

Research Summary:

Young people and alcohol marketing on social media

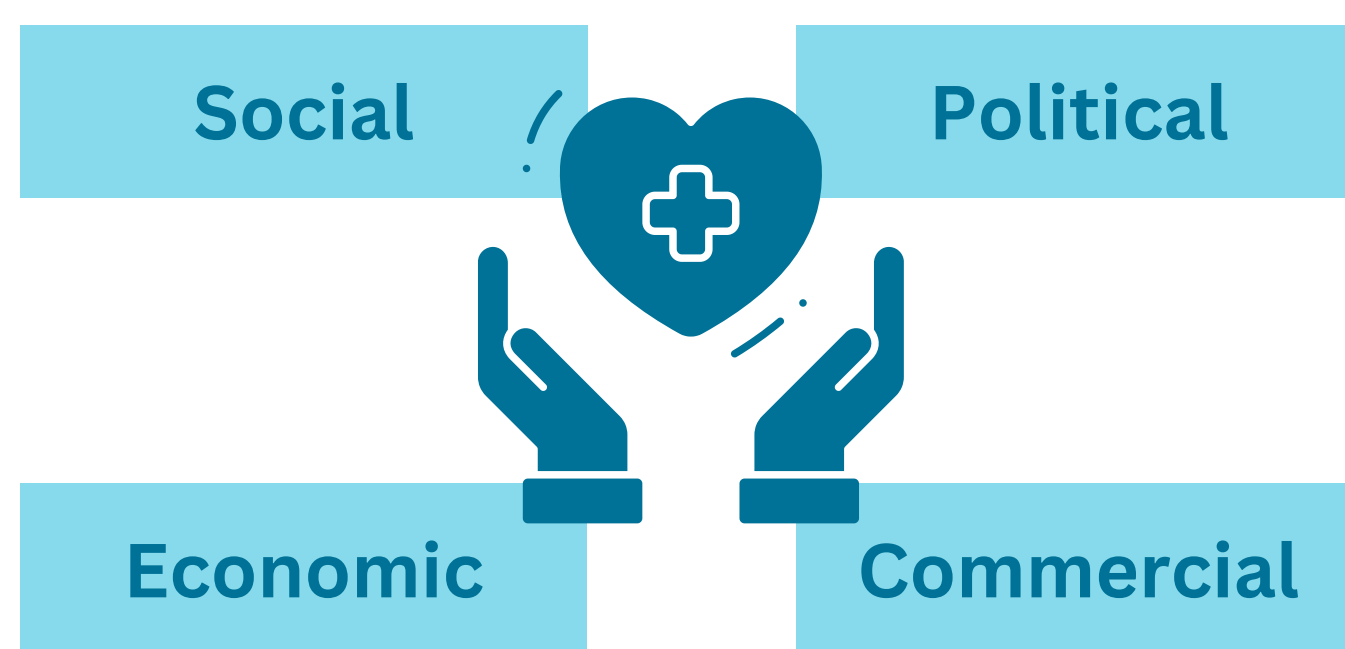


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The issue

Public health research is increasingly focused on how commercial entities influence health behaviours and outcomes. This concept, termed the **commercial determinants of health** (CDoH), recognises that health isn't just about individual choices but is shaped by broader systems - social, political, economic and commercial factors. The CDoH approach suggests that commercial entities, like the alcohol industry, often promote harmful behaviours, yet health problems are framed as the responsibility of individuals, neglecting the wider social, political, economic and commercial influences on behaviour.

Determinants of health and behaviour



The role of the alcohol industry

The alcohol industry has significant power in shaping public health policies, especially in Australia. Industry actors influence the narrative around alcohol use, promoting the idea that only a small minority misuse alcohol, while the majority drink "responsibly." This narrative aligns with corporate interests, normalising alcohol consumption while shifting responsibility away from broader societal influences.

Alcohol marketing: Normalising risk

Alcohol marketing is a key driver of alcohol consumption, with various forms of promotion including social media, sports sponsorships, and giveaways. Research shows that exposure to alcohol marketing, especially among young people, increases the likelihood of harmful drinking practices, contributing to a culture where alcohol is perceived as fun and harm-free.

