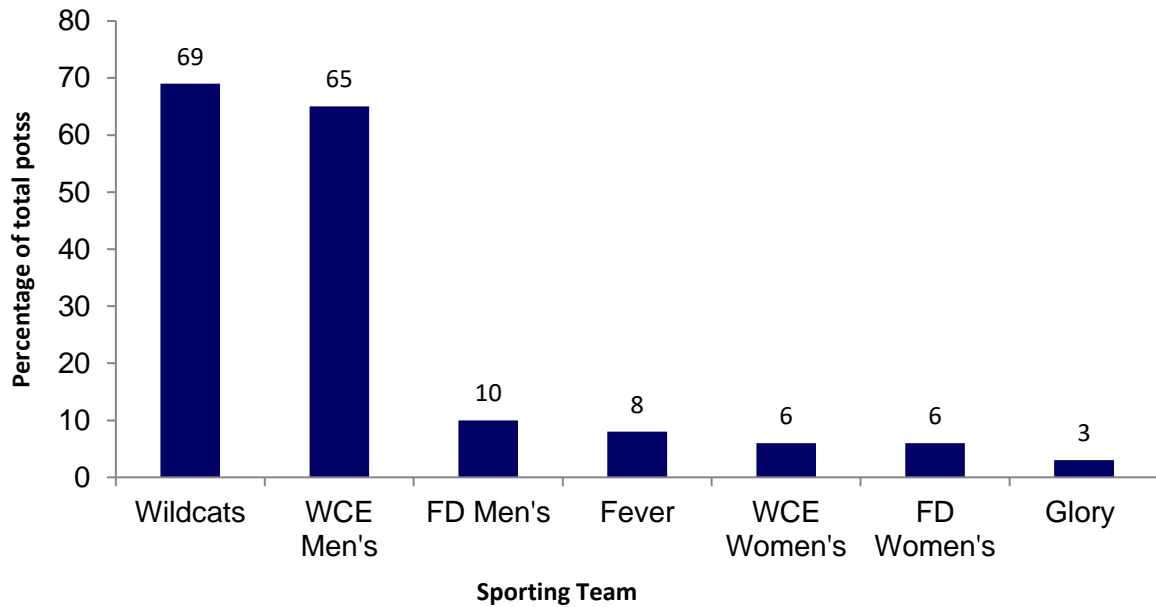
	<b>WCE Men</b>	<b>WCE Women</b>	<b>FD Men</b>	<b>FD Women</b>	<b>West Coast Fever</b>	<b>Wildcats</b>	<b>Glory</b>
<b>Instagram followers</b>	213,000	9,470	130,000	8,175	30,900	72,500	40,600
<b>Posts analysed</b>	150	68	179	113	204	176	232
<b>Team sponsorships of interest</b>	Junk food Gambling Alcohol	Gambling	Junk food Gambling Alcohol	Junk food Gambling	Nutritious food Pro health	- *	Pro health

Table 1. Instagram pages analysed, total followers, posts in two-month period and categories of interest

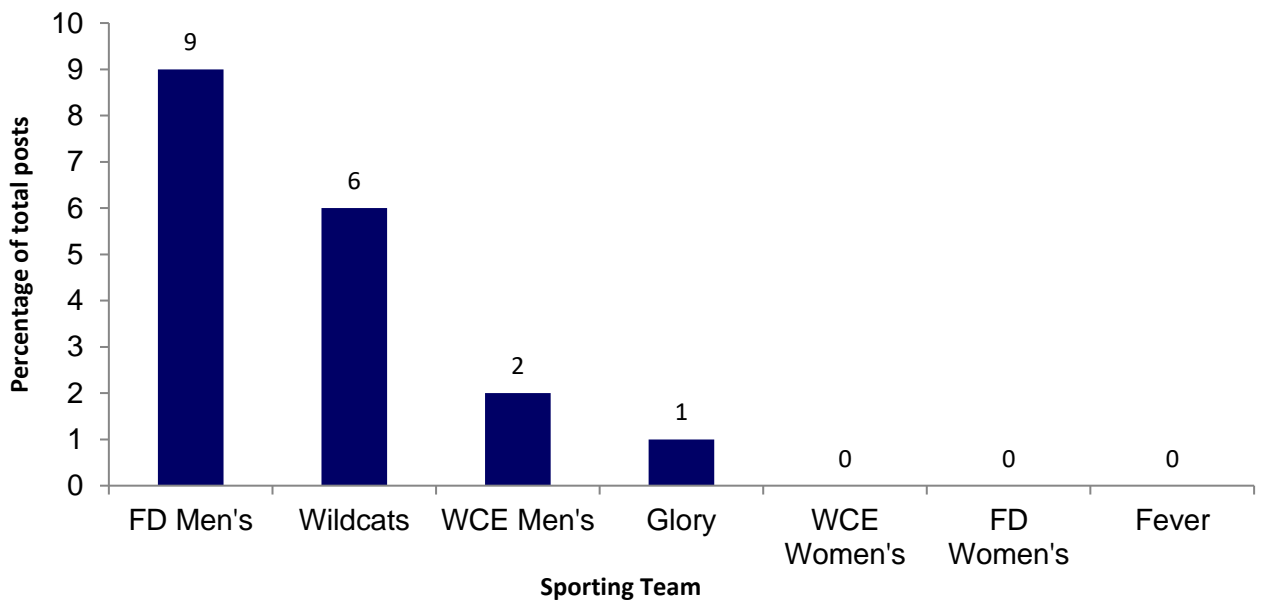
\*The Perth Wildcats do not have a junk food sponsor listed in their partnerships for 2021. However, Hungry Jack's has the naming rights partnership of the NBL, thus the Hungry Jack's logo is present on all NBL teams jerseys (National Basketball League, 2020). This is crucial to highlight because this type of sponsorship is beyond the control of individual teams and the league itself should be held to account. Further, this indicates that the high level of

