

Experiences with online marketing of alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food: A survey

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Foundation for Alcohol
Research & Education



VicHealth

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About FARE and VicHealth

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)

FARE is the leading not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms.

We approach this through developing evidence-informed policy, enabling people-powered advocacy and delivering health promotion programs.

Working with local communities, values-aligned organisations, health professionals and researchers across the country, we strive to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone in Australia.

To learn more about us and our work visit www.fare.org.au.

You can get in touch via email at info@fare.org.au.

FARE is a registered charity, and every dollar you give helps fund projects keeping our communities healthy and safe. You can make a tax-deductible donation at: www.fare.org.au/donate.

VicHealth

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is a pioneer in health promotion – the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health. Our primary focus is promoting good health and preventing chronic disease.

We create and fund world-class interventions. We conduct vital research to advance Victoria's population health. We produce and support public campaigns to promote a healthier Victoria. We provide transformational expertise and insights to government.

Of all the things we do, above all we seek to make health gains among Victorians by pre-empting and targeting improvements in health across our population, fostered within the day-to-day spaces where people spend their time, and with benefits to be enjoyed by all.

To learn more about us and our work visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au.

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Executive summary

This report summarises the findings from a survey of 220 people who were either currently trying to reduce or stop at least one of three harmful and unhealthy products (alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy foods), or were trying to remain that way. The survey was conducted by FARE and VicHealth to develop a better understanding of the impact of online marketing by companies selling harmful and unhealthy products.

Survey participants indicated they are concerned about online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products, that online marketing can make it harder for them to reduce their use or consumption of these products, and that they want to see less marketing for such products and feel better measures are needed to reduce the current amount of online marketing for these products.

- Over 90% of participants reported they are concerned about online marketing for the products they are trying to reduce.

"I do not want to be tempted by things that I know are harmful for me."

- Scott, 45-54 years old, Male

- 83% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that marketing makes it more difficult for them to reduce their use of these products.

"I struggle with alcohol and have struggled with gambling in the past so when I see [online advertisements], I sometimes get tempted and triggered...The constant bombardment with the marketing is wearing down my resilience."

- Maz, 35-44 years old, Female

- Between 89% and 96% of participants indicated they would prefer to see less or no online marketing for the product that they are trying to reduce.

"The amount of advertising needs to be reduced drastically."

- Riley, 55-64 years old, Male



Introduction

Our community is engaging with digital technologies more than ever before. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital world has been cemented as a foundational element in our lives and has become integral to our ability to take part in society. Therefore, it is crucial that our whole community, including our children, can safely participate in the online environment.

However, companies selling harmful and unhealthy products like alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food (i.e., products high in salt, sugar or fat and/or highly processed) are currently undermining the health and wellbeing of our community by inundating online spaces with marketing for products that hurt people's health and wellbeing.¹⁻³ The harms from these products are well established, as is the proliferation of marketing that is often targeted towards young people and people experiencing dependence and addiction (see Box 1).

Our community is exposed to advertisements telling us to drink alcohol, eat unhealthy foods, and gamble everywhere we go. These products are marketed to us across television, sports events, in supermarkets, on public transport, and now in every other location through digital devices we carry with us and use throughout the day. This extends to our children, who are exposed to significant amounts of marketing for alcohol, unhealthy foods and gambling online.⁴⁻⁶

Research shows that exposure to online marketing for alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food is associated with increased use and consumption of these products.^{7,8} This supports a significant amount of research that has shown a similar negative effect of marketing for harmful and unhealthy products via traditional media.

For children and adolescents, research has shown that exposure to alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that they will start drinking alcohol earlier and go on to drink alcohol at risky levels.⁹ Exposure to gambling marketing is also associated with gambling among adolescents,⁸ with an Australian study finding greater exposure to gambling marketing increases the likelihood that an adolescent gambles at risky levels.¹⁰ Research has similarly shown that children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing leads to increased consumption.¹¹

Digital marketing of harmful and unhealthy products is also a concern for others in the community. Existing research indicates people with higher use and consumption of such products might be more negatively affected by marketing. For example, Australian research has found that people at risk of or experiencing gambling problems were significantly more likely to report having been exposed to gambling marketing online than people not experiencing gambling problems, and reported that online gambling advertisements increased their gambling problems.¹² A recent review of research similarly found alcohol marketing may increase positive alcohol-related emotions and cognitions and trigger alcohol cravings among people at-risk of or experiencing an alcohol problem, and is seen to trigger a desire to drink among people in recovery from an alcohol use disorder.¹³

