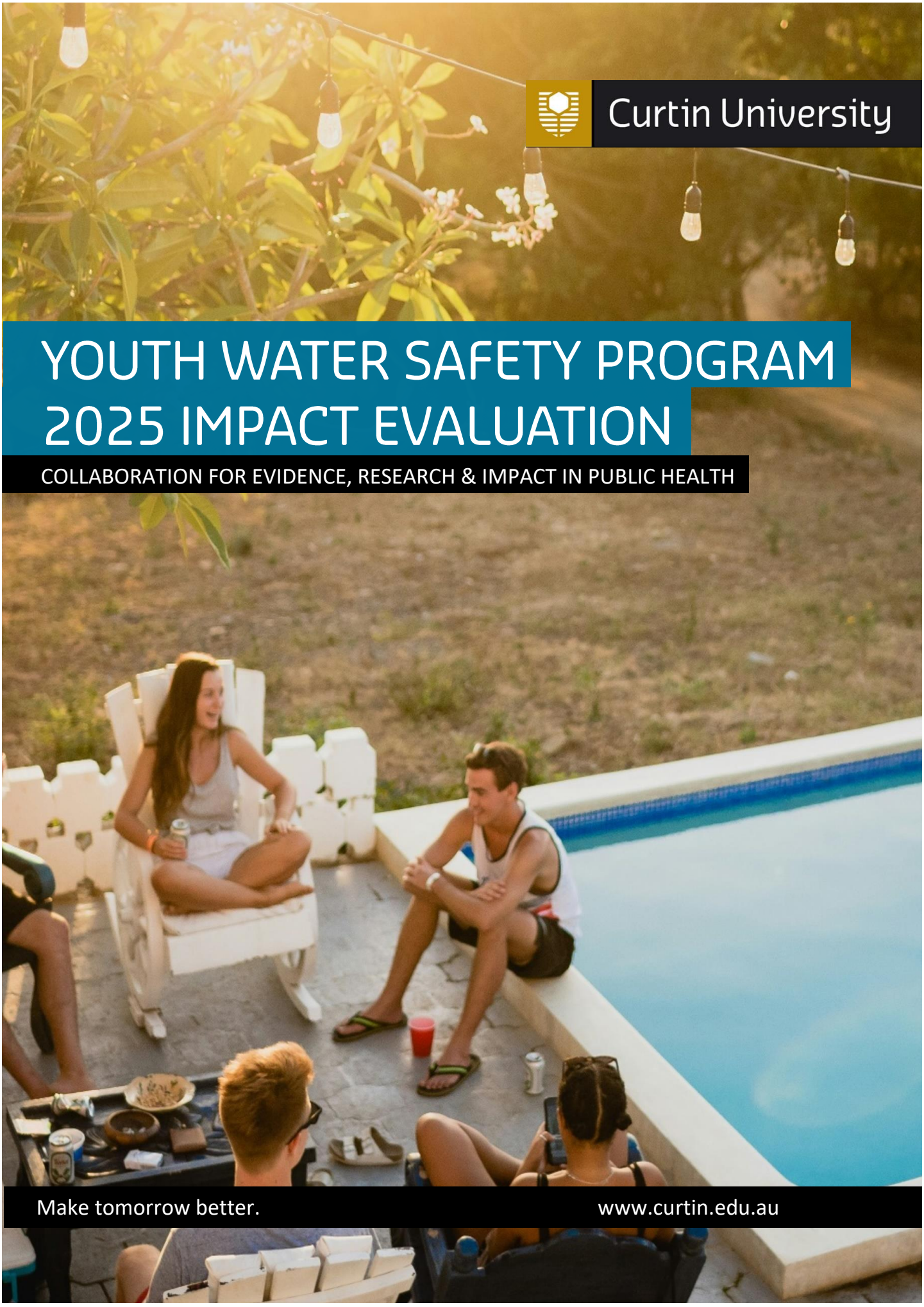

Curtin University
YOUTH WATER SAFETY PROGRAM
2025 IMPACT EVALUATION
COLLABORATION FOR EVIDENCE, RESEARCH & IMPACT IN PUBLIC HEALTH
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SUMMARY

