

An alcohol ad every 35 seconds.

A snapshot of how the alcohol industry is using a global pandemic as a marketing opportunity.



May 2020

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Key points

- In one hour on a Friday night, 107 sponsored alcohol advertisements were displayed on a personal Facebook and Instagram account. This equates to approximately one alcohol advertisement every 35 seconds.
- Six marketing message categories were identified: get easy access to alcohol without leaving your home (58%), save money (55%), buy more (35%), drink alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic (24%), use alcohol to cope, 'survive', or feel better (16%), and choose 'healthier' alcohol products (14%).
- Nearly three-quarters of advertisements (71%) explicitly or implicitly referenced the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Two-thirds (66%) of the alcohol advertisements had a 'Shop now' or 'Get offer' button linking directly to their online store.
- The marketing messages being used to promote alcohol during COVID-19 are particularly concerning as they promote known risk factors for harmful drinking, including buying more, drinking to cope, drinking daily and drinking at home or alone in the home.

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Pandemics, alcohol harm, and digital marketing

In 'normal' times, the home is where the majority of alcohol is consumed, with 80% of alcohol sold for take-away use.¹ Harms related to drinking alcohol in the home, including family violence, injury, suicide and child neglect,^{2,3,4} are likely to be exacerbated during a pandemic in which people are isolated and feeling heightened stress and anxiety.

Evidence from past pandemics indicates that quarantined people experience stress, confusion and anger,⁵ which can lead to higher rates of alcohol use and dependency.⁶ Behaviours adopted during this period, such as increases in daily drinking or drinking alone, may be sustained after the pandemic is over, which can contribute to increased alcohol dependence and long term chronic health conditions including alcohol-related cancer and diabetes.

There have been reports of spikes in spending on alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic. CommBank reported a 34% increase in alcohol sales in the last week of March compared to the same time a year earlier.⁷ Recent YouGov Galaxy Polling by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education found one in five households in Australia reported purchasing more alcohol.⁸ Of these people, 70% reported drinking more alcohol and almost one in three reported being concerned about their own drinking or the drinking of someone in their home.

With the emergence of targeted marketing through digital platforms, businesses can now promote products and discounts with immediate click-through for purchase. Evidence shows that online advertisements increase alcohol consumption and intentions to purchase alcohol.⁹ This is of concern in the context of a pandemic where people are spending more time in the home and are more frequently using their mobile devices.

This report provides a snapshot of the quantity of alcohol marketing on social media on a Friday night during COVID-19 isolation measures in Australia, and how alcohol brands and liquor retailers are marketing their products.

How is the industry marketing alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic?

On the evening of Friday 17 April 2020, sponsored alcohol marketing was monitored on a personal Facebook and Instagram account. Each alcohol advertisement identified was noted and a screenshot taken.

Over a one hour period 107 alcohol advertisements were displayed. This equates to approximately one alcohol ad every 35 seconds. All 107 advertisements were sponsored content that appeared on Facebook and Instagram newsfeeds and Instagram stories.

The content of the sponsored alcohol advertisements was reviewed and 29 themes were identified. The themes were then grouped into categories that summarise the key messages being promoted by alcohol companies.

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Six categories were identified in the 107 sponsored alcohol advertisements, with multiple messages identified in some advertisements:

- Get easy access to alcohol without leaving your home (58% of advertisements)
- Save money (55% of advertisements)
- Buy more (35% of advertisements)
- Drink alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic (24% of advertisements)
- Use alcohol to cope, 'survive', or feel better (16% of advertisements)
- Choose 'healthier' alcohol products (14% of advertisements)

Of the 107 sponsored alcohol advertisements, 76 (71%) explicitly or implicitly referenced the COVID-19 pandemic and 71 (66%) had a 'Shop now' or 'Get offer' button linking directly to an online store.

Why is this a problem?

