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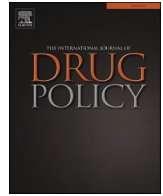
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Policy Analysis

The confluence of legacy, corporate social responsibility, and public health: The case of Migros and alcohol-free retailing in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol policy studies have traditionally focused on formal policymaking processes. Retail cooperatives, however, have rarely been studied as sites of public health interventions. Migros, a cooperatively owned chain of supermarkets in Switzerland, has long forbidden alcohol sales in its supermarkets. Focusing on processes of framing, this study explores a recent unsuccessful attempt to reverse the long-standing ban via membership vote in 2022.

Methods: The study draws on a range of data sources, including company documents, a televised debate, and the results of a large online survey among the general population conducted ahead of the referendum. Using thematic analysis, it investigates various campaign-related arguments, including those made by Migros management, NGOs, and other key campaign participants.

Results: Proponents and opponents used a combination of public health, economic/market-oriented, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frames. Migros's longstanding dedication to CSR, its participatory governance structure, and the regional political dynamics in the Swiss context are essential in understanding the nature and impact of framing.

Conclusions: Alcohol-related harm arises from a complex interaction between different social, political, and economic factors. Reducing harm requires approaches that consider the range of contexts and measures that can shape alcohol availability.

Introduction

Alcohol-related harm poses a significant threat to public health. The public policy solutions for reducing consumption and harm are well-established (Burton et al., 2017). Strategies that control alcohol pricing (Dhalwani, 2011; Elder et al., 2010; Xu & Chaloupka, 2011), advertising (Anderson et al., 2009; Jernigan et al., 2017; Lobstein et al., 2017), and availability (Sherk et al., 2018) have a strong track record of effectiveness. The World Health Organization (WHO) has urged governments to adopt several specific “best buy” policy solutions, including increased taxes on alcohol, bans or comprehensive limitations on alcohol advertising, and restrictions on the retail availability of alcohol (World Health Organization, 2018).

The political barriers to evidence-informed alcohol policymaking have prompted public health researchers to study alcohol policymaking

dynamics in several different national contexts (Butler, 2015; Greenaway, 2008; Greenfield et al., 2004; Hawkins & McCambridge, 2020a, 2020b; Katikireddi et al., 2014; Lesch & McCambridge, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Morojele et al., 2021; Ngqangashe et al., 2021; Nicholls, 2012; Nicholls & Greenaway, 2015). These studies have typically focused on the same set of actors: alcohol industry representatives, government officials, and public health advocacy groups (Greenfield et al., 2004; Katikireddi et al., 2014; Lesch & McCambridge, 2020). A key finding is that alcohol industry actors have enjoyed considerable success in opposing the implementation of the WHO's best buy policies (McCambridge et al., 2018). On the other hand, several actors comprise the industry, including different types of alcohol producers and retailers. These actors can have different economic interests and policy preferences, depending on the issue in question (Holden et al., 2012). This suggests the need for more context-specific and nuanced research on the

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alcohol policy stakeholders.

Although voters are not often the central focus of alcohol policy research, the public is broadly understood as having an indirect yet significant influence on policy decisions (Lindeman et al., 2013; Rossow & Storvoll, 2014). Cultural factors can curtail or expand the scope of policy interventions governments consider (Callinan et al., 2014; Greenfield et al., 2004; Li et al., 2017; Österberg, 2007). As a general rule, voters have similar policy preferences to the alcohol industry, in that they typically favour less coercive policy measures, such as educational campaigns, and express less support for more coercive measures, including alcohol taxes or restrictions on alcohol availability (though, this varies across context) (Chalmers et al., 2013; Giesbrecht et al., 2007; Lonsdale et al., 2012; Tobin et al., 2011). These policy preferences, however, are not static. The public can reevaluate their policy preferences in light of new information or conditions (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). For example, in a set of recent studies, respondents initially in favour of liberalising the alcohol retail sector in Washington State shifted their attitudes after the policy measure was implemented (Greenfield et al., 2018; Subbaraman et al., 2020). Greater attention to alcohol-related problems can also generate shifts in public opinion (Demant & Krarup, 2013). Here, issue framing (Chong & Druckman, 2007), or the strategic presentation of policy-relevant information can alter how the public understands alcohol-related problems (Katikireddi & Hilton, 2015; Katikireddi et al., 2014). The study of public attitudes toward alcohol availability restrictions, however, is underdeveloped.

There are compelling reasons to examine how industry actors and the public approach alcohol, particularly outside the context of formal policymaking processes. First, businesses can adopt policies and practices that influence public health even in the absence of public regulation. For example, due to economic reasons or moral objections, some retailers decide not to sell tobacco products. Second, the growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in general (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010), and within the alcohol industry specifically (Mialon & McCambridge, 2018), means that companies are increasingly sensitive to consumer values and priorities. A company's brand can encompass the entire brand promise, incorporating both the commitments related to its products and the values associated with the company as a whole (Alwi et al., 2017). Although it encompasses a variety of issues, safeguarding public health can constitute a fundamental aspect of a company's value system.

Cooperative societies provide a valuable institutional context for exploring how alcohol-related issues are approached outside the context of formal politics. Cooperatives are quasi-private organisations with governance structures that involve management and cooperative members collaboratively determining company practices and policies. Often established with dual economic and social purposes (Mazzarol et al., 2018), cooperatives blend profit-seeking motives with social and environmental goals in their decision-making processes. This study draws on theoretical insights on framing as well as the business and marketing literature to better understand decision-making on alcohol-related issues.

