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Original Article

The manufacture of lifestyle: The role of corporations in unhealthy living

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Abstract Recently, researchers have debated two views on the connection between lifestyle and health. In the first, health-related lifestyles including tobacco and alcohol use, diet, and physical activity are seen as primary influences on health. In the second, social stratification is the dominant influence with lifestyles simply markers of social status. Neither approach leads to interventions that can reverse the world's most serious health problems. This article proposes that corporate practices are a dominant influence on the lifestyles that shape patterns of health and disease. Modifying business practices that promote unhealthy lifestyles is a promising strategy for improving population health. Corporations shape lifestyles by producing and promoting healthy or unhealthy products, creating psychological desires and fears, providing health information, influencing social and physical environments, and advancing policies that favor their business goals. Public officials and health professionals can promote health by advocating policies to modify these corporate practices.

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Introduction

One could not characterize the lifestyles of most of the world's population as healthy. Over the last 18 years, according to one US study, adherence to healthy lifestyle patterns as measured by daily consumption of fruits and vegetables, regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight, moderate alcohol consumption, and not smoking declined from 15 to 8 per cent for adults aged 40 to 74.¹ Other studies show that unhealthy lifestyles are prevalent in Europe and in emerging nations such as Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia, and China.^{2,3} The World Health

Organization (WHO) estimates that the number of overweight adults in the world, 1.6 billion, will increase by 40 per cent in the next decade.⁴ Problem alcohol use causes about 5 per cent of the global burden of disease, a toll that will increase as prosperity in emerging nations enables more drinking.⁵ In the twenty-first century, tobacco use is expected to contribute to one billion deaths.⁶ Given these trends and their inequitable impact on poor and vulnerable populations,⁷ how can the public health community develop more effective and efficient interventions to reduce unhealthy lifestyles and the burden of non-communicable diseases to which they contribute?

How can we best understand the influence of lifestyle on health? Researchers who posit that health-related lifestyle is the primary influence on health advocate interventions designed to encourage healthier lifestyles, most often by changing individual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Others argue that social structures, not lifestyle, are the main influence on health. They call for research and advocacy for policies that reduce social stratification and dismantle social and economic hierarchies that produce ill health. In this view, unhealthy lifestyles are markers rather than fundamental causes of disadvantage.

For advocates of healthier public policies, these two options offer unpalatable choices. We can launch campaigns designed to change the lifestyles of those at risk of premature mortality, usually one person at a time, by modifying eating, drinking, smoking, or other behaviors. Or we can call for the transformation of the social stratifications that produce ill health. And policy makers rarely respond.

In this article, I consider lifestyle as the product of social structures and individual choices. I propose that the business and political practices of corporations are a dominant influence on lifestyles that shape global patterns of health and disease. A focus on modifying corporate practices that promote unhealthy lifestyles promises to improve population health. It can also create common ground for the lifestyle and structuralist camps. By asking how we can change *lifestylers*, those who shape lifestyle options, as well as lifestyles, we expand our options for developing health-promoting public policies.

How and Why Corporations Manufacture Lifestyle

To illustrate my more integrated approach, I consider one major influence on lifestyle: the business and political practices of corporations.

Corporations are the most visible manifestation of the current free-market economy, the symbol and public face of a complex system of organizations and relationships. Yet, they are also the active agents of that system, the institutions that execute decisions shaping policies, environments, and living conditions.⁸ They are, therefore, an appropriate focus for public health investigation.

In the last two centuries, corporations became the world's dominant economic unit.⁹ By the start of the twenty-first century, 51 of the 100 largest 'economies' in the world were corporations.¹⁰ They influence every aspect of human experience, from diet, air pollution, work, and health care to personal identity, sexuality, and governance.

