



## SHAAP RESEARCH BRIEFING

### ***“ROUTES TO MAGIC”*: the alcoholic beverage industry’s use of new media in alcohol marketing**

#### **1. Background**

This research briefing summarises the findings of a research study undertaken by Dr Oona Brooks, the Institute for Social Marketing, at the University of Stirling and the Open University on behalf of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP). The report examines the use of new media to market leading alcohol brands in the UK. The full report is available from [www.shaap.org.uk](http://www.shaap.org.uk).

#### **2. Methodology**

Four brands – WKD, Lambrini, Smirnoff and Carling<sup>i</sup> were selected<sup>i</sup> for in-depth analysis of two aspects of their new media marketing activities – brand websites and social networking sites. These two channels were selected for scrutiny as brand websites and non-paid for space in social networking sites are currently beyond the remit of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). The nature and content of new media advertising used for the four alcohol brands on these two marketing channels was documented and reviewed against the CAP Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing Code in relation to alcohol.

#### **3. Summary of Main Findings**

- All four alcohol brand websites contain material which clearly contravenes the spirit of the CAP Codes on advertising.
- The official pages of three of the four alcohol brands on social networking sites also contain material which contravenes the spirit of CAP Codes on advertising.
- Effectiveness of age verification processes is questionable since there is nothing to prevent underage users from entering a fictitious date of birth.
- Alcohol television adverts which have been banned by the ASA from television broadcast can be found on video sharing sites such as Youtube.
- Television adverts for alcohol brands streamed on Youtube are frequently cited as being most popular with 13- 17 year olds.
- Viral marketing campaigns are used by alcohol producers to encourage consumers to adopt brand values and distribute these messages within their social networks.

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<sup>i</sup> Brands were drawn from the sample chosen by the UK Health Select Committee on Alcohol for its 2009 investigation on the basis that they represent leading brands from a cross-section of drink sectors.

- The cumulative impact of such an extensive range of marketing communications has the potential to contribute to the normalisation of excessive alcohol consumption.
- Self-regulatory codes which focus primarily on *content* rather than *volume* are ineffective as both the volume *and* content of alcohol advertising must be addressed.
- Consumers develop their own alcohol brand related pages and groups on social networking sites, often using branded images provided by alcohol producers to celebrate irresponsible, excessive and underage consumption.

Overall, the research found that the use of social networking sites to promote alcohol is a matter of serious concern due to the youth appeal of these sites, the difficulties associated with enforcing age restrictions, the relative lack of regulation and the sheer volume of promotional messages. The extensive use of new media to market alcohol represents a proliferation of alcohol branded messages directed at consumers. Of particular concern, is the extent to which much of the material contained within both the alcohol brand websites and social networking sites contravenes the spirit of the CAP Codes on alcohol advertising by:-

- appealing to youth, social success, masculinity and femininity (WKD, Lambrini)
- suggesting that alcohol might be indispensable (Smirnoff) and that the success of a social occasion depends upon alcohol (Smirnoff, Lambrini)
- suggesting that alcohol can enhance mood (Lambrini)
- linking alcoholic drinks to sexual success (WKD)
- suggesting that alcohol can enhance sporting achievements (Carling).

#### **4. Recommendations**

SHAAP is calling on the four governments of the UK to:-

- Subject alcohol brand websites to CAP Codes and all online alcohol adverts to a pre-vetting process in keeping with broadcast adverts with immediate effect.
- Move towards ending self-regulation - regulation should be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries.
- Move towards a complete ban on alcohol promotion on social networking sites.
- Involve young people in the process of regulation given the rapidly evolving nature of new media.

#### **5. Alcohol Related Harm**

In the UK, alcohol consumption has more than doubled in the past 60 years, with a notable increase occurring since the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Over a third (37%) of those over the age of 16 now report consumption levels which exceed the UK

recommended guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Increased alcohol consumption has brought about a corresponding increase in alcohol related harm and significant concern exists in the UK about high levels of consumption in terms of the detrimental effect for health<sup>3</sup> and social order.<sup>4</sup> Concern exists in relation to increasing levels of consumption amongst young people and a 'culture of intoxication'.<sup>5</sup> There is a growing body of evidence which highlights the particularly detrimental effects of alcohol on young people's mental health<sup>6</sup> and physical development<sup>7</sup> coupled with increased risk of harms such as violence, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>8</sup>

