

Alcohol advertisers may be using social media to encourage parents to drink during COVID-19

TO THE EDITOR: Australia's social distancing policies to contain the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), have had social consequences. Social distancing and school disruptions have increased parental responsibilities. There has also been an increased opportunity

for parents to use alcohol to cope with increased stress.¹

Parents, especially mothers, have taken to social media to share "memes" about needing a drink to survive staying at home (Box). These posts are mostly shared with the aim of creating an online environment for peer support and stress relief, but they risk normalising the use of alcohol as a coping strategy and promoting the false belief that alcohol is good for mental health.² Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that may relieve stress in the short term, but regular drinking increases psychological distress and the risk of alcohol-related harm.³

quasi-regulatory system that is activated by consumer complaints and lacks systematic independent monitoring.⁷ Further, regulations do not prevent certain social media platforms from being used by alcohol brands to post advertisements and engage with consumers.⁸

In light of the alcohol industry's opportunistic advertising through social media, it is questionable how well Australia's regulatory system protects parents and other targeted populations at risk from exposure to constant encouragements to drink during these challenging times.

Janni Leung^{1,2} 
 Jason Connor²
 Leanne Hides^{1,2}
 Wayne D Hall^{2,3}

¹ University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD.

² Centre for Youth Substance Abuse Research, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD.

³ National Addiction Centre, Kings College London, London, UK.

j.leung1@uq.edu.au

Acknowledgements: Janni Leung is supported by the University of Queensland Development Fellowship. Leanne Hides is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council Senior Research Fellowship. The Centre for Youth Substance Abuse Research and the Lives Lived Well Group are supported by Commonwealth funding from the Australian Government provided under the Drug and Alcohol Program. The funding bodies had no role in the study design, collection, analysis or interpretation of the data, writing the manuscript, or the decision to submit it for publication. We thank Sarah Yeates for her assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures. ■

doi: [10.5694/mja2.50707](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.50707)

© 2020 AMPCo Pty Ltd

References are available online.

Examples of parental drinking-related memes during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown



A review of recent advertising complaints indicated that some alcohol advertisers have been quick to capitalise on COVID-19.⁴ An investigation of a social media account found an average of one alcohol advertisement every 35 seconds, with themes of easy access without leaving home (58%), buy more (35%), drink during COVID-19 (24%), and drink to cope (16%).⁵ Australia has a regulation system for alcohol advertising, which most people mistakenly believe is government-funded.⁶ It is in fact an industry-funded

- 1 Alcohol and Drug Foundation. The COVID-19 parenting juggle: home schooling, alcohol, and stress management. *Alcohol and Drug Foundation Insights* (Melbourne) 2020; 19 May. <https://adf.org.au/insights/covid-19-parenting-juggle/> (viewed May 2020).
- 2 Cassidy T. Coronavirus-themed alcohol marketing sparks calls for regulators to raise the bar. *ABC News* 2020; 18 Apr. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-16/coronavirus-themed-alcohol-marketing-sparks-call-for-ban/12151912> (viewed May 2020).
- 3 Connor JP, Haber PS, Hall WD. Alcohol use disorders. *Lancet* 2016; 387: 988–998.
- 4 Lavarch M, Richards D, Mattick R. The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code Scheme Adjudication Panel determination No. 35/20. Stirling: ABAC, 2020. <http://www.abac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/35-20-Determination-Latitude-34-Wine-Company-29-April-2020.pdf> (viewed May 2020).
- 5 Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, Cancer Council Western Australia. An alcohol ad every 35 seconds. A snapshot of how the alcohol industry is using a global pandemic as a marketing opportunity. <http://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020-05-08-CCWA-FARE-An-alcohol-ad-every-35-seconds-A-snapshot-final.pdf> (viewed May 2020).
- 6 Brennan E, Wakefield MA, Durkin SJ, et al. Public awareness and misunderstanding about DrinkWise Australia: a cross-sectional survey of Australian adults. *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2017; 41: 352–357.
- 7 Reeve B. Regulation of alcohol advertising in Australia: does the AABAC Scheme adequately protect young people from marketing of alcoholic beverages? *QUT Law Review* 2018; 18: 96–123.
- 8 Brodmerkel S, Carah N. Alcohol brands on Facebook: the challenges of regulating brands on social media. *J Public Aff* 2013; 13: 272–281. ■