The alcohol industry spends over **\$100 million** annually in Australia on marketing

Social media and alcohol marketing

Social media has become a dominant platform for alcohol marketing, allowing brands to directly target young consumers. Instagram, in particular, is popular among young adults and enables alcohol companies to use influencer marketing and user-generated content, making it hard to distinguish between paid promotions and organic posts. This subtlety reinforces the normalisation of alcohol use, particularly in contexts like beaches and aquatic activities, where alcohol consumption is often portrayed as part of an ideal lifestyle.



Study focus: Alcohol marketing, aquatic environments and Instagram

This research analysed alcohol marketing strategies on Instagram, focusing on five popular Australian brands - Gage Roads Brewing, Corona, Pirate Life Brewing, Somersby, and Smirnoff. The 20 most recent posts from each of the five Instagram pages were extracted, resulting in a total of 176 images to be analysed along with their captions. An established coding framework from the WAVE environmental audit was used to analyse each of the images. The aim was to understand how these brands use aquatic settings and activities in their social media content to promote alcohol, and what marketing elements they employ to engage their audience, particularly young people.

Key findings: Aquatic settings and targeting young audiences

The study found that over 20% of the Instagram posts analysed featured aquatic environments, with beaches and oceans being common backdrops. Corona, for instance, frequently used beach settings, while Gage Roads focused on activities like surfing. The posts also commonly depicted young people under 25, particularly in Smirnoff's content, raising concerns about targeting at-risk age groups.



Common themes

Mateship

Fun

Lifestyle

Marketing strategies

Hashtags

Emojis

Collaborations

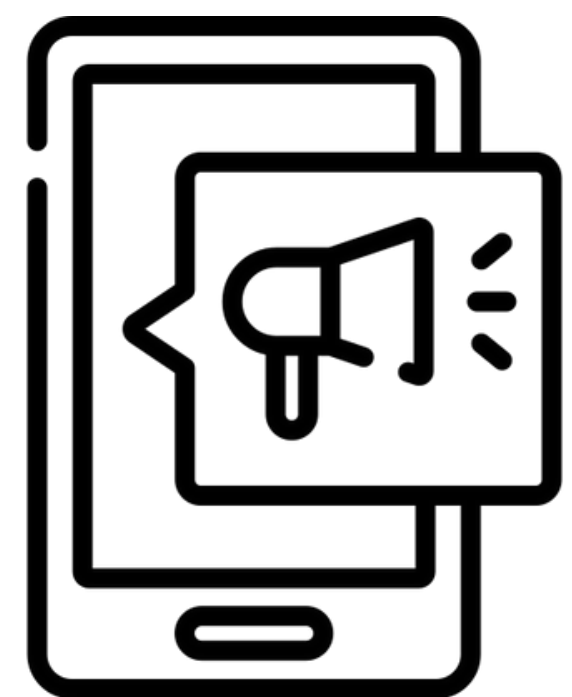
The content often used these themes to make alcohol consumption seem integral to social and leisure activities, reinforcing the alcoholic environment - where external factors promote alcohol use. The sophisticated marketing strategies used also target and appeal to younger demographics.

Regulatory gaps: Ineffectiveness of self-regulation

Despite the existence of the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), the study found that alcohol brands regularly circumvent regulations, particularly on social media. Age restrictions were inconsistently applied, and the content frequently blurred the lines between organic posts and paid promotions. This highlights the limitations of self-regulation in effectively controlling alcohol advertising, especially in digital spaces.

Conclusion: Implications for public health

Alcohol marketing is pervasive on social media and commonly features aquatic environments. These factors contribute to what has been termed an aquatic alcogenic environment which normalises alcohol use in and around waterways, particularly among young people, creating risks for drowning. Current regulatory frameworks are inadequate in addressing the challenges posed by digital advertising, and stronger measures are needed to protect at-risk populations from the influence of alcohol marketing.



Policymakers must enforce stricter regulations on alcohol marketing, especially on social media platforms. Reforms should address the shortcomings of self-regulation, ensuring that advertising targeting young people and high-risk activities is better controlled. Additionally, public health campaigns should raise awareness of the subtle marketing techniques used by alcohol brands, such as influencer marketing and user-generated content, to empower consumers and reduce alcohol-related harms.

Alcogenic environments exist not only in the physical settings in which people work and play, but are also prevalent in the online digital spaces in which people exist. A robust regulatory framework for alcohol advertising must therefore address the online alcogenic environment and its associated health risks to create a healthier and more supportive digital landscape for young people and all consumers of social media.