## **6. Concern about Alcohol Marketing**

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between advertising and young people's attitudes, knowledge and behaviour in relation to alcohol. Three systematic reviews of this evidence all point to links between marketing communications and young peoples' drinking behaviours.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup> More specifically, this work indicates that alcohol advertising and promotion increases both the likelihood that adolescents will start to drink and the amount that they will drink if they already consume alcohol. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends placing restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship as part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol.<sup>12</sup>

## **7. Regulation**

In the UK, the promotion of alcohol is regulated primarily by rules which govern the *content*, rather than the *volume* of alcohol advertisements. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK self-regulatory body responsible for maintaining standards in advertising, as laid down in the advertising codes (CAP Codes). The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) represents the main industry bodies including advertisers, agencies and media owners. Stricter advertising rules were introduced in 2005 aimed at preventing advertisers from associating alcohol with youth culture, irresponsible behaviour, seduction, sexual activity, or sexual success.<sup>13</sup> The use of new media for marketing activities is regulated by the British Code of Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing. The editorial content of company websites, pages on social networking sites and personal emails are beyond the remit of the ASA. The alcohol-industry funded organisation the Portman Group has published guidelines for alcohol companies on digital media which apply to any internet communication used by a drinks producer to promote an alcoholic drink, which falls outwith the remit of the ASA and associated CAP Code. Recent research highlights the inadequacies of the system of self-regulation, suggesting that it is vulnerable to exploitation by alcohol producers and their advertising agencies.<sup>14</sup>

## **8. New Media**

It is estimated that the UK alcohol industry spends as much as £800 million a year on marketing communications to promote the sale of alcohol.<sup>15</sup> There has been a rapid growth in the use of new media to market alcohol in recent years with online advertising expenditure in the UK reported to be overtaking television advertising expenditure.<sup>16</sup> Beattie McGuinness Bungay (BMB), an advertising

agency whose clients include Carling and Diageo, have described digital marketing as *"routes to magic"*.<sup>17</sup> Channels such as text messaging, social networking and blogging sites are recognised as having particular appeal to young people, yet this is an area which presents particular challenges to the current system of self-regulation.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that new media is not simply replacing traditional media marketing channels, rather it compliments and extends the existing channels. The opportunity to utilise viral marketing techniques is another key factor in the appeal of new media. Viral marketing involves targeting consumers who are likely to pass on brand messages to other potential consumers within their social network via e-mail or social networking sites.

## 9. Social Networking

Social networking has grown rapidly in recent years and is now recognised as part of mainstream culture.<sup>19</sup> Facebook, Bebo and YouTube are the three most popular networking sites in the UK.<sup>20</sup> Research suggests that online social networking is considered an important part of youth culture which facilitates participation in a peer network and the development of social identity.<sup>21</sup> Companies can buy advertising space on these sites and use free features of the site to promote their products. By setting up a 'page' on a social networking site, alcohol producers can promote their products free of charge and encourage users to become 'fans' on their pages. Users can also set up alcohol-related 'groups' on social networking sites, generating comments, uploading photos and videos and inviting friends to join their groups.

## 10. Findings

### a) WKD

The home page of the WKD website is dominated by images of the fictional 'lad' characters Kev and Dave. They are featured in a student flat with a television showing football and an accompanying audio stream with statements such as *"have a butchers at some Irish footy"*. These characters appear to appeal to both youth culture and masculinity in direct contravention of the CAP Codes. WKD website users are provided with alcohol branded material which allows them to generate alcohol branded content on social networking sites. There are 13,000 WKD groups and pages on Facebook, the vast majority user-generated although it should be noted that with all four brands, it was often difficult to distinguish between official and user-generated content on social networking sites. The official 'WKD Ireland' page on Facebook contains posts relating to WKD promotional giveaways and events:-

WKD Ireland: *Anyone want a WKD Horny Hat? We have TEN to give you lovely people! Who could refuse this chick magnet?!!*

A 'fan' asks for a WKD hat to be sent out since they have freshers week starting the following week.

WKD Ireland: *"Of course you can. Crazy freshers are what these hats are MADE for!!!.....Post us a pic of you wearing it too!!!."*<sup>22</sup>

The largest group on Bebo, called 'Lovers of WKD' is user generated and has 77,703 members. Although age is not always given in a member's profile, where it is given, several members are under 18. Photographs of members would also suggest that a significant number may be under 18, and images of children in school uniforms are included as members.