Framing alcohol-related issues

Framing involves drawing attention to a particular dimension, characteristic, or understanding of an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In the context of alcohol policy, industry actors typically frame alcohol-related problems as only affecting a minority of the population (i.e., problem drinkers). Consequently, population-level measures, such as availability restrictions, are portrayed as blunt policy instruments that punish the majority of responsible drinkers (Katikireddi & Hilton, 2015; Kypril et al., 2014; Lesch & McCambridge, 2021a; Martino et al., 2017; McCambridge et al., 2018; McCambridge et al., 2013; Rinaldi et al., 2021). In contrast, public health actors stress the health and social harms of consumption at the population level. These actors marshal epidemiological indicators and other scientific evidence to underline the

scope and severity of alcohol-related problems across society (Butler et al., 2017; Chapman, 2001; Katikireddi et al., 2014; Lesch & McCambridge, 2021; Thom et al., 2016).

The role of corporate social responsibility

CSR relates to a company's claimed efforts to enhance the well-being of society through different social and environmental initiatives. The motivations for undertaking CSR are manifold. These can stem from pure profit-seeking motives (i.e., "greenwashing") (Banerjee, 2008; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020), a blend of strategic and moral considerations (Graafland & Van de Ven, 2006; Öberseder et al., 2013), as well as socialisation processes (Cronqvist & Yu, 2017; Van der Ven, 2014).

While CSR strategies can include several elements, including philanthropic activities and civil society partnerships, they can also encompass specific business policies and practices. Retailers, for example, might choose to exclusively source their products from suppliers that meet certain environmental or social criteria (Van der Ven, 2014). CSR activities can influence how consumers perceive companies and their associated brands (Hess & Warren, 2008). By emphasising a company's commitment to the broader society, these activities can strengthen a business's public reputation. There is some evidence to suggest that CSR is positively associated with the financial performance of a company (Van Beurden & Gössling, 2008).

Consumers can play an indirect role in influencing the decisions and conduct of individual companies. Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSI), for example, refers to when consumers punish a business based on some perceived violation of a moral or legal norm (Valor et al., 2022). The extent to which an incident of CSI is perceived as harmful is influenced by attributions of blame, ethical considerations, and the appraisal of victims and their suffering. For instance, studies have pointed to McKinsey's involvement in the opioid epidemic as indicative of this trend (Valor et al., 2022). Selling highly addictive and health-harming products, including alcohol and tobacco, seems relevant in this context. In the case of alcohol, making alcohol more readily available is associated with increases in alcohol-related harm (Bryden et al., 2012), including potential harm to others (e.g., drink-driving and alcohol-related violence). Therefore, for retailers and consumers who value and prioritise public health, alcohol sales might pose a moral dilemma. As such, understanding how cooperative retailers approach alcohol-related issues could be potentially instructive for understanding the role and interaction between framing and CSR.

The case of Migros

The Migros group (referred to as Migros hereafter) is a cooperatively owned major retailer in Switzerland. It is the country's largest retailer, operating numerous supermarkets and convenience shops. In 2021, Migros recorded sales amounting to 24.74 billion CHF, (approximately equivalent to \$27.67 billion USD). This makes it one of the largest retailers in the world. At the heart of Migros's operations are its 600 supermarkets. What sets Migros apart from other major retailers in Switzerland and Western Europe more broadly is its decision to abstain from selling alcohol and tobacco products.

The ban on alcohol sales at Migros can be traced back to the vision and ideological orientation of Gottlieb Duttweiler, the company's founder. Duttweiler envisioned a company that would protect individuals from poverty and the harm caused by alcohol, challenging the influence of the "almighty alcohol capital" (Häsler, 1993; Riess, 1961). His views of alcohol were broadly consistent with the prevailing political climate. Between 1930 and 1932, Switzerland enacted several policy changes which increased taxes and imposed new restrictions on commercial enterprises. This period also saw the peak of the temperance movement's influence, notably *Blaues Kreuz Schweiz* (Blue Cross Switzerland) (Tanner, 2002). Migros's company policy was also ideologically in line with the social-centre political party – *Liste der*

Unabhängigen (List of the Independents) – established by Duttweiler. The party enjoyed some electoral success, securing seven seats in the national parliament in 1935.

Even with a change in ownership (see below), Migros has maintained the founder's commitment to public health promotion. The prohibitions on alcohol and tobacco sales were officially incorporated into the company's statutes in the 1980s and have represented a key pillar of the company's CSR strategy. In addition to banning these health-harming products, the company oversees the Migros Culture Percentage program, which allocates one percent of all retail revenues to different cultural and social initiatives ([Federation of Migros Cooperatives, 2022](#)). Thus, Migros offers a potential example of how a founder's legacy can continue to inform CSR approaches.

Migros has a complex governance structure. It is a cooperative association with 2.27 million members spanning 10 affiliated regional cooperatives. The regional cooperatives represent business regions and partially overlap with Swiss cantons (subnational governments). These cooperatives, in turn, are represented in the Assembly of Delegates ([Federation of Migros Cooperatives, 2022](#)). The key components of its structure include the Assembly of Delegates, the Board of Directors, the Executive Board, and the Board of Control ([Federation of Migros Cooperatives, 2020](#)). Migros's governance structure reflects the broader historical significance of regional representation and direct political participation in Switzerland. Throughout its history, Migros's members have directly influenced key business decisions. In 1948, for example, members narrowly rejected a proposal to introduce wine sales. Moreover, in 1981, members defeated management's efforts to expand Migros into international markets ([Smith & Liebreuz, 2022](#)). Notably, the alcohol sales ban has been maintained despite a broader trend of alcohol policy liberalisation ([Gmel & Meury, 2023](#)). In comparison to its peers, Switzerland has few restrictions on alcohol availability ([World Health Organization, 2018](#)).

