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Compliance with regulations and codes of conduct at social media accounts of Swedish alcohol brands.

Running head: Compliance with alcohol-advertising policies in Swedish social media

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Abstract

Introduction and Aims. This study has, for the first time, mapped the extent to which alcoholic beverage brands operating on the Swedish market follow national advertising regulations and industry self-regulating codes in their postings on social media.
Design and Methods. All social media content posted on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram by 52 brands operating in the Swedish market was gathered from three sample months in 2014, 2016 and 2017. A content analysis was performed.
Results. An audit of the 1204 posts shows that the brands' social media content conforms rather well with the industry's own self-regulation codes. However, the studied beverage brands had alarmingly inadequate age-gates to social media accounts. Advertisements for alcoholic beverages must be clearly distinguishable from advertisements for non-alcoholic beverages, according to the Swedish Alcohol Act criteria. These criteria are fulfilled to a varying degree among the posts in the analysed data. Advertisements for non-alcoholic beverages give companies a greater leeway in terms of shape and content of the post through logotypes, settings and connotations. However, advertisements of non-alcoholic beverages continue to convey the brand connotations and image to consumers.
Discussion and Conclusions. Regulating alcohol advertising in online milieus can be very difficult because of the complex mixture between quickly evolving techniques and the diverse nature of communication messages targeting consumers. Many countries, including Sweden, are now focusing on how to enforce effective policies. This short report strives to shed some light on the scope and content of commercial messages on Swedish social media platforms.

Key words: Alcohol, advertising, social media, Sweden, marketing

Introduction and background

Recently there has been an increased academic interest in the rationales of commercial communication in digital landscapes. Compared to traditional alcohol marketing, online environments allow brands to reach a large number of consumers at lower expenses [1], and it is well-established that many of these marketing techniques appeal to young people. Advertisements are often disguised as personal social media postings, games, quizzes, music or videos inserts [2]. This has raised concern whether existing regulations are sufficient to protect young people from the exposure to alcohol marketing in digital environments, and especially on social media [3]. Social media has great persuasive power, and the participatory nature affects how consumers perceive brand messages [4]. Still, few studies have assessed how well social media alcohol marketing complies with regulations. The aim of this study is to analyze posts published on Swedish alcoholic beverage brands' social media platforms, and determinate whether the content and characteristics of the posts comply with Swedish law, and the self-regulative codes of conduct.

To our knowledge, this is the first study analysing both scope and content of posts on Swedish alcohol beverage brands' social media accounts. How brands behave in these milieus is not a marginal question; social media posts can reach and engage with large audiences. 95% of all Swedes aged 12 or older have internet access. 80% use YouTube, 75% Facebook, 50% Instagram and 25% Twitter. These numbers are significantly higher in younger age groups [5].

Swedish alcohol policies are strict in a European comparison [6]. Alcohol advertising is permissible online, in newspapers and in shops, but banned on national TV and radio, on billboards and in cinemas. Since the legalisation of alcohol marketing in 2003, estimates suggest that marketing investments have grown from ~€1 billion in 2000 to €14 billion in 2014 [7]. The shift from traditional marketing to online marketing is also significant. The total amount of advertising investments increased by 10% from 2014 to 2016, but 21 % for investments online [8].

The Marketing Act [9] and the Alcohol Act [10] state that alcohol advertising must be exercised with special moderation. Commercials are not to be intrusive, insistent or encourage drinking, and may neither target nor depict young people below the age of 25. Pictures in advertisements are only to show the product, primary products, logotype, the packaging, or a combination of these. Commercials of light beverages (alcohol free or with a maximum alc./vol.% of 2.25) cannot be presented so that they can be confused with commercials for alcoholic beverages.

The Consumer Agency has published advice on which criteria need to be fulfilled when targeting the Swedish market on online platforms [11]. Marketing is allowed only at sites where the target audience, or at least 70% of the visitors, are at least 25 years old. Sites selling or advertising alcohol must have an age-check for visitors, and clear distinctions are needed between editorial material and marketing ditto.

