# What does the Privacy Act have to do with alcohol?

Right now, there is an important national conversation about information privacy, and the impact of social media on children and young people.

Nationally, the protection of our personal information is mainly governed by the *Privacy Act 1988*.

But with the explosion of new technologies, digital platforms, and hyper targeted marketing practices in recent years, our legal and policy frameworks aren’t cutting the mustard.

**In fact, there haven’t been any meaningful privacy reforms since the launch of the internet.**

The online world is a place where we can learn, connect and work, and this is why it’s important that it’s safe for everyone.

But it’s also a place where predatory marketing practices are rife, which is particularly concerning when it comes to how this can impact children, young people and people who are most at risk of harm.

**And when it comes to harmful products like alcohol and gambling  – the companies behind them are taking every opportunity to exploit the gaping holes in the current system.**

Take alcohol for example - children and young people under 18 can’t legally buy it – for very good reasons.

But despite this, alcohol companies and digital platforms can mine their digital data and aggressively target them with online marketing.

A study by [**Reset Australia**](https://au.reset.tech/uploads/resettechaustralia_profiling-children-for-advertising-1.pdf) found that Facebook uses data it collects about children and young people aged between 13 and 17 years to tag them as interested in smoking, gambling, alcohol and extreme weight loss.

[Another study](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/resources/resource-download/citizen-voices-against-harmful-marketing) with Australian young people aged 16-25 years old found that an average of 194 advertisers uploaded data about young people to the Meta marketing algorithm – including alcohol companies uploading data on children.

Leaked internal Meta documents also reveal it gathered psychological insights on more than two million kids in Australia and New Zealand, monitoring them in real-time to pinpoint when they feel anxious and overwhelmed.

**All these interests and insights go into a data profile which is sold to companies, including those that profit from making harmful and addictive products.**

As these children and young people move through life, by design – the people most likely to see targeted advertising for alcohol and other harmful products will be the people who are most at risk.

The more they are sold alcohol online, the more they will be targeted.

And if they search for support services to get help, they can be tagged as interested in alcohol and targeted with even more ads.

**We know**[**the earlier children are exposed to alcohol marketing, the more likely they are to start drinking**](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27565582/)**at a younger age and go on to drink at higher-risk levels later in life.**

This is why measures to help to protect children and young people are so important.

Given that by the time a child reaches their mid-teens, companies will have collected a staggering **72 million data points** on them, it’s clear we have a perfect storm brewing.

**Right now the Federal Government is reviewing the Privacy Act, so there’s an opportunity to ensure we are all better protected online.**

So what can the Federal Government do that will help?

First, we need amendments that **ensure children’s information is not collected, used or disclosed for commercial purposes**.

The best way to protect children is to also make a safe system for everyone, by ensuring no-one’s information is collected or shared by these companies unless they freely opt-in for this.

This would also help protect people most at risk of alcohol harms.

But while privacy reforms can address some of the most egregious data-driven marketing, it won’t tackle contextual marketing – like harmful product ads being shown beside children’s content or in the games they play, or alcohol ads alongside information for people seeking anxiety or depression support.

We need greater transparency.

Our laws have not kept pace with advances in digital technology and we’re playing catch up.

Now is the time to put the health and wellbeing of children, young people and people who are most at risk of harm above corporate profits.