At a time when Australians are facing isolation, anxiety, and economic uncertainty, we should not be bombarded with constant messages encouraging us to drink. The key marketing messages identified in this sample of alcohol advertisements are particularly concerning as they promote known risk factors for harmful drinking, including buying more, drinking to cope, drinking daily and drinking at home or alone in the home. Additionally, call to action buttons including 'Shop now' and 'Get offer' can lead to impulse purchases.¹⁰

Marketing focused on take-away alcohol and alcohol home delivery could increase the risk of alcohol harm in the home. Online sales and delivery of alcohol operate in a highly unregulated environment compared to traditional 'bricks and mortar' stores,¹¹ thereby increasing risk of harm. Home delivery of alcohol has known risks, including supply of alcohol to people who are intoxicated or underage.^{12,13}

The emphasis on buying large quantities of alcohol through bulk purchase promotions and the use of discounts and other price-based promotions could also lead to increased alcohol use during the pandemic. There is clear evidence that alcohol use increases as prices decrease.¹⁴ Point of sale promotions involving price discounts have been found to be effective in encouraging the purchase of more alcohol among young people.¹⁵

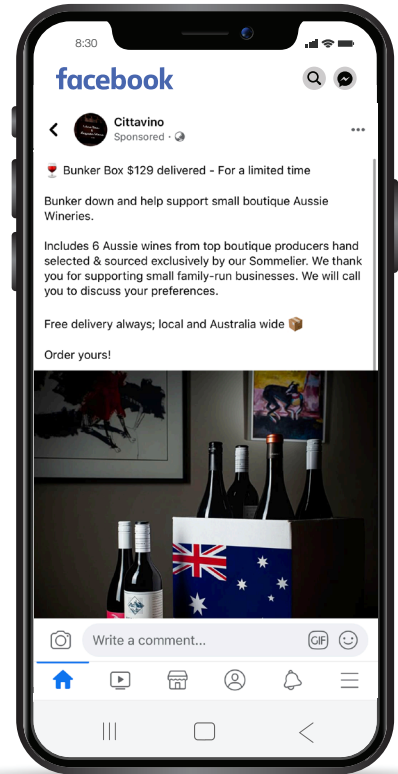
Encouraging alcohol use during times of stress and anxiety is a public health concern, particularly when alcohol is being promoted as a coping mechanism or essential to happiness. Evidence shows that in the long-term, alcohol use can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and depression.¹⁶ Acute alcohol use increases the risk of attempted suicide.²

Given the many negative impacts alcohol can have on health, the promotion of seemingly 'healthier' alcohol through claims like 'vegan' and 'natural' is highly inappropriate. Alcohol products are inherently unhealthy. It is the alcohol within these products that poses the risk to health, including being a cause of seven different cancers.¹⁷ In addition, alcohol weakens the immune system, which reduces the ability to cope with infectious diseases, including COVID-19.¹⁸

Examples of each marketing message and identified themes are presented below.

