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# ACMA Consultation: Review into alcohol advertising in the Free TV Code

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Submission:  
Alcohol and Drug  
Foundation

30 April 2026

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## Executive Summary

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation (ADF) is Australia's leading alcohol and other drug (AOD) harm prevention organisation. We work nationally to prevent AOD-related harm through evidence-based policy development, education and community programs. A community-centred approach is at the heart of everything we do.

The ADF thanks the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) for the opportunity to contribute to the review of alcohol advertising rules in the *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice* (Free TV Code). As an organisation focused on preventing alcohol and other drug harm, we have a strong interest in evidence-based reform to reduce the public's – and particularly children and young people's – exposure to alcohol promotion and advertising.

Rates of alcohol consumption in Australia are amongst the highest in the world.<sup>1-3</sup> Decades of research demonstrates that alcohol advertising plays a significant role in shaping alcohol consumption and related harm.<sup>4</sup> This is not limited to adults. Exposure to alcohol marketing also influences children and young people's perceptions of and attitudes toward alcohol, and is associated with early initiation, increased consumption, and a greater likelihood of alcohol-related harm over time.<sup>5-7</sup> The Australian public considers current exposure to alcohol advertising to be too high and expects stronger government action: a recent survey found that three in four Australians (75%) want fewer alcohol advertisements on television.<sup>8</sup>

This submission argues that the Free TV Code is ineffective at limiting exposure to alcohol advertising during free-to-air broadcast. In some respects, the Code actually facilitates increased exposure to children and young people by allowing advertisers to circumvent restrictions via exemptions for sports broadcasts. Effective regulation of alcohol advertising must be independent, robust and enforceable if it is to meaningfully reduce alcohol-related harm in Australia. In practice, this requires a regulatory framework that is free from industry influence, supported by independent oversight and backed by enforceable standards.

While this submission primarily addresses free-to-air broadcast television, it also provides brief comment on related issues specifically identified in the Terms of Reference, namely video-on-demand services, in-stadia advertising, and sponsored collaborations embedded within programming.

The ADF also considers that Australia's broader alcohol advertising framework requires more comprehensive reform, including establishing strong legislative foundations for regulation instead of relying on industry self-regulation. As such, this submission identifies additional issues that sit beyond the immediate scope of this consultation and ACMA's statutory remit.

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## Alcohol harm in Australia

Alcohol-related harm remains a significant and preventable public health issue in Australia. Alcohol consumption contributes substantially to the national burden of disease (4.1%) and has been identified as a leading modifiable risk factor for poor health outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Alcohol is associated with over 200 diseases, conditions and preventable injuries including cardiovascular illness, diabetes, stroke, road trauma, mental ill-health and suicide, violence (both domestic and non-domestic), and at least seven types of cancer.<sup>10-12</sup>

The impacts are particularly concerning for young people.<sup>13, 14</sup> Alcohol contributes to two of the leading causes of death of young people: suicide and road traffic injury.<sup>9, 15</sup> This underscores that alcohol harm is not confined to long-term chronic disease but also includes acute, life-threatening harms.

Australia also remains a comparatively high-consuming nation by international standards. Most Australians aged 14 and over report consuming alcohol, and average consumption among those who drink remains substantial.<sup>12, 16</sup> Around one-in-four Australians consume alcohol at levels that place them at increased short term risk of injury or other acute harm at least monthly (based on NHMRC Guidelines).<sup>16, 17</sup> Rates of risky drinking are highest among young adults aged 18-24 years.<sup>16</sup>

Alcohol also places significant pressure on health and social services, emergency response systems, policing, community safety and wellbeing, while having a significant impact on productivity. The total social costs of alcohol were estimated to be approximately \$75 billion in 2022-23.<sup>18</sup>

Together, this demonstrates that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity.<sup>19</sup> It contributes to substantial and widespread health, social and economic harm, and this should be reflected in the strength of the regulatory settings governing its promotion and advertising.

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## Responses to Terms of Reference

The ADF welcomes ACMA's decision not to register the revised version of the Free TV Code due to insufficient community safeguards. The code is produced by industry and places commercial interests over the health and safety of the public or community standards. It also largely defers enforcement and compliance to the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code, a separate and voluntary scheme run by the alcohol industry. In its current iteration, the Free TV Code is insufficient to restrict alcohol-advertising to appropriate times and audiences, particularly in relation to sports broadcasts. This results in excessive alcohol advertising on free-to-air television including the inappropriate exposure of children and young people to alcohol marketing.

