



Viewpoint

Consumer alcohol policies in Switzerland: A case study of Migros supermarket group

Alexander Smith*, Michael Liebreuz

University of Bern, Department of Forensic Psychiatry, Falkenplatz 18, 3012 Bern, Switzerland



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Migros supermarket
Alcohol policy
Switzerland
Prevention
Harm reduction

ABSTRACT

In June 2022, the Migros supermarket group in Switzerland declared the results of its referendum on the prospect of selling alcohol. Nationwide, individual members of the Federation of Regional Cooperatives that own the store had voted “No” to alcohol sales, thus continuing a philosophy that was implemented with its founding in the 1920s. As one of the biggest supermarket and convenience store chains in Switzerland, Migros is atypical in Western Europe for its alcohol-free consumer stance. However, this is complicated by the company selling alcohol in several of its retail subsidiaries and its stocking of alcohol-free beverages in own-brand shops. As such, Migros offers a distinctive and underexamined case study for wider drug policies and principles of prevention and harm reduction. This is especially notable within the framework of Switzerland’s well-documented “four pillar” approach to substance use. Accordingly, in this article, we discuss the context of Migros’ decision, issues raised by the referendum, and the significance of this consumer policy within Swiss society.

Introduction

The Migros group is one of the biggest supermarket and convenience store chains in Switzerland, with over 600 outlets, a 20% share of the total market, and annual sales of around 29 billion Swiss Francs (approximately 30 billion US Dollars) (as reported in the media: [Stephens, 2021](#)). On 16th June 2022, it was announced that members represented by each of the Regional Cooperatives that own the company had voted against the sale of alcohol in a referendum ([Migros Group, 2022](#)). This reaffirmed a philosophy first adopted in 1928, which precludes the stocking of alcohol and tobacco in Migros-branded shops.

For an international readership, the nationwide prohibition of alcohol in a major Western-European retailer may seem surprising and even commercially anachronistic, particularly given Migros’ other subsidiaries stock alcohol products, as do its main Swiss competitors. Interestingly, the Migros referendum and its consumer position encapsulate evolving debates about alcohol use and alcohol use disorder (AUD), highlighting theoretical considerations around prevention and harm reduction.

Across scientific literature and public discourse, Switzerland has been celebrated for its so-called “four pillar” approach to substance use, which is based not solely on repression (that is, policing), but incorporates harm reduction, prevention, and treatment as equal components. Accordingly, we discuss the historical and sociocultural contexts of Mi-

gros’ alcohol-free stance and its relevance to wider drug policy frameworks.

The 2022 Migros alcohol referendum: background and overview

Emphasising social responsibility and consumer protection, Gottlieb Duttweiler (1888-1962) established Migros in the 1920s and proscribed the sale of alcohol and tobacco, though it has been reported that Duttweiler used these substances himself ([Stephens, 2021](#)). Duttweiler centred the business around public health principles and his decision to exclude these products was motivated by his belief in restricting their cheap availability and his aim of supporting customer wellbeing.

Today, over 2 million members, representing approximately a quarter of the Swiss population, own the supermarket and convenience store group through its corporate governance structure. Membership is arranged across ten Regional Cooperatives, which roughly align with the country’s cantonal population density ([Migros Group, 2022](#)). Whilst membership levels may seem substantial in proportion to the national population, we believe that they could be due to the prevalence of Migros’ stores across Switzerland, their extensive member benefits, and the accessibility of the application process; any Swiss resident over the age of 18 can freely become a member and individuals are encouraged to sign-up either instore or online. Although they do not receive dividends, members are granted a gratis share in the company and are able to vote on the annual accounts and administrative matters. For instance,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Alexander.smith@fpd.unibe.ch (A. Smith).

Table 1
Breakdown of member voting decisions by Migros' Regional Cooperatives based on publicly-available data (Migros Group, 2022).

