

# Coke and Obesity in the United States

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Coke and Obesity in the United States**

Coca-Cola Company is one of the largest beverage companies in the world. Its flagship brand, Coke, is one of the best-selling carbonated soft drinks. Critics of Coca-Cola, including some nutritionists and researchers from Harvard School of Public Health, have contended that Coke's sugar, additives, and sweet taste may contribute to the high national obesity rate in the U.S. (Taubes, 2018). According to National Center for Health Statistics, in 2004, the age-adjusted prevalence of obesity among U.S. adults, age 20 years and over, is 32.2 percent. (NCHS, 2008). However, Coke has remained popular: it contributed 70 percent to Coca-Cola's net operating revenue of 31.8 billion dollars in 2018 (Coca-Cola, 2019). How has Coca-Cola, since 2005, defended Coke from accusations that Coke causes obesity? Coca-Cola launched healthier products, collaborated with health advocacies, used celebrity branding, used preemptive advertising strategies, funded health research groups, and lobbied regulatory agencies. The case illustrates how scientific research is influenced by the material interests of its funders.

### **Review of Research**

Butler and Tischler (2015) studied Coca-Cola's success in selling Coke, concentrating on the contribution of its marketing strategies and the diversity of its advertising channels. Even though little research has been conducted on other strategies used by Coca-Cola, some of them can be inferred from published research on other industries. Brandt (2012) contend that tobacco companies, confronted by compelling peer-reviewed scientific evidence of the harm of smoking, created a scientific controversy through a program that depended on academic conflicts of

interest, producing scientific uncertainty and therefore undercutting public health efforts and regulatory interventions designed to reduce smoking. Reuters (2018) stated that big tobacco companies has used its resources to lobby policy makers to prevent legislations against it. Coca-Cola's strategy has been similar. Heid (2016) argued that the meat and dairy industries lobbied USDA to skew the final 2015 USDA dietary guidelines from the Advisory Committee's report which suggests nutrition intake based on scientific research. Industries, including Coca-Cola, influence scientific research outcome to avert threats.

### **Criticism and policies against soft drinks**

There has been criticism from scientific researchers and health advocacies against the soda industry, including Coca-Cola. For example, when Coke made a contract with regulatory agencies in the District of Columbia to increase the vending machines of soft drinks in school, health advocacies tried to warn the potentially harm consequence of such deal (The Washington Post, 1999). There are also articles on the Washington Post suggesting that "kids who drink a lot of soft drinks risk becoming fat, weak-boned, cavity-prone, and caffeine-addicted" (Marc, 2001).

More importantly, legislation moved against the soda industry. In 2004, President Bush signed the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act requiring schools to meet more strict requirements for child nutrition programs such as school lunch and breakfast, child and adult care food, after-school snacks, etc. (Congress, 2004). Following this trend, many states made action specifically against soda industry. According to Debra, "New Jersey Schools, regardless of grade, will not be able to sell anything during the normal day that lists sugar in any form as the first ingredient of the product, or any candy" (Debra, 2005).

**Coca-Cola launched a no-calorie product and collaborated with health advocacies**

The Coca-Cola Company has tried to defend Coke. Since most critics attack Coke's high sugar content (Pan 2011; Whiteman 2015; Taubes, 2018; BMJ, 2018), Coke launched its no-calorie product, Coca-Cola Zero in 2005, as a direct answer to such critics. Coca-Cola advertisements claimed that by replacing sugar with low-calorie sugar substitutes, Coca-Cola Zero could be much healthier than the regular Coke.

In 2014, the American Beverage Association (ABA) and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation started the Balance Calories Initiative, claiming that low-calorie beverage, plus physical activity, can prevent obesity (IBISWorld, 2019). The claim greatly helped the company retain the customers, serving mainly as an excuse for those Coke lovers who hesitate before the health risk of soft drinks. The credibility of such claim is questionable since ABA is the trade association that represents America's non-alcoholic beverage industry and shares the same material interests as any companies involved, including Coca-Cola which is one of the major founders and funders of the association. Therefore, it is very unlikely for it to truly speak for the interests of the customer, especially when such action is against the benefits of its members. Rather than to directly cut soft drink companies' sales and see if that move can help reduce the national obesity rate, it tends to give empty slogans and divert public attention to indirect approaches. Following the Balance Calories Initiative, ABA claimed that "The largest U.S. soda makers pledged on Tuesday to cut sugary drink calories by 20 percent in 10 years through education, marketing and packaging. ... Soda makers plan to reach their goal by 2025 by educating communities to reduce the calories they are drinking, and offering more zero or low calorie drinks including bottled water" (Athavaley, 2014). According to Coca-Cola's annual reports, the sales of Coke zero has been constantly increasing since 2014 (Coca-Cola Company,