In 2022, Migros's ban on alcohol sales encountered a significant internal challenge. Critics of the policy contended that although the primary supermarket did not sell alcohol, the same restriction did not apply to the company's subsidiaries, Migros Online, Migrolino and Denner. This inconsistency, along with other factors, prompted the Assembly of Delegates to put the issue to the general membership. Delegates proposed amending the company's statutes so that individual regional cooperatives could sell alcohol. For the measure to pass, however, a two-thirds majority nationwide was required ([Smith & Liebreuz, 2022](#)). Several leaders within Migros's administrative and regional bodies supported the proposal's adoption. On March 21, 2022, the referendum on alcohol sales was announced. Between May 27 and June 4, cooperative members voted in person or by post. Voters were asked: "Would you like to lift the ban on selling alcohol in the Migros branches and agree to the amendment of the regional statutes?"

The proposal ultimately failed, with a clear majority of cooperative members voting against the proposal in every region. The total voter turnout for the spring 2022 vote was 29 %, with approximately 630,000 cooperative members participating. Despite endorsements from Migros management and regional cooperative bodies, all ten regional cooperatives voted against the proposal. The Zurich cooperative had the highest rejection rate (80.3 %), while the Tessin cooperative had the lowest (55.3 %) (see [Table 1](#)). The required two-thirds majority of regional cooperatives was thus not achieved. Consequently, the alcohol-free beer, produced by Switzerland's oldest brewery, Schützengarten, has now been introduced into the product range of Migros supermarkets.

The regional disparities in support for reversing the alcohol sales ban in Migros supermarkets are noteworthy, with significantly less support in German-speaking regions compared to the French- and Italian-speaking parts of the country. The potential explanation for this may reside in the varying drinking cultures and economic forces in each region. In French and Italian regions, wine production holds greater economic significance (see [Table 1](#)). Moreover, there are also higher levels of heavy alcohol consumption ([Bundesamt für Statistik, 2016](#); [Obsan,](#)

Table 1

Results of the June 4th vote to change Migros statutes, by regional Migros cooperative, alcohol consumption frequency and vineyard area by linguistic region.

Regional Migros cooperative	Percentage voting "yes"	Linguistic region's daily alcohol consumption*	Linguistic region's vineyard area (hectares)**
Tessin	44.7 %	Italian-speaking 16.9 %	1159 ha
		French-speaking 13.4 %	10,849 ha
Wallis	39.7 %	German-speaking 7.7 %	2,619 ha
Genf	35.2 %		
Waadt	31.0 %		
Neuenburg- Freiburg	26.9 %		
Luzern	25.3 %		
Basel	23.9 %		
Ostschweiz	23.7 %		
Aare	20.1 %		
Zürich	19.7 %		

* [Gmel, Kuendig, Notari, & Gmel. \(2017\)](#)

** [Bundesamt für Landwirtschaft BLW \(2021\)](#).

2023).

The current study

Migros's decision in 2022 to retain its existing ban on alcohol sales in its supermarkets offers a valuable opportunity to explore alcohol policy framing contests outside the context of traditional political processes. As a retail cooperative, the case is potentially useful for understanding how company leadership and cooperative members reconcile their desire for profit with CSR-related goals. As identified above, a company's CSR commitments can often be tied to specific values that have been reinforced over time. This study addresses two main questions. First, how were alcohol-related issues framed during the campaign to overturn Migros's long-standing ban on alcohol sales in its core supermarkets? Second, to what extent did corporate social responsibility (CSR), particularly Migros's historical commitment to promoting public health, influence campaign dynamics? In addressing these questions, the study aims to understand how debates over public health, CSR, and organisational identity unfold within the distinct institutional context of retail cooperatives.

Methods

This qualitative study is based on several secondary data sources, covering November 2021 (the launch of the initiative) to May 2023 (the announcement of a new independent organisation by the Migros Board).

The following sources were collected and analysed. First, we conducted a secondary literature search. This involved using Web of Science databases to collect relevant studies on alcohol policy and business and management articles. We also used Google to search and compile relevant news media articles. Similarly, we gathered Migros's primary documents, including press releases related to the ballot initiative as well as annual company reports from 2021 and 2022 ([Federation of Migros Cooperatives, 2022](#); [Migros Group, 2021](#)).

Second, we examined stakeholders' statements to the media. We identified several relevant groups, particularly NGOs, based on several criteria, including size, previous engagement in national politics, and participation in *Vernehmlassungen* (government consultation) on addiction-related issues. This selection included *Sucht Schweiz* (Addiction Switzerland), an established addiction-focused NGO in Switzerland ([Sucht Schweiz, 2023](#)), and *Blaues Kreuz Schweiz* another prominent

alcohol-related advocacy group (Blaues Kreuz Schweiz, 2023).

Third, to identify key campaign themes, we analysed proponents' and opponents' statements made during a televised debate on the ballot initiative. The debate was broadcast on DRS's Arena program on May 27, 2022. The program is one of the most influential platforms on Swiss television, airing partially in French and covering the country's most significant national election events and popular votes (Gall & Oberholzer, 2023; Mäder & Tschanz, 2014).

