

Digital and social media marketing of alcohol



About us

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in effective advocacy, campaigning and policy research.

Our work involves providing information on alcohol-related issues, creating awareness of alcohol-related harm and offering policy solutions with the potential to reduce that harm, with a particular emphasis on the implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. Our overarching goal is to achieve a reduction in consumption of alcohol and the consequent health and social harms which alcohol causes in society.

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Summary

The advertising landscape has changed dramatically since the turn of the century and has been marked by a shift towards digital media and social media marketing. The widespread adoption of digital technologies and online social networks has revolutionised the way marketers engage with consumers.[1] While this has brought many benefits for businesses and customers, it has also brought new, and ever evolving, issues. This is especially true in relation to child protection in the online space, and in the context of this paper, the digital and social media marketing of harmful products, such as alcohol, to children and teenagers.

Children in Ireland spend a significant amount of time on digital platforms, social networking sites, and video sharing platforms. Research by CyberSafeKids revealed that 71% of 8–12-year-olds have their own accounts on social media and instant messaging

“ Research from Australia has shown that young people may see more than 20 alcohol ads per hour on social media”

apps with a minimum age restriction of 13.[2] This near-ubiquitous use of social media has created opportunities for corporate brands to target and engage with children and teenagers in unprecedented and unparalleled ways.[3]

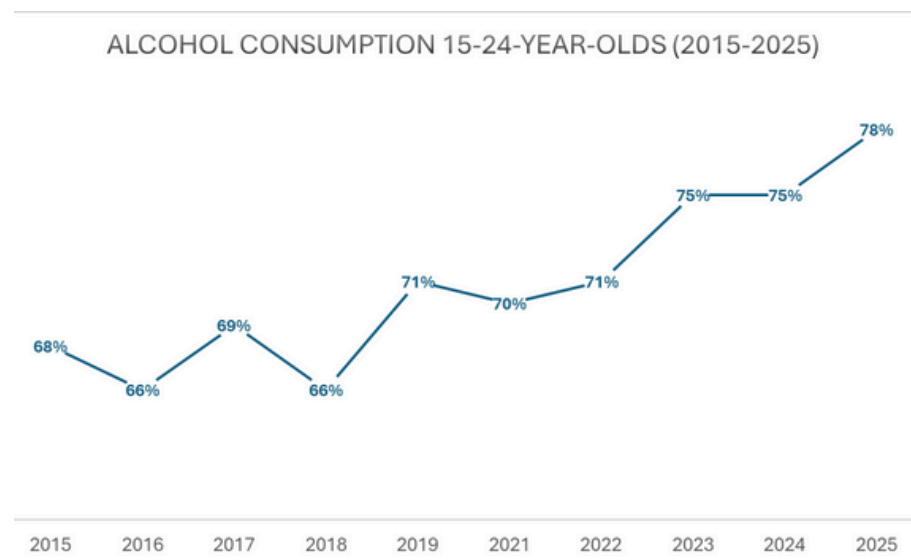
We now know through national and international research that digital alcohol marketing employs subtle tactics, including influencer marketing, sponsored content, and user-generated content, which effectively promotes drinking behaviours among young people.[4] Internationally we have seen that social media and video sharing platforms offer ideal environments for marketing, allowing alcohol companies to reach young people with tailored and engaging content, often through the exploitation of user data and preferences to create sophisticated, personalised marketing content.[5]

Several international studies have revealed the scale and breadth of digital and social media alcohol marketing. Research from Australia has shown that young people may see more than 20 alcohol ads per hour on social media,[6] while New Zealand research found that nearly three-quarters of young people in a study (70.6%) reported seeing alcohol marketing on a social media platform they regularly use.[7] These advertisements appeared across many different social media platforms, but most commonly were seen on Instagram (72.9%), YouTube (56.6%), Facebook (45.8%), Tik Tok (37.1%) and Snapchat (19.6%).[8]

Ireland has introduced a prohibition on profiling for advertisements, under the EU Digital Services Act, when a platform can establish with reasonable certainty that the recipient of the service is a minor.[9] However, 'content' is not covered, even though issues persist in relation to children being fed harmful 'content' on social media and video sharing platforms which puts them at risk. This is of further concern because it can be argued that there is a fine line between what constitutes advertising and what constitutes 'content', and the impact of the person digesting that information.

