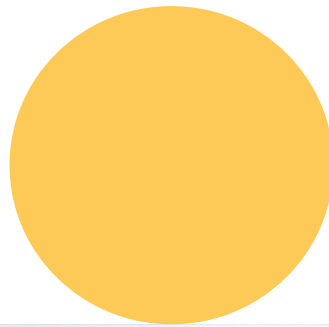


Alcohol Advertising, Social Media and Young People.



Each year the alcohol industry spends more than \$100 million on alcohol advertising.

Given how extensive this is, young people (aged 12-24 years) often see many different forms of alcohol advertising (on tv, radio, billboards etc) – which can contribute to them taking up drinking, starting drinking at a much younger age, and engaging in risky drinking behaviours.¹⁻⁴

The popularity of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) has also created a unique digital environment where young people can be influenced by alcohol-related messages.

Alcohol brands (or ‘big alcohol’ companies) contribute to social media channels by using both direct (more obvious) and indirect (subtle) advertising techniques. This on-line content regularly breaches advertising laws and usually goes unchecked.^{1,2}

This mini bulletin will:

- explore alcohol advertising to young people through social media, why it is difficult to regulate, and why it can be harmful
- look at the different advertising techniques used by ‘big alcohol’ brands on social media, and how they can impact drinking behaviours – especially among young people
- consider what can be done by you and the young person in your life to reduce exposure to – and the impact of – these advertising practices.

The effectiveness of alcohol advertising on young people

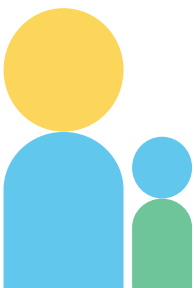
Young people can be particularly influenced by alcohol advertising – especially as they don’t tend to recognise the intentions of advertisers until they are around the age of 16.⁷

They also often have stronger feelings of self-consciousness and concerns around identity⁸, which alcohol advertising can attempt to tap in to.

For example, alcohol ads often show drinking alcohol as something that will enhance mood or well-being, as well as contribute to positive emotional experiences, friendships, and achievement – all ideas which young people find appealing.⁴⁻⁷

Young people’s exposure to alcohol advertising can increase:

- intention to drink alcohol
- positive beliefs about alcohol
- likelihood of underage drinking
- level of alcohol consumed
- likelihood of hazardous or binge drinking.^{5, 8-10}



Regulatory challenges

Alcohol advertising and marketing in Australia is self-regulatory and voluntary. This means the alcohol companies themselves are in charge of making sure their own Advertising Code is not breached.

The Code has 'four key standards' of responsible promotion:

1. content cannot target minors or young people under 25 years of age
2. content cannot encourage heavy or excessive drinking
3. content cannot promote alcohol as a mood enhancer, therapeutic solution, or contributor to success
4. content cannot show alcohol being consumed during an activity that requires safety precautions (such as driving or operating heavy machinery).

You can read the Code in more detail [here](#).

Evidence suggests that:

- the Code and key standards are violated routinely
- there is bias in decision-making
- penalties are rarely handed out for advertisers who breach the Code
- very few complaints are upheld.^{1,2}

As a result, large amounts of unchecked marketing content is publicly released, which can be potentially harmful to young people and other vulnerable populations.^{1,2}

Through social media, alcohol brands are now targeting young people in new ways that are even more difficult to regulate than traditional advertising.

The failure of 'age-gating'

'Age-gating' or 'age verification' technologies are protection measures used to restrict access to digital content from those that are not appropriately aged.

These techniques have been found to be ineffective on social media however, with young people able to access alcohol-related content quite easily.²

For example, a group of researchers who registered with underage profiles on YouTube had a 100% success rate when attempting to subscribe to alcoholic brands' channels. They were also able to view two thirds of the brands' videos.¹¹

In a separate study, fake underage profiles were able to access content posted by alcohol brands on Twitter and Instagram, and the underage Instagram profiles were able to receive alcohol-branded promotional materials.¹²



Social media as an advertising platform

Social media has become a central part of the lives of adolescents and young adults,¹⁴ providing alcohol companies with opportunities to advertise their products to millions of young people cheaply.⁹

The alcohol industry itself has actually stated that social media marketing can reach more consumers than broadcast media, with a 600% return on investment.²

A study in the United Kingdom found that 89% of males and 91% of females aged 15-24 were exposed to alcohol marketing monthly via Facebook, and 81% of males and 73% of females were exposed to content via Youtube.¹⁴

On social media, alcohol consumption (binge drinking in particular) is normalised and often glamorised among adolescents and young adults.¹⁴ There is strong evidence that this is linked to increased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems.^{10, 14}

How alcohol brands are using social media

SPONSORED/PAID ADVERTISEMENTS

Social media accounts are often filled with ‘sponsored’ alcohol advertisements that ‘pop up’ in newsfeeds or stories.