2020). Keeping its promise, Coca-Cola protected both its brand reputation and revenue.

However, according to National Center for Health Statistics, in 2015-2018, instead of dropping as expected, the prevalence of obesity among adults age 20 and over actually increases from 39.8 to 42.4 percent (NCHS, 2020). Even though the increase of obesity rate is not entirely due to soft drinks, they have a positive correlation. By creating a purported health-advocating initiative, ABA and Coca-Cola promoted its no-calorie products.

ABA and Coca-Cola also collaborate to defend themselves from lawsuits. In 2017, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a consumer-advocacy group, filed a lawsuit, claiming that “Coca-Cola and industry group the American Beverage Association have misled customers regarding the health risks of consuming sugary drinks such as soda” (Taylor, 2017). ABA stated that “Unfounded accusations like these won’t do anything to address health concerns, but the actions we’re taking, particularly in areas where obesity rates are among the highest, can make a difference” (Taylor, 2017). Similar lawsuits has been taking place for many years, and to counter these accusations, Coke has been trying to claim the moral high ground. In 2013, it began a new television ad campaign “aimed at getting on the healthy side of the national debate over obesity — a novel step for a company built on sugary soft drinks” (Strom, 2013).

### **Coca-Cola invited famous sports stars to represent the Coke brand**

In order to create positive respond to Coke Zero, Coca-Cola invited famous athletes to represent the Coke brand. In 2012, two football players from Chicago Bulls, Brian Urlacher and Patrick Sharp signed endorsement deals to represent the Coke zero brand (fig. 1).

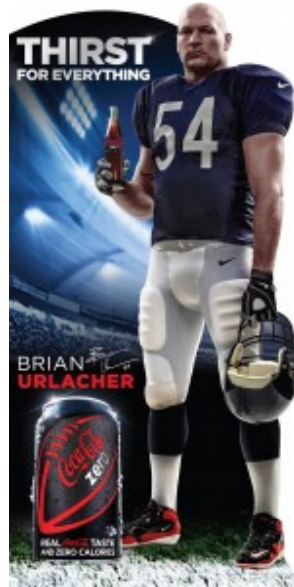


Figure 1. Press release (Coca-Cola 2012).

This is a common strategy in many industries, yet has been effective all the time, with two psychological effects used in such advertisement campaign. The first one is celebrity branding: by letting famous people speak for Coke zero, Coca-Cola can attract their fans to be loyal customers of Coke zero. This effect is especially effective among specific customer groups such as teenager who generally tends to pay more attention to stars and more passionate in mimicking their idols. Besides, Coca-Cola uses classical conditioning to relate Coke zero to the concept of healthiness. People tend to view athletes as strong, muscular, and healthy. When seeing the advertisement which combines the image of an athlete with the image of Coke zero, the viewer will naturally give a positive respond to those traits of an athlete such as healthy, which will be unconsciously linked to the figure of Coke zero in his brain (Marketing-Schools.org). Then it will counteract the effect of propaganda of soft-drinks-are-harmful theory and undermine such impression Therefore, the viewer tend to view Coke zero as healthy subconsciously.

One similar example of such advertising technique can be found in Coca-Cola's advertising campaign for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in Australia. Coca-Cola announced Michelle Jenneke who was an Australian hurdler and model as the #thatsgold campaign ambassador. The company said that "Jenneke was selected for her well-known positive outlook and ability to bring her personality her sport" (Coca-Cola Australia, 2016; fig. 2). In this case, Coca-Cola tried to bond more positive traits such as beautiful, lively, and charming to the Coke brand. It also appealed to Jenneke's fans.