Background

The Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia (RLSSWA) has delivered youth-focused drowning prevention programs to people aged 15-24 years since 2004. One key program strategy of the Youth Water Safety Program (YWSP) is mass-media campaigns, most recently the *'Be a Mermate'* campaign (the Campaign), which commenced in 2019. In 2024, a new iteration of the Campaign '*Splash in the face'* was launched. The campaign aims to increase knowledge and skills regarding preventing drowning and aquatic injury, including awareness about risk-taking in and around water. The Campaign uses a multi-strategy approach and incorporates video advertising on streaming services and social media. This report presents YWSP evaluation findings for 2025, with comparisons to 2024 and 2019.

Evaluation approach

The current evaluation was conducted for July 2024 – June 2025 using a population-level cross-sectional online survey. Data collected in 2019 acts as a baseline (n=516) and includes the period before the first Media Wave of the Campaign (November - December 2019). In 2024 (October – November 2024), data (n=454) were collected before the latest iteration of the Campaign, launched in the summer of 2024/25. Data collection in March – April 2025 (n=281) occurred following the first Media Wave of the latest campaign iteration *'Splash in the face'*.

Collection protocols required an equal proportion of males and females; an 80%/20% metropolitan/regional split; and a 40%/60% split of age categories (those aged 15 – 19 and those aged 20 – 24). Descriptive statistics summarised demographic factors; water-based activity; factors influencing behaviour; drowning and water safety; and campaign recall. Independent t-tests analysed alcohol consumption, sensation-seeking and peer influence. The current report summarises campaign recall and recognition, key messages, advertising diagnostics, and behavioural intent from participants in the 2025 survey. Comparisons are made with 2024 and 2019 survey results as well as by age (15 – 19 years and 20 - 24 years) and by gender (male and female); however, only comparisons of interest are reported.

Key findings

Key findings are summarised to inform RLSSWA practice, advocacy, policy and research**.** For noting limited comparisons are made with post Media Wave 1, due to insufficient data collection in 2020 (due to COVID); 2023 aligns with post Media Wave 4 data.

Demographics

Differences were observed in the demographic profile of participants over 2019, 2024, and 2025. Compared with 2024, 2025 participants were younger (more likely to be aged 15-19 years), more likely to live in the Perth metropolitan area and be studying at university, and less likely to be employed. Compared with 2019

baseline participants, 2025 participants were more likely to reside in the Perth metropolitan area and less likely to have completed Year 12, not be studying, and be employed. Participants in 2025 were less likely than 2019 participants to have been born in Australia; overseas-born participants in 2025 were more likely to have resided in Australia for a shorter period (1-5 years) than those in 2019. As in previous years, 2025 participants were typically Australian-born females, residing in the Perth metropolitan area. Most had completed Year 12, were currently studying, and employed part-time or casually. Over half were aged between 20 and 24 years.

As evidenced by findings, different recruitment strategies have afforded some diversity, with the demographic shifts observed across the evaluation period revealing opportunities and challenges. The 2025 cohort's younger age profile (15-19 years) and higher university enrolment suggest successful penetration into educational settings. However, the decreased representation of participants who have completed Year 12 and the reduced employment rates may indicate sampling bias toward more accessible populations. The increasing representation of overseas-born participants with shorter Australian residency (1-5 years) may reflect broader migration patterns to Perth, but also suggests potential gaps in cultural competency within current campaign messaging. While consistent across years, the concentration of participants in the Perth metropolitan area provides possible areas for future work to increase the campaign's reach and relevance for those less engaged in tertiary study and those in regional populations who may face different water safety risks and have varying access to safety resources. In addition, developing culturally responsive campaign materials that acknowledge diverse cultural relationships with water and swimming practices is critical. Building on the strategies used to create a more diverse sample would be beneficial in subsequent campaign evaluation.

Water-based activity

In 2025, swimming confidence was generally high, although it had decreased since 2019. The demographics for the 2025 evaluation, which included a greater proportion of those born overseas, may be one explanation for the change in perceived swim ability. The top three water-based activities: swimming in the pool, swimming at the beach, and relaxing in the water, were the same across all years. However, the order has changed slightly since 2019, with pool swimming replacing beach swimming as the most reported activity.