Box 1. Harms and marketing examples from companies marketing harmful and unhealthy products

| HARMS | MARKETING EXAMPLES |
|--|--|
| Alcohol | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6,000 lives are lost and 144,000 people are hospitalised annually from using alcohol.¹⁴ • Over 230 diseases and injury conditions are caused by alcohol.¹⁵ • The cost of alcohol harms is \$66.8 billion annually.¹⁵ | <p>The most popular online alcohol retailers in Australia sent 1,496 alcohol marketing emails to a single recipient over a 3-month period in 2021. Almost half of these emails (48.5%) advertised free or discounted delivery if the person bought over a specified threshold of alcohol.¹⁶</p> <p>At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a single Facebook and Instagram account received 107 alcohol advertisements in a one-hour period on a Friday night – approximating an alcohol advertisement every 35 seconds.¹⁷ The advertisements promoted alcohol as a way to cope and feel better during the pandemic,¹⁷ delivered at a time when the Australian community were experiencing heightened levels of isolation, anxiety, and economic uncertainty.¹⁸</p> |
| Unhealthy Food | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27,500 preventable deaths annually are directly linked to an unhealthy diet.¹⁹ • An estimated 2 in 3 Australians are overweight or obese.²⁰ • Overweight and obesity represent 8.4% of the total burden of disease and account for the leading contributor to non-fatal burden.²⁰ | <p>Australian adolescents 12–17 years old are exposed to 100 unhealthy food advertisements on their mobile devices each week.²¹</p> <p>Over half of adolescents in Australia (55%) report seeing unhealthy food or drink advertising on social media at least weekly, and a quarter report seeing this advertising daily.⁵ Adolescents that engage with this content have a higher consumption of unhealthy food and beverages.⁵</p> |
| Gambling | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 6.8 million Australians gamble regularly.²² • An estimated \$25 billion was lost on gambling-related legal fees in 2018–19.²³ | <p>Over half (55%) of children aged 11–16 years old reported seeing gambling advertisements on social media in a Victorian study and 36% of reported seeing gambling advertising on YouTube, predominantly before watching sporting or gaming videos.⁶</p> <p>People who undertake risky levels of gambling have been found significantly more likely to report seeing gambling advertisements on social media than people who don't undertake risky levels of gambling.¹²</p> |

Methods

FARE and VicHealth conducted a brief survey to develop a better understanding of how marketing by companies selling harmful and unhealthy products is impacting people trying to reduce their use of these products, or who have reduced their use and are trying to remain that way. This report summarises the findings from the survey.

The survey was conducted online from 19 May 2022 to 24 June 2022 with a convenience sample. The survey was open to all Australians over 18 years of age. The anonymous nature of responses was explained to participants to ensure informed consent, and participants were given the option to provide their first name with open text responses they submitted.

Participants were recruited online through FARE, VicHealth and other organisations sharing the survey among their networks. This increased the likelihood of the survey reaching people who are impacted by the harms from alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food products. Paid promotion through Facebook advertisements was also used to supplement organic promotion.

In the survey, we specifically asked participants about the online marketing of alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food and beverages (i.e., products high in salt, sugar or fat and/or highly processed). While other harmful and unhealthy products are marketed online, we focused on these products for this specific survey. Because we wanted to know about experiences related to any type of online marketing for these products, we defined online marketing broadly to mean any online promotion of these products, including advertisements or sponsored content promoted through social media, websites, emails, direct messaging, and other digital channels.

Participants were asked about their observation, concern and opinion of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products, and how they are affected by this marketing. Both open-ended and closed questions were included in the survey.



Results

The results presented below are for 220 participants (from a total of 240) who completed the survey and indicated that they were either currently trying to reduce or stop their use or consumption of at least one of the three harmful and unhealthy products, or that they had already reduced or stopped their use or consumption and were trying to remain that way (alcohol = 71.4%, gambling = 20.5%, and unhealthy food = 93.6%; Table 1). The sample was skewed toward female and older participants, and most participants did not have dependents under the age of 18 (sample characteristics presented in Appendix 1).

Table 1. Participants who are trying to reduce or stop their use and consumption of harmful and unhealthy products (N = 220)

| | Alcohol | | Gambling | | Unhealthy food | |
|--|---------|-------|----------|-------|----------------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Are you currently <u>trying</u> to reduce the amount of harmful and unhealthy products you use/consume? | | | | | | |
| Currently trying to reduce use/consumption | 23 | 10.5% | 1 | 0.5% | 82 | 37.3% |
| I am trying to stop use/consumption | 6 | 2.7% | 1 | 0.5% | 19 | 8.6% |
| I have already reduced my use/consumption am trying to maintain my reduced level of use/consumption | 89 | 40.5% | 15 | 6.8% | 82 | 37.3% |
| I have already stopped use/consumption and am trying to keep it that way | 39 | 17.7% | 28 | 12.7% | 23 | 10.5% |
| No, I am not trying to reduce or stop use/consumption. | 7 | 3.2% | 4 | 1.8% | 1 | 0.5% |
| Not applicable, I don't use/consume | 56 | 25.5% | 171 | 77.7% | 13 | 5.9% |

Most participants indicated that they have recently noticed (range 75.8%–95.6%), are either very or somewhat concerned about (range 91.1%–97.8%) and would prefer to see less or no (range 89.2%–95.6%) online marketing for the product they are trying to reduce or stop their use or consumption of (Table 2).