Fourth, to gain a deeper understanding of Swiss public opinion on the issue, we used a dual strategy. We analysed a Tamedia report that summarised a general population survey, conducted in April 2022, on attitudes toward the ballot initiative (LeeWas GmbH, 2022). Tamedia commissioned the poll, and the survey was conducted by the LeeWas GmbH Survey Institute. The Tamedia report used quantitative content analysis of open-ended questions (frequencies of codes) to identify relevant categories of individuals. We also analysed several online comments ($n = 77$) that were posted on *Tages-Anzeiger*'s website, one of Switzerland's most-read daily newspapers. User comments were posted specifically in the context of a news story summarising the Tamedia report (Tagesanzeiger, 2022). The comments were posted between April 25 and May 1, 2022, and ranged from 15 to 90 words. Although online comments are typically generated by a small group of readers the content can significantly influence broader segments of the population (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020; Eberwein, 2020). Since access to the population survey was not provided, the user comments provided an alternative way to identify relevant campaign themes.

As to the specific analytical approach, the LeeWas report used a quantitative content analysis of the open-ended questions (frequencies of codes) to identify relevant categories. These were used as references when conducting an inductive thematic analysis (TA) of the statements of the participants of the ARENA program and the newspaper user comments qualifying themes and not quantifying categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Statements made during the ARENA discussion were not counted if they were similar; however, each statement was screened to identify new themes. The analysis was repeated to ensure the validity of the contextualization of the statements during the debate.

Results

Key actors and their political activities

Our analysis of various documents, including media coverage, press releases, and campaign materials, enabled us to identify and examine the actors and key political activities that transpired throughout the campaign. In the following sections, we present an overview of each category of actor, distinguishing between opponents, proponents, and neutral actors

Referendum opponents

At the core of the opposition campaign were several leading NGOs and civil society organisations.

Sucht Schweiz was a key actor and led a highly influential media campaign. The NGO used several platforms, employing a combination of informational and emotional strategies. Sucht Schweiz played a pivotal role as an opponent of the measure, leading a highly influential media campaign (Sucht Schweiz, 2022b; Sucht Schweiz, 2022). The NGO used various platforms, employing a combination of informational and emotional strategies. This included posters and online videos which featured a "love letter to Migros." The letter urged the company to "stay as you are" and was signed by "your Migros children" (translations provided by authors). One video garnered over 360,000 views in just three weeks, underscoring the campaign's widespread visibility and success. Additionally, the charity provided key information on alcohol-related harms, including insights into limited access to alcohol treatment and the connection between alcohol availability and

alcohol-related health and social problems.

Blaues Kreuz Schweiz was another highly active participant in the opposition campaign. This organisation used its existing social networks to mobilise cooperative members sympathetic to its concerns (Blaues Kreuz Schweiz, 2022; Weinmann, 2021). Additionally, the umbrella organisation *Allianz Gesunde Schweiz* (Alliance Healthy Switzerland), representing 40 health organisations from across the country opposed the proposal. The alliance released a press statement before the vote, emphasising the importance of maintaining "safe zones" in Migros supermarkets for individuals dealing with alcohol-related issues (Schweiz, 2022).

The Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland (EVP) was one of the only political parties involved in the opposition campaign. The party argued Migros had a social responsibility to uphold its ban on alcohol sales. The EVP cautioned that modifying the policy could endanger the company's "ethical DNA." According to the EVP, the proposal posed a particular threat to young people and risked sending the message that alcohol-related issues were no longer a problem in Switzerland (Evangelische Volkspartei, 2022).

Finally, a former Migros director formed an opposition group called *Gruppe für die Migros-Werte* (Group for Migros Values). The group emphasised the potential danger the proposal posed to Migros's core values and the company's unique identity.

Referendum proponents

Proponents of lifting the alcohol ban included various stakeholders, such as Migros management and cooperative commissions. For these supporters, the central concern was that Migros's ban on alcohol sales no longer aligned with the current economic and cultural environment. They believed the founder's ideas about alcohol were outdated, acting as a barrier to innovation and modernisation.

Beyond Migros management, some of the key proponents of the measures included elected officials from different political parties as well as individuals representing different regional cooperatives (see below).

Neutral parties

Several notable organisations refrained from participating in the campaign. The Federal Office of Public Health and the Federal Commission on Addiction chose not to express their views or make any recommendations, citing the private nature of the vote. Furthermore, the major political parties in Switzerland abstained from publicly taking a stance on the issue.

Finally, the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute (GDI), an independent think tank focusing on economics, society, and consumption related to Migros, did not adopt a clear position. Instead, the GDI expressed concern about a potential regional patchwork of policies if only some of the cooperatives voted in favour of the proposal (Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute, 2023).

Competing to frame the debate

We analysed the televised debate featuring key proponents and opponents to understand how these actors sought to portray the same issue in different lights. Our thematic analysis (see Table 2) of the debate highlights a blend of economic market-oriented themes alongside consistent references to corporate social responsibility and arguments related to public health.

Opponents

Opponents during the televised debate were represented by 1) Lilian Studer, President of the EVP and former deputy director of the Blaues Kreuz Schweiz (Aargau/Luzern); 2) Ueli Maeder, Emeritus Professor of Sociology and 3) Stefan Vogler, a lecturer at the Zurich School of Economics and freelance consultant (Play SRF, 2022).

Opponents emphasised the importance of having alcohol-free spaces

Table 2
Stakeholders' perspectives: Thematic analysis of the televised ARENA discussion program.