Figure 2. Advertisement (Coca-Cola Australia, 2016).

Coca-Cola promoted the sales of Coke by provoking the passion of teens through #thatsgold campaign in Brazil. It is well-acknowledged that Olympic Games is the most connected games in history. Everyone craves for seeing gold medals won by athletes of his country, so they are willing to participate in this social media activity. According to Patricia Pierranti, Coca-Cola's marketing manager overseeing the social media activity during this event,

“Everyone can be gold, like everyone can have a Coke” (Liffreing, 2016). By promoting the participation of people, the Coke brand’s fame is much improved. “Since July 13, the Coca-Cola Brazil campaign reached 21 million teens (or 77% of Brazil's teen population)” (Liffreing, 2016) Most of such involved teens are very likely to have a positive impression about Coke due to the exciting moments they see and the sense of honor they feel.

This advertising technique can also be seen in cannabis industry. Even today, cannabis, more commonly known as marijuana, is illegal under federal law and allowed only in some states. However, there are many athletes sponsored by cannabidiol (CBD) companies that speak for marijuana. For example, the Flav Company sponsored Andrew Tabiti, an American professional boxer ranked as the world’s sixth best active cruiserweight in 2019.

Correspondingly, Tabiti has the Flav tag on its twitter and Instagram account and wears Flav gear during his fights (Flav, 2019), which serve as a decent advertisement to the company.

### **Coca-Cola used a preemptive advertising strategy**

Coca-Cola also used a preemptive advertising strategy, publicizing the health costs of fat while advertising the advantage of its no-calorie products. According to Robin (2013), Andrew Hughes, a marketing professor at the Australian National University, argues such ads on television in Australia are its way to promote its healthier brands, which are likely to grow, “I think this is about Coca-Cola’s maturity as a product. They know it’s in decline. Its glory days are behind it. So they’re doing this to promote their other products, which they mention, which are on the rise as far as sales go. Those are the ones they want you to buy more of. It’s a really, really clever ad. They’ve done it really subtly – it looks as if it’s about health concerns. That obscures the underlying purpose and makes it more effective.”



Given the rising needs for healthier product from the customer, Coca-Cola shifted its main production from regular soft drinks to low-calorie drinks such as Coke zero. Meanwhile, it tried to squeeze out the last bit of value from the falling brand. By publicizing the health risk of its old product and emphasizing the absence of such risk in its new product, Coca-Cola successfully retained the existing customer groups, shifting their consumption to the new product and more importantly, builds the company's figure as trustworthy. According to CNA Insider (2018), James Quincey, Coca-Cola's president and CEO, claimed that Coca-Cola commits to "help people consume less sugar and have a more balanced lifestyle." Such action creates an impression among customers that Coca-Cola deals with those health concerns seriously and proves trustworthy, provoking market confidence which ensures the vitality of the market and provoke desire to consume (Kuepper, 2019). When the total number of consumption is increasing, Coca-Cola's material interests will be secured.

Coca-Cola's strategy is similar to that of tobacco companies which ran ads to promote products they claimed could ensure smokers' health (American Lung Association, 2019). Tobacco companies promoted filters through ads which promised health reassurance while ensuring the original good taste, although it was proved by industry chemists that filters did little to truly reduce the hazards of smoking (Stanford, 2019; fig. 3). Similarly, Coca-Cola and ABA promised to help customer intake less sugary calorie, yet low-calorie measure did little to drop the national obesity rate. The subtle difference is that there has been no well-acknowledged scientific research determining the relationship between low-calorie soft drinks with sugar substitute and obesity.



Figure 3. 1960 Kent advertisement (Lorillard, 1960; Stanford, 2019).

### **Coca-Cola funded health research groups to defend its product**

Coca-Cola looked for scientific evidence to defend Coke. Some published research, although not well-acknowledged, showed that noncaloric drinks can reduce weight gain and fat accumulation (Ruyter, 2012). Besides advertising outcomes of those existing researches in favor of Coke, Coca-Cola tried to support itself by actively funding health research groups and influencing their agenda to its advantage. The Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN) was a US-based nonprofit founded in 2014, claiming to fund research into causes of obesity. In fact it promoted claims that inactivity, not bad diet, was primarily responsible for the obesity epidemic

(O’Conner, 2015). By advertising such claim, Coca-Cola shifted blame for obesity away from bad diets caused by its products.