Most participants also agreed or strongly agreed that online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products makes it more difficult for them to reduce the use or consumption of these products (82.7%). Half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they feel like they are personally targeted with online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products (51.8%), while a quarter could neither agree nor disagree with whether they felt personally targeted (25.9%; Table 3).

Table 2. Observation, concern and opinion of digital marketing for harmful and unhealthy products by people who are trying to reduce/stop or remain at reduced/stopped amount of use/ consumption.

| | Alcohol (N = 157) | | Gambling (N = 45) | | Unhealthy food (N = 206) | |
|---|----------------------|-------|----------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Have you noticed online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products in the past month? | | | | | | |
| Yes | 119 | 75.8% | 43 | 95.6% | 167 | 81.1% |
| No | 30 | 19.1% | 0 | 0 | 29 | 14.1% |
| Don't know | 8 | 5.1% | 2 | 4.4% | 10 | 4.9% |
| How concerned are you about online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products? | | | | | | |
| Very concerned | 95 | 60.5% | 38 | 84.4% | 123 | 59.7% |
| Somewhat concerned | 48 | 30.6% | 6 | 13.3% | 69 | 33.5% |
| Not concerned at all | 14 | 8.9% | 1 | 2.2% | 10 | 4.9% |
| Don't know | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1.9% |
| Based on the current amount of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products you see, how much online marketing for such products would you like to see? | | | | | | |
| I would prefer to not see any | 96 | 61.1% | 36 | 80.0% | 104 | 50.5% |
| I would prefer to see less | 44 | 28.0% | 7 | 15.6% | 87 | 42.2% |
| I am OK with the amount I currently see | 13 | 8.3% | 1 | 2.2% | 13 | 6.3% |
| I would prefer to see more | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| I would prefer to see all advertisements | 2 | 1.3% | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.5% |
| Don't know | 2 | 1.3% | 1 | 2.2% | 1 | 0.5% |