Opponents' themes	Proponents' themes
Economic/market-oriented	
The proposal makes little financial sense since introducing beer in supermarkets would entail high investment. Moreover, Migros subsidiaries that sell alcohol could be negatively affected by this shift.	Profit from alcohol sales would increase the resources available for other CSR activities (e.g., Migros Culture Percentage).
There are significant threats to Migros's brand and reputation. The company could lose its central unique selling proposition (USP).	Customers should have the option to buy alcohol and groceries in one shop. Risks to brand image over overstate as the company has many other USPs, including Migros Cultural Percentage and good price-performance ratio.
Corporate social responsibility	
Migros should "celebrate being different" that its different from its competitors and embrace its role as a corporate socially responsible citizen.	Asking Migros to reduce alcohol problems is asking too much from a private company.
Liberal understanding of freedom (i.e., consumers' choice) also implies responsibility to others, including the protection of children and youth.	Most consumers are responsible and should have the autonomy to decide how to address issues such as obesity, loneliness, and alcohol-related harms. Migros needs to be seen as honest, credible but this is challenging if alcohol is already being sold by the company's other subsidiaries.
Migros has been a part of Switzerland across generations is expected to stand for the vulnerable groups in society and public health.	
Public health, alcohol narrative	
Alcohol-free spaces are important, as alcohol is not a normal commodity. The burden for society, including harm to others and a trigger for risk consumers in supermarkets must be considered.	Alcohol consumption has declined even with the liberalisation of alcohol in Switzerland (e.g., number of outlets increasing), therefore there is no higher risk for customers.
The founder's position in favour of the wine vote motivated by the precarious socio-economic situation of the wine growers at the time and was not meant as an endorsement of alcohol.	Opponents have the wrong interpretation of the Duttweiler heritage as launched the reject vote on allowing wine sales in 1948.

due to the societal harms resulting from alcohol (*public health, alcohol narrative*). They argued that alcohol should not be treated as a normal commodity, particularly given the potential harm to others or its potential triggering effect on at-risk consumers. However, it's worth noting that no alcohol policy or public health researchers participated in the televised debate.

Connected to this public health framing, opponents countered the idea that consumer choice was the paramount concern. It argued for a more expansive view of freedom, saying that the company had a *social responsibility* to protect others, particularly the protection of children and youth.

Opponents also focused on the proposal's potential consequences for Migros's brand and reputation (*economic/market-oriented* theme). It argued that the company could lose its central unique selling proposition (USP) if it decided to start selling alcohol.

Opponents, in their arguments, also referenced the historical foundation of the company's policy and the founder's vision. Specifically, they contended that the 1948 vote (referenced above), which the founder had supported, was solely motivated by the precarious socio-economic situation facing wine growers at the time. Opponents disputed that it signalled the founder's endorsement of alcohol consumption. Instead, they framed the 1948 vote as an example of the founder's strategic vision and willingness to adapt to shifting conditions. For instance, the founder transitioned the private company to a

cooperative and embraced a model of corporate social responsibility when capitalist competition prevailed in the 19th century (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001).

Migros's long-standing commitment to CSR provides a crucial lens for understanding the opponents' framing strategies. According to the Swiss Corporate Reputation Ranking, an annual survey conducted by GfK Business Reflector, in 2022, Migros saw a shift in its social moral reputation, dropping from first to second place in the category. This drop marked a symbolic change as the company had previously held the top position in this category for eight consecutive years (PPS, 2022). The referendum campaign and the subsequent survey results (see below) likely elevated the importance of Migros's social reputation in 2022.

Referendum proponents

During the televised debate, proponents were represented by 1) Nicolo Paganini, a member of Die Mitte, a centre-right party representing St. Gallen canton; 2) an administrative representative from Migros Ostschweiz (Eastern Switzerland); 3) Matthias Müller, the president of the Liberal party's youth section and President of the Swiss Brewery Association (although the debate moderator failed to disclose the latter association); 4) Renata Georg, a member of the Migros Ostschweiz cooperative, who initiated the vote at the assembly.

Proponents focused most of their messaging on *economic/market-oriented* themes. They stressed the need for economic modernisation, citing consumers' expectation that they have convenient access to alcohol. These actors also cast doubt on the claim that the ban on alcohol sales was Migros's only USP. They argued that the company possesses many USPs, including the Migros Cultural Percentage program. According to proponents, if Migros's supermarkets start selling alcohol, the company could use the funds from these sales to better finance other important CSR activities. Proponents, however, may have underestimated the prominence of this particular USP. Other USPs, such as the Migros Culture Percentage, are less directly integrated into the daily shopping experience of customers.

Another key theme for proponents was *corporate social responsibility* and specifically whether it was appropriate for Migros to impose its moral preferences on consumers. Proponents argued that the consumer "should be king," meaning if customers wanted to purchase alcohol at Migros, they should have that ability. They also argued that it was inappropriate for private companies to shoulder social responsibility and that this was best left to the state.

While proponents placed less emphasis on the *public health, alcohol narrative* theme, they argued that the broader shift towards the liberalisation of alcohol in Switzerland, including the expansion of the number of alcohol-selling outlets, had not coincided with greater harm. Thus, if Migros began selling alcohol, it would not pose a higher risk for customers.

The role of Migros management

Migros management did not have an official presence during the televised debate, but our analysis of other materials reveals evidence of their framing efforts in other capacities. Upon announcing the referendum, for example, Migros launched a corresponding marketing initiative. Collaborating with a PR firm, Migros announced that the vote's outcome would determine the introduction of one of two new products: an alcohol-based Migros beer or an alcohol-free version. If the ban remained, an alcohol-free beer (branded as "NO") would be introduced in their supermarkets, while a beer containing alcohol (branded as "YES") would be made available if the ban were lifted. This marketing campaign might have been a strategic response to evolving market conditions. For instance, the demand for low and non-alcoholic beer has been steadily rising worldwide. According to a Swiss beer producer, this market is expanding at a rate of approximately 13 % annually (Tio 20 Minuti, 2023). On the contrary, opting for beer instead of spirits or other alcohol-based beverages could be seen as an attempt to influence the

vote. Beer typically has lower alcohol content and is less frequently linked to alcohol-related harm. By choosing a traditional Swiss beverage like beer and steering the focus away from products often associated with younger individuals or excessive drinkers, Migros may have intentionally or inadvertently framed the issue.