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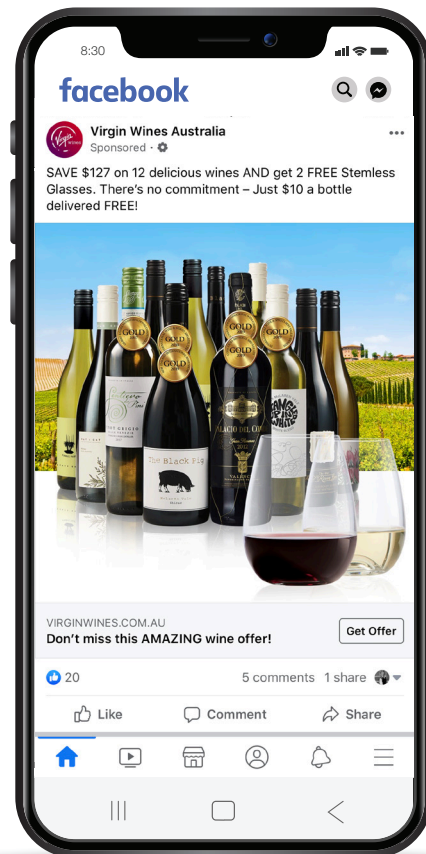
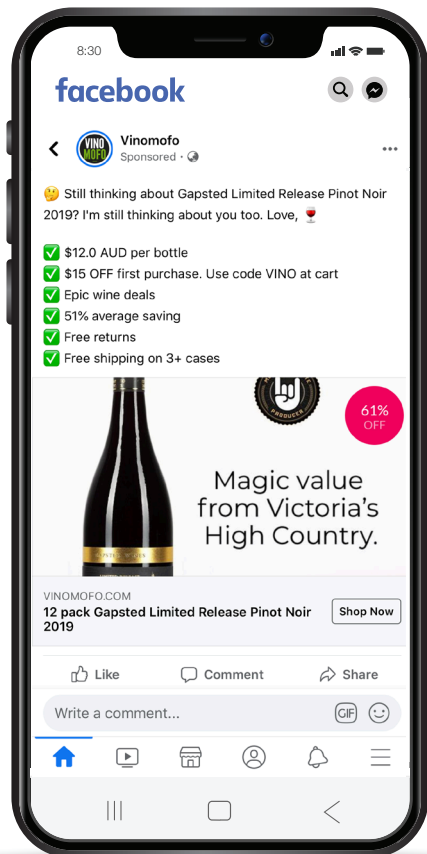


Get easy access to alcohol without leaving your home

Even when we need to stay home, it has never been easier to access alcohol. Advertisements referred to staying home, nights in drinking, and bunkering down. There were 60 references to free delivery and home delivery, including getting products 'delivered directly to your door'. Six advertisements referred to contact-free delivery.

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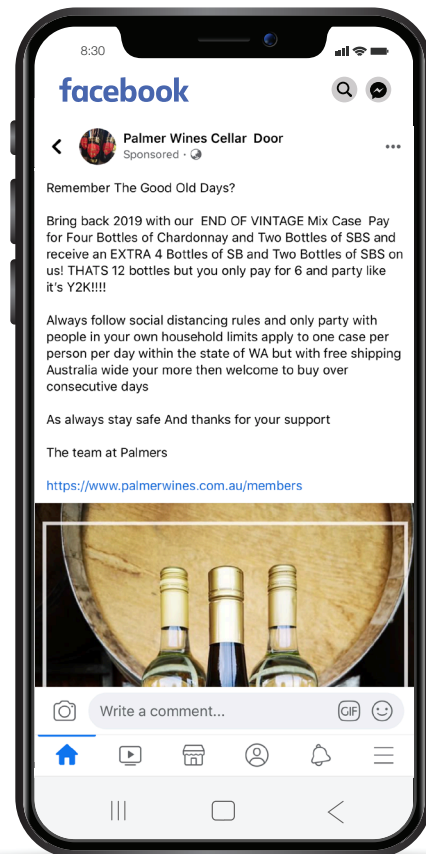
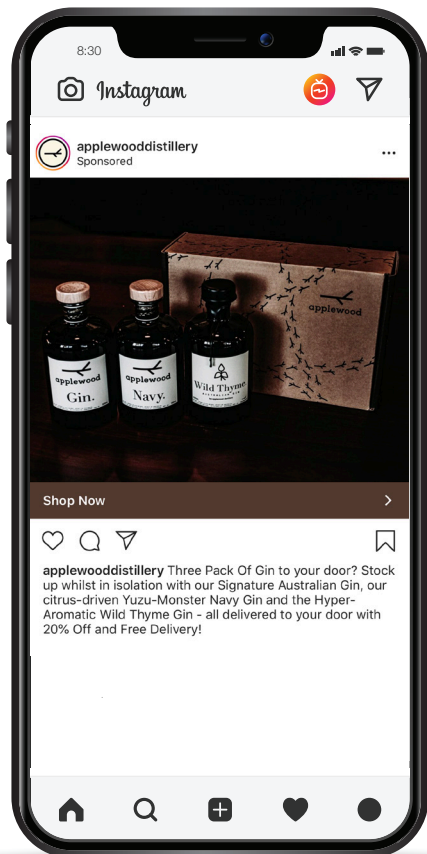