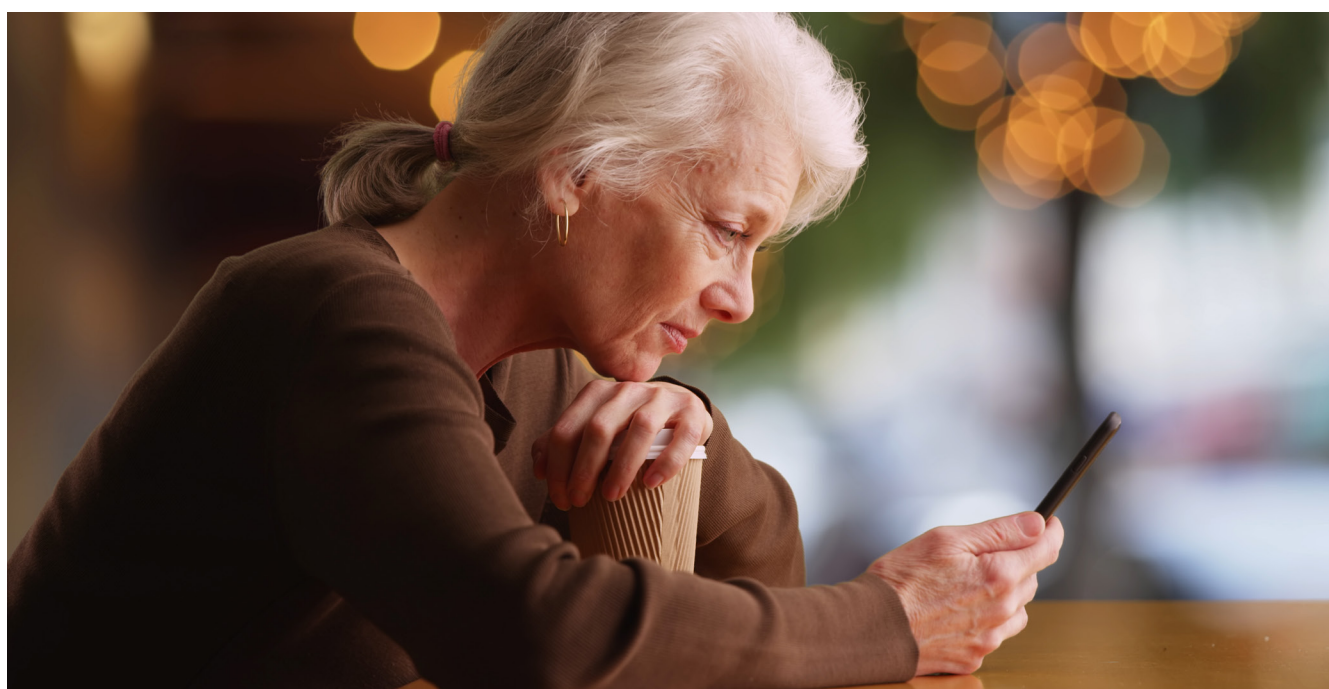


Table 3. Opinions about online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products by people who are trying to reduce/stop or remain at reduced/stopped amount of harmful and unhealthy product use/consumption.

| | Any (N = 220) | % |
|---|---------------|-------|
| I feel like I am targeted with online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products (e.g., alcohol, gambling, or unhealthy foods). | | |
| Strongly agree | 44 | 20.0% |
| Agree | 70 | 31.8% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 57 | 25.9% |
| Disagree | 33 | 15.0% |
| Strongly disagree | 16 | 7.3% |
| Online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products (e.g., alcohol, gambling, or unhealthy foods) makes it more difficult to reduce the use/consumption of these products. | | |
| Strongly agree | 104 | 47.3% |
| Agree | 78 | 35.5% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 16 | 7.3% |
| Disagree | 7 | 3.2% |
| Strongly disagree | 15 | 6.8% |

Participants were asked three open-ended questions about the ways in which they feel targeted by online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products, its effect on themselves and their communities, and whether there was anything else they would like to comment on the topic. The results from participant responses to these questions are presented below, illustrated with select quotes.

How people feel targeted by marketing for harmful and unhealthy products

Participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they feel like they are targeted by online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products (n = 114) were asked in what ways they feel targeted by this marketing. All but eight participants responded.

“It’s a constant reminder of things I’d prefer not to think about, and even though I like alcohol (for example) the sheer volume of ads is ridiculous.”

– Liz, 35-44 years old, Female

“Alcohol ads on social media and also marketing sent to my personal inbox that I haven’t subscribed to (I have an alcohol addiction). Uber Eats also promotes delivery of alcohol on their app and through emails to members.”

– Heidi, 25-34 years old, Non-binary

While we specifically asked about online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products, through the open-ended questions participants also spoke about feeling bombarded by marketing across media. Many participants specifically mentioned feeling targeted by harmful and unhealthy product marketing in association with sports.

"Marketing for alcohol seems to be everywhere I look."

– Theresa, 45-54 years old, Female

"Overt and covert messaging on tv, social media, influencers, conversations, the fact that alcohol is a part of everyday conversation in tv shows, radio, podcasts (grab a beer, happy hour, rose all day, vino night, etc). Nonstop ads on tv for gambling."

– Anonymous, 25-34 years old, Female

"I can't watch an AFL game without being bombarded with gambling promotion in ads, by commentators and on the boundary fence screens."

– Anonymous, >65 years, Male

When it came to online marketing specifically, many participants mentioned they felt targeted by harmful and unhealthy product marketing while using social media platforms. Several participants were aware that marketing they are receiving on social media platforms is targeted. There was general awareness among some participants that they are being targeted based on certain factors. This included targeting based on their demographics, interests, and past purchasing histories. A few participants noted the time at which they received the marketing.

"I often see alcohol and food marketing, much of it tailored around what 'mums' want or need. My husband gets targeted with gambling adverts."

– Alex, 35-44 years old, Female

"Always see food marketing at specific times of day i.e., evenings or weekends. Similar to alcohol and gambling, mostly see this on weekends"

– Clare, 25-34 years old, Female

"I also feel like unhealthy food companies like McDonalds and Hungry Jacks know to advertise when you are most hungry - definitely being targeted in those times!"

– Umi, 35-44 years old, Female

Several participants specifically noted that they believe they are being targeted by gambling advertisements online because they play games online, and that these advertisements are particularly noticeable when they are playing online.

"I play word and card games to keep my mind active. The gambling ads are too frequent. I would prefer to see none."

– Elizabeth, >65 years old, Female

"Because I play non-gambling type games online, I feel I am targeted with marketing for casino or pokie type games."

– Anne, >65 years, Female

Some participants also noted that they receive targeted advertising after searching online. This included some participants working in support roles related to harmful and unhealthy product use who indicated they receive a large amount of targeted advertising they believe is associated with their work, which involves online searching around harmful and unhealthy products.

"Google being what it is, as an addictions counsellor it is always listening/watching and referring ads my way. It is NOT what I want to see on any of my social media or online activity!!"

