# Our kids aren’t legally allowed to drink. Why are they being targeted with alcohol ads?

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Our children are being watched from the moment they enter the online world.

By the time an Australian child reaches their 13th birthday, digital advertisers will have collected a staggering 72 million datapoints on them.

They know what these kids like and don’t like, and what their greatest fears are. These psychological insights are then used to target them with adverts for harmful products like alcohol, at a time when they may already be feeling vulnerable.

Children and young people should be able to experience the benefits that come with engaging in the online world, without being commercially cyberstalked with aggressive and potentially dangerous marketing.

This week, I will join other community organisations, policymakers, academics and young people in attending the Social Media Summit.

The summit – a joint venture of the New South Wales and South Australian governments – will look at a range of ways social media impacts positively and negatively on children and young people, including wellbeing, online safety, and its role in perpetuating online hate and extremism. It will also investigate ways governments can best support their digital wellbeing.

It is impossible to examine the potential dangers of social media for young Australians without addressing the role commercial actors play in creating unsafe online environments and deliberately targeting them with marketing for harmful and addictive products.

Social media corporations like Meta [have been shown to gather data for psychological insights on Australian children](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/digital/facebook-targets-insecure-young-people-to-sell-ads/news-story/a89949ad016eee7d7a61c3c30c909fa6), including monitoring kids in real time to pinpoint when they feel overwhelmed and anxious.

When we explore further, we see that [social media platforms tag Australian children and young people with advertising interests for harmful and addictive products like alcohol](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/citizen-voices-against-harmful-marketing) – tags that identify them as interested in ‘beer’, ‘vodka’ and ‘liquor stores’.

A recent Australian study showed [a teenager being targeted with as many as 14 alcohol ads over a typical two-hour period online](https://fare.org.au/new-research-shows-kids-are-targeted-with-alcohol-gambling-and-junk-food-ads-online/).

This is all deeply concerning, as the evidence clearly shows that when kids see alcohol advertising, they are more likely to start drinking at younger ages and to go on to drink at high-risk levels later in life.

Banning children from accessing social media – a proposal currently being considered in Australia – may remove them from harmful online environments but does not make these online spaces safer for when they will be able to access social media.

We must ensure our policy response considers the guardrails required to make these online environments safer.

This would include addressing the practices of social media corporations as well as commercial companies that use their platforms.

In addition to putting this issue on the Social Media Summit agenda, policy makers have a number of opportunities to clean up this online predatory minefield for kids.

The Australian government is currently reviewing The Privacy Act and the Online Safety Act, and we would like to see amendments made to the legislation to ensure children’s information is not collected, used or disclosed for commercial purposes.

We also need to see an end to alcohol ads being shown alongside children’s content, and greater transparency from companies on how their algorithms are being used to predict and recommend the types of ads young people are served.

It would be an important step toward holding the companies accountable for their predatory behaviour, and would help foster the creation of safer online spaces.

Our children exist in a modern world with ever evolving digital technology that can either be a force for good or a cause of great harm. Our laws must adapt to keep up with the rapid pace of change and protect young people online.