The shift from beach swimming to pool swimming as the most reported activity warrants careful consideration within the broader context of water safety risk. While this change may reflect seasonal variations or increased access to pool facilities, it could also indicate changing recreational patterns that may influence risk exposure. The sustained high levels of swimming confidence, despite the observed decrease since 2019, suggest that confidence may not be an accurate predictor of actual water safety competence or risk-taking behaviour providing an actionable insight to expand efforts to develop swimming competence in this age group. Qualitative research may also assist in understanding the factors contributing to decreased swimming confidence and possible interventions that address skill development and realistic risk assessment. The consistency of the top three water-based activities across all evaluation years indicates stable recreational preferences within the target demographic. This stability provides a foundation for

targeted messaging, as campaign materials can be designed around predictable activity patterns. However, the decrease in swimming confidence requires investigation to determine whether this reflects more realistic self-assessment or indicates barriers to skill development. An additional action may be to consider developing activity-specific safety messaging that acknowledges the different risk profiles of pool versus beach environments.

Factors influencing behaviour

The Campaign focuses on factors with the potential to influence behaviours, specifically alcohol consumption (1-3), sensation-seeking (2, 4, 5) and peer influences (2, 6). There was a significant decrease in alcohol consumption over time, with mean scores in 2025 lower than those in 2019, and more participants in 2025 reporting low-risk alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption did not differ by age or gender. The mean sensation-seeking score in 2025 was significantly lower than that in 2019; however, in both years, the mean score represented the scale's midpoint. Male participants reported higher sensation-seeking scores than females in 2025. Conversely, the mean peer influence score in 2025 was higher than in 2019 and 2024, although all scores again represented the approximate scale midpoint. Again, male participants reported higher peer influence scores than females.

The significant decrease in alcohol consumption represents a positive outcome that aligns with broader public health trends among young adults (7). This finding suggests that the campaign messaging contributes to behaviour change or that the target demographic is already moving toward lower-risk consumption patterns. The absence of age or gender differences in alcohol consumption indicates that this trend is consistent across demographic subgroups, which supports the universality of current messaging approaches. While remaining at the scale midpoint, the decrease in sensation-seeking scores indicates modest progress toward risk-averse attitudes. However, the gender differences observed, with males reporting higher sensation-seeking and peer influence scores, continue to highlight the need for gender-responsive intervention strategies. The increase in peer influence scores suggests that social dynamics remain critical to decision-making, potentially offsetting individual risk reduction efforts. There is an opportunity to develop gender-specific campaign components that address sensation-seeking and peer influence susceptibility, alongside peer education strategies that leverage positive social influence.

Social Norms

Most participants across all timepoints agreed that their partner and friends would approve of them undertaking protective behaviours around water. However, participants in 2025 (15.3%) were less likely to believe that their friends would approve of them *calling out their mates' risky behaviour* than 2019 participants (23.8%). In addition, 2025 participants were less likely to believe that their friends (42.0%) or partner (45.1%) would approve of them *looking out for their mates* than participants in 2019 (partner 77.9%; friend 76.1%). Female participants were also more likely than males to believe that their partner and friends would approve of them undertaking protective behaviours. There were no differences in sensation-seeking, peer influence, or social norms by age.

Changes in social norm perceptions regarding protective behaviours warrant further investigation, as it is a trend that may undermine campaign effectiveness. The decreased belief that friends would approve of calling out risky behaviour and looking out for mates suggests that while individual attitudes may have improved, the social environment may be less supportive of intervention behaviours. This disconnect between personal attitudes and perceived social approval could create barriers to translating campaign messages into protective actions. Consistent gender differences, with females more likely to perceive social approval for protective behaviours, indicate that social norm interventions may need to be tailored differently for male and female audiences. The persistence of these gender differences across evaluation periods suggests clear opportunities for tailored campaign approaches to address the social context in which water safety decisions are made. Prioritising campaign materials that explicitly model peer approval for safety-focused behaviours, particularly targeting male social networks where protective behaviour approval appears lower, is recommended.