– Janene, 45-54 years old, Female

"As an AOD librarian I do frequent searches around alcohol and other drugs and gambling triggering the Google algorithms to do their work. Even as a responsible adult who drinks lightly, I'm sometimes tempted by the gin adverts."

– Debbie, 55-64 years old, Female

A few participants provided specific examples where they have received targeted marketing based on previous purchases. In one case, the participant spoke about the personalisation used in alcohol marketing being sent to them after making a purchase.

"I purchased a bottle of gin at Dan Murphy's and received multiple personalised emails with comments suggesting I would like to buy more saying – '[Name] want gin? Try these', or '[Name], remember Gin Lane 1751 Sloe Gin 700mL? Revisit some familiar favourites today! Here's some gins you bought before. Want to enjoy them again?' or "Drink like your neighbours – These gins are in with members near you. Try them for yourself to see why!" I remember thinking, wow, if I had a problem with gin this would be really triggering."

– Anonymous, 55-64 years old, Female

"I've used the Jimmy Brings service once or twice in the past 2 years, but I feel like I see an ad on Facebook or banner ads on websites at least once a day, sometimes more. Plus, they send several emails a week. It feels a bit like being bombarded with alcohol advertising, seeing as I've only used it once or twice during covid lockdowns."

– Kate, 35-44 years old, Female

Concerningly, a few participants indicated that they continue to receive online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products even after changing online settings, including unsubscribing to mailing lists, in an attempt to avoid this marketing.

"I am an alcoholic and I feel targeted with marketing that promotes alcohol despite choosing preferences within browsers not to see alcohol."

– Anonymous, 55-64 years old, Female

“Online gambling ads are ridiculous – I try to stop them and then there are a different set presented.”

– Anonymous, 55–64 years old, Female

“I am pretty good at deleting and unsubscribing, but it took me about 4 months of emails to unsubscribe. I am sure I noticed sales on products I have bought before and on one occasion did buy the product. I definitely think more about alcohol when the emails from Dan’s [Dan Murphy’s] keep popping up. I think for anyone with a history of harmful alcohol use it would be extremely triggering. It’s also relentless.”

– Anonymous, 55–64 years old, Female

How online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products affects communities

Participants were asked how online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products affects them, their families, or their communities; 198 (90.0%) participants responded. Responses have been separated into personal impact, impact on families and impact on the community below.

Personal impact

Some participants acknowledged the ways they personally experience the negative effects of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products. This included marketing that acts as a trigger or prompts cravings for the products, and some participants specified their awareness that the marketing triggers their use of harmful products.

“I have had issues with gambling in the past and it seems that there are gambling ads in games for children, on television, Facebook. They’re all so enticing, and they can be a potential trigger. I feel that they are aimed toward people who have the inclination to gamble.”

– Ursula, 35–44 years old, Female

“I have found myself thinking about purchasing alcohol more when I see advertising all the time. I probably have started buying a bit more online as a result.”

– Kate, 35–44 years old, Female

“On many occasions I choose to drink more because I think I am getting a “great offer”, or at least I use that as my excuse in my mind.”

– Heidi, 25–34 years old, Non-binary

“I personally have family history of gambling, alcohol and drug addictions and have had a binge eating disorder that certainly wasn’t helped by constant ads for unhealthy and sugary foods which can become addictive.”

– Blue, 18–24 years old, Non-binary

"I find online marketing of unhealthy foods to often trigger me to want to purchase these foods or fixate on thinking about them more than I would if I hadn't seen an advertisement."

– Anonymous, 25-34 years old, Female

"It is difficult to stop the consumption of harmful products if they are always in your face."

– Anonymous, >65 years old

Some participants also spoke about how online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products is more generally unhelpful when trying to reduce their use or consumption and that it is not something they want to see.

"It's an unhelpful reminder when you are trying to turn your life around for the better."

– Georgia, 35-44 years old, Female

"I do not want to be tempted by things that I know are harmful for me."

– Scott, 45-54 years old, Male

"I'm in recovery so don't need or want to be seeing alcohol ads."

– Anonymous, 35-44 years old, Female

Several participants commented that they are annoyed by online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products. Although, beyond being annoyed, many participants indicated they don't feel they are personally affected by the marketing.

"Does not affect me, just annoys me. The ads normalise and make fashionable negative pastimes, activities and foods that seem very attractive to teens and young adults."

– Anne, >65 years old, Female

"It's just simply annoying and inconvenient. They are trying to normalise it with their softly spoken conning voices."

– Johnny, 55-64 years old, Male

Impact on families

Parents and/or caregivers with children aged under 18 years were concerned about the effect of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products on their children. A few of these participants directly mentioned that the marketing triggers their children to ask for advertised products.