Corporations use business practices such as product design, advertising, retail distribution, and pricing to achieve their goals of maximizing profit and increasing market share. Their political efforts – lobbying, campaign contributions, and public relations – seek to create a business-friendly climate.¹¹ In the twentieth century, consumption became a marker of modern life and corporations actively promoted the lifestyles to sustain this new order.¹² In the twenty-first century, corporations are extending their influence to low and middle income nations, where patterns of consumption and lifestyles are beginning to more closely resemble those in high income nations.²

How do corporations shape lifestyles? They:

- manufacture goods that enhance or harm health;
- shape people's psychological states through advertising and the media; creating or reinforcing the wants, desires, and identities that influence lifestyle and health behavior. They also generate the information that individuals use to make decisions about diet, physical activity, tobacco and alcohol use, and health care;
- structure physical environments through commercial decisions and influencing zoning, design, and economic development. This, in turn, shapes choices about what to purchase, where to live, and how to get from one place to another;
- alter social environments in which people make decisions about lifestyle and health;
- lobby, conduct public relations, make campaign contributions, litigate, sponsor scientific research, and use philanthropy to guard their financial interests and ensure a favorable business climate.

While other forces, such as culture, religion, biology, government, and family, also influence health-related behavior, currently no other institution can compete with the power of corporations to shape lifestyle around the world.^{13–15}

Impact of Corporations on Products

Companies design products to maximize return on investment, and these products can have a profound impact on health as product design shapes lifestyles. Food manufacturers create products high in fat, sugar, and salt, which humans have evolved to crave, thus encouraging food choices that contribute to chronic conditions.¹⁶ With these ubiquitous and inexpensive products, producers construct an environment where unhealthy food choices are the default.¹⁷ The food industry has increased portion size¹⁸ and added *trans* fats that extend shelf life and stability of processed foods while causing cardiovascular and metabolic diseases.¹⁹

Cigarette makers manipulated nicotine levels to make their product more addictive to retain a more stable customer base.²⁰ The alcohol industry developed wine coolers and flavored malt beverages to attract younger drinkers; increasing sales and developing brand loyalty for lifetime customers.²¹

Impact of Corporations on Psychological States

Corporations use advertising and other forms of marketing to shape desires and identities and to provide information that influences health behavior. Between 1950 and 2005, global expenditures for advertising increased from US\$50 billion to \$570 billion.²² Researchers estimate that an American is exposed to several thousand advertisements every day. Advertising of sports utility vehicles, fast food, and wine coolers exacerbate harmful health impacts.^{21,23} Between 1996 and 2005, spending on direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs in the United States increased by 330 per cent, contributing, for example, to widespread exposure to Vioxx and Celebrex, drugs later found to have serious adverse effects.^{24,25}

Neuroscientists can now probe brain activity to understand how consumers process product information. These ‘technologies will enable researchers to better understand the role of emotions in decision making, to develop more effective methods of triggering those emotions, to build

greater trust and brand loyalty, to measure intensity of an individual's likes and dislikes, and, in general, to be more persuasive marketers'.²⁶

Corporations now manufacture distinct lifestyles for every class and racial/ethnic stratum, segmenting their markets to appeal to specific incomes, tastes, and vulnerabilities. The food industry targets low-income populations with inexpensive 'value' foods, usually high in fat, sugar and salt, and higher income groups with pricier 'good-for-you' foods.²⁷ Tobacco, alcohol, and high fat foods are marketed as antidotes to the stress and anxiety associated with lower social status, contributing to social inequalities in health.

Most health messages reflect commercial interests: advertisements, public relations, philanthropy, and media messages on industry-sponsored research. The alcohol industry sponsors social responsibility programs that promote drinking, albeit responsible drinking. No studies have found that these programs reduced problem drinking.²⁸

Common themes are the importance of individual responsibility, the right of consumers to choose their own lifestyles, and the value of voluntary guidelines to govern corporate behavior.²⁹ Corporations' sophisticated multimedia communications campaigns can overwhelm public health messages from government or non-profit groups. In the United States, in 2007, the food industry spent \$10 billion promoting food directly to children; the federal government only \$1 billion on school nutrition education, often on programs found to be ineffective.³⁰

To defend their products, the tobacco industry has spent billions to discredit research documenting cigarettes' harm. The food industry suggests that increasing physical activity is more effective than decreasing consumption of unhealthy food at reducing obesity.^{29,31} These corporate efforts counter campaigns for healthier lifestyles.

Impact of Corporations on Physical Environments

Corporations influence the physical environments that shape lifestyle: locating retail outlets; promoting economic development that encourages shopping and consumption; advocating policies that favor automobile transportation; and opposing effective regulation of air pollution.