The reason this is of such concern is because results from research and systematic reviews show a significant association between exposure to alcohol advertisements/content and drinking intentions, attitudes, and behaviours, particularly among children and adolescents. It is within this context that we must view the 12% increase in youth drinking in Ireland over the past decade. [10] Indeed, there is now a situation where young drinkers, 15-24 year-olds, make up the largest proportion of the population consuming alcohol – 78% - significantly higher than the national average (71%).[11]

This paper will look at how and why alcohol advertising works, how it has exploited the opportunities provided by digital and social media, and the impact this marketing has on consumption amongst children and young people.



Alcohol consumption amongst 15–24-year-olds (2015–2025) as recorded by Healthy Ireland Survey's. NB. In 2019 Healthy Ireland data on alcohol was collected through the National Drug and Alcohol Survey, while in 2020 the Healthy Ireland Survey was cancelled due to Covid19. [12][13][14][15][16][17][18][19][20][21]

Recommendations

- **AAI recommends** a coherent approach to digital and social media marketing to children and teenagers, including a clearly defined goal to protect children and young people online.
- **AAI recommends** the ban of algorithmic targeting, tracking, profiling, monitoring or targeting of children and teenagers.
- **AAI recommends** that alcoholic beverages and brands should not be seen by minors in digital spaces. To achieve this will require statutory measures and strict monitoring by government agencies not linked to the alcohol industry.
- **AAI recommends** social media and video sharing platforms be compelled to provide to governments relevant data on marketing, spending, and demographics reached.
- **AAI recommends** comprehensive, agile, and proactive monitoring and compliance systems , funded by levies on advertisers and the platforms on which the advertisements appear.
- **AAI recommends** that Coimisiún na Meán takes a proactive approach to monitoring the activities commercial communications in the online space.
- **AAI recommends** severe penalties for non-compliance with regulations for the advertiser, alcohol producer and the digital platform. These penalties should be based on the global profits of the offending companies, comparable to those in relation to violations of GDPR.
- **AAI recommends** alcohol brands should not be allowed to use sponsored content to advertise across digital and social media platforms.

Introduction

Alcohol is one of the most heavily marketed products in the world with estimates on annual spending ranging from \$7.7bn to \$17.7bn.[22][23] In Ireland, the annual spend on marketing alcohol to the public was conservatively estimated to be €115m in 2021. The purpose of marketing is clear – it is to create a need or desire for a product. When it comes to alcohol this is most interesting because alcohol is not a staple, it is not a necessary purchase, therefore a market must be created for it – and new drinkers must be recruited to create, sustain, and expand that market.[24]

Traditionally, the channels used for advertising alcohol were print media, cinema, radio and television, and billboards, amongst others. While advertising continues via these routes, marketing has increasingly moved online. Indeed, the online space now constitutes the largest marketing channel in Ireland with its importance reinforced by the fact that in 2025 companies spent over €1bn advertising online.[25]

In particular, the alcohol industry markets its product across social media platforms using traditional mechanisms, however, they also use more modern methods such as targeted advertisements, social media influencers, or encouraging individuals to become the marketer by presenting their selves as drinkers.[26] Thus, situations have developed where young teenagers say they see an almost equal amount of alcohol advertising from industry (36%) as they do from influencers (38%) when using social media.[27]

In this paper, Alcohol Action Ireland will seek to investigate the nature and scale of digital and social media alcohol marketing and the exposure of children and young people to alcohol as a result.

Reason for marketing

Marketing can more broadly be understood as the communication channel linking a product or service to targeted customers.[28] It aims to demonstrate product value, strengthen brand loyalty, and ultimately increase sales.[29] Marketers are, in essence, salespeople who communicate product value to customers. Formal marketing activity focuses on analysis, planning and control of the matching process, with special attention to the 4 Ps - product, price, promotion, and place.[30] Therefore, we can say that marketing is how businesses connect with audiences and persuades customers to acquire and consume products and services.

Traditional marketing

Historically, the alcohol industry prioritised traditional marketing to advertise their products. This included a variety of 'offline methods' to promote alcohol products, such as print media, television and radio, and billboards, to name but a few. In addition to the use of cultural pursuits such as sport, music, and the arts, these were the main methods of advertising until the turn of the century, and the alcohol industry became extremely adept at utilising these methods to platform their products.