Current regulatory controls on alcohol advertising in Australia are fragmented across multiple codes, standards and regulatory models, including the Free TV Code, Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), the Australian Association of National Advertisers *Code of Ethics 2021* and the *Australian Content and Children's Television Standards 2020*. These instruments range from industry self-regulation to co-regulation, creating a complex and inconsistent framework distorted by industry influence. While some instruments have a legislative basis, such as the Children's Television Standards, none provide a genuinely evidence-based and independent system of regulation or the clarity, consistency and enforceability of primary legislation.

Research across multiple commercial industries including alcohol demonstrates that industry self-regulation does not protect the public from harmful products.<sup>20-22</sup> Given alcohol is associated with significant health, social and economic harms, it is inappropriate for industries with commercial interests – the commercial television and alcohol industries – to self-regulate. The regulation of alcohol advertising should be independent and situated within a public health framework.

### The link between alcohol advertising and alcohol-related harm

Alcohol-use is shaped by a range of interconnected factors, including psychological, social-behavioural and environmental influences. Within this broader context, alcohol advertising is an important commercial driver of consumption that can shape perceptions, attitudes, norms and drinking behaviours.<sup>23</sup>

Exposure to alcohol marketing shapes people's perceptions of alcohol (including whether it is harmful), associations with specific alcohol types or brands, as well as their intention to drink.<sup>24</sup> Alcohol advertising has been found to be important in sustaining a cultural environment in which drinking is seen as normal or favourable;<sup>25</sup> higher alcohol advertising exposure is associated with increased drinking initiation;<sup>26</sup> and health claims on alcohol products (such as "low-carb") are effective at shaping consumers' perceptions of specific alcohol products for example, viewing drinking alcohol products that make health claims as more justified or healthier.<sup>27</sup>

Greater overall exposure to alcohol marketing is associated with stronger impacts on drinking behaviour, and those impacts are amplified when consumers are reached across multiple formats and channels. For example, a systematic review of alcohol exposure found clear associations between alcohol advertising exposure and subsequent binge drinking.<sup>13</sup> Another large US study found a positive association between binge drinking and exposure to different formats of alcohol advertising including television, internet, alcohol branded merchandise, and alcohol product placement in film.<sup>27</sup> Scottish research has shown brand recognition and association is an important factor in determining hazardous drinking among adolescents.<sup>28</sup>

Exposure to alcohol marketing has been consistently linked to earlier initiation of drinking, increased likelihood of alcohol use, and increased risk of alcohol-related harm. The evidence base is sufficient to demonstrate a direct causal relationship between advertising exposure and drinking behaviours among young people.<sup>7</sup> This is supported by multiple systematic reviews, and evidence showing children as young as 12 are able to recognise multiple alcohol brands and possess associations and attitudes toward specific alcohol products and brands.<sup>6, 28, 29</sup>

While advertising is not the only factor influencing alcohol consumption or related harm, the evidence is clear that marketing plays an important and determinative role in shaping attitudes, normalising use and influencing purchasing and drinking behaviours. The scale of industry investment in advertising and promotion – and its consistent preference for self-regulatory arrangements – further underscores the commercial value and behavioural impact of alcohol marketing at the population level.

### The operation and outcomes of current Free TV Code provisions

A substantial body of Australian research has examined alcohol advertising on television over the past two decades. While studies have used different methods and measures – including content analysis, advertising volume, placement during children's viewing times, and audience exposure – the findings are consistent: the current regulatory framework is not sufficient to meaningfully limit exposure to alcohol marketing, particularly for children and young people.

Studies looking at alcohol advertising have found:

- Up to half of all alcohol ads are broadcast during children's viewing times, and commonly portray alcohol consumption as fun, social and inexpensive.<sup>30</sup>
  - Children aged 0-12 years experience one-third of adult exposure to advertising, while adolescent aged 13-17 years experience the same exposure as young adults (18-24 years).<sup>31</sup>
  - Alcohol ads commonly contain at least two features known to appeal to children.<sup>31</sup>
  - Current time-based restrictions are ineffective at reducing children's exposure to alcohol advertising in both sports and non-sports programming.<sup>32</sup>
- Longitudinal studies have linked children and adolescent exposure to alcohol advertising to long-term consumption patterns.<sup>33</sup>
- Viewers in Australia's five largest cities were exposed to an average of 75 minutes of alcohol advertising per week, with half of that occurring in children's viewing times and half of alcohol ads broadcast during sports programs were shown during or immediately adjacent to children's viewing times.<sup>34</sup>

