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‘MISINFODEMICS’— UNPACKING THE CORE NARRATIVES OF MULTINATIONAL FOOD AND DRINK COMPANIES’ ONLINE MARKETING CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR ROLE IN CREATING DOUBT ABOUT THE CAUSES OF OBESITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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The affordances of Social Media on Smartphones (SMSP) creates a particular confluence of interactivity, immediacy, intimacy, measurability and scale, that, especially when combined with traditional marketing platforms, transforms audiences into more active agents in marketing campaigns (Dunlop, Freeman, & Jones, 2016; Yadav, Joshi, & Rahman, 2015). Getting people talking, sharing, liking and clicking, i.e. more *involved* in the marketing of products, helps sales and, for multinational food and drink companies, there are clear links between significant recent shifts to greater spend on social media marketing, and increased youth consumption of highly refined snack foods and Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (SSBs) (Brownbill, Miller, & Braunack-Mayer, 2018; Hernández-Chávez, Velasco-Bernal, Aguilar-Menéndez, & Bolado-Velázquez, 2017; Liu & Lopez, 2016), even as overall consumption of SSBs, in many more developed countries, is falling (Brand-Miller & Barclay, 2017; Chaloupka, Powell, & Warner, 2019)

But at the same time, multinational companies are also waging more existential battles against a growing public awareness of the harm their products cause via their contribution to rising overweight and obesity levels globally (Du, Tugendhaft, Erzse, & Hofman, 2018; Nestle, 2018). Multinational food companies have long been involved in challenging the science that links consumption of their products to the epidemiology of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in both developing and developed world (Limb, 2015). As with climate change denial campaigns and attacks on the science on the harmful effects of tobacco products, these campaigns are multifaceted and multinational, seeking mostly to promote the mistrust of ‘authority’ and to obscure, confuse and ‘muddy the waters’ to ward off both public policy responses (especially ‘sugar taxes (Backholer, Blake, & Vandevijvere, 2017)

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and labelling requirements(Mandle, Tugendhaft, Michalow, & Hofman, 2015)) and dampen consumer disquiet about consuming their products.

This paper explores in particular how so-called 'Big Food' multinationals combine their traditional 'sell more product' marketing, via the relatively new overlay of their multiple social media channels, with a 'our products are harmless' defences via both attempts to influence the understanding of the science and their attempts to engage and shape, via social media, public discourses around health, eating, weight gain and excess kilojoule consumption-related disease. Led by Coca-Cola, the industry has tried to frame these debates around issues of 'energy balance' and highlight their role in promoting healthy activities on the exercise side of the balanced(Ruskin, Stuckler, Serôdio, Barlow, & McKee, 2018). Multinational drink companies, for example, almost all sponsor sports at different levels, and, as this paper argues, with a growing focus on children and young adults(Bragg, Roberto, Harris, Brownell, & Elbel, 2018) to reinforce their dual messages of the desirability of their products and that a key affordance of exercise (or a less sedentary lifestyle) is the ability to consume (and enjoy) more of their products. Highlighting issues of urbanisation, increases in youthful screen time (ironically as these companies ramp their often-compelling content driven social media marketing strategies) and other sedentary-behaviours, their messaging seeks to absolve their products from responsibility for individual and population-level gains in weight.

This misinformation is implicated in the epidemic of over and under nutrition in both developing and developed countries.(Ramachandran et al., 2018)

The broader research project that this paper draws upon argues that this marketing takes place in the context of these companies aggressive shift of production capacity to the developing world, and a particular emphasis on selling more SSBs (and other snack products) into African countries, and into poorer regions in Asia and central and South America(Jacobs, 2017). Drawing on global political economy perspectives to explain these shifts, the paper explores how, in all these areas, Social Media on Smart phones (for most Africans, for example, social media is only accessed via smart phone (Evans, 2018; Poushter, 2015) is emerging as a key marketing channel for food and drink companies, as they artfully combine intimacy and interactivity of social media with 'third party endorsement' by consumers/audiences/digital social media users themselves to build trust, succeeding (in part) in simultaneously challenging the science of obesity and also in accelerating the infusion of SSBs into everyday diets and even into everyday *identities* of people in developing countries.

Drawing on a wide range of recent theorising on the affordances of social media and mechanisms for the spread of misinformation in general and health misinformation in particular(Buchanan, Kelly, Yeatman, & Kariippanon, 2018; Centola, 2013; Dunlop et al., 2016; Hanitzsch, Hanusch, & Lauerer, 2016; Tatlow-Golden et al., 2017), and using both thematic content analysis as the initial method and augmented this with audience reception study methods (with focus groups of university student consumers of these products in Lagos, Nigeria and Grahamstown, South Africa), this paper explores how

these companies' social media marketing combines with their marketing in more traditional channels to tease out how both the 'our products are harmless' and the 'buy our products now' messages articulate with each other and how they resonate, or not, with selected youth audiences.

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