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Australian Competition & Consumer Commission  
Digital Platforms Inquiry  
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We welcome the opportunity to comment on the preliminary report for the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry. Our submission summarises the evidence of the extent of alcohol advertising on digital platforms and its impact on children and young people, and highlights the need for the final report to prioritise the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Australia.

### **Alcohol marketing in a digital world**

Children and young people are regular users of digital technologies. Eighty-three percent of Australian teenagers are going online three or more times a day.<sup>1</sup> Online activities include streaming videos and music, playing games, communicating through email and social networking, and research and browsing.<sup>1</sup>

Alcohol is one of the most heavily marketed products in the world.<sup>2</sup> There is growing concern about the promotion of alcohol using social media and digital technologies due to the rapid expansion of digital communication and the extent to which young people have taken up such forms of communication. Evidence shows alcohol brands are increasingly reallocating their marketing spend away from traditional advertising towards online media<sup>3</sup>, however there is limited publicly available information on total alcohol marketing expenditure in Australia.

Australian children and adolescents are exposed to alcohol advertising on digital platforms, including through social media, YouTube, mobile phones apps, and websites. One in five young people aged 16 to 24 years reported that they had visited an alcohol brand page on Facebook, including 10% of those aged under 18 years.<sup>4</sup> Currently, there does not appear to be in place any effective controls to prevent young people's exposure to online alcohol advertising, with research finding that age

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Communications and Media Authority. Aussie teens and kids online. 2016. Available from: <https://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/engage-blogs/engage-blogs/Research-snapshots/Aussie-teens-and-kids-online>

<sup>2</sup> Jernigan D. The extent of global alcohol marketing and its impact on youth. *Contemp Drug Probl.* 2010; 37:57–89.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholls J. Everyday, Everywhere: Alcohol Marketing and Social Media—Current Trends. *Alcohol and Alcoholism.* 2012; 47(4):486–493.

<sup>4</sup> McClure AC, Tanski SE, Li Z, et al. Internet alcohol marketing and underage alcohol use. *Pediatrics.* 2016; 137(2).

verification controls on websites are largely ineffective.<sup>5</sup> The preliminary report notes that there are serious concerns about the lack of effective regulation to protect children from being targeted by online marketers. In addition, we are concerned about the lack of effective regulation to prevent children and young people's exposure to alcohol advertising.

### **Impact of alcohol marketing on children and young people**

The evidence for the impact of alcohol advertising on young people is consistent and comprehensive. Exposure to alcohol advertising influences young people's beliefs and attitudes about drinking, and increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol and will drink more if they are already using alcohol.<sup>6, 7</sup> When looking at the impact of specific media, the evidence shows liking or following alcohol marketing pages on social media is common among young Australians and is associated with riskier alcohol use and an earlier start to drinking.<sup>8</sup> Significant associations exist between exposure to internet-based alcohol-related content and intentions to drink and positive attitudes towards drinking among young people.<sup>9</sup>

### **Regulation of alcohol marketing in Australia**

In Australia, alcohol advertising is largely self-regulated by the alcohol and advertising industries. The system of self-regulation has been found to be ineffective.<sup>10</sup> Recognised weaknesses include that code provisions are narrowly worded and important forms of marketing are not covered, and the system is voluntary (non-signatories go unregulated). As the preliminary report notes, there are no sanctions for advertisers breaching codes, decisions are not directly enforceable, and there is no monitoring function. There is also a lack of independence, with the alcohol industry heavily represented in the management of the system. Of particular concern, the self-regulatory system has failed to keep pace with the rapidly developing technologies available to alcohol advertisers.

The World Health Organization, the Australian Medical Association, the National Preventative Health Taskforce, and other expert groups have recommended restricting alcohol advertising during times and in places which have high exposure to children and young people as part of a comprehensive approach to reducing alcohol related harms.<sup>11,12</sup> There is strong community support for effective regulation to protect young people from alcohol promotion; 71% of Australian adults support using legal controls to reduce children's exposure to alcohol promotion, with only 6% opposed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jones SC, Thom JA, Davoren S, et al. Internet filters and entry pages do not protect children from online alcohol marketing. *J Public Health Policy*. 2014; 35(1):75-90.

<sup>6</sup> Jernigan D, Noel J, Landon J, et al. Alcohol marketing and youth alcohol consumption: a systematic review of longitudinal studies published since 2008. *Addiction*. 2016; 112(Suppl. 1):7-20.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson P, de Bruijn A, Angus K, Gordon R, Hastings G. Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies. *Alcohol Alcohol*. 2009; 44(3):229-243.

<sup>8</sup> Carrotte ER, Dietze PM, Wright CJ, et al. Who 'likes' alcohol? Young Australians' engagement with alcohol marketing via social media and related alcohol consumption patterns. *Aust N Z J Public Health*. 2016; 40(5):474-479.

<sup>9</sup> Gupta H, Pettigrew S, Lam T, et al. A Systematic Review of the Impact of Exposure to Internet-Based Alcohol-Related Content on Young People's Alcohol Use Behaviours. *Alcohol Alcohol*. 2016; 51(6):763-771.

<sup>10</sup> Reeve B. Regulation of Alcohol Advertising in Australia: Does the ABAC Scheme Adequately Protect Young People from Marketing of Alcoholic Beverages? *QUT Law Review*. 2018;18(1):96-123.

<sup>11</sup> World Health Organization. Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. WHO; 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Medical Association. Alcohol Marketing and Young People: Time for a new policy agenda. Canberra: AMA; 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Independent market research commissioned by the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth, July 2017. Available from: [www.mcaay.org.au](http://www.mcaay.org.au)

## **Recommendations**

With children and young people in Australia regularly accessing and engaging with digital platforms, approaches to preventing their exposure to alcohol advertising through the internet and new media need to be a focus of government action. We urge the final report from the ACCC inquiry into digital platforms to:

1. Acknowledge that in regulating digital platforms, consideration must be given to the protection of children and the ability of children to engage safely with digital platforms.
2. Prohibit the use of children's personal data for tracking, targeted advertising, and other marketing strategies.
3. Recommend the introduction of statutory regulations that are designed to protect children and young people from alcohol marketing on digital platforms.
4. Recognise that the role of a regulatory authority as described in Preliminary Recommendation 4 of the report could also be expanded to regulate the content and placement of alcohol marketing, and record and report on advertising expenditure.

We thank the ACCC for the opportunity to comment on the preliminary report for the Digital Platforms Inquiry. Should you wish to clarify any matter raised in this submission, please contact the Alcohol Programs Team at the Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia on (08) 9266 9079.

Yours sincerely,

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