#### **b) Lambrini**

Key themes highlighted in the Lambrini website are the brand values of good times, fun, being carefree and female with visitors encouraged to 'do the Lambrini' - a jump style dance created by Lambrini for use in a television advertising campaign. Lambrini branded materials can be downloaded and passed on to friends and can also be used to generate content on social networking sites. The CAP Code states that alcohol advertising must not suggest that alcohol can enhance femininity, the success of a social event or mood. However, the official Lambrini page on Facebook states that:

*"The Lambrini brand is all about a celebration of being female, carefree and up for some fun. It stands for good times with friends and making the most of life....Available in a cute 275ml bottle, standard 75cl and whopping 150cl magnum, there is a bottle to suit every occasion".<sup>23</sup>*

Users of Bebo can access video clips of the 'Do the Lambrini' television advert and a range of self filmed video-clips with titles such as *"Down a bottle of Lambrini in 3 mins"*. The most popular Lambrini video-clip on YouTube (81,386 views) features the 'Do the Lambrini' television advert and this clip is most popular with 13-17 year old girls (followed by 35-44 and 45-54 year old men). Youtube also features self-filmed videos of users 'doing the Lambrini' including some which use the strapline *Lambrini girls just wanna have fun* - a strapline which Lambrini is no longer allowed to use since it breeches CAP Codes in relation to youth appeal. The self filmed video-clips offer a clear example of the viral marketing process whereby consumers pass on brand values to their peers.

#### **c) Smirnoff**

Visitors to the Smirnoff website are encouraged to access a wide range of information including downloading music videos at 'Smirnoff Experience' music events. The CAP Code prohibits advertising from making the suggestion that alcohol is indispensable or that the success of a social occasion is dependent on alcohol, yet the promotion of the 'Smirnoff Experience' positions the Smirnoff brand as an important feature of a successful night out. This is also apparent on the Smirnoff GB official page on Facebook which is described as *"home to all the latest news on one-of-kind experiences happening around the country"*. Particular emphasis is given to publicising 'Smirnoff Experience' events which usually take the form of Smirnoff sponsored live music events with youth appeal. Users are encouraged to enter dialogue with the Smirnoff brand although, as with the other alcohol brands, it is not clear who is responsible for posting prompts and questions (*"Who are the hot new bands you're listening to at the moment?"*) on behalf of Smirnoff. Fans of Smirnoff GB can invite their friends to become fans of this brand page but there is no information to suggest that

invited friends should be over the age of 18. Users can also view photographs from Smirnoff sponsored events uploaded by Smirnoff GB or upload their own photographs and post comments about the photographs. One comment accompanying a photograph posted by a user reads:

*"Yea nice one Smirnoff, can you now pay for the steel filter that I need to replace my liver?"<sup>24</sup>*

Using the term 'Smirnoff' to search for groups Facebook generates over 500 results. The groups listed include groups with names such as 'Addicted to Smirnoff' with 833 members and 'Smirnoff is my life!!!!' with 233 members. Video clips of Smirnoff television adverts posted by users can also be found on Youtube including adverts for Smirnoff Ice, featuring 'Uri', despite these adverts being banned by the ASA due to their youth appeal.<sup>25</sup>

#### **d) Carling**

As with the other three brand websites, the Carling website features an extensive range of promotional material and interactive features to appeal to users with the homepage asserting *"Whether it's beer, football, music or entertainment you're here for, we've got the lot"*.<sup>26</sup> The Carling website is strongly associated with football, despite the CAP Codes stipulating that marketing communications should not suggest that alcohol can enhance sporting achievements. Visitors are encouraged to register with the 'One-All Amateur Football Community' which enables them to create a free website for their team, win Carling-sponsored kit and tickets to Carling Cup or Old Firm. Users are urged to "Email the team to let your players know about the website".<sup>27</sup> This effective viral marketing technique means that although users are encouraged to set up their own team's website, the reality is that it is a Carling branded website and is intended to be viewed as such by other potential consumers. Although Carling does not appear to have an official page on Facebook, visitors to the Carling website are encouraged to use this, and other social networking sites to pass on the 'Carling Gospel'.

*Seen a hilarious story? Noticed a top competition? Then use these links to spread the Carling gospel amongst your pals! Nearly every man and his dog has a social networking site these days, such as Facebook, and some of us even have friends! So simply click on the icon for the site that you're registered on and share our colourful content with your mates....We're a friendly bunch here at Carling and so we've made it nice and simple for you.....Follow the relevant links below and you can be sharing the very best of Carling with your mates in seconds."<sup>28</sup>*

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