According to Warner (2005), “in a program called Live It, Lance Armstrong and other sport figures will appear in posters encouraging children to be active . . . . In each school, Coke will hand out pedometers to students and hold contests to reward students who log the highest numbers of steps in a week” (fig. 4).

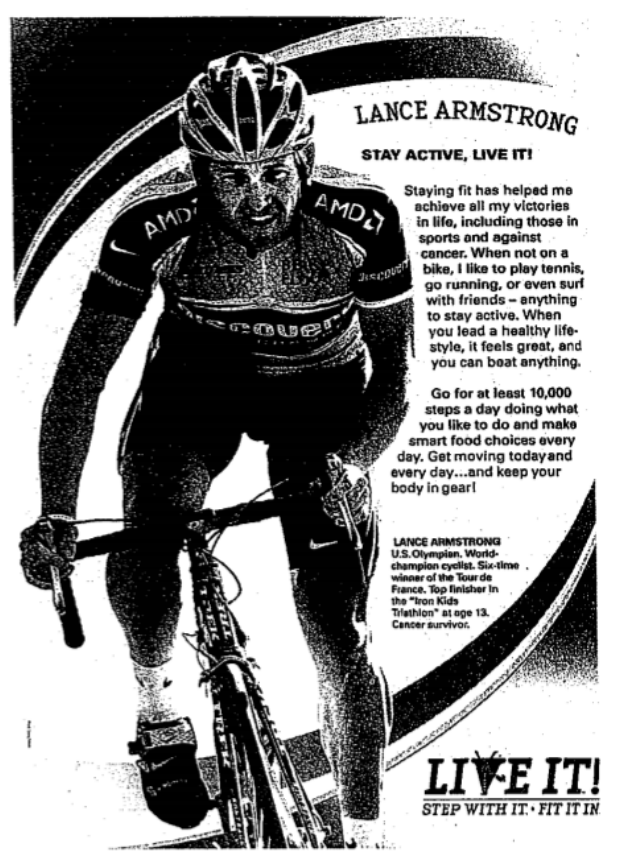


Figure 4. Coca-Cola advertisement (Warner, 2005).

However, emails were found to prove Coca-Cola’s collaboration with GEBN to promote obesity reduction strategies that conform to Coca-Cola’s material interests. According to Barlow

et. al. (2017), Coke intended to establish an ostensibly independent broker of the obesity debate to its advantage. According to Huehnergath (2015), “an August 30, 2014 email from James Hill, the GEBN president and a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, to a Coke executive about a research proposal: "Here is my concept. I think it could provide a strong rationale for why a company selling sugar water SHOULD focus on promoting physical activity. This would be a very large and expensive study but could be a game changer. We need this study to be done.” In a November 9, 2014, email, Hill wrote to a Coke executive: “I want to help your company avoid the image of being a problem in peoples’ lives and back to being a company that brings important and fun things to them.” It was clear that Coca-Cola provided \$1.5 million fund to GEBN not to philanthropically support scientific research but to take advantage of the influenced research outcome for its material and reputational interests.

Besides, Coca-Cola had some private connections to Hill prior to the establishment of GENB. According to Olinger (2015), “Coke said it paid Hill \$550,000 separately starting in 2010 for various purposes. ... During that time, Hill traveled at the company’s invitation to Mexico, Grenada, England, Australia and New Zealand, according to e-mail records. Coke also paid for his wife’s trip to Australia and New Zealand. ... In 2013, Hill asked a Coca-Cola vice president if she could find a job for his youngest son.” This greatly damaged Hill’s credibility as the director of GEBN’s research.

Schultz (2019) argued that bias is inherent in company funded research because of the dependent funding mechanism. After reporters exposed Coca-Cola’s funding of this organization, even though Hill had denied statements from the *New York Times* that Coca-Cola’s donation had shaped its research agenda (Huehnergath 2015), it quickly lost public trust and was disbanded within a year (O’Conner, 2015).