Attitudes of the general population on introducing alcohol to Migros supermarkets

The information provided in this section is an analysis of the published survey report, including tables adopted from the report on the survey (LeeWas GmbH, 2022).

The general population survey aimed to capture the public’s attitudes toward the proposal. In general, the proposal revealed limited public support, with 46 % of respondents firmly against it, and an additional 12 % leaning towards rejection. On the contrary, 27 % expressed support for the proposal, and 11 % were inclined towards approval. Notably, only 4 % of respondents remained undecided or did not provide an answer, indicating that the majority of the public had formed a clear opinion on the matter (LeeWas GmbH, 2022).

The respondents’ demographic traits seemed to play an influential role in explaining their relative positions. Younger respondents, specifically those aged 18 to 34, showed the highest level of support for lifting the alcohol ban. This support declined with each subsequent age group. Furthermore, regional disparities were evident in the data, indicating a distinct divide. Opposition to the proposal was most pronounced in the German-speaking regions of Switzerland, where 60 % of respondents were against it. In contrast, the wine-producing Italian-speaking and French-speaking areas exhibited the highest levels of public support, with 59 % and 48 % in favour, respectively (LeeWas GmbH, 2022).

Respondents frequently cited economic or moral reasons as the basis for their attitudes. This aligns with the thematic analysis reported in Table 2. Among supporters, 60 % of survey respondents pointed to the perceived hypocrisy of Migros selling alcohol through its subsidiaries as a significant reason for their stance (see Table 3). In contrast, over two-thirds of opponents (68 %) believed that the policy change contradicted the founder’s commitment to public health values (see Table 4) (LeeWas GmbH, 2022).

The emotional attachment that Swiss people have towards Migros is evident from other data sources. According to research in management, legacy companies can “provide a sense of comfort, safety... [because they have a life-long deeply rooted intimacy with the consumers]” (The Reputation Institute, 2018). This emotional connection should be understood in the context of the prevailing political and economic climate. In 2022, the year of the referendum, Switzerland faced societal insecurity fuelled by political and economic crises such as the war in Ukraine, inflation, and the energy crisis. Additionally, 39 % of respondents identified climate change and environmental protection as the most pressing issues facing Switzerland (Crédit Suisse and GFS Bern, 2022).

Table 3
Proponents’ reasons for supporting alcohol sales in Migros supermarkets (n = 3675).

Category	Percentage of respondents’ (only proponents)
Migros is already selling alcoholic beverages in Migros Online. Migrolino and (Migros-owned) DENNER shops. Therefore, a ban of alcohol in Migros shops is not logical.	60 %
Migros should be on an equal footing with other retail competitors	25 %
Saving a trip to another shop if alcoholic beverages were available at	12 %
No reason provided	3 %

Notes: Table is adapted from (LeeWas GmbH, 2022). LeeWas GmbH. (2022). 20 Minuten-/Tamedia-Abstimmungsumfrage; final report.

Table 4
Public opposition to alcohol sales (n = 5626) in Migros supermarkets

Category – opposition	%
“This is a betrayal of Gottlieb Duttweilers heritage. The founder of Migros wanted to protect people from the addictive substance alcohol”	68 %
“If selling alcohol in Migros supermarkets, Migros would compete with its own brands; DENNER, Voi and MIGROLINO. Branches of DENNER shops close to Migros might disappear in particular”	15 %
“The inclusion of alcohol by Migros would lead to the elimination of other articles because a lack of space.”	7 %
Other reasons	7 %
None	3 %

Note: Table is adapted from LeeWas GmbH (2022).

This emotional connection to a trusted and familiar brand like Migros potentially played a role in shaping public sentiment and attitudes during the campaign.

Online comments in response to Tamedia report

Our analysis of user comments highlights the variation in public attitudes toward the referendum by categorising individuals into *emotionally disenchanted proponents, pragmatic proponents, emotionally loyal opponents, and pragmatic opponents* (See Table 5).

This nuanced approach provides a deeper understanding of the varying perspectives of the general public. While the survey commissioned by Tamedia linked support for overturning the ban to practical considerations, including contradiction in Migros-owned shops selling alcohol (pragmatic proponents), our analysis identifies emotional

Table 5
A thematic qualitative analysis of readers’ on-line comments (n = 77) regarding Tamedia population survey.

Theme	Example of Comments
Emotional loyal opponents	“The philosophy of the company should not be changed just to generate more profit and sales volume”. “Duttweiler fighting for Swiss values, Migros should keep its heart and soul not betraying his heritage”. “There is more than just alcohol at stake; if Migros would give up its credibility with this central point; pure business only would be left”. “The ballot is a joke; management has already decided in advance and the results will never be published.” “Management should resign if rejected, wrong leadership.” “The whole thing amounts simply to a marketing theatre.”
Pragmatic opponents	“An alcohol-free offer, ‘island’ in society is important giving addicts a chance, there are already enough drugs.” “If the ban of alcohol sales is lifted, next would-be allowing tobacco sales as well.” “Adding alcohol would reduce retail space of other products, hence less attractive.” “Migros’ unique selling proposition (USP) would be gone”; Migros would lose customers.”
Emotional disenchanted proponents	The convictions of Duttweiler have been given up a long time ago. “Migros as biggest seller of alcohol with other shops and opposition is just empty folklore.” “Migros gave up much of what made it different from competitors, therefore accepting alcohol also would not change much of this picture.”
Pragmatic proponents	“Everybody can buy alcohol anytime and anywhere, would make no difference – you really think people would drink more?” “To sell no alcohol is a relic from the last century.”“Times have changed, and the Scandinavian Prohibition model is outdated.”“Migros should have the same options as market competitors.”