"I have had issues with gambling in the past and I have noticed recently that even games for children have ads for gambling. Unhealthy food is advertised everywhere, and my children constantly ask me for products they have seen advertised."

– Ursula, 35-44 years old, Female

"It affects my young family by bringing these products into our home through television and social media against our will. The ads depict these products through rose coloured glasses to a vulnerable audience (kids)."

– Anonymous, 35-44 years old, Female

"I am especially concerned about my sons. They are able to recite ads on YouTube for gambling, alcohol and junk food. The ads are having an impact on children and teenagers. I hear my sons talking about these ads with their friends."

– Agnes, 45-54 years old, Female

A few participants spoke about how the marketing for harmful and unhealthy products act as a reminder of the impact the products have had on people they care about, and that they are concerned about how the marketing affects others in their family.

"My husband is in recovery from alcohol addiction, so I worry about it triggering him."

– Andy, 45-54 years old, Female

"Alcohol [advertisements] remind me of how [alcohol] contributed to the suicide of my first husband and the pain, destruction, [and] ongoing mental health problems of my children and [the] breakup of my second marriage."

– Caraline, 55-64 years old, Female

"I have family members who have problems with all three [products] so having it in their face when trying to avoid them is detrimental. The ads make it extremely difficult for them to fight their problems."

– Sue, 55-64 years old, Female

Impact on the community

Even when participants suggested they didn't feel personally affected by the marketing, they often acknowledged that the marketing has negative effects on the community, or for certain segments of the community, particularly for children and young people and for people experiencing vulnerabilities or addiction/dependence.

"I personally ignore it, but children and young people are impressionable and could be susceptible to the social pressure and conditioning as a result of it."

– Alexander, >65 years old, Male

"This marketing could be harmful to young people, those who are susceptible to addictions or are trying to recover from addictions, and may place people at higher risk of becoming addicted. The health and wellbeing of the community should be prioritised over companies wanting to make money."

– Anonymous, 45-54 years old, Female

"It doesn't affect me personally however I do not like the amount of advertising there is for gambling, especially as it seems to be shown no matter what time of day it is, and I think this is very harmful to the younger generations who will think this is a normal way of life."

– Jennifer, >65 years old, Female

Participants generally commented about the community being affected by the online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products, including effects on health and wellbeing. Some participants specifically listed health conditions related to the use of these products, and some indicated they believe online marketing encourages their use.

"The impact we encounter is hidden from public eye. Alcohol does both acute and chronic harms to the user, but more disturbingly to their families. Also, the spill over effect into community safety is also seen. Gambling is putting incredible financial and consequently relational stress of marriages and families."

– Anonymous, 55-64 years old

"It sets up people for long term impairment and co-morbidities and so places additional burden on the health budget and hospital system."

– Andris, >65 years old, Male

"It makes it harder for people to make positive lifestyle changes."

– Anonymous, 55-64 years old, Male

"Encourages bad purchases, poor behaviour, poor health."

– Anonymous, >65 years old, Male

There was strong sentiment across many of the participants that online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products normalises and glamourises the use of such products. This sentiment was similarly expressed in responses to the other open-ended questions.

"It glorifies what for a lot of people is a nightmare. The ads make out that drinking and gambling is fun and further ostracise addicts because when we use, we destroy our lives, but these ads give the message that it's ok."

– Sami, 55-64 years old, Female

"It makes it hard to go against the socially accepted drinking culture. It also makes gambling seem normal and fun."

– Anonymous, 35-44 years old, Female

"I'm particularly concerned with gambling marketing - I think it's insidious. It's clearly trying to normalise gambling and link it with social connections, which is very dangerous."

– Anonymous, 35-44 years old, Female

"It makes me mad. It normalises and encourages my family and community. By the harmful products being in your face, it makes [them] appear normal and part of everyday life."

– Anonymous, 45-54 years old, Female

"We have a collective responsibility to look after the health of ourselves and of each other. This is made infinitely more difficult when we live in a society that promotes the false idea that life is much better, faster, fun, connected – by using alcohol, gambling and fast food. We know it isn't. But we don't call it out."

– Heidi, 25-34 years old, Non-binary

People want greater measures to stop online marketing of harmful and unhealthy products

At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether there was anything else they would like to say about the online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products. Of the 136 people who responded to the question, 57 (41.9%) stated that they want to see better regulation. A quarter of participants that responded (n = 36; 26.5%) specifically raised that they wanted to see the online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products removed. This comprised responses that specified that they want to see a "ban" (n = 22) or that the marketing should be "stopped", "not allowed", "gotten rid of" or "removed" (n = 14). Some participants calling for a ban made a point of referencing tobacco regulation and that these other harmful and unhealthy products should be treated in the same way.

"I think advertising for alcohol and gambling should be banned like it is for tobacco."