Retail chains decide where to locate stores based on expectation of profits, leading to distinct area-specific health consequences. The literature documents the health consequences of the density and distribution of retail outlets. Studies are not conclusive, but individuals in

communities with more fast food outlets consume more calories and are more likely to be overweight and obese.³² Alcohol outlet density is reflected in drunk driving, crime, injuries, and homicide.³³

Developers and real estate interests advocate urban design organized around shopping and consumption,³⁴ encouraging residents to spend more time shopping. New York, Rio de Janeiro, London, and Paris influence what cities look like, what sophisticated people eat, drink, and drive, and how they define their identities.³⁵ Automobile industry advocacy has contributed to pollution and crash-related deaths.³⁶

Impact of Corporations on Social Environments

Corporations also influence social environments, as they commodify elements of youth, Black, or feminist movements, using these images to sell products.^{37,38} Philip Morris used women's emancipation to advertise Virginia Slims: 'It used to be, lady, that you couldn't vote or earn or even smoke... You have a right to your own cigarette'.³⁹ By conflating rights to vote and smoke, Philip Morris helped channel a lifestyle based on asserting rights into one based on consumption. Industry promotes values that support consumption in general and their product in particular. They operate directly through the media, product placements, and public relations and more indirectly as peers enforce and disseminate values. Viral marketing, where peers promote products to friends and neighbors, often without disclosing that they are being paid, creates social networks that promote particular patterns of consumption.⁴⁰

Impact of Corporations on Policies and Politics

Corporations' role in local, national, and global policy shapes global trade policies, resisting government's ability to regulate their practices. They help elect officials who support their positions, and frame public debates. They ensure that the political climate favors their interests.

In 2006, the European Spirits Organization led a vigorous and successful lobbying campaign to prevent the European Commission from proposing more stringent rules to control alcohol use.⁴¹ Similarly, Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco have challenged UK limits on tobacco ads, larger health warning labels in South America, and higher cigarette taxes in the Philippines and Mexico.⁴² In Mexico, after the implementation of the North American Free Trade

Agreement in 1994, a treaty whose terms were shaped by global food companies, imports of cheap US processed foods and beverages to Mexico increased consumption of products high in sugar and fat, contributing to obesity and diabetes.^{43,44}

In the last two decades, the number of lobbyists operating in the United States, the European Union, and at international trade negotiations has skyrocketed.⁴⁵ Between 2000 and 2005, registered lobbyists in Washington doubled to 34 750.⁴⁶ Omnipresent corporate lobbyists ensure attention to industry viewpoints. Campaign contributions from corporations and their trade associations amplify this influence. US legislators who received campaign contributions from the tobacco and firearms industries were more likely to vote for industry positions than non-recipients.^{47,48} Corporations work to ensure that health behaviors, values, and lifestyles that boost profits will not be undermined by regulation, taxation, or popular protest.

Corporate influences on lifestyle shape global patterns of disease, but corporations and the market economy also influence health in other ways. Production processes affect workers' health⁴⁹ and the wider environment.⁵⁰ Trade agreements and employment practices influence the global movement of capital, people, and goods, often exacerbating inequalities, and the epidemics related to affluence and destitution.⁵¹ Patterns of consumption become as important as production processes – driving human and economic development. Public health researchers need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how corporations shape health.

From Changing Lifestyle to Changing *Lifestylers*: An Agenda for Healthier Public Policy

How can we change *lifestylers* – organizations and individuals that create consumption patterns as well lifestyles? For tobacco, alcohol, food, automobiles, and pharmaceuticals, where products define health-related lifestyles, a few global companies dominate. Could changing the practices of a relatively few companies have an important impact on population health?^{28,52,53}

How can health professionals and researchers encourage government, civil society, and business to take actions advancing policies that reduce unhealthy lifestyles? They can regulate advertising, hold companies liable for the health-related costs, promote healthier and more

sustainable lifestyles, and reduce corporations' disproportionate impact on policy. Incremental policy changes could advance more transformative reforms that might make healthier lifestyles the default.