A major goal of traditional advertising is the creation of messages and visuals that get audiences' attention and persuade them to take actions – i.e. to get them to purchase and consume.[31] Indeed, as the early 20th century advertising pioneer Claude Hopkins believed - the only purpose of advertising is to make sales.[32] In the modern world traditional media still remains very powerful, especially in terms of establishing brand awareness and consideration.[33] Research indicates that, compared to other means of marketing, traditional advertising has a strong influence on customer acquisition.[34] However, its most important role in modern advertising is to provide information to help consumers make their final purchase decision.[35]

In this way traditional advertising derives power from its intersection with digital and social media marketing. Therefore, it is unsurprising that with the advent of digital technologies, many agencies integrated traditional and digital to offer more holistic campaigns.[36] This gives digital marketing a unique power in modern advertising.

Digital and social media marketing

Digital marketing uses the internet and digital technologies to advertise products, services and brands. More recently, the widespread adoption of digital technologies and online social networks has revolutionised the way marketers engage with consumers.[37] For instance, over the past three decades, digital marketing has evolved from simple banner ads to complex, data-driven marketing strategies that influence nearly every aspect of our daily lives.[38] Indeed, the online space has allowed brands to target audiences on a global scale at a fraction of the cost of traditional advertising.

Digital marketing has been driven by the rapid growth of social networking sites and video sharing platforms. These social media platforms are an extremely important avenue for advertising and brand engagement, radically changing how companies communicate with consumers. This rapid rise of social media has opened unprecedented opportunities for advertisers to reach and engage audiences.[39] Furthermore, these mediums have offered industry the opportunity to employ advanced advertising and marketing approaches to target their audiences, increasingly blurring the lines between commercial marketing and user-generated content, which poses a challenge for effective regulation – as we will be shown later in the document.[40]

Social media represents a cost-effective way to increase the scope of digital marketing and thus led to the emergence of the social media marketing paradigm and associated marketing analytics.[41] Social media marketing is an integrative process aimed at promoting goods and services on social media platforms and can target a far wider consumer base than traditional forms of marketing.[42] This type of marketing has been further enhanced by the advent of influencer marketing to the point that social media platforms have introduced features to facilitate brand collaborations.[43]

This adoption of innovative devices and data-driven marketing, specifically in digital advertising and social media marketing has provided brands and companies with a wide and efficient reach. However, its unregulated, or self-regulated, nature has allowed children and teenagers to be exposed to harmful content, including a deluge of alcohol advertising.

Digital and social media marketing of alcohol seen by children and young teenagers

Social media plays a dominant role in young people's lives and as a result digital marketing, and in particular social media marketing, has unique strengths over traditional marketing, including low cost and opportunities for tailored audience targeting and engagement.[44] Therefore, it is an important tool for the alcohol industry to target and influence.

Young people are an important market for the alcohol industry. Comprehensive research clearly tells us that alcohol marketing, including advertising, sponsorship and other forms of promotion, increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol.[45]

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With the rise of new technologies young people increasingly spend time on social networking sites and video sharing platforms.[46] Research from CyberSafeKids revealed that 93% of 8-12-year-olds owned their own smart device, rising to 99% of 12-15-year-olds.[47] Some of the most prominent pastimes of children and adolescents is to use smart devices to engage with social media, such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitter/X, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, amongst others. [48]

Another potent form of marketing to children and adolescents comes from harnessing interests such as online gaming. Research in Australia indicates that young people are being saturated with multiple ads for alcohol, gambling and junk foods via searches for games,[49] while other research has found alcohol references integrated into youth oriented online games as well as direct marketing.[50]

Therefore, it is little wonder that research has shown how the rapid growth of social networking sites and video sharing platforms has created an opportunity for the alcohol industry to employ advanced advertising and marketing approaches to target their audiences – much of which is seen by children and young people.[51] This has led to the World Health Organisation (WHO) stating that “the invasion of children and young people's digital social spaces by companies promoting alcohol

consumption normalizes a drinking culture from a very young age, placing them especially at risk of harm.” [52] In short, we now have a situation where children and teenagers navigate a tsunami of digital alcohol promotion every day that ensures messages about drinking are increasingly normalised.