Regional Cooperative	Yes %	No %	Number of valid votes
Migros Aare	20.1%	79.9%	164,556
Migros Basel	23.9%	76.1%	46,485
Migros Geneva	35.2%	64.8%	27,523
Migros Lucerne	25.3%	74.7%	69,683
Migros Neuchâtel-Fribourg	26.9%	73.1%	27,365
Migros Eastern Switzerland	23.7%	76.3%	124,198
Migros Ticino	44.7%	55.3%	22,284
Migros Vaud	31.0%	69.0%	39,975
Migros Valais	39.7%	60.3%	20,475
Migros Zurich	19.7%	80.3%	89,869
Total	-	-	632,413

alongside the 2022 alcohol ballot, there were concurrent polls on digital membership rights and online voting (Migros Group, 2022).

During its history, Migros' members have directly shaped business strategies. Notably, in 1948, a members' vote narrowly rejected introducing alcohol sales and in 1981, members repudiated expansion into international markets, invoking tensions between cooperative decisions and corporate growth. In 2002, company decision-making was largely centralised, shifting power away from first-hand member consultations to a representative assembly of delegates elected by Migros' Regional Cooperatives. In 2021, these delegates decided on a change to the company's statutes that would allow respective Regional Cooperatives to sell alcohol if their constituent members voted in favour with a two-thirds majority in a nationwide poll the following year. Hypothetically, owing to its federal structure, this could have entailed a patchwork result in which alcohol was sold by Migros in some cantons but not in others.

The alcohol referendum was the first of its kind for two decades to put a critical commercial decision before Migros' members. Voting was open from early May until 4th June 2022 and the question on the ballot was expressed as follows: "Would you like to lift the ban on selling alcohol in the Migros branches and agree to the amendment of the regional statutes?". The Geneva Regional Cooperative had a slightly altered question as prohibiting alcohol sales was not explicitly part of its regional statute; however, a two-thirds majority was still required for alcohol to be introduced in Migros' stores in this area. The poll received considerable press attention and company-level marketing, with Migros producing a distinctive promotional campaign featuring two beer bottles embellished with "Oui" and "Non" (Migros Group, 2022).

Participant numbers were sizable, involving 623,413 Migros members. This equated to a turnout of 29% of the membership (Migros Group, 2022), or around 7% of the national population of Switzerland, which is akin to some federal referenda. With a two-thirds majority required to overturn the policy, each of Migros' Regional Cooperatives ultimately voted "No" to stocking alcohol (Migros Group, 2022). Interestingly, even "Yes" votes from Migros' Regional Cooperatives based in urbanised areas, like Zurich, and key wine-producing areas, such as Geneva, Valais, Vaud, and Ticino, did not reach the two-thirds threshold required to permit alcohol sales (Table 1).

Migros' consumer policy and approaches to substance use

When the referendum was announced, some perceived Migros to be abandoning Duttweiler's founding principles in order to pursue new revenue streams, provoking existential tensions within the company (Stephens, 2021). There were suggestions from Migros' management that the ballot was commercially significant because their main competitors sell alcohol and future attempts to grow market share may be inhibited. Nevertheless, non-governmental organisations and campaign groups proposed alternative arguments, suggesting that a "Yes" vote would adversely affect vulnerable individuals and might exacerbate social, economic, and health-related issues.

Specifically, Blaues Kreuz Schweiz (Swiss Blue Cross) contended that by advertising and stocking alcohol, Migros could introduce visible stimuli for individuals with AUD, removing a safe shopping space and precipitating potential relapse incidents (Blaues Kreuz Schweiz, 2021). Scientific evidence supports this view; for example, Scottish findings show that individuals with AUD identified retail settings as a common environmental and community-level risk factor for alcohol use (Shortt, Rhyas, & Holloway, 2017). Moreover, studies indicate that product placement and exposure to alcohol advertising can influence purchasing decisions (Nakamura, Pechey, Suhrcke, Jebb, & Marteau, 2014). Thus, Migros' alcohol-free supermarkets have been seen by some to fulfil an important role in alcohol use prevention and harm reduction, restricting the availability and promotion of a deleterious (yet normalised) substance (Blaues Kreuz Schweiz, 2021).