– Theresa, 45-54 years old, Female

"The fact that both gambling and alcohol seem to be 'self-regulating' is very concerning. There should be a ban on both."

– Anonymous, 55-64 years old

"I would back any government move to stop the advertising completely of these harmful products."

– Gordon, >65 years, Male

"For people who have a gambling or alcohol problem these ads are extremely detrimental. I believe ads for gambling should be banned like ads for smoking are banned."

– Anonymous, >65 years, Female

Some participants more generally stated that better or more controls are needed, or that the marketing needs to be strictly regulated or heavily restricted. Other participants raised specific regulations they would like to see, with several mentioning that gambling and/or alcohol marketing associated with sports should be stopped. Several participants also suggested that there should be limitations to when and where marketing for harmful and unhealthy products can be shown, with some participants specifying regulation across media other than online platforms. A few participants specified that there should be restrictions to prevent children or young people from exposure to marketing for these products.

“The amount of advertising needs to be reduced drastically.”

– Riley, 55-64 years old, Male

“Needs to be strongly regulated by government as disproportionately impacts low socio-economic communities.”

– Anonymous, 25-34 years old, Female

“Stop all cigarette, alcohol and gambling advertising during childhood television timeslots and during any sporting events.”

– Bob, >65 years, Male

“The advertising of gambling and alcohol in prime-time viewing is a concern and gambling during football games or sporting events is also a concern.”

– Daryl, >65 years, Male



Discussion

This survey provided insight into experiences of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products such as alcohol, gambling and unhealthy foods. The survey particularly shed light on the experiences of people who are trying to reduce or stop their use or consumption of these products, or who have already reduced or stopped their use or consumption and are trying to remain that way.

People are exposed to, and concerned about, online marketing for harmful products

Most participants in the survey indicated they have seen online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products within the past month, and that they are concerned about and would like to see less of such marketing. In their open-ended responses, participants spoke about online marketing contributing to normalising the use or consumption of harmful and unhealthy products, and the detrimental effect this has on their health and wellbeing.

The role of marketing in normalising harmful and unhealthy product use has similarly been reported elsewhere. Participants of a community survey in the UK reported feeling bombarded by alcohol marketing and believed that this encourages and normalises alcohol use.²⁴ Gambling research also found that gambling marketing normalises gambling in the community. For example, the omnipresence of gambling marketing during sporting events has normalised gambling within sport and has led young people to feel they need to gamble to partake in sport and sporting culture.^{6, 25}

In their open-ended responses, participants also indicated they find it difficult to ignore online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products and they continue to receive marketing even after changing subscription and filter settings on their personal devices. In 2021, similar stories emerged from people trying to reduce their alcohol use who reported that changing their social media settings to see less alcohol advertising was ineffective and, in some cases, worsened the amount of alcohol advertisements they received.²⁶ This is concerning as it indicates people are unable to escape harmful and unhealthy marketing while participating in online activities.

Participating in help-seeking activities, such as attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and following Alcoholics Anonymous related support pages, were also previously reported to result in receiving increased amounts of alcohol adverts online.²⁶ This phenomenon has similarly been observed among people searching for health-related information and support such as diabetes awareness, cancer prevention and depression support who were later targeted with advertisements for pharmaceuticals related to these health issues.²⁷ The propensity for online marketing algorithms to target people at vulnerable moments is particularly harmful.

People are targeted by online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products

Half of the participants in the survey felt like they are personally targeted with online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products. Participants felt targeted based on their product use, gender identification and age. Companies selling alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food are known to use sophisticated digital systems and tools for targeting their marketing.¹⁻³

The tools that are used to deliver much of the online marketing we now see feed on people's intimate lives so that advertisers can target people with personalised advertising that is most likely to affect them,²⁸ based on

their individual characteristics, interests and behaviours.²⁸ This includes identifying and targeting people who are most likely to make a purchase, and to spend higher amounts when doing so, who then become a core target group for marketing.^{2, 29, 30} Further, to ensure the advertising content most likely resonates with a person, 'dynamic' advertisements are used, automatically tailoring the sales promotion, price and product based on the personal information collected.^{1, 2} In the case of harmful and unhealthy products, particularly those that are addictive like alcohol and gambling, this ability to prey on people's susceptibilities is particularly harmful as it can disproportionately target vulnerabilities such as addiction and dependence.³¹

Companies selling harmful and unhealthy products are investing in data-driven marketing databases and methods as they result in higher sales. For example, the alcohol and gambling corporation Endeavour Group have developed and continue to invest heavily in EndeavourX, which uses an AI-powered personalised marketing engine to increase the sale of alcoholic products.³² This marketing engine is fuelled by a wealth of information about individuals, including data collected on 6.2 million Australians through their My Dans program alone,³³ and is trained to find and target people who are most likely to click through an advertisement to buy alcoholic products.³² Endeavour Group have described their digital marketing method as the "Netflix approach" whereby they collect extensive personal information to target individuals with personalised marketing – continually encouraging them to buy more alcohol.³¹

Online marketing makes it harder for people to reduce their use of harmful and unhealthy products

Most participants indicated that online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products makes it more difficult for them to reduce their use or consumption. This has implications for both people generally trying to reduce their use or consumption, as well as people experiencing greater harms from these products and who might be more negatively affected by this marketing.