The Free TV Code contains exemptions to restrictions on alcohol advertising, most notably in relation to sport broadcasts. Research has shown these exemptions allow alcohol advertisers to circumvent age-related restrictions and access demographics that are supposed to be protected by the code. One study of AFL and NRL broadcasts over the course of a year found children and adolescents received 51 million exposures to alcohol advertisements, with 47% of this occurring during the daytime.<sup>35</sup>

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that the Free TV Code has not been effective at controlling exposure to alcohol advertising. In fact, exemptions in the Free TV Code appear to have facilitated the alcohol industry's circumvention of the Code's restrictions through sport and family viewing periods. More broadly, overall exposure remains high and inconsistent with a public health approach to regulating a harmful product.

In the ADF's view, alcohol advertising on television should be phased out entirely in line with a public health approach to regulating harmful products. However, recognising the scope of the current inquiry and the practical realities of reform, the ADF recommends that ACMA develop and introduce a binding standard for alcohol advertising on television that is independent and free from influence by the alcohol and commercial television industries.

At a minimum, this standard should:

- **remove sports broadcast exemptions** that permit alcohol advertising during times when children are likely to be watching;
- **expand children's viewing times** so they reflect contemporary viewing patterns and apply without exception; and
- **replace reliance on industry self-regulation** with independent oversight and enforceable compliance mechanisms.

#### *A note on the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code*

The Free TV Code directs many alcohol advertising matters, such as complaints, to the Australian Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) Scheme, another industry-created and administered system. This reliance on self-regulation weakens the effectiveness of the overall framework, as the applicable standards, thresholds and enforcement mechanisms are not designed to provide robust independent oversight.

For example, ABAC's audience threshold for certain rules relating to children's exposure requires children to comprise more than 20% of the total audience (based on projections) before compliance is required. In practice, this approach exempts many family-oriented and sporting programs that attract large numbers of child viewers but have majority adult audiences simply because adults are also watching.

A review (conducted by the author of this submission) of published ABAC adjudications between January 2025 to April 2026 found most complaints were dismissed. Of eleven adjudications relating to alcohol advertising in free-to-air/digital broadcast reviewed, ten were dismissed with seven citing the 80/20 rule as reason for dismissal.

Even where complaints are upheld, enforcement outcomes are minimal: outcomes are limited to requests for compliance or modification. In some cases, the advertising campaign has already concluded by the time a determination is made, rendering any deterrent effect or consumer protection void.

Replacing industry self-regulation with a legislative framework, including an independent complaints mechanism, impartial adjudication and enforceable penalties, would strengthen oversight and create meaningful deterrence against breaches of alcohol advertising rules.

#### The economic contribution of alcohol advertising on commercial TV



While precise and up-to-date figures are limited, publicly reported Nielsen data cited in industry media suggests the Australian alcohol industry has consistently spent more than \$100 million annually (across all advertising channels, not just free-to-air broadcast).<sup>36</sup> Recent analysis of commercial television advertising revenue for the major free-to-air television networks routinely exceeds \$1 billion per network, with alcohol advertising accounting for between 1.4% to 2% of total annual revenue for commercial television networks.<sup>34</sup> This indicates that broadcaster reliance on alcohol advertising income is limited.

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Any reduction in broadcaster income from alcohol advertising is likely to be offset, at least in part, by replacement advertisers from other sectors seeking access to the same audiences and timeslots. If restrictions are introduced in, for example, sports broadcasts, some advertising expenditure may shift to other timeslots of media channels where regulation is weaker.<sup>37</sup> This underscores the need for comprehensive reform across platforms, while also highlighting that the financial impact of increased regulation is likely to be modest.

More broadly, because alcohol advertising contributes to alcohol consumption, which generates substantial economic costs, any claimed economic benefits of advertising must be weighed against its downstream impacts on productivity, health systems, community safety and social wellbeing. In contrast, any short-term reduction in advertising-related activity due to increased regulation is likely to be offset by the medium- and long-term benefits of reduced alcohol consumption and related harm. Recognition of the economic costs of tobacco use was a key driver of Australia's world-leading tobacco control reforms, including progressive restrictions and eventual bans on advertising.

