

## Summary and ABAC response to Community Standards Research

### Introduction

JWS Research undertook quantitative research in June to July 2021 to explore current public perceptions of alcohol marketing and whether decisions made by the ABAC Complaints Panel align with the 'reasonable person'. This market research was similar, but more expansive than prior quantitative research undertaken in 2013 and 2017.

An on-line survey of 1500 people (nationally representative of Australian adults) tested 14 alcohol marketing communications that had been subject to consideration by the ABAC Complaints Panel.

Of the 14 alcohol marketing communications tested, 8 complaints had been upheld, while 6 had been dismissed, by the Complaints Panel. The marketing was assessed on both an unprompted basis and then against the relevant ABAC Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code ('Code') standards

### Key Insights

- Prior to being exposed to the Code, only 2 of the 14 marketing communications were considered unacceptable by a majority of respondents while the ABAC Complaints Panel found 8 of the marketing communications to be unacceptable.
- After being exposed to the Code, there was closer agreement between respondents and ABAC Complaints Panel decisions, indicating that Panel decisions align with, or are more conservative than, the views of a 'reasonable person'. In particular, it was found that the Complaints Panel had:
  - Correctly dismissed complaints about 6 advertisements/packaging that a majority of the community believed did not breach ABAC standards (alignment with the community).
  - Correctly upheld complaints against 5 advertisements/packaging that a majority of the community believed were in breach of ABAC standards (alignment with the community).
  - Conservatively upheld complaints against 2 advertisements on which the community was borderline on whether there was a breach of ABAC standards (49% and 52%) (alignment with the community).
  - Conservatively upheld a complaint against 1 advertisement that a majority of the community believed was acceptable and did not breach the ABAC standard.
- Most respondents (60%) said they have had no concerns about alcohol advertising, labelling or packaging over the last 12 months. Less than a third (29%) say they are concerned, with only 7% 'very concerned'.
- The Code's content standards appear to reflect community expectations for alcohol marketing and in some cases, appear to be more conservative. Of the 24% of people that said they had read, seen or heard something about alcohol advertising, packaging or labelling in the last 12 months that concerned them, their main concerns are already covered by the Code. There is strong support for current ABAC restrictions around the promotion of alcohol to people under 18.

- Among the few who are concerned or offended about advertising standards on any issue, only 15% complained. The main reasons for not complaining were the perception that nothing will happen, lack of awareness of avenues for lodging complaints and a lack of knowledge about the process.
- Awareness of Ad Standards, ABAC and the Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code is not widespread. Just over a third (35%) of people were aware they can complain to Ad Standards about alcohol advertising. Awareness of ABAC and/or the Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code was lower at 17%.
- Familiarity with unusual alcohol terms used for emerging alcohol categories was low.

#### ABAC Response to the Research

- ABAC notes that the unprompted assessment of the 14 marketing communications (2 of the 14 were found to be unacceptable) against the decisions of the Complaints Panel (8 of the 14 complaints were upheld) is generally reflective of the high standards set by the Code for alcohol marketing.
- ABAC was pleased to see almost full alignment between Complaints Panel decisions and community standards, with the Complaints Panel continuing to be more conservative than the community on both an unprompted and informed basis. The ABAC Management Committee has no intention of lowering the high standards set by the Code for alcohol marketing in Australia.
- ABAC notes that a majority of the respondents had no concerns about alcohol advertising, labelling or packaging over the last 12 months, with only 16% of respondents rating alcohol advertising as an issue of significant concern.
- ABAC notes that awareness of Ad Standards, ABAC and the Code is not widespread and that a portion of people concerned about an alcohol marketing communication do not complain.
- ABAC will utilise the research insights to assist in its periodic reviews and ongoing evaluation of the Code standards and the ABAC Scheme.

#### Background

- The ABAC Scheme is a key part of Australia's system for responsible alcohol marketing and is administered by a management committee which includes industry, advertising and government representatives.
- The ABAC Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code regulates the content and placement of alcohol marketing (including packaging) in Australia. Subject to regular reviews, the Code reflects community expectations and changes in the media and advertising industries.
- The ABAC Pre-vetting Service provides independent, confidential advice to companies on whether proposed marketing communications comply with the Code. This service is offered on a 'user pays' basis.
- The ABAC Adjudication Panel, headed by the Chief Adjudicator, Professor the Hon Michael Lavarch AO, considers public complaints about alcohol marketing communications that fall within the jurisdiction of the Code. The Panel and its deliberations are independent of the Management Committee and the broader alcohol and advertising industry.
- In 2021, alcohol complaints represented 6% of all marketing complaints received by Ad Standards.