A review of research on people experiencing alcohol problems suggests that the more a person uses alcohol, the more attentive they are to alcohol cues like marketing, which in turn leads to increased cravings for alcohol.¹³ This creates a harmful cycle in which alcohol marketing becomes more noticeable the more a person craves and uses alcohol, and the more a person notices alcohol marketing, the more they crave alcohol. Online marketing models fuel this cycle by sending more alcohol advertising to people who use more alcohol, as discussed above.

Similar to our survey, a community survey in the UK found that people in recovery from alcohol-related problems indicated that frequent exposure to alcohol marketing can be triggering, making it more difficult to remain sober.²⁴ The omnipresence of alcohol marketing in the community was also a trigger for people who have experienced other harms from alcohol.²⁴ Likewise, Australian research found that people at moderate risk of experiencing gambling problems were significantly more likely to report an increase in the desire to gamble due to online gambling marketing, as well as increasing their actual gambling, compared to people not considered at risk of experiencing gambling problems.¹²

Better measures are needed to reduce marketing of harmful and unhealthy products online

While participants in our survey were not directly asked about their opinion on measures for reducing the marketing of harmful and unhealthy products online, many spoke about the need for better measures to protect the community in their open-ended responses. Participants made comments that government should be more involved in regulation or that online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products should be banned altogether. Participants particularly spoke of the need to protect people who might be at increased risk from such products, such as people who are struggling with the use or consumption of these products as well as children and young people.

Support for restrictions on alcohol and gambling marketing have similarly been reported in the 2020 FARE Alcohol Poll, which found 85% and 86% of Australians either agreed or strongly agreed that alcohol and gambling advertising, respectively, should not be shown to children while online.³⁴ Further, the 2020 poll found that 76% of parents with children under 18 years supported the introduction of regulation that stops social media channels from collecting children's data that identifies them as a target for advertisements of addictive products like alcohol and gambling.³⁴

Currently, online marketing by companies selling harmful and unhealthy products is mostly governed by industry-developed- and -led voluntary codes, which are inadequate, ineffective, and lack transparency and accountability. It is well demonstrated that the self-regulation of marketing by companies selling these products does not lead to a meaningful reduction in the exposure to harmful marketing.³⁵⁻³⁶ This is unsurprising as companies selling harmful and unhealthy products have vested commercial interests whereby the maximisation of profits and shareholder returns is their primary goal, which naturally opposes measures that effectively restrict marketing practices. It is clear from the responses received in the survey that measures for reducing the amount of online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products are both wanted and needed in Australia.

Survey Limitations

This survey uses a convenience sample and is not representative of the Australian population. The survey was completed by people trying to reduce their use of harmful and unhealthy products as intended. The sample included a comparatively low amount of people trying to reduce their gambling. The sample was skewed toward people who identified as female and from older age groups, with less representation from people aged 25-54 years and little participation from young adults aged 18-24 years. Nevertheless, the results from this survey indicate a cause for concern about the impact of current online marketing by companies selling harmful and unhealthy products on people trying to reduce their use or consumption of these products or trying to remain that way. Research exploring this in further detail with a larger sample is warranted.

Conclusion

With the online environment now playing an important role in our everyday lives, it is impossible for people to escape the ubiquitous online marketing for harmful and unhealthy products like alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food. Online marketing for such products undermines people's attempts to reduce their use. It acts both as a prompt for individuals to buy, use and consume these products and by normalising their use and consumption within the community. Better measures are needed to reduce the amount of marketing for harmful and unhealthy products online and to ensure that online marketing systems are not targeting people in harmful ways.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Sample characteristics (N=220)

| | n | % |
|---------------------------------|-----|-------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 140 | 63.6% |
| Male | 65 | 29.5% |
| Non-binary | 9 | 4.1% |
| Prefer not to say | 6 | 2.7% |
| Age | | |
| 18-24 years | 5 | 2.3% |
| 25-34 years | 24 | 10.9% |
| 35-44 years | 38 | 17.3% |
| 45-54 years | 32 | 14.5% |
| 55-64 years | 45 | 20.5% |
| 65+ years | 76 | 34.5% |
| Have dependents under 18 | | |
| Yes | 55 | 25.0% |
| No | 165 | 75.0% |

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