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## Other issues identified in the Terms of Reference

The ADF provides brief comments on the following matters, which sit outside the direct scope of the Free TV Code but were identified in the Terms of Reference. While these issues are not governed by the Free TV Code, they are relevant to the broader alcohol advertising environment and warrant consideration in future regulatory reform.

### Sponsored collaborations within programming

Sponsored collaborations embedded within programming are a significant regulatory gap in the current free-to-air television framework. These arrangements are often integrated into programming, presented as news, lifestyle, entertainment or informational content, obscuring their commercial and promotional purpose.

This form of alcohol promotion appears across a range of commercial television formats, particularly breakfast television, current affairs and sport-entertainment programming. Examples include segments promoting low- or no-alcohol products, alcohol-related content framed as lifestyle advice, promotion of an alcohol-based event (e.g. Oktoberfest), features on celebrity-owned alcohol brands, and alcohol-branded integrations of sport-themed panel shows (e.g. studio settings that mimic a pub).

While these programs may not be expressly directed to children, many are broadcast during times when children are likely to be watching television and when conventional alcohol advertising would otherwise be restricted. The promotional impact of this content is further extended when clips are republished through broadcaster video-on-demand services, social media platforms and other digital channels.

In effect, sponsored collaborations can enable alcohol marketing to reach audiences through programming content in circumstances where equivalent paid advertisements would be banned. This undermines the intent of existing safeguards and highlights the need for clearer rules that apply to paid

promotional content regardless of format or presentation style. Even a limited desktop search by ADF staff identified multiple distinct examples sponsored collaborations with alcohol brands and companies on commercial breakfast and current affairs programs (aired primarily within children's viewing times).

ACMA should develop a dedicated, enforceable standard that includes regulation of sponsored collaborations featuring alcohol products or products mimicking alcohol during children's viewing times.

### In-stadia advertising and alcohol branding in sport

The alcohol industry uses sport to normalise their products and legitimise their brands through association with healthy, family-oriented activities, sporting success, and high-profile athletes.<sup>34</sup> Existing broadcast exemptions allow alcohol promotion during live sport, including at times when children are likely to be watching. These dynamics extend beyond conventional advertising breaks on free-to-air broadcast to in-stadia advertising and alcohol branding on team uniforms and merchandise.

In-stadia signage, digital perimeter boards, field-of-play logos and branding displayed on jerseys embed alcohol marketing directly within the sporting spectacle itself. Unlike conventional advertisements, these promotions are integrated into the event and may be repeatedly visible throughout broadcasts, highlights packages, replays, news coverage and social media clips. Branding on jerseys is particularly prominent, placing alcohol logos directly on athletes who may be viewed by children and young people as role models.

The ADF therefore recommends reform to restrict alcohol advertising during sports broadcasts as well as within other professional sporting contexts such as in-stadia advertising (static and digital signage), field-of-play branding, and jersey signage. This would see alcohol treated consistently with other harmful products such as tobacco and recently introduced restrictions on gambling. It is important that, while stronger regulation is pursued across other advertising media, ACMA plays an important role in regulating free-to-air television. We need complementary and intersecting regulation across different advertising media to meaningfully reduce population-level exposure to alcohol advertising.

### Video-on-demand services

Video-on-demand (VOD) services – including subscription video-on-demand platforms, advertising-based video-on-demand services and broadcaster video-on-demand services – now form a central part of Australia's media environment.

The regulation of VOD services is a complex and evolving policy challenge. These services operate across multiple models, technologies and jurisdictions, raising distinct regulatory issues and challenges. Effective oversight is further complicated by the global scale and market power of major digital platforms, many of which operate across borders, command dominant audience shares and can limit or circumvent the effectiveness of national regulatory approaches. As a result, they remain subject to fragmented and comparatively weak regulation in relation to advertising standards.

#### *Broadcaster video-on-demand*

Broadcaster video-on-demand (BVOD) services are digital platforms owned by traditional broadcasters that allow viewers to stream broadcast content on demand (such as 7+ and 10Play). In Australia, digital broadcaster channels are excluded from regulation under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* through the *Broadcasting Services ("Broadcasting Service" Definition – Exclusion) Determination 2022*, first introduced in the early 2000s and recently renewed in 2022.