Attitudes

Participants' attitudes around these protective behaviours were also assessed. In 2025, these behaviours were seen as less beneficial than in 2019. Participants in 2025 considered *calling out your mates' risky behaviour* more pleasant (16.1%) than those in 2019 (11.3%); however, *looking out for your mates* was considered less pleasant in 2025 (33.6%) compared with 2019 (45.3%). Female participants (42.5%) were more likely than males (27.3%) to consider *calling out your mates' risky behaviour* beneficial. At the same time, those in the older age group (20 – 24 years) (64.1%) were more likely than younger participants (50.8%) to consider *looking out for your mates* pleasant.

The mixed findings regarding attitudes toward protective behaviours present a campaign challenge to ensure messages enhance perceived benefits while maintaining or improving perceived pleasantness. The improved perception of calling out risky behaviour as more pleasant suggests that some aspects of campaign messaging are successfully shifting attitudes. However, the decrease in perceived benefits of protective behaviours should be monitored, as benefit perception is often a strong predictor of behaviour adoption. The age-related differences in finding protective behaviours pleasant indicate that developmental considerations may be important in campaign design. The finding that older participants find looking out for mates more pleasant may reflect greater maturity or life experience, suggesting that messaging strategies should acknowledge developmental differences in attitude formation (2). Ensuring that campaign messaging emphasises concrete, relevant benefits of protective behaviours that resonate with the target demographic's immediate concerns and values is a valuable approach. In addition, age-appropriate messaging would be beneficial to acknowledge developmental differences in risk perception and social responsibility.

Knowledge

Knowledge was generally high across 2024 and 2025, and consistent with 2019. Participants were particularly likely to correctly answer questions around diving safety (scores above 85% for both time points) and deciding when a location is safe to swim (scores above 70% for both time points). More

participants in 2025 correctly identified the possible effects of drinking alcohol around water compared with 2024.

The consistently high knowledge scores across evaluation periods indicate that information-based approaches effectively reach the target audience. Diving safety knowledge suggests that specific, tangible safety information has been successfully communicated and retained. Improving knowledge about alcohol effects around water demonstrates that targeted educational messaging can achieve measurable knowledge gains. However, the high knowledge levels coupled with continued risk behaviours reinforce the need for comprehensive health promotion approaches that acknowledge that knowledge alone is insufficient for behavioural change (8). This knowledge-behaviour gap indicates an opportunity for campaign strategies to move beyond information provision to address the contextual and social factors that influence decision-making in real-world situations.

Perception of Risk

Two risk perception indicators were explored in 2024 and 2025: seriousness of effects and peer influence. Participants in 2025 rated the seriousness of the effects of drinking alcohol around water (M=5.7) as significantly lower than those in 2024 (M=6.1). There was also a wider variability in scores in 2025. Across both 2024 and 2025, the influence of peers on drinking alcohol around water was rated as low (2025 m=3.2; 2024 M=3.0). Differences by gender were observed, with females rating the seriousness of effects as higher than males, and males rating the influence of their peers as higher than females. There were no differences by age.

The decreased perception of alcohol-related risk seriousness is concerning, given the established relationship between alcohol consumption and drowning incidents. This finding may reflect a broader demographic with more diverse perspectives towards alcohol consumption. The increased variability in risk perception scores indicates that the target population may be becoming more polarised in their risk assessments. The gender differences in risk perception, with females rating effects as more serious and males rating peer influence as higher, reinforce the need for gender-responsive approaches. The low rating of peer influence on alcohol consumption around water may indicate either successful social norm changes or unrealistic self-assessment of social susceptibility. Risk communication strategies that emphasise the severity and probability of alcohol-related water incidents using concrete, relatable scenarios may have utility, along with approaches that account for gender differences in risk perception and peer influence susceptibility.