Save money

There were 64 references to discounts, giveaways, or the price of a product. Discounts ranged up to 75% off recommended retail price, and some advertisements promoted saving money on your first order or when you spend over a certain amount. Giveaway promotions included receiving up to six bottles free, winning wine for a year, and winning a \$100 giftcard for a liquor retailer.

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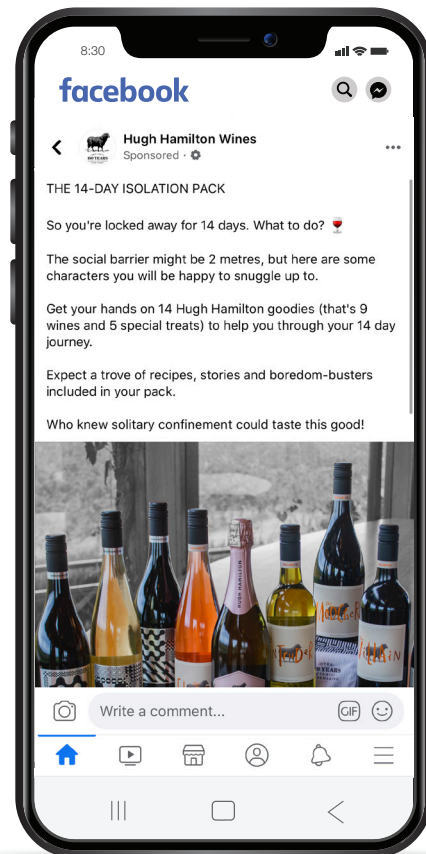
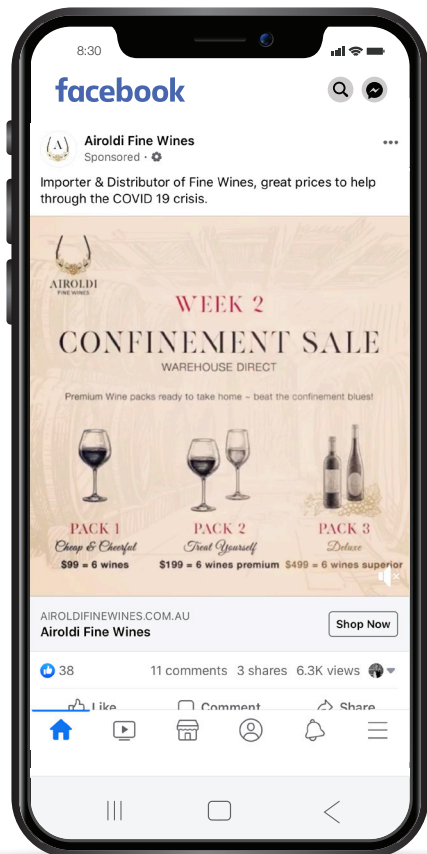


Buy more

There were 37 advertisements that encouraged purchasing larger amounts of alcohol, including four references to stocking up. Thirty advertisements encouraged bulk purchases, such as 12 bottles of wine. In some promotions, discounts or free delivery were only applied to purchases of multiple bottles of wine, or when a minimum spend was reached. Three advertisements offered a subscription service, where alcohol products are delivered every month. One advertisement suggested that to get around alcohol purchase restrictions, multiple purchases could be made over consecutive days.