The effect is that content provided by the same broadcaster may be subject to different regulatory settings depending on whether it is viewed via a traditional free-to-air channel or through the



broadcaster's digital platform. This creates inconsistency in audience protections and weakens the overall effectiveness of the regulatory framework.

The ADF recommends that the Australian Government not renew the current exclusion when it is due to expire in 2027. This would bring BVOD services under ACMA's regulatory scope, while providing major broadcasters with a reasonable transition period to ensure their digital services are brought into alignment with the standards and obligations that apply under the Act.

### *Subscription video-on-demand*

Subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services such as Netflix and Disney+ now account for a substantial and growing share of television and video consumption, in many cases exceeding traditional free-to-air viewing. Because content is accessed on demand, conventional regulatory tools are less effective in this environment.

In response, many providers have relied on parental controls, profile settings and child accounts to manage access to content and advertising. While these tools may assist some households, they should complement – not replace – baseline regulatory protections that apply across the service as a whole.

Subscription television services have been subject to the *Subscription Television Code of Practice 2013*,<sup>38</sup> however, this framework has narrow standards, inconsistent transparency, limited oversight and weak enforcement mechanisms. Legislative reforms introduced in 2025 expanded ACMA's regulatory remit in relation to subscription services, although they did not specifically address alcohol advertising.<sup>1</sup>

The ADF recommends that, as part of the independent standard we recommend ACMA develop, that subscription television services are covered by this.

### *Advertising-based video-on-demand*

Advertising-based video-on-demand (AVOD) services include platforms and channels funded wholly or partly through advertising revenue, including major social media and video-sharing services such as YouTube. These services are a significant source of media consumption for young people and a major pathway through which audiences may be exposed to alcohol marketing.<sup>39</sup>

The ADF is particularly concerned about the scale and sophistication of alcohol advertising in these environments, where advertising can be personalised, embedded within influencer content, algorithmically promoted, and encountered repeatedly across multiple formats. Young people may be exposed to substantial volumes of alcohol promotion that are not subject to equivalent controls or oversight as those applying in traditional broadcast settings.

The Australian Government has recently introduced reforms, including restrictions relating to under-16 access to social media platforms, intended to address some of the broader risks children face online. While the ADF supports efforts to strengthen protections for children in digital environments, it remains to be seen how effective these measures will be in practice. In any event, older adolescents and young adults continue to face high levels of exposure to alcohol advertising online.<sup>39</sup>

The regulation of alcohol advertising on AVOD and social media platforms raises complex legal, technological and jurisdictional issues that extend beyond the scope of this submission. Nevertheless, the ADF supports further reform to establish effective controls on alcohol advertising in these environments and to ensure digital platforms are subject to stronger public interest safeguards.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Communications Legislation Amendment (Australian Content Requirement for Subscription Video On Demand (Streaming) Services) Act 2025*.

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## Conclusion

Given the significant and well-established harms associated with alcohol, and the clear role that advertising plays in shaping attitudes, normalising consumption and influencing behaviour, particularly among children and young people, the current regulatory settings are not sufficient. The status quo allows substantial exposure to alcohol marketing across broadcast and adjacent media environments despite the known risks associated with it.

Ideally, the ADF would like to see alcohol advertising banned across all television media. However, within the scope of this consultation, the ADF recommends ACMA develop an independent standard for alcohol advertising on television (both free-to-air and subscription). At minimum, this should:

- remove exemptions permitting alcohol advertising during live and non-live sports broadcasts during children's viewing times;
- expand children's viewing times so they more accurately reflect when children are likely to be watching free-to-air television;
- subject sponsored partnerships involving alcohol and products mimicking alcohol to the same standards as other alcohol advertising;
- introduce obligations on broadcasters to ensure that free-to-air content made available through digital channels is also appropriate for child audience;
- ensure standards apply to subscription video-on-demand services;
- ensure the operation and administration of the standard is independent, meaningfully enforceable, and informed by public health evidence.

Beyond the Free TV Code, more comprehensive reform of alcohol advertising is required. The ADF encourages ACMA and the Australian Government to work together on legislative reforms that see alcohol advertising on television prohibited as part of broader reforms prohibiting the advertising of alcohol across other types of media such as outdoor signage, in-stadia advertising, and social media.

Thank you for consulting with the Alcohol and Drug Foundation. Should you wish to meet to discuss the above matters, please contact Dr James Petty on [james.petty@adf.org.au](mailto:james.petty@adf.org.au).

Yours sincerely,

Dr James Petty

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