Public health professionals could:

1. Encourage governments to set advertising standards prohibiting promotion of unhealthy products and making misleading health claims. Where commercial speech is protected, as in the United States, it is supposed to help consumers make informed decisions. But today's food, tobacco, and alcohol advertising reveals widespread misinformation or disinformation.⁵⁴ Many jurisdictions are considering restricting advertising to children, requiring public or industry support for counter-advertising of unhealthy products, restricting rights of companies to target advertising of unhealthy products to vulnerable populations, and requiring warning labels on advertisements.⁵⁵ Such policies might begin to undermine corporations' ability to dominate public discourse on lifestyle and health. At the recent United Nations High Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases in New York, participants debated how governments and non-governmental organizations could best restrict the alcohol, food, and tobacco marketing that contributes so heavily to non-communicable diseases.⁵⁶
2. Strengthen laws making corporations liable for the health-related damage associated with products they produce and promote. When companies externalize these costs onto consumers or taxpayers, they impose a burden on society and divert public resources from other social goods.⁵⁷ Requiring companies to absorb these costs could change corporate decisions about what to produce and advertise. Create enforceable standards giving consumers and workers the right to know the health consequences and companies the duty to disclose what they know about a product.⁵⁸ Requiring company-financed independent health impact assessments of new products and practices might help health officials translate the *precautionary principle* into policy.⁵⁹
3. Actively promote healthier, more sustainable lifestyles, addressing demand for unhealthy products as well as supply. Too often campaigns blame the victims, use ineffective strategies, or fail to enlist people's underlying desires for community, sustainable environments, and more meaningful daily lives.⁶⁰ Tapping into people's desire to avoid

corporate manipulation (for example, the truth campaign's anti-smoking ads); linking with social movements that effectively advocate alternative lifestyles (for example, the women's and food movements); and linking healthy lifestyles to environmental sustainability, pleasure, and capacity to enjoy life, can assist those who promote healthy lifestyles to more effectively counter corporate lifestyles.^{61,62}

4. Demand political reforms that reduce corporations' privileged voice in public policy. Globally, public health needs to claim a voice in trade negotiations, as they often help corporations promote unhealthy lifestyles and undermine national health regulations. The growing power of corporations that shapes national legislation, court decisions, elections, and health regulations calls out for a democratic approach to restore and expand citizen participation in political processes that influence health. Municipal governments, too, need to assert authority to shape social and physical environments that influence lifestyle.

Business can also play a role, using its track record of innovation to develop new products that support rather than harm health; designing marketing campaigns that reinforce rather than undermine public health messages. But businesses, on their own, cannot lead efforts to create healthier lifestyles or set health policy. Globally, companies face an irreconcilable conflict of interest between maximizing profit and promoting general welfare. Only government has the authority and responsibility to protect public health. Only civil society can hold government and business accountable.

In medicine, incorrect diagnoses lead to incorrect treatment. Our emphasis on treating consequences rather than eliminating causes of unhealthy lifestyles misses key opportunities. Perhaps it reflects the success of corporations in shaping discourse, as we advocate only policies and programs easily accepted by mainstream players. In the last two centuries, public health reformers have succeeded only when they articulated a clear moral vision – another world was possible. Then they took time to mobilize constituencies and push towards their vision.

In the past decade, public health professionals and advocates have launched policy and programmatic initiatives to modify corporate behaviors – advocacy campaigns, appeals to social responsibility, regulation, litigation, and international treaties.^{63–66} They have not yet lead to transformative changes in corporate practices. Future research

and practice should compare approaches and develop strategies to integrate these efforts into a more coherent movement.

The Occupy Wall Street movement and its critique – a world where fewer than 1 percent of the population determine the living conditions for the other 99 per cent – suggests the potential to mobilize people in opposition to a corporate-controlled world. Our generation's public health challenge: Can we find ways to link the Occupy Wall Street spirit to the difficult task of overcoming corporate control of lifestyles that are killing us?

About the Author

Nicholas Freudenberg, DrPH, is Distinguished Professor of Public Health and director of the doctoral program at the City University of New York School of Public Health at Hunter College. He founded Corporations and Health Watch (www.corporationsandhealth.org), a network of researchers and activists.

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