The difficulty this presents is that we know that exposure to alcohol advertising increases the likelihood that children and adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol. Indeed, recent research investigating the associations between online alcohol marketing exposure and onset of drinking and binge drinking among adolescents across four European countries found a relationship with frequent exposure of teenagers to digital alcohol marketing.[53] The same research revealed that a higher exposure to online alcohol marketing was related to starting to drink and the odds of binge drinking.[54]

Social media influencers

Such studies have been reinforced by recent research from YouGov and Cancer Research UK which found that young teenagers see an almost equal amount of alcohol advertising from industry (36%) as they do from influencers (38%) when using social media.[55] The alcohol industry has been quick to use increasingly innovative digital marketing strategies, such as influencers and content creators, to reach audiences.[56] The massive user base of social media platforms combined with the ability to precisely target ads and track engagement metrics has made social media an increasingly attractive option for advertisers.[57]

We know that the attraction with using celebrities in digital marketing is because they are often seen as attractive, trustworthy and expert.[58] Indeed, this vulnerability of young people to celebrity endorsement has also been shown in the context of alcohol consumption. For example, research has shown that young people are more likely to recall exposure to online alcohol advertisements and pictures including celebrities than adults.[59]

However, where it comes to using social media influencers for advertising, children and teenagers are even more susceptible. This is because influencers and content creators can be more persuasive as they are deemed more similar and approachable for young people than celebrities, thereby creating stronger feelings of intimacy.[60] Research into influencer alcohol posting which analysed the posts of 178 Instagram influencers found that 63.5% had at least one alcohol post among the last 100 posts.[61] By seeing alcohol posts from influencers, young people might be encouraged to start drinking, or if they already drink, to consume more alcohol.[62] This situation is exacerbated by the fact influencer marketing elicits less resistance to the ad message than traditional advertisements do.[63]

The situation is further compounded by research from the Netherlands which revealed that young people posting alcohol-related posts on social media have been shown to increase drinking behaviours.[64] This is reinforced by a comprehensive European school-based survey in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland which found a strong association between young people explicitly presenting themselves as drinkers on social media and harmful drinking behaviour.[65] This illustrates the blurring of the lines between commercial advertising messages and user-generated content, whether that be influencers or social media users themselves, on social media sites and video sharing platforms.[66]

Algorithms and online content

These difficulties are further complicated by the use of sophisticated and predatory algorithmic systems designed to maximise engagement regardless of harm.[67] Research is now scrutinising the use of algorithms to personalise content and sustain user engagement on social media as long as possible. Such research has painted a stark picture of the detrimental effects of social media advertising on children and teenagers which has a profound impact on the mental health, social development, and cognitive growth.[68]

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We live in an algorithmic society, characterised by digital scrutiny and data collection by private companies who in turn exploit this information for profit. [69] This has allowed social media companies sell advertisers access to targeted ad placements based on users' personal data, creating a level of advertising influence never witnessed before in scale, scope, or depth as tailored content dissemination and algorithmic advertising methodologies blur the lines between manipulation and persuasion.[70] This social media manipulation effect refers to the ability of search engines to influence users' beliefs and behaviours on their search result rankings, which can lead to biased information dissemination, impacting decision making. [71]

This transformation has profoundly reshaped media consumption habits, with social media platforms taking a central role in shaping user experiences and revolutionising advertising with content accessible around the clock.[72] This has led public health bodies to highlight a situation where young people are 'overwhelmed by harmful online marketing'. According to the Public Health

Communication Centre, Aotearoa, New Zealand, “When young people are online, they are exposed to the intensive marketing of unhealthy products including alcohol...”, and that “Industries that sell addictive or habituating commodities use digital marketing to recruit young consumers to increase their consumption over lifetimes.”.[73]

Ireland has introduced a prohibition on profiling for advertisements, under the EU Digital Services Act, when a platform can establish with reasonable certainty that the recipient of the service is a minor. [74] However, content is not covered, even though issues persist in relation to children being fed harmful content on social media and video sharing platforms which puts them at risk. This is of further concern because it can be argued that there is a fine line between what constitutes advertising and what constitutes content, and the impact of the person digesting that information.

Such issues were recently raised at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence (AI), where Noeline Blackwell of the Children’s Rights Alliance told TDs and Senators that AI-powered recommender systems are feeding millions of children toxic material about eating disorders, self-harm, and graphic videos, amongst other content.[75]

“ AI-powered recommender systems are feeding millions of children toxic material”

Social media algorithms play a core role in feeding children and teenagers content that capitalises on their naivety and lack of experience. [76] This manipulation of what young people can see and learn from has a strong impact on their education, beliefs, and practices[77] with content being pushed by algorithms to many young people even though they never searched for such content.[78] Where it comes to seeing alcohol content, this means normalising the product in the eyes of young people or framing alcohol as essential or central to weddings, funerals, socialising, relaxation, sport, music, parties or celebrations.[79]