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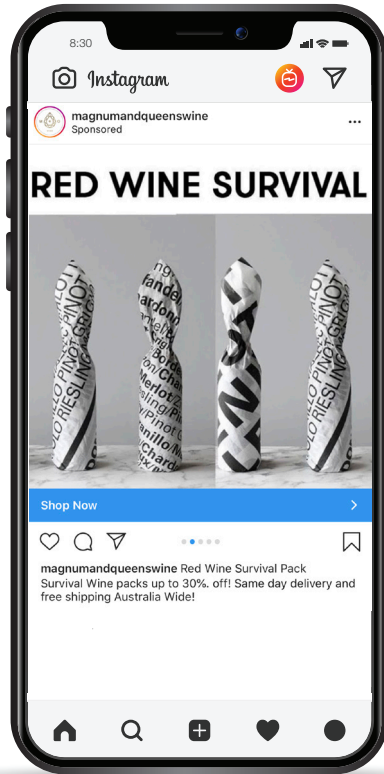
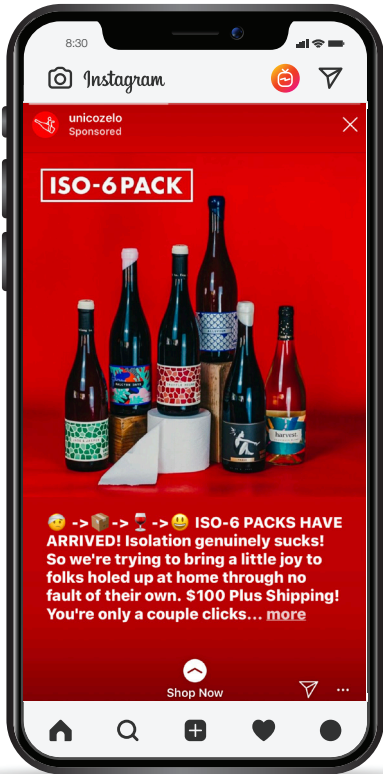
Drink alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic

Twenty-six advertisements referred to drinking alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 25 explicit references to the pandemic, including 6 advertisements that specifically mentioned 'COVID-19' and 19 references to COVID-related terms such as isolation (or #iso), lockdown, or confinement. For example, Australians working from home were encouraged to 'Wine from home'. Other advertisements suggested having a 'Lockdown happy hour' or drinking cocktails while isolating.

Six advertisements encouraged people to drink at higher levels. For example, several advertisements used phrases like 'Keep drinks flowing' and 'Drink up'. Two advertisements suggested alcohol could be used to quench thirst, while one ad encouraged excessive drinking with the suggestion of drinking nine bottles of wine over 14 days.

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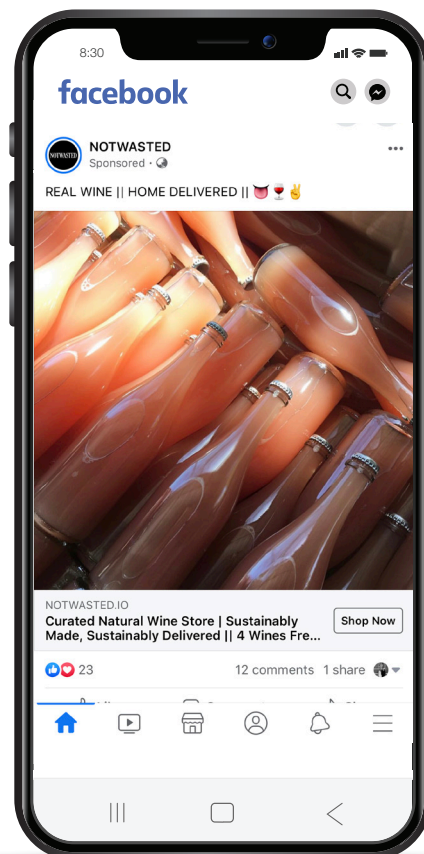
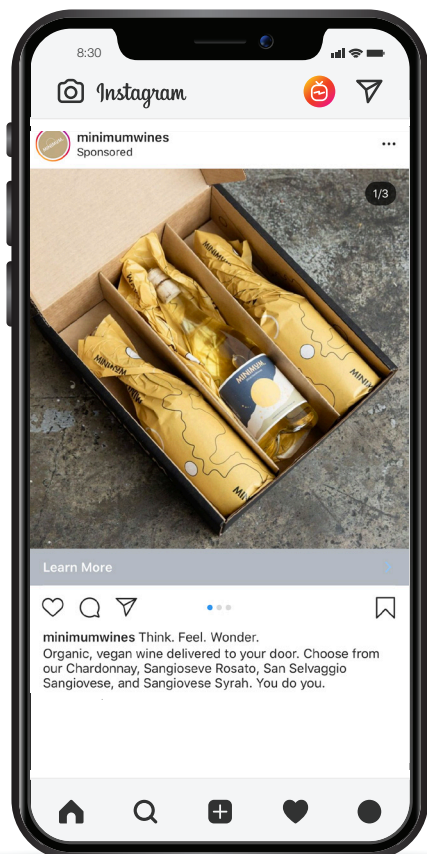
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Use alcohol to cope, survive, or feel better