Note: Statements are summarized and translated excerpts.

disconnection among some proponents. This emotional disenchantment stems from the perception that Migros is no longer the iconic company it once was, leading them to believe that lifting the ban on alcohol sales would not significantly impact Migros's image. This layer adds complexity to the overall public sentiment surrounding the referendum.

Proponents' support for lifting the ban on alcohol sales at Migros might also be rooted in "moral disengagement strategies," a psychological mechanism in which individuals "justify unethical actions" such as the sale of alcohol, "as inevitable in order to obtain economic growth or as justifiable in absence of tight regulations" (Valor et al., 2022, p. 1223). The co-existence of CSR and CSI can complicate public perception of a company. The presence of both positive and negative actions by a company can create ambiguity, making it challenging for the public to form a clear overall assessment and make decisions about the firm's ethical standing (Valor et al., 2022).

In contrast, emotionally loyal opponents cited Migros's heritage and long-standing values as their primary reason for opposition. This group strongly criticised Migros's board and management for prioritising profit over morality. Another group, the pragmatic opponents, argued that accepting the proposal would pave the way for the sale of tobacco products (which are currently banned by Migros's statutes). Additionally, pragmatic opponents pointed out reasons not captured in the survey, such as reduced retail space and a potentially less attractive product offering. These factors could potentially result in the loss of Migros's USP to consumers as well.

Public discourse after the vote

The groups that supported the continuation of the alcohol sales ban were content with the referendum result. The president of the International Organization of Good Templars (IOGT) Switzerland, for example, said that the results should serve as a lesson for Migros management that the people do not want increased availability of alcohol (Lindemann, 2022).

Similarly, Blaues Kreuz Schweiz portrayed the outcome as a victory for prevention efforts. The outcome meant that consumers at high risk of harm would continue having access to alcohol-free spaces (Amstutz & Graber, 2022). Similarly, the EVP welcomed the decision. For them, it meant upholding Migros's USP and preserving the company's historical commitment to corporate social responsibility (Ref.ch, 2022).

Sucht Schweiz also welcomed the result and urged Migros to consider stricter regulations for its online alcohol sales (Sucht Schweiz, 2022a). The NGO asserted that the vote should serve as a clear signal to politicians that there is widespread public support for addiction prevention programmes. Additional developments in Swiss politics provide additional evidence for this claim. In February 2022, Swiss voters decided to support new restrictions on tobacco advertisements targeting children and youth (Der Bundesrat, 2022).

While Migros's governing bodies initially supported the policy change, the company's leadership took steps to deflect potential criticism. The company's president issued a press release shortly after the vote, distancing management from the outcome by arguing that delegates, not management, had initiated the vote. He also portrayed the outcome as a victory for the company's commitment to democracy, stating, "Alcohol-free Migros beer is now a visible symbol of Migros democracy in our shops." (authors' translation). Furthermore, his statement referenced the potential use of digital voting in future company referendums (Migros, 2022). Focusing on digital voting could also be seen as CSR-related framing, as it allows the company to highlight its commitment to sustainability (Challagalla & Dalsace, 2022). Moreover, shifting the discussion away from the outcome and, instead, emphasising the company's commitment to democratic processes, the president appealed to broader values, central to Swiss identity. These findings underscore the importance of issue framing for industry actors even in the context of the post-vote.

Some marketing and management experts believe that for Migros,

the real victory was the public relations one (Kornfield et al., 2015). The vote garnered extensive coverage over the year with 2,500 newspaper and online media reports. Under normal circumstances, this exposure would have incurred a cost of around 24 million CHF. Some commentators speculated that Migros management may have had little intention of winning the vote in the first place (Frasch, 2022).

Finally, more recent developments suggest a different political strategy at play. In May 2023, Migros announced an agreement between the Migros board and the ten regional cooperatives to establish a new independent centralised, organisational structure for Migros supermarkets (Migros, 2023). As this re-organisation is underway, it remains unclear what the governance implications are, including whether a second attempt to lift the alcohol ban would be subjected to the same rules as before.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to understand how stakeholders frame alcohol-related issues in a non-traditional political setting and to explore how this context influences framing processes. The analysis focuses on a significant debate concerning alcohol availability restrictions, using the case of Migros. Drawing on analysis of several data sources, including a televised debate, a public opinion survey, and user comments, the study illustrates the sensitivity of framing dynamics to context.

While the study cannot pinpoint the reasons for the referendum's failure, insights from public policy offer a potentially illuminating perspective. Policy feedback effects, which refer to the impact of past policies and their outcomes on contemporary political attitudes, behaviours, and preferences of individuals or groups, provide a useful framework (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). In the case of the unsuccessful Migros proposal, cooperative members may have experienced policy feedback effects, where alcohol-free Migros supermarkets became an accepted norm, and the proposal was perceived as a threat to that norm. This aligns with the earlier discussion on CSI, wherein cooperative members acted to protect the norm before customers could potentially punish Migros.