Behaviour

The most frequently reported risk behaviour across all years was swimming alone. Most participants reported never diving into an unknown depth, swimming in a prohibited area, swimming after consuming alcohol or drugs, or diving into shallow water. However, participants in 2025 were more likely to report always swimming after consuming alcohol or drugs, and never diving into shallow water, and less likely to report always swimming in a prohibited area than participants in 2024. Younger participants (aged 15-19

years) were more likely to report never swimming after consuming alcohol or drugs than older participants. At the same time, males were more likely to report always diving into shallow water than females.

In 2025, the most frequently reported risk behaviour that participants had seen their friends undertake was not wearing a lifejacket, which had decreased significantly from 22.5% in 2019 to 17.5% in 2025. Friends were also less likely to always ignore safety behaviour, encourage others to take risks, dive headfirst into water, and swim in prohibited areas, and more likely to never use alcohol and/or drugs during water-based activity in 2025 compared with 2019. Differences were also observed in 2025 by age and gender. Younger participants were more likely than older participants to report friends never diving headfirst into water, swimming in prohibited areas, or using alcohol and/or drugs during water-based activity. Females were less likely to report that their friends never dived headfirst into water and more likely to report their friends never swum in prohibited areas.

The behavioural findings present a mixed picture of campaign impact. The increase in participants reporting always swimming after consuming alcohol or drugs is concerning (though numbers remain small) and suggests that risk behaviours may be increasing. However, the positive changes in diving behaviour and swimming in prohibited areas indicate that some safety messages are translating into behavioural change. The peer behaviour observations provide insight into the social context of risk-taking. The decrease in observed risky peer behaviours, particularly regarding alcohol and drug use during water activities, suggests positive social norm changes within peer groups. However, the age and gender differences in peer behaviour observations indicate that social dynamics vary significantly across demographic subgroups. There is a need to continue a focus on alcohol and other drugs around water. Peer-based intervention programs that leverage the observed positive changes in social norms while addressing persistent risk behaviours could be considered.

Media Campaign

Recall, recognition and awareness

Over one-third recalled any advertisement about water safety and young people. Unprompted recall of the '*Be a Mermate*' campaign increased from 2024 (18.9%) to 2025 (32.6%). In 2025, of those who remembered and described a water safety advertisement, around 40% recalled '*Splash in the face'*, a pool or river advertisement, or mentioned the '*Be a Mermate'* campaign by name. Around 1 in 5 still recalled the '*Don't Drink and Drown'* campaign (not featured since 2019), while eight participants mentioned the '*Don't Drink and Dive'* campaign sponsored by alcohol brand Malibu. Around 18% of participants were aware of the '*Be a Mermate*' campaign, consistent with the 2023 evaluation (17.3%) but slightly lower than 2021 (20.4%).

The sustained recall and recognition levels across evaluation periods indicate that the campaign maintains reasonable visibility within the target audience. The diversity of advertisement recall, including competing campaigns, demonstrates the complex media environment in which water safety messages must compete. The awareness of industry-sponsored campaigns presents a significant challenge, as commercial messaging may undermine public health objectives. The multi-channel approach appears to be achieving reach across different media platforms, including increasing social media tile recognition. There is a critical need to

strengthen brand differentiation to distinguish public health messaging from industry-sponsored campaigns. Enhanced social media strategies may be beneficial to improve recognition and engagement, while maintaining the multi-channel approach that appears to be achieving broad reach.

Main Messages and Campaign Diagnostics

Participants generally agreed that the messages were well-conveyed, a finding consistent with previous evaluations. The most positive response was for the message '*I should speak up if my mates are about to or are participating in risky behaviour around water*'. Messages were also generally well-received. More than 70% of participants agreed that the advertisement grabbed their attention, was easy to understand, was relevant, and made them think about the issue of water safety. However, less than half agreed that they would talk about the advertisement with their friends and that the advertisement told them something new (slightly lower than the 2023 findings). Most identified Royal Life Saving Australia or RLSSWA when asked about who developed the advertisement. Most had seen the advertisement on television or streaming services, with over one-third also viewing the advertisement on social media (Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube). Campaign social media tiles were recognised by 13.6% of participants, an increase from previous recognition levels (10.5%). Participants generally agreed that the social media tiles conveyed the Campaign messages well. This is a positive finding for a new media execution.