**Coca-Cola lobbied the regulatory agencies to prevent legislation against the soda industry**

Coca-Cola, has tried to lobby regulatory agencies in several states to make legislation in its favor. Collaborating with PepsiCo, “it has spent millions to defeat public health legislation that would reduce Americans’ soda intake” (O’Connor, 2016). According to Aaron and Siegel (2016), “From 2011 to 2015, the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo were found to sponsor a total of 95 national health organizations, including many medical and public health institutions whose specific missions include fighting the obesity epidemic.” Some groups against soda industry are persuaded by Coca-Cola’s money. For example, the nonprofit group Save the Children, which had actively supported soda tax campaigns in several states, withdrew its support in 2010. Save the Children had accepted a \$5 million grant from Pepsi (Neuman, 2010).

Coca-Cola has been spending larger amount of money lobbying (OpenSecrets.org, 2019; fig. 5). Such action had significant impacts on policy changes. According to Szabo (2018), in California, where four cities have soda taxes, the beverage industry pressured lawmakers this summer into accepting a 12-year moratorium on local taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks. The soda industry also makes financial contributions to the campaign of policy makers, even paying them with meals, events, and travel. According to Young (2019), “dinners at an expensive restaurant in Maui — with ocean views. Tickets to professional sports games. A free screening of “Black Panther” at a Sacramento IMAX theater. And a \$250,000 donation to a group that funds the governor’s travel. That’s just a sampling of the \$11.8 million that soft drink companies and their lobbyists spent at the state and local levels in the last two years in California to block proposals such as taxing sugary beverages and slapping health warnings on their drinks.”

### Annual Lobbying by Coca-Cola Co

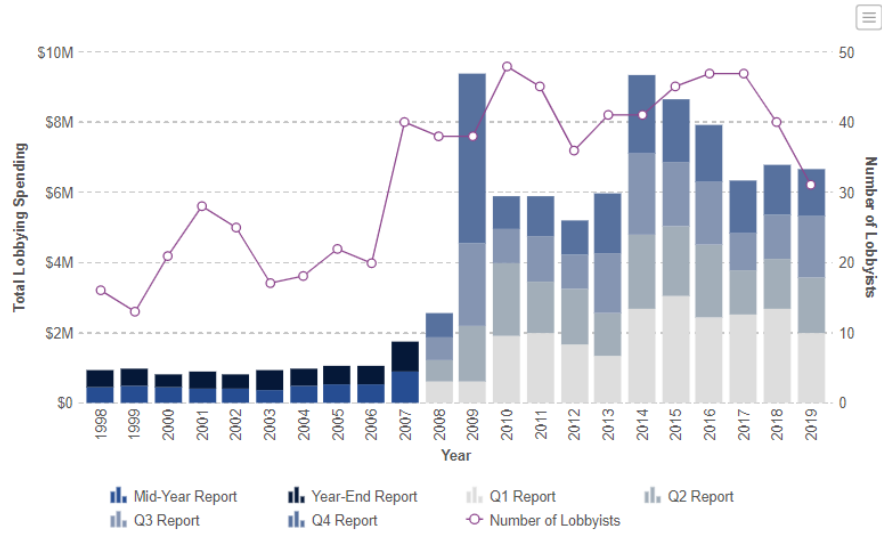


Figure 5. Coca-Cola: lobbying expenditures, 1998-2019 (OpenSecrets.org, 2019).

Soda industry took similar actions to tobacco industry. Philip Morris International (PMI) is one the largest tobacco companies in the world. In its Oct 19, 2017 letter to Pakistan Prime Minister, PMI requested his office to ask the health ministry to “implement recommendations for smaller health warnings than originally proposed for cigarette packaging” (Kalra, A., et. al., 2017). It was clear that PMI has focused its financial and social resources to impair the world’s tobacco control for its material interests. Industries, once grown to large scale, tend to acquire political influence with their financial power to their advantage.

### Conclusion

To protect Coke’s reputation, Coca-Cola collaborated with health advocacies, invited sports stars to represent the brand, engaged in preemptive advertising, funded research groups, and lobbied legislations. Industry tends to use sophisticated strategies to protect its markets,

including influencing research agendas. Among all the research on calorie and health from universities and research institutes, which are directly or indirectly funded by Coca-Cola or groups that share similar material interests?

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