These posts are similar to traditional advertising, as alcohol brands pay for them to be placed in the newsfeeds of their target audience.¹⁵ These ads tend to appear more frequently for people who search for, talk about, or purchase alcohol online, as companies can use personal data to target people ‘interested’ in alcohol. Regular alcohol buyers are targeted the most, exposing them to high levels of advertisements and encouraging impulse purchases.¹⁶

BRANDED SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES

Alcohol brands also create official pages on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

These pages engage with ‘fans’ through questions/polls, by posting photos and memes, hosting competitions, and sharing videos. This content is highly visual, interactive, and created to be easily shared among users.¹⁷

Through this personalised interaction alcohol brands embed their product – and drinking in general – into the everyday lives of social media users.¹⁷

In 2012, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) conducted a study analysing 40 posts from Australian alcohol brands on Facebook.

They found 76 breaches of the industry’s self-regulatory advertising code – from both the brands themselves and responses from fans in the comments section, including:

- content which encouraged and celebrated excessive alcohol consumption
- crude and offensive language, as well as derogatory and vilifying comments
- content implying that alcohol can change mood or environment, and improve social or sexual prowess
- images of consumers who were clearly under the minimum age of 25.¹⁸

A similar study conducted in 2018 of popular alcohol brands on Instagram found that a number of posts:

- promoted drinking excessively or at inappropriate times
- associated drinking with positive emotional experiences
- portrayed alcohol as something that can assist in goal achievement – for example, depicting wealth (jewellery, cars, etc.) or social, athletic or professional gain (individuals in suits in an office, leading a meeting).¹⁰



Opportunistic marketing

Alcohol brands on social media are often quick to capitalise on marketing opportunities created by the topical events or current news.

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic in Australia in 2020 is a prime example of this opportunistic marketing.

Liquor retailers heavily promoted 'contactless' home delivery services through social media, telling drinkers that they never had to run out of their chosen product.

Other retailers and brand pages posted memes and videos promoting the stockpiling of alcohol and heavy drinking while in quarantine at home.¹⁹

Messaging during this period actually promoted a number of known risk factors for harmful drinking, including buying more, drinking to cope, drinking daily and drinking at home or alone in the home.¹⁶ These types of patterns of drinking can carry over after the pandemic, and has the potential to contribute to increased alcohol dependence and related harm for some Australians.¹⁶

To read more about how 'big alcohol' took advantage of the pandemic, see the following links:

- Drinktank blog - **Alcohol marketing in the time of COVID-19**
- FARE report - **An alcohol ad every 35 seconds. A snapshot of how the alcohol industry is using a global pandemic as a marketing opportunity.**
- VicHealth web article - **How the alcohol industry has lined its pockets with money from vulnerable people during coronavirus restrictions [plus tips to rise above their tactics]**



Subtle promotion by alcohol brands on social media

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Social media influencers with large networks of followers are often paid by alcohol companies to share self-generated pictures or videos relating to a brand or product which all of their followers can see.²⁰

To younger followers, posts relating to alcohol products might indicate that drinking is a normal, fun, and even a glamorous thing to do. This may encourage them to start drinking – or if they already drink, to drink more.²¹

Social media influencers are perceived as more relatable and approachable than traditional celebrities, and promote lifestyles that many young people aspire to.²¹

Influencer posts can also be perceived as more credible and trustworthy than traditional forms of ‘paid’ advertising, and are known to increase positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards the products they promote.^{21, 23, 24}

Research from VicHealth reviewed the top 70 Aussie Instagram influencers and found that almost three-quarters showed alcoholic drinks in their posts; yet only a quarter fully disclosed when they had been paid by alcohol brands.²⁴

In the Netherlands, Instagram influencers popular among adolescents and young adults were analysed and it was found that 64% had posted about alcohol recently. Of these, only 20% of posts clearly showed an alcohol brand and only a third disclosed their sponsorship.²¹

The alcohol industry has effectively found a way to bypass legislation and promote alcohol to minors – if influencers are being paid to advertise alcohol brands and are not being transparent about it.²¹

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

User-generated content is when social media users post or comment on posts related to specific alcohol brands or drinking in general.