Recall of advertisements via social media aligns with the evidence that young people use different platforms for different messages and highlights the need to use the channels in ways young adults already use them (9). However, using social media tiles does not yet demonstrate high recall, reinforcing the importance of a multi-channel distribution strategy. While technically incorrect, the identification of government as a campaign developer may enhance message credibility and suggest that participants perceive official endorsement of the safety messaging, a positive leverage point.

Action and Intention

When asked about their behavioural intentions following the advertisement, more than two-thirds of the participants intended to call out their mates' risky behaviour, and more than half intended to: pay more attention to their mates' behaviour, pay more attention to their own behaviour, and change their own behaviour. Behavioural intentions, however, generally trended downwards from previous reporting periods across most statements. Participant intentions to change their own behaviour (2025 55.9%, 2023 52.8%) and to drink no alcohol (2025 45.8%, 2023 34.8%), were exceptions, pleasingly and importantly trending upward from 2023.

The behavioural intentions reported by participants continue to broadly represent a positive outcome that suggests campaign messaging motivates intended behaviour change. The specific intentions to call out risky behaviour and pay attention to safety represent tangible actions that could contribute to drowning prevention. However, the relationship between stated intentions and actual behaviour implementation requires ongoing monitoring, given broadly downward trends. This provides a foundation for continued campaign development, though strategies to support intention-to-behaviour translation remain critical.

Follow-up interventions that reinforce initial intentions and provide practical guidance for implementing protective behaviours in social situations may be worth consideration.

Youth Water Safety Program

Similar proportions of participants had heard of the '*Be a Mermate'* in 2025 (27.8%) and 2024 (25.4%), slightly higher than findings in 2023 (24.7%) and 2021 (23.6%). One-third of participants in 2025 recognised the logo when prompted (up from around one in five participants in 2023 and 2021). Most participants reported seeing the logo at Leavers' events and on Instagram.

The stable awareness levels of *'Be a Mermate'* suggest consistent program visibility, with potential for improvement across the life of the new campaign. Program visibility at Leavers' events indicates successful integration into relevant social contexts, though broader program promotion may be needed to achieve population-level impact beyond school-leavers.

Reflections

Findings reveal a complex pattern of campaign impact that includes positive outcomes and opportunities for refinement and future development. Positively, participants have reported decreased alcohol consumption over time, reflecting broader trends for young people. The evaluation demonstrates that the *'Be a Mermate'* campaign continues to achieve meaningful reach and engagement within its target audience. The sustained message resonance in the context of decreased alcohol consumption represents significant achievements that provide a foundation for continued campaign development.

Demographic shifts observed across evaluation periods highlight the importance of adaptive strategies that can respond to changing population characteristics. We recommended the need to broaden the socio-demographic composition of the sample and continue to invest in recruitment processes to include those from culturally diverse backgrounds and regional locations. Findings reflect mixed progress regarding the Campaign's influence on attitudes, norms and sensation-seeking, indicating that current approaches require enhancement and refinement.

Persistent differences across multiple measures indicate that gender-responsive approaches are essential for achieving population-level impact. The knowledge-behaviour gap suggests that future campaign development should prioritise implementation support over and above information provision. The high knowledge levels indicate that the target audience understands water safety principles, but translating this knowledge into consistent protective behaviour requires addressing social, contextual, and individual barriers to behavioural change. The evaluation highlights areas for further examination in some cases, specifically gender, and a focus on peers, both for the program and Campaign strategies. Concerningly, some participants were aware of the industry-sponsored '*Don't Drink and Dive'* campaign, which has the potential to dilute the existing brand awareness and increase alcohol industry influence. Sophisticated alcohol advertising widely promotes drinking in and around the water, making it difficult for drowning prevention messages to compete. Future research could build on existing work around the aquatic alcogenic environment.

Findings suggest that the Campaign materials continue to resonate across the target audience as a function of sustained messaging. This is a positive outcome for the Campaign and drowning prevention efforts broadly. Future success will require strategic evolution of campaign approaches to address the changing demographic, social, and behavioural context in which water safety decisions are made.

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