Previously, there have been investigations into the corporate social responsibility of supermarkets in a public health context, especially in relation to the marketing of unhealthy food products and obesogenic environments (Ejlertskov, Stead, Adamson, White, & Adams, 2018). However, to the authors' knowledge, no empirical research exists examining the effects of Migros' consumer stance on alcohol use patterns in Switzerland. This topic could therefore form the basis for future drug policy studies given Migros' status as one of the biggest supermarket and convenience store chains in the country.

To mark the referendum, the company has announced that it will stock an alcohol-free beer with a bespoke design, alongside other zero-alcohol products it already sells (Migros Group, 2022). Whilst evidence remains underdeveloped, there are signs that low- and alcohol-free drinks are useful harm reduction measures (Miller, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2022). Yet, there are also suggestions that these beverages can function as a gateway for increased alcohol use, markedly amongst young people (Miller, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2022). Serious ethical concerns would arise if a corporate decision intended to commemorate this alcohol vote leads to a higher prevalence of alcohol consumption, especially with Migros' substantial marketing efforts around this. Detailed analysis on consumer demographics and behaviours are necessary to ensure this move upholds Migros' commitments to social responsibility and customer wellbeing.

In addition, despite the "No" vote, the implementation of Migros' prohibition remains inconsistent across the company. The Migros group continues to sell alcohol through its retail subsidiaries, like Denner and migrolino, which have substantial representation across Switzerland and are often located in close proximity to Migros-branded stores. This has evoked criticisms that Migros is commercialising alcohol "through the back door", thereby undermining its public pledges and notions of prevention and harm reduction (Stephens, 2021).

Societal implications?

Following the "No" result, other associations suggested that this decision provides a mandate for broader discussions about substance use reforms, citing the social and health-related burdens of alcohol consumption in Switzerland (Sucht Schweiz, 2022). Research shows that alcohol, as a legally classified substance in many Western societies, can be associated with elevated harms as compared to illicit substances. For instance, alcohol consumption constitutes a prevalent risk factor for increased offending, particularly in the context of interpersonal violence.

Do the results of this ballot reflect a popular, national consensus? After all, as one company slogan proclaims, "Migros belongs to the people" (Stephens, 2021). What this event could mean for the country's drug policies is an intriguing consideration, but we believe it is unlikely to have a major impact. As a secret ballot, it should be noted that the motivations of voters are unclear; they may encapsulate sociocultural paradigms that are unrelated to alcohol use, like the desire to preserve traditions or other nostalgic reasons. In the authors' opinion, these latter points may be particularly pertinent given the phrasing of the referendum question in all areas except Geneva, which specifically referenced adjustments to pre-existing regional statutes that have endured for many

decades. Paradoxically, despite being perceived as a commercial disadvantage and restricting potential revenue streams, some have suggested that Migros' no-alcohol approach strengthens its brand and distinguishes it from the competition (Stephens, 2021). These considerations may also have contributed to the "No" vote.

As press coverage and campaigning for Migros' ballot resembled that of a federal referendum, it is not inconceivable that this result may have some influence on public attitudes towards alcohol policies. In the authors' view, if such societal debates do materialise, policymakers must not overlook the efficacy of alcohol harm reduction strategies, as have been adopted in other contexts. Examples include moderation-based self-help methods, targeted community and primary care interventions, and psychosocial techniques informed by alcohol moderation goals (Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002). Further, learnings can be taken from the efficacy of state substance use programmes in Switzerland, including heroin-related measures. In this regard, safe supply, supervised consumption, and awareness campaigns have proven beneficial and received public approval in past Swiss referenda (Csete & Elliott, 2021).