junk food sponsorship seen from the Perth Wildcats is also occurring throughout all NBL teams across Australia and New Zealand.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Instagram posts containing one or more junk food sponsor, per sporting team.**

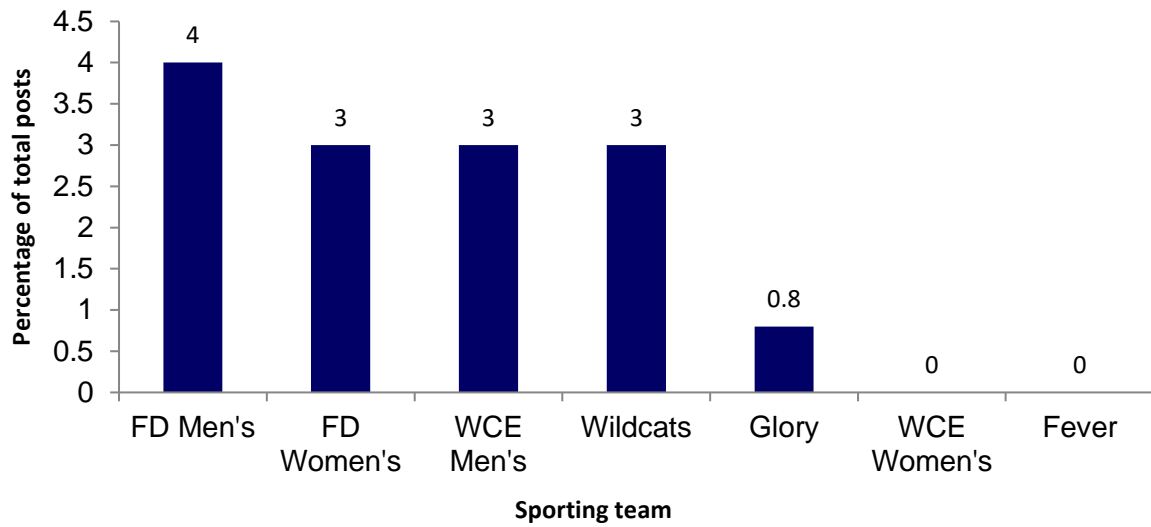


**Figure 2. Percentage of Instagram posts containing one or more alcohol sponsor, per sporting team.**

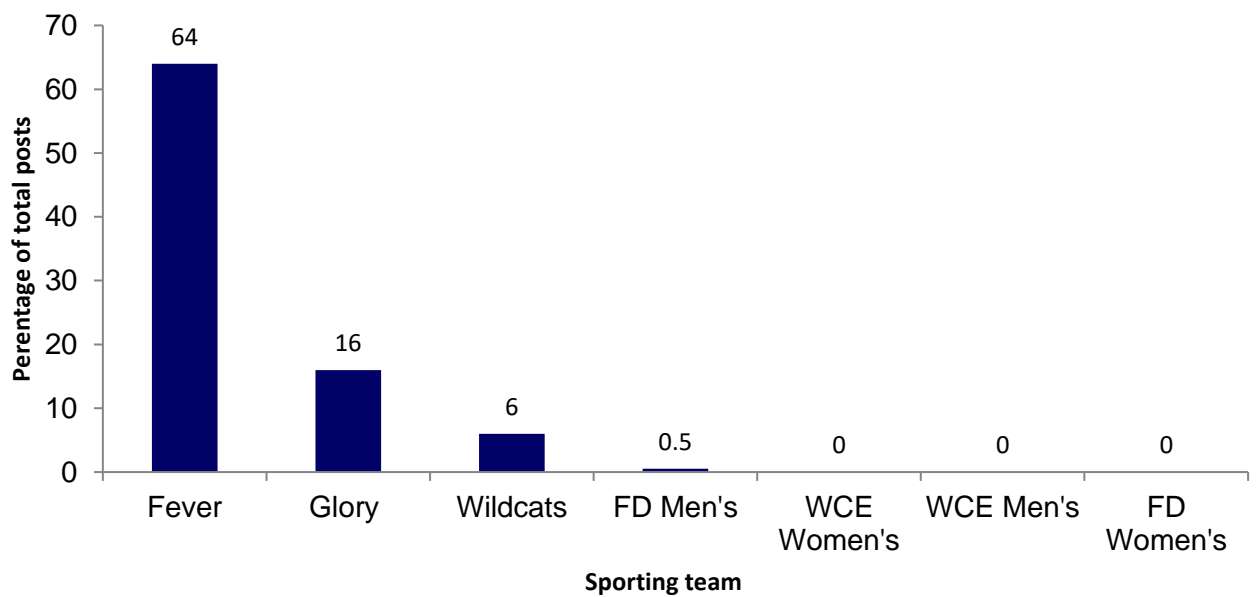




**Figure 3. Percentage of Instagram posts containing one or more commercial gambling sponsors, per sporting team.**



**Figure 4. Percentage of Instagram posts containing one or more pro-health sponsors, per sporting team.**



## Discussion

This review has highlighted the high levels of junk food, alcohol and commercial gambling promotion that children are exposed to on the Instagram pages of seven selected elite sporting teams in Western Australia. Sponsorship can increase the awareness of a brand, modify its image and increase the purchase of the product (Dixon et al., 2018). Given the power of this type of media and its role in promoting harmful behaviours (Donaldson et al., 2019), there has been increasing calls for the introduction of policies to reduce or restrict sponsorship by junk food, alcohol and gambling brands in elite sports (Lindsay et al., 2013).

The presence of pro-health sponsors is a potential strategy to reorientate sporting sponsorship away from junk food, alcohol and gambling sponsors (Dixon et al., 2018). This is demonstrated through the partnership that West Coast Fever and Perth Glory have with Healthway. West Coast Fever has been in partnership with Healthway for 12 years and Perth Glory for eight years. Perth Wildcats and Healthway partnered for six years, ending in 2018. As part of the partnership, there is an agreement that teams will not partner with junk food or alcohol sponsors, and their logos will not appear at home game venues. This results in reduced exposure of junk food and alcohol sponsors to children who are following these teams. Instead, positive health messages such as LiveLighter® or Alcohol.Think Again. are promoted. Promisingly, the Perth Wildcats continue to have no junk food, alcohol and gambling sponsors three years after their partnership with Healthway ceased. It is worth noting however, that the NBL's association with a junk food sponsor means that there is a high level of incidental junk food marketing on their Instagram page.