There is evidence that some user-generated content is created in response to promotion by alcohol companies, with social media users encouraged to upload pictures or videos featuring the companies’ products.^{15, 18}

For example, companies might sponsor a sporting event, and create a corresponding brand-orientated hashtag that people can use when uploading a photo.¹⁵ Another technique is to host photo or video competitions, encouraging social media users to upload their own photos or videos and share to their own networks.¹⁵

User-generated content is very attractive to the alcohol industry as it easily bypasses advertising rules – for example, content that depicts drinkers below the age of 25, promotes risky drinking, or suggests sexual advantages due to alcohol.¹⁵

It’s also considerably cheaper than traditional advertising, and user-generated brand posts are more likely to encourage people to buy alcohol than more obvious paid or disclosed advertising.¹⁵

“We suggest policy makers should hold alcohol brands responsible not just for what they say, but also for the kinds of audience participation and mediation they invite and encourage.”¹⁵



Top Spin competition

For a better understanding of the way the alcohol industry tries to reach young people, check out the Top Spin competition. Top Spin was a state-wide competition asking young Victorians (18-29 years) to call out the sneaky tactics used by the alcohol industry to influence them to drink. Read more about the competition **here**, and visit the website to see some of the entries **here**.

What you can do

TALK WITH YOUR YOUNG PERSON

If you have a young person in your life, have a conversation about alcohol advertising on social media.

Help them become aware of how advertising on social media may be affecting their behaviour or attitude towards drinking, and recognise the subtle techniques used by the alcohol industry to promote their products and influence consumers.

For advice on how to approach a conversation like this with a young person, see this resource from Positive Choices **here**.

Explore media literacy

Media literacy is the ability to identify different types of media and understand the messages they are sending. It may be worth checking how media literacy is taught at your young person's school. Learning media literacy from an early age can assist young people in identifying some of the advertising practices used by alcohol companies, and how they may be targeting them. For more information, see below:

- <https://www.utas.edu.au/social-change/publications/insights/insight-five-media-literacy-in-australian-schools>
- <https://www.qut.edu.au/news?news-id=164131>

Reduce exposure of paid advertisements

You can limit the amount of alcohol advertisements shown on individual social media platforms – and encourage your young person to do the same. This can be done by adjusting settings on Facebook and Instagram. See below:

- > **Facebook**>Settings & Privacy>Settings>Ads>Ad Topics>See fewer – Alcohol
- > **Instagram**>Settings>Ads>Ad topic preferences>See fewer – Alcohol

While this function is unlikely to prevent **all** advertising and exposure on any given social media platform, it may help reduce what is being seen.



Report inappropriate content

You can report any post that you consider to be offensive or inappropriate, including any alcohol-related images, videos, or wording that meets this criteria.

While the major social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter – do not have a specific report mechanism for inappropriate representations of alcohol consumption, you can still follow these steps to report posts:

Facebook: Report>something else>promoting drug use>I believe this goes against FB's community standards

Instagram: Report>It's inappropriate>I just don't like it OR false information

Twitter: Report Tweet>It's abusive or harmful>It's disrespectful or offensive

Note: It is unlikely that user-generated content would be successfully taken down unless the content was incredibly offensive or vulgar. However, content that is posted by an alcohol brand which clearly breaches the advertising codes may be more properly investigated.

Make an official complaint

If you see an advertisement or promotion from an alcohol brand which you believe violates the advertising code, make an official complaint to the ABAC (Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code) and the Alcohol Advertising Review Board (AARB).

The ABAC is the official regulatory body governed by the alcohol industry. An online complaint form is available at this third party site: <https://adstandards.com.au/lodge-complaint>.

The ABAC has had a limited response to complaints historically²⁶, so complaints can also be made through the AARB, which is run by the Public Health Advocacy Institute of WA and Cancer Council. It was developed in response to the weakness of the current self-regulatory system run by the alcohol industry, and accepts all community complaints about alcohol advertising through the online form here: <https://alcohol.phaiwa.org.au/alcohol-advertising-review-board/make-a-complaint>

Resources/further information

For further information on alcohol advertising and alcohol consumption in general, refer to the following resources:

- <https://positivechoices.org.au/teachers/alcohol-factsheet>
- <https://adf.org.au/insights/alcohol-advertising/>
- <https://www.cancerwa.asn.au/articles/news-2020/alcohol-ad-every-35-seconds-during-covid-19/>
- <https://fare.org.au/like-comment-share-alcohol-brand-activity-on-facebook/>
- <https://fare.org.au/breaching-the-code-alcohol-facebook-and-self-regulation/>
- https://cdn.adf.org.au/media/documents/AlcoholAdvertisingSponsorship_PP_final_200722.pdf



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