Our research findings provide important insight into the processes of issue framing. On the one hand, our findings echo previous research on alcohol policy (Greenaway, 2011; Hawkins & Holden, 2013; McCambridge et al., 2018; Nicholls & Greenaway, 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2021; Vallance et al., 2020). In the case study, those arguing for stronger alcohol availability restrictions focused on broader health and social impacts, whereas proponents emphasised the economic benefits of liberalisation. On the other hand, our research identifies novel insights as well. Cooperative retailers, for example, operate within a commercial and yet quasi-democratic decision-making context, which can shape processes of framing. Those supporting more restrictive policies (the ballot opponents) did not limit their focus to public health harms; they underscored the potential economic costs of policy reversal. These actors used a combination of historical concepts (such as the founder's commitment to economic justice and public health) and contemporary economic ideas (like CSR and USP) to frame their campaign messaging. Similarly, the proponents did not rely solely on economic frames. To garner support, they appealed to cooperative members' identity-based concerns, contending that the proposal was consistent with Migros's commitment to CSR. These examples show how stakeholders can tailor strategies to reflect the norms and considerations made salient by the institutional context. Future work on alcohol policy should be mindful of how different institutional conditions provide different opportunities and constraints for framing alcohol-related issues.

The study also underscores the potential for stakeholders to counter-frame or reframe alcohol-related issues. In our analysis, proponents of the referendum concentrated on issues of honesty and credibility, arguing that Migros's approach to alcohol was inconsistent, given that its subsidiaries already sold alcohol. However, this framing strategy did not yield the desired outcome. Conversely, a counterargument gained

traction by emphasising the value and necessity of having alcohol-free spaces, especially for individuals dealing with alcohol-related addictions. Shifting the focus away from internal consistency and towards the shopping experiences of at-risk customers proved to be a successful reframing strategy for opponents.

By examining a cooperative retailer, this study also contributes nuance to the existing studies on the alcohol industry. While industry influence on policy is well-established in the scientific literature, much of the focus has been on the activities of global alcohol producers and large retailers (McCambridge & Mialon, 2018; McCambridge et al., 2018). Less attention has been paid to variation within the sector, including the quasi-private retail cooperative studied here. In our analysis, cooperative members safeguarded a pro-public health company policy from being reversed, demonstrating how public health concerns can be a motivating factor for for-profit companies. This suggests that ownership structure matters; it can have key consequences for decisions about alcohol availability and thus important implications for public health. This research extends earlier work which explores alternative models for regulating alcohol availability, specifically community-owned alcohol licensing trusts (Adams et al., 2021; Stewart & Casswell, 1987).

Implications

Our study also holds implications for public health policy in Switzerland and potentially beyond.

First, in the context of Switzerland, our findings suggest that Migros's tobacco-free policy is unlikely to be overturned in the future. Any effort to lift the tobacco sales ban would likely encounter stiff political resistance, akin to those observed in the alcohol case. There is also evidence of growing public support for population-level public health interventions. As previously mentioned, Swiss voters recently approved new restrictions on tobacco advertising targeting children and young adults. When considering the political environment as well as the recent vote on alcohol, Migros's ban on tobacco sales is likely to endure.

Second, our research indicates that established norms for dealing with alcohol-related issues are highly resistant to change. This finding could significantly impact the feasibility of implementing *stricter* alcohol regulations in other settings where a different norm currently exists. In England and Ireland, few restrictions on alcohol availability are the norm; alcohol can be readily accessed at most supermarkets and convenience shops (Butler et al., 2017; Lesch & McCambridge, 2022). Thus, efforts to fundamentally disrupt approaches to alcohol, in either a pro- or anti-public health direction, can be expected to be met with strong resistance from stakeholders accustomed to the status quo.

Finally, while public health actors have had difficulties persuading governments to adopt alcohol availability restrictions (Hawkins & Holden, 2013; Hawkins & Holden, 2014; Lesch & McCambridge, 2021), our analysis points to another potential path. Industry opposition has been a key barrier to policy change in many contexts. In the case of retailers, alcohol often forms a significant part of business models. Many of these actors have a clear incentive to mobilise against new legal restrictions (Hawkins & Holden, 2013; Holden et al., 2012). On the other hand, drawing retailers' attention to the economic success of the Migros model could prove instructive for public health advocates. The Migros case shows how an alcohol-free policy can be a key source of an organisation's identity. In turn, this could potentially increase customer loyalty as a result. That being said, other retailers do not share the same history or governance structure as Migros. Thus, in the absence of strong leadership committed to public health, the replication of the Migros model is perhaps unlikely.

Limitations

Some key limitations of this study are worth noting. First, our findings may not be generalizable due to several unique features of the case

study and data analysis. Migros's approach to alcohol sales is informed by various idiosyncrasies, particularly its unique history and governing structure. These conditions are unlikely to be observed in other contexts. Further, by generating case-specific categories of opponents and proponents through an inductive process, our typology is unlikely to apply to other contexts.

Second, while the analysis focused on framing activities by different actors, the study could not capture the effects of framing strategies on individual cooperative members. The overlap between the thematic content presented in Tables 2 and 5, however, provides us with some confidence that framing mattered in this particular case.

Finally, the study primarily relies on secondary data, limiting our ability to fully understand the reasons for support and opposition to the proposal. At the same time, our analysis used a range of data sources to comprehensively study framing activities as well as identified proxies for cooperative members' opinions, including general population surveys and user comments.

Conclusion

Alcohol-related harm arises from a complex interaction between different social, political, and economic factors. Reducing harm requires approaches that consider the range of contexts and measures that can shape alcohol availability. Such attention can provide both researchers and practitioners with a clearer understanding of the range of opportunities for improving public health outcomes.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Harald Klingemann: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Matthew Lesch:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethics approval

The authors declare that the work reported herein did not require ethics approval because it did not involve animal or human participation.

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