Moreover, there is a fine line between persuasion and manipulation, particularly when marketing to children and young people. Persuasion seeks to influence behaviour through logical reasoning or emotional appeal; however, manipulation often employs deceptive tactics that take advantage of people’s vulnerabilities – especially those of children and young people.[80] This distinction becomes blurred when digital platforms use sophisticated and advanced algorithmic content, potentially breaching ethical standards controlling the information users see.[81] Such manipulative techniques customise content based on financial, political, or other interests, delivering filtered information that may be incomplete or biased in order to advance a specific agenda – such as trying to sell a product. [82]

Most critically, personalised algorithmic recommendations often target material to children that a platform's official policy forbids – such as alcohol;^[83] and as we have seen, alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol. Current empirical research suggests that digital alcohol content remains widespread on social networking and image sharing sites, online video hosting/sharing platforms, and regular websites, including those currently most popular by children and teenagers.^[84]

All in all, digital and social media practices may undermine government policies which seek to change social norms around drinking, especially the normalisation of consumption.^[85]

Alcohol consumption and problem alcohol use among children, adolescents and young people

As previously outlined, the reason this issue is so serious is because we know that exposure to alcohol marketing/content increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol.[86] While in terms of digital marketing, we know that exposure to this type of marketing is related to starting to drink and the odds of binge drinking.[87]

When we look at the data on youth drinking, we can get an appreciation for the seriousness of the situation. Alcohol is the most commonly used substance among young people in Europe and is most commonly the first substance used by children.[88]

Alcohol is so deeply entrenched in our lives that it is easy to discount the health and social damage caused or exacerbated by drinking alcohol.[89] However, alcohol consumption among young people is a particular public health concern for government and policy makers as it carries significant health risks.[90]

“ 64% of 15-24 year-olds regularly binge drink and one in three young drinkers has an Alcohol Use Disorder”

Research from the Netherlands found indications that alcohol consumption can have a negative effect on brain development in adolescents and young adults and entails a risk of later Alcohol Use Disorder.[91] There is also extensive evidence that drinking alcohol as a child, which is the norm rather than the exception in Ireland, is more likely to lead to heavy episodic drinking and is a known risk factor for later alcohol dependency.[92]

However, while drinking among young people in Ireland declined from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, since 2015, that downward trend has reversed with consumption by 15–24-year-olds increasing from 66% in 2016 to 78% in 2025. [93] What is also clear is that when drinking is initiated it is accompanied by high levels of particularly risky and hazardous consumption - 64% regularly binge drink and one in three young drinkers has an Alcohol Use Disorder. With such high levels of hazardous and binge drinking come associated harms across a range of areas, such as physical and mental health, criminal justice, road safety, economic productivity, amongst others.

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity; it is a depressant drug with significant health implications for those who use it, and it is a significant risk factor for suicide, as recognised by the World Health Organisation.[94] Young people classified as problem or hazardous drinkers are most likely to be in the severe category for depression and more likely to have engaged in deliberate self-harm or have attempted suicide. In almost three-quarters of suicide cases among young people, there was a history of alcohol and/or drug misuse.[95]

Globally, in 2019, alcohol use ranked second for attributable disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) among adolescents and young adults aged 10-24 years.[96] Alcohol contributes to all the leading causes of death for young people: suicide, road traffic collisions, poisoning, and assaults, while long-term use is linked to seven different types of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and liver disease.[97]

Furthermore, acute alcohol related conditions tend to be more common among younger people.[98] Alcohol-related hospitalisations among young people increased by 12% between 2015 and 2018 while

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the number of discharges with a diagnosis of alcohol-related liver disease increased by 221% since 1995, to 90.8 per 100,000 persons, with the increase most pronounced among those aged 15–34 years (and those aged 65+). [99] Of all discharges with a diagnosis of alcoholic liver disease, 8.4% died while in hospital.