A number of advertisements implied alcohol is necessary to cope with or 'survive' the pandemic. One company was giving away a three month craft beer subscription to "make isolation more 'beer-able'", while another was selling 'Eau de vie Survival Kits'. Other advertisements suggested that alcohol could be used to 'treat yourself', or to bring joy and hope in uncertain times.

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Choose 'healthier' alcohol products

There were 18 references to health-related product claims. A number of companies promoted wine that was 'organic', 'vegan', 'sustainable', and 'natural'. One promotion was a collaboration between a liquor retailer and a 'sugar-free' soft drink brand.

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Conclusion

The World Health Organization recommends governments restrict alcohol advertising as a way to minimise alcohol harm.¹⁸ Yet the Australian Government permits industry self-regulation, allowing alcohol companies to regulate themselves. There is no evidence that the self-regulatory scheme is effective in protecting vulnerable groups from exposure to alcohol advertising or in preventing the promotion of harmful messaging.^{19, 20, 21}

The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) Scheme – the industry self-regulatory system – states that marketing communication must not (among other things):

- show (visibly, audibly or by direct implication) or encourage the excessive or rapid consumption of an Alcohol Beverage, misuse or abuse of alcohol or consumption inconsistent with the Australian Alcohol Guidelines
- suggest that the consumption or presence of an Alcohol Beverage may create or contribute to a significant change in mood or environment
- suggest that the consumption of an Alcohol Beverage offers any therapeutic benefit or is a necessary aid to relaxation

However, it is evident from our analysis that there are several advertisements that appear to breach the industry's own code.

There are also serious concerns regarding the targeted nature of digital alcohol advertisements. Unlike broadcast media, where everyone sees the same advertisements that are generally grouped together and recognisable as advertising, digital platforms deliver personalised content to individuals in which the lines between what is advertising and what is user-generated content is often blurred. Additionally, the use of personal data and algorithms to target consumers that are 'interested' in alcohol, or regular purchasers of alcohol, can increase their risk of harm by targeting them with more advertisements and encouraging impulse purchases.

This report further demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the current self-regulatory scheme for alcohol advertising. There is a clear conflict of interest arising from the industry's business imperative to sell more alcohol. This is particularly problematic at a time when secondary health and social impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic – such as risky alcohol use, poor mental health and increased frequency and severity of family violence – are of great concern.

Alcohol marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic should not:

- portray alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism for the isolation, boredom, stress or anxiety people are feeling
- encourage bulk or impulsive purchases through the use of low prices, discounts or offers
- target people at risk of alcohol harm, including people who have recently lost their job, those seeking help for anxiety, and heavy or dependent drinkers.

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