The alcohol industry has adopted self-regulatory codes of conduct for marketing, however questioned by a number of scientific reviews [12]. Table 1 lists items forbidden in advertising according to The European Advertising Standards Alliance [13] and The International Alliance for Responsible Drinking [14].
(Table 1 here)

Data and methods

The material consists of screenshots of 1204 posts published by accounts registered by 52 Swedish alcoholic brands, gathered from the four most widespread social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. All posts stems from three sampled months: January 2014, January 2016 and January 2017. The brand selection covers a large share of the Swedish market concerning volume and popularity (Table 2). All brand-authored posts were manually stored and analysed according to a content analytical scheme. The posts were coded according to Swedish legislation and industry self-regulation by two researchers. A sample of posts was coded by the whole research-team to ensure mutual understanding of codes.

To further ensure reliability of the coding a Delphi review method was applied, in which a panel of eight experts rated a sample of 20 posts in two assessment rounds with the aim of reaching a consensus in interpreting the content according to the study's coding scheme. All experts agreed with the research team in 69% of the ratings. In 87% of the ratings six or more experts agreed with the original rating. The experts disagreed mostly on how to assess the suggestions to share the content indicated in posts, which is not the scope of this study.

In order to assess whether the brand accounts are accessible by minors, fake under-age social media profiles were created and put to use by the research-team.

(Table 2 here)

Results

94% of the brands had a Facebook account, 69% were on Instagram, 40% on Twitter and 34% on YouTube. Many brands were present on several platforms incorporating integrated social media strategies [15]. Overall, the sampled content followed the self-regulative codes. None of the posts attributed alcohol to medical aspects, nor give the impression that alcohol could enhance mental or physical abilities. The material did not show young people consuming alcohol, and none of the posts used themes, music, games or characters that could be claimed to appeal primarily to minors. We found no suggestions that consuming alcohol would enhance social or sexual success or that alcohol would be related to drugs or drug cultures. Alcohol was not presented as a solution to problems, and we found no example of targeting risk groups or portrayals of alcohol consumption in relation to skill-requiring activities.

According to our analyses, only 7 of the 1204 posts (0.006%), breached the self-regulatory codes. Four posts did not follow the recommendations concerning the description of alcohol content, one post suggested immoderate drinking and two posts suggested mood-altering effects.

The Consumer Agency in Sweden recommends that alcohol-related online sites check the visitors' age. Of the 49 brands with registered Facebook accounts, 31 had activated age limits. No age-checks were found on the Instagram accounts.

83 posts (6.8%) portrayed non-alcoholic beverages. In some cases, the content was produced by companies manufacturing also alcohol-free products, and in other cases brands had dedicated their social media content to non-alcoholic drinks, despite the majority of their

products being alcoholic drinks. These posts were difficult to interpret from a legislative point of view, as the law states that advertising of light beverages must not be designed so that they can be confused with alcoholic beverages. Many of the posts were indeed difficult to distinguish from posts depicting alcoholic beverages. In some cases, the words “Non alcoholic” appeared only in minimal prints on the etiquettes of the bottles.

The Alcohol Act states that both printed and online advertisements may only show the product, logo or ingredients of the product. This rule was not followed in the sample of this study. For example, 35% of the posts (N=412) displayed PR-elements that enhanced the credibility of the brand; 23.5% (N=292) were collaborations of different kinds; 15% (N=190) were related to events and happenings and 7% (N=76) were categorized as humorous posts.

Discussion and conclusions

This inquiry found minimal violations by the Swedish alcohol brand accounts of its own codes of conduct, which can be seen as expected in view of a historically long and strict national regulation of alcohol advertising [16]. Of greater concern was the brands’ lack of age-limit enforcement. None of the Instagram accounts had age gates, and roughly four out of ten brands with Facebook accounts neglected age checks. This indicates that the brands do not comply to the recommendations of the Consumer Agency regarding the protection of minors. As many social media users are under-aged [5], this is worrying.

Most of the posts are not easily definable as commercial messages. Rather, the posts constitute different marketing messages mixed with editorial materials. The Alcohol Act requires a clear differentiation between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverage advertisements. The brands adhered to this rule to a varying degree as the words ‘non-alcoholic’ were difficult to detect, and the posts often looked like posts portraying alcoholic beverages. The strategy of posting material connected to the company's non-alcoholic products places the brands in a grey zone, as they are not required to follow the Alcohol Act for these products. These posts give the company more leeway in terms of shape and content but will still convey the image of the brands to the consumer with the help of logotypes, settings and connotations.

