# Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Everyone should be able to enjoy the benefits of using digital technologies to work, learn and play. This can happen when we have safe digital environments that support people’s health and wellbeing. However, when it comes to harmful and addictive products like alcohol, social media platforms have designed marketing systems geared toward creating harm.

At present, social media platforms have designed marketing systems that target people’s characteristics, interests and behaviours. Companies selling harmful and addictive products like alcohol access these sophisticated digital systems to aggressively market products that hurt people’s health and wellbeing.

Alcohol use causes significant harm to Australian society. One Australian dies every 90 minutes and another is hospitalised every three and a half minutes because of alcohol. Alcohol-induced deaths are at the highest reported rate in 10 years and deaths from alcohol-related injuries have more than doubled over the past 10 years. Alcohol use exacerbates mental health conditions, and causes broader harm to the community, with almost half of all Australians having been harmed from another person’s alcohol use. Among the harmful impacts of alcohol is its role as a trigger and exacerbating factor in family violence, with 23-65 per cent of police reported family violence incidents in Australia are estimated to involve alcohol.

By design, people who purchase harmful and addictive products like alcohol the most are also targeted by social media marketing models the most. Extensive data collection allows social media platforms to develop detailed psychometric profiles that are combined with detailed accounts of people’s browsing behaviour. These insights are used to tailor marketing activities, including content and messaging, towards an individual’s specific susceptibilities. In the case of alcohol marketing, this ability to prey on people’s susceptibilities is particularly harmful because it can disproportionately target people experiencing alcohol use disorders and dependence.

The hidden and ephemeral nature of digital marketing also means that companies selling harmful and addictive products can target their digital marketing to children and young people out of sight. Children’s exposure to alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that they will start drinking alcohol earlier and go on to drink at high-risk levels.

In these ways, current social media platforms are creating a harmful online environment that actively undermines people’s health and wellbeing, particularly children and people most at risk of harm from alcohol, such as people experiencing or recovering from addiction.

A regulatory approach addressing the systemic issues with how social media platform advertising models are designed and the dissemination and targeting of harmful digital marketing on social media platforms is needed to ensure people are protected from harms driven by social media platforms. People’s wellbeing must be prioritised over commercial profits from social media platforms’ marketing practices.

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