This study has highlighted the need for a policy that covers all sporting leagues to ban junk food, alcohol and gambling sponsorship, making way for pro-health sponsorships to be championed. This would allow for consistency between sporting codes, ensuring a healthful environment across Australia for children, no matter which team they follow.

## Policy recommendations

### **1. Introduction of policy to cease the sponsorship of elite sporting teams by junk food, alcohol and gambling companies**

We need higher standards regulating junk food, alcohol and gambling sponsorship in elite sports. A long-term goal is for a uniform policy across all sports, providing children with an environment that promotes health and wellbeing.

The policy should prioritise pro-health sponsors and create a sponsorship and marketing environment that is free from junk food, alcohol and gambling promotion. The policy should be enforced by the Federal Government, with the development of an independent monitoring and complaints system to ensure it is upheld by all sporting codes.

Commercial concerns may be cited in opposing the implementation of such a policy. However, Healthway's partnership with the West Coast Fever and Perth Glory and

Programmed (operational services) and Woodside's (gas production) sponsorship of the Fremantle Dockers Men's team, provide counter-examples.

## **2. Introduction of regulations on social media**

In the short term, regulations similar to those placed on 'social media influencers' should be enforced by both the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the social media platforms themselves. This would assist viewers to recognise sponsorships and make them aware of the relationship between elite teams and junk food, alcohol and gambling sponsors.

These regulations could include the mandatory introduction of #Ad and #Sponsored to all social media posts where there is a contractual agreement (verbal, email, digital or other), transaction involving a financial payment, gift, value or free product, or if there is an affiliate marketing engagement. These regulations would align with Instagram's marketing and promotion policy which currently applies to influencers. This would mean that the majority of posts on the social media pages of elite sporting teams would be easily recognised as a result of a commercial agreement and that opinions portrayed may not be that of the club or team themselves. This would not be a burden to the club/team as many teams already insert an array of hashtags such as #foreverfreo.

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