

ASA System briefing note on alcohol advertising

A note for policymakers



Background

The UK Advertising Codes contain general rules that require all ads are responsible. And, recognising their inexperience, vulnerability and credulity, we have strict rules dedicated to protecting young and vulnerable people from potential ad related harms. This includes specific rules for age-restricted products such as alcohol.

Against a backdrop of increasing public policy and societal concern about underage, binge drinking and associated anti-social behaviour, in 2005 the ASA system strengthened the existing alcohol rules in the Advertising Codes.

Changes to the TV rules sought to prevent alcohol advertising having a strong appeal to "under 18s" particularly with the intention of protecting the young in the four areas where they may be considered vulnerable to alcohol misuse: sexual behaviour, immoderate drinking, youth appeal and anti-social behaviour. And, while advertisers have always been expected to portray their alcoholic products responsibly, the changes tightened the ASA's position. The rules now state explicitly that they apply irrespective of whether alcohol is shown or seen being consumed.

Alcohol ads were already prohibited from appearing in or around children's TV programmes, on dedicated children's channels or programmes likely to have a particular appeal to children. And alcohol ads were prohibited in media, including online, aimed at those under 18, or where more than 25% of the audience is under 18.

Crucially, our rules are designed to appropriately limit children's exposure to alcohol ads rather than to prohibit children from ever seeing them. Such a restriction would, in our expert view, entail a level of media restriction out of proportion with the evidence of potential harms arising from alcohol advertising.

Where children do see alcohol ads, our strict content rules prohibit the ads from containing anything that is likely to inappropriately appeal to under-18s whether through content or context. Our content rules also protect vulnerable adults, for example by banning the condoning or encouragement of immoderate, irresponsible or anti-social drinking.

We consider it is a legitimate regulatory objective to seek to minimise children's exposure to age-restricted ads generally, including alcohol. Age-restricted ads are those for products subject to legal restrictions on their sale to people of a specified age (under-16/18) or where there is another policy basis (e.g. public health) for limiting the protected age group's exposure.

We respond quickly and effectively to consumer complaints, banning ads on the infrequent occasions when the rules are broken. And we have rebalanced our regulation, shifting away from complaints-led investigations towards front-foot ASA-led tech-assisted monitoring and enforcement action.

The ASA continues to work with the alcohol sector, through educational events and training seminars, to maintain high rates of compliance with the rules. And we continue to assess the evidence base around the potential for alcohol advertising related harms to ensure our rules continue to provide effective protections.

The alcohol advertising rules

In summary, our alcohol advertising rules prohibit ads from:

- Being likely to appeal particularly/strongly to people under 18, especially by reflecting or being associated with youth culture
- Featuring or portraying real or fictitious characters who are likely to appeal particularly to people under 18 in a way that might encourage the young to drink
- Showing people who are or seem to be under 25 drinking playing a significant role in the ad
- Linking alcohol with seduction, sexual activity or sexual success or implying that alcohol can enhance attractiveness
- Implying that drinking alcohol is a key component of the success of a personal relationship or social event
- Implying that alcohol might be indispensable or take priority in life or that drinking alcohol can overcome boredom, loneliness or other problems
- Featuring alcohol being handled or served irresponsibly

Scheduling, placement and targeting

The Codes are designed to appropriately limit children's exposure to alcohol ads.

On TV alcohol cannot be advertised in or adjacent to programmes commissioned for, principally directed at or likely to appeal particularly to audiences below the age of 18. Channels devoted to children's programmes, or where the generality of the programme content might reasonably be expected to appeal particularly to children, are not at any time allowed to carry alcohol ads.

In non-broadcast media alcohol ads must not be directed at people under 18 through the selection of media or the context in which they appear. And alcohol ads cannot appear in dedicated children's media, including on websites or social media, or where under-18s make up 25% of the audience.

Online, we expect advertisers to employ age-targeting and interest-based targeting tools to keep alcohol ads away from children's media entirely and to reduce their exposure to alcohol ads in mixed-age environments.

We have an array of resources for advertisers to help them produce alcohol ads that are responsible and targeted appropriately. Our [Advertising Guidance on 'Age-restricted ads online'](#) provides principles, tools and checklists to help advertisers ensure they have taken adequate steps when targeting their alcohol ads.



Monitoring and enforcement

We actively monitor children's exposure to alcohol ads and compliance with the rules across media, including online. This helps us identify trends and ensure our tough scheduling and targeting restrictions are working to limit appropriately children's exposure to them.

We have published reports over several years that reveal children are seeing fewer ads for alcohol products on TV, in a continuing downward trend. Our monitoring shows that **under-16s exposure to TV ads for alcohol has decreased by three quarters since 2010**.

Our [most recent report](#) (May 2024) reveals that overall, between 2010 and 2023:

- Children's exposure to alcohol advertising on TV reduced from an average of 3.2 ads per week in 2010 to 0.7 ads per week in 2023, and children saw on average around one alcohol ad on TV for every six seen by adults in 2023.
- Exposure to alcohol TV ads was broadly consistent across the nations, ranging from 1.2 ads per week in Northern Ireland to 0.7 ads per week in England, Scotland, and Wales.

It also reveals that, at a UK level:

- Children's exposure to alcohol ads relative to adults has fallen from a peak of 39.9% in 2010 to 16.4% in 2023.

Online

We know, of course, that a lot of the continued decline in children's exposure to TV ads is down to changing media habits, which is why we are also continuing to conduct proactive project work looking at what ads they are seeing online.

Harnessing innovative technology and undertaking world-leading regulatory initiatives, including:

- [Avatar software technology](#) (online profiles which simulate children's browsing activity)
- Web scraping tools to deliver [CCTV-style scrutiny](#) of online ads
- Mobile phone metering software ([The 100 Children Report](#))

Enables us to monitor alcohol and other age-restricted ads online to identify the minority that, in breach of our rules, are placed on websites and YouTube channels disproportionately popular with children or that are served to the social media accounts of children who are age-registered as 17 or younger. This is backed by effective follow-up enforcement action.

Our 100 Children Report provided us with a fascinating insight into UK children's real-world mobile phone and tablet use, the platforms and sites they visit and the ads they're exposed to. Where we identified potential problems, we followed-up with advertisers and platforms to secure remedial action and assurances of future compliance.

And we have launched [a groundbreaking project](#) aimed at better understanding where responsibility lies for inappropriately targeted and irresponsible ads that appear online. We are using technology to monitor for ads for age-restricted products, including alcohol, on sites of particular interest to under-18s. We will use our findings to identify the parties involved in the supplier pathway of non-compliant ads, assessing the part played by the advertiser, the publisher and the intermediary companies that sit between them.

Key alcohol rulings

Global Brands Ltd: A TikTok ad for alcohol was not appropriately targeted, irresponsibly condoned excessive drinking and featured individuals under the age of 25.

Brown-Forman Beverages Europe Ltd t/a Jack Daniel's: A poster irresponsibly implied that drinking alcohol could overcome boredom and promoted adopting unwise drinking styles.

Au Vodka Ltd: Instagram posts irresponsibly referred to aggressive behaviour, linked alcohol with illicit drugs and tough and daring behaviour.

Litty Liquor: Posts on an alcohol brand's Instagram account broke our rules by featuring the rapper ArrDee who is under 25 years of age and encouraged excessive and irresponsible consumption of alcohol.

DrunkH Ltd: A paid-for ad on Instagram and a website that promoted a drinking card game encouraged irresponsible or anti-social behaviour, portrayed drinking alcohol as a challenge and was inappropriately targeted at people under 18 years of age.