Concluding remarks

An anomaly within Western Europe, Migros' no-alcohol policy has been seen to be beneficial for alcohol use prevention and harm reduction in Switzerland, offering safe shopping environments for individuals with AUD. Nevertheless, the company's inconsistent commercial approaches to alcohol complicate its emphasis on consumer wellbeing. Publicly-expressed attitudes throughout the referendum highlight these diverse arguments, invoking wider discussions within Swiss society, including debates around safe shopping spaces, corporate responsibility, and attitudes to substance use.

Such are the complexities of operating an alcohol-free supermarket in twenty-first century Switzerland. There are inherent challenges in harmonising principles of care developed in the 1920s with ever-evolving societal and scientific concepts of substance use and consumer policies; or, as some would posit, balancing profit maximisation with harm minimisation.

Ethics statement

Not applicable.

Funding

No funding was received for this project.

Declarations of interest

Michael Liebreuz has represented the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health several times in the work of the Council of Europe - International Cooperation Group on Drugs and Addictions (Pompidou Group). The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank international colleagues who provided critical feedback on a first draft of this piece. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewer for their constructive and useful suggestions.

References

- Blaues Kreuz Schweiz. (2021). *Medienmitteilung: Nun liegt die Verantwortung bei den Migros-Genossenschaften (Media release: Responsibility now lies with the Migros cooperatives)* <https://blaueskreuz.ch/news/detail/medienmitteilung-nun-liegt-die-verantwortung-bei-den-migros-genossenschaften>.
- Csete, J., & Elliott, R. (2021). Consumer protection in drug policy: The human rights case for safe supply as an element of harm reduction. *The International Journal on Drug Policy*, 91, Article 102976. [10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102976](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102976).
- Ejlerskov, K. T., Stead, M., Adamson, A., White, M., & Adams, J. (2018). The nature of UK supermarkets' policies on checkout food and associations with healthfulness and type of food displayed: cross-sectional study. *The International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 15(1), 52. [10.1186/s12966-018-0684-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-018-0684-2).
- Marlatt, G. A., & Witkiewitz, K. (2002). Harm reduction approaches to alcohol use: health promotion, prevention, and treatment. *Addictive Behaviors*, 27(6), 867–886. [10.1016/s0306-4603\(02\)00294-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0306-4603(02)00294-0).
- Migros Group. (2022). *Die Genossenschaftsmitglieder haben entschieden: Migros-Filialen bleiben schweizweit alkoholfrei (The members of the cooperative have decided: Migros branches throughout Switzerland will remain alcohol-free)* <https://corporate.migros.ch/de/medien/mitteilungen/show/news/medienmitteilungen/2022/alkohol-abstimmung-resultateid=e628a4d6-11f0-4fc9-9ab1-ae1b6e540a0df.html>.
- Miller, M., Pettigrew, S., & Wright, C. (2022). Zero-alcohol beverages: Harm-minimisation tool or gateway drink? *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 41(3), 546–549. [10.1111/dar.13359](https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13359).
- Nakamura, R., Pechey, R., Suhrcke, M., Jebb, S. A., & Marteau, T. M. (2014). Sales impact of displaying alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages in end-of-aisle locations: an observational study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 108(100), 68–73. [10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.02.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.02.032).
- Shortt, N. K., Rhynas, S. J., & Holloway, A. (2017). Place and recovery from alcohol dependence: A journey through photovoice. *Health & Place*, 47, 147–155. [10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.08.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.08.008).
- Stephens, T. (2021). *Retail giant Migros confronts its complicated history with alcohol* <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/should-retail-giant-migros-start-selling-alcohol-/47103466>.
- Sucht Schweiz. (2022). *Die Migros bleibt alkoholfrei – Abstimmende zeigen, dass Alkohol kein Produkt wie jedes andere ist (Migros remains alcohol-free – voters show that alcohol is not a product like any other)* <https://www.suchtschweiz.ch/aktuell/medienmitteilungen/article/die-migros-bleibt-alkoholfrei-abstimmende-zeigen-dass-alkohol-kein-produkt-wie-jedes-andere-ist>.