Harm also extends into the criminal justice system. In 2022 the Health Research Board analysed alcohol and other drug use among children and young people in Ireland. The HRB overview also examined Garda PULSE data and found that 14% of drink-driving arrests, 30% of drug-driving arrests, and 43% of controlled-drug-offences arrests were of young people aged 18-24 years. [100] While data from the Road Safety Authority indicated that one-half (49%) of young driver fatalities during 2013–2017, with a toxicology result available, were positive for alcohol. [101]

Applying the existing research on digital marketing and its likelihood to increase alcohol consumption amongst children and young people, we can say with confidence that increasing consumption, and associated harms, is a related cause. [102] [103]

How to tackle digital and social media marketing of alcohol to children and young teenagers

As policy makers, legislators and protectors of children's rights, we are already way behind industry tactics designed to ensure young people drink as soon as possible and as often as much possible. People's well-being must be prioritised over commercial profits – action must be taken. We know the alcohol industry continues to use increasingly innovative strategies, not yet covered by statutory regulatory frameworks,

to reach their audiences.[104]

This is despite digital marketing and advertising of alcohol content, which is being spread through social media and image/video sharing platforms by alcohol producers

and their brands, often being inconsistent with their own self-regulation frameworks.[105] Therefore, effective and enforced legal regulation is necessary, not self-regulation by industry funded bodies.

“ Diageo is the number 4 broadcast advertiser to children, and Heineken the number 14”

This is especially true in relation to algorithmic targeting, or recommender systems, that determine what social media users see based on personal data such as search history, past purchases, age and location given these algorithms are not covered by Ireland's Online Safety Code.[106] Additionally, more must be done to ensure minors are not exposed to alcohol advertisements/content on social media in instances where industry's self-regulatory age-affirmation systems are ineffective at preventing under-aged access.[107] While cases of self-regulatory violations by the alcohol industry, and increasingly innovative 'grey-area' advertising approaches (advertising which blurs ethical lines, using tactics that aren't illegal but can be misleading or manipulative such as clickbait, exaggerated claims, emotional exploitation (fear/envy), unclear pricing, or overly granular targeting, often exploiting ambiguities in regulations or platform policies) must be investigated as a matter of urgency.[108]

It is of note that the statutory controls on alcohol advertising from the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 which have been implemented to date refer specifically to the traditional channels including such measures as a ban on alcohol ads close to schools, on public transport and a broadcast watershed on TV and radio. These are designed to protect children from alcohol advertising. However, it is clear that the digital space greatly exceeds these modest controls which are not sufficient to protect children online.

It should also be noted that Section 13 of the Act provides for controls on content of alcohol ads, though this has not yet been implemented. This could, and should, be explicitly applied to online advertising and content as part of an overall approach to digital alcohol marketing. There is no doubt that government and policy makers are aware of the need to protect children from harmful advertising online given that they have implemented some moderate controls in relation to gambling ads on social media and on-demand platforms under the Gambling Regulation Act 2024.[109]

The influence of media on children and young people has evolved over time, moving from platforms such as television and radio to the global online world. This shift has had a wide range of reported effects on young people, both immediate and lasting. [110] Although media has traditionally been a source of entertainment and information, the rise of digital platforms has ushered in a new era of extraordinary interactivity, diverse content, and modified approaches to advertising.[111]

Furthermore, as the shift from traditional to digital marketing/content has occurred, significant monitoring requirements have not followed suit. Previously, children's exposure to broadcast advertising was monitored through reporting mechanisms such as the Statutory Report on the Children's Commercial Communications Code. Indeed, this monitoring exposed unpalatable facts about alcohol marketing – such as Diageo being the number 4 broadcast advertiser to children, and Heineken the number 14.[112] Unfortunately, there are no such monitoring mechanisms for the online space.

This document has laid out much of the national and international research on digital and social media marketing of alcohol to children and young people. While many of the techniques discussed are relevant to other products, the reason they are so dangerous when applied to alcohol is because it is no ordinary product – it is a depressant drug with significant health implications for those who use it, especially children and young people. [113] Most worrying of all, youth drinking has increased significantly, and it can be hypothesised that part of the reason for the 12% increase in youth drinking in a decade is due to the exposure of children and teenagers to online marketing.

Therefore, AAI believe a multi-departmental and multi-agency response is necessary to regulate against manipulative digital and social media marketing and to curtail the harmful effects of social media content and advertising practices. In doing this, however, it is important to acknowledge the complexities and nuances inherent in this relationship, including the positive aspects of social media. Nevertheless, through strong regulation and enforcement, as well as fostering awareness, and advocating for responsible media consumption practices, we can strive to protect young people as they navigate the online world.[114]

Recommendations

- **AAI recommends** a coherent approach to digital and social media marketing to children and teenagers, including a clearly defined goal to protect children and young people online.
- **AAI recommends** the ban of algorithmic targeting, tracking, profiling, monitoring or targeting of children and teenagers.
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