At the moment, many countries are turning the spotlight towards how to enforce alcohol policies online [17], Finland being the first European country to legislate on alcohol advertising in social media [18]. A corresponding legislation does not yet exist in Sweden, but a white paper presented in December 2017 suggested improved control over online advertising [8]. The paper proposes that producers would still be allowed to use social media for certain messages, such as editorial material, but that clear-cut advertising would be banned.

To summarise; the question of restricting content on social media concerns how to define both commercial advertising and the nature of post content under this conceptual umbrella. A renewed Swedish regulatory framework for alcohol advertising on social media is a challenging, yet timely, task. This report has explored some relevant matters to consider when taking the next legislative step.

Limitations

This study is limited to its scope. It is concerned with the content on online platforms, and the ways in which the messages are interpreted by consumers is outside its design. It focuses on three sample months which all represent only the winter month of January. However, considering the frequency of the social media posts, the research team could estimate a rather high percentage of representativity [19*], and the content was homogenous to the degree that a saturation point could be claimed to have been reached.

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Conflict of interest

None to declare

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*This forthcoming publication analyses a multitude of aspects concerning alcohol marketing on Social Media in Sweden and Finland, and goes into greater detail about the study described in this short report.

Tables

Table 1. Alcohol industry self-regulatory codes.

Headline	**Explanation**
Misuse	Advertisements cannot portray immoderate or excessive drinking.
Dangerous activities	Advertisements should not associate drinking with dangerous or daring activities.
Alcohol content	Advertisements should avoid any confusion about the nature and strength of alcoholic drinks.
Medical aspects	Advertisements must not suggest that alcoholic drinks can prevent, treat or cure a human disease, or refer to such properties.
Performance	Advertisements should not create the impression that consumption of alcoholic drinks enhances mental ability or physical performance; for example, when engaging in sports.
Minors	Advertisements should not specifically aim at minors or show minors consuming alcoholic beverages.
Social success	Advertisements should not create the impression that the consumption of alcohol is required for social success and should not imply that the successful outcome of a social occasion depends on the consumption of alcohol.
Sexual aspects	Advertisements should not create the impression that consumption of alcohol is required for sexual success and should not imply that the successful outcome of a social occasion depends on the consumption of alcohol.
Minor appeal	The advertisement cannot use themes, icons, music, games or characters that appeal primarily to minors.

Drugs	The advertisement cannot contain references to or make associations with drugs or drug cultures.
Mood-altering effects	The advertisement cannot present the product as a stimulant, sedative, or tranquiliser.
Risk group	The advertisement cannot depict or address at-risk groups, for example, pregnant women.
Skill-requiring activities	The advertisement cannot portray or encourage drinking prior to, or during, activities requiring sobriety or a high degree of skill or precision, such as controlling a motor vehicle or operating machinery.
Alcohol effects	The advertisement cannot mislead consumers about the nature and strength of the product, present high-alcohol content as a principal basis of appeal or suggest that the product can enhance physical, sporting or mental ability.

Table 2. The selected brands, stemming from the member list of the Swedish Brewers association and the top-20 sales lists of the state retail monopoly Systembolaget.

Swedish Brewers Association Barlingbo Bryggeri, Beer Studio, Cap Brewery, Carlsberg Sverige, Carlskrona Bryggeri, Centralbryggeriet, Coppersmiths, Dugges, Electric Nurse, Eskilstuna ölkultur, Galatea, Gotlands Bryggeri, Grebbestad, Halmstads brygghus, Herrljunga Cider, Jämtlands Bryggeri, Krönleins Bryggeri, Monks Cafe, Nya Carneige bryggeriet, Poppels, Sahlins Brygghus, Sigtuna Brygghus, Slottskällan, Spendrups, Södra Maltfabriken, Åbro, Österlensbryggarna **Systembolaget** Falcon, Mariestads, Norrlands Guld, Pripps Blå, Sofiero, Ginger Joe Sverige, Halmstad Cider, Rekordelig, Somersby, Kopparbergs bryggeri, Xide, Blossa Glögg, Dufvenkrooks glögg, Tegnér & Son, Varm & Kall Äppelvin, Chill Out, Tommasi, Gato Negro, Freixnet, Aussie, Chapel Hill, Drosdy Hof, Göteborgs nya bryggeri, Lindemans, tr3 apor