

# The role of the state in consumer culture: the case of “Operation Vin” in Sweden

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the market dynamics that led to a shift in Swedish consumers’ alcohol preferences from schnapps to wine. Specifically, the study investigates how the Swedish state influenced consumers’ alcohol habits and highlights the role of governance units in shaping consumer culture.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study reconstructs the historical memory of the “Operation Vin”, a strategic marketing campaign implemented by Systembolaget from 1957 to 1985, to conceptualize the past and to uncover the structures and change dynamics of the Swedish alcohol market system. Following this approach, the research contrasts historical data from multiple sources with market-oriented ethnographical data and traces the trajectory of how the consumption of alcohol has changed as a consequence of the Swedish state’s initiatives.

**Findings** – The study offers two contributions to the literature in marketing and consumption history. Firstly, it uncovers the lines of actions (framing and settlement) involved in creating marketing systems and shaping consumer culture. Secondly, it explores how the state strategically leveraged its social skills to promote a specific type of alcohol consumption (wine) and to induce the Swedish consumer to cooperate in the refashioning of the alcohol field.

**Social implications** – The authors aspire for this paper to offer valuable insights into how a state, as a governance entity, can shape consumer culture through a strategic blend of various regulatory measures, both gentle and forceful. The authors emphasize the pivotal role of social skills in fostering cooperation during the implementation of a new alcohol policy.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides valuable insights into the role of the Swedish state in shaping consumer culture and explores the strategic actions and marketing systems involved, contributing to marketing and consumption history literature.

**Keywords** State intervention, Strategic action field, Social skills, Consumer culture, Alcohol consumption

**Paper type** Research paper

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**Data availability statement:** The ethnographic data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author(s) upon reasonable request.

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## Introduction

Swedish consumers today have access to one of the world's broadest assortments of wine through the state monopoly Systembolaget. What market dynamics led up to this focus on wine in a field where consumers' preferences had traditionally been for distilled spirits and beer? How was the Swedish State able to convince consumers to change their alcohol habits? Answering these questions will give important insight about the potential role of governance units as agents able to shape consumer culture, which is a perspective that has hitherto been relatively overlooked.

The role of the state in consumer culture has a long history. In the ancient era, it is well documented that the state played a primary role in fostering consumerism by building infrastructure to promote domestic demand for products (Minowa and Witkowski, 2009) or leisure activities (Karababa and Ger, 2011). Other studies have focused on totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union, to illustrate the emergence of a marketing system to direct consumption for ideological purposes (Tadajewski and Stole, 2016; Papushina, 2020; Dufek, 2021). During other historical periods, the state may be driven by forces of globalization to embrace marketing practices to meet consumer culture preferences (Carpenter and Luciano, 2021).

As our case will illustrate, the state can play other important roles in shaping consumer culture. In particular, we will show how the state can drive consumption by changing cultural frames. The state achieves this by not only leveraging its regulative power but also by adopting marketing communication techniques to form the underlying cultural meanings framing actors' interactions. We address this issue in the context of the Swedish alcohol field, using the historical case of "Operation Vin", a strategic marketing action perpetuated by the state-owned alcohol retailer Systembolaget from 1957 until 1985. Theoretically, we follow Layton (2015) to frame marketing history from a strategic action field (SAF) perspective (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012). Of particular focus is how the state was able to leverage on social skills to mobilize key resources for the strategic project of (re)framing market interactions and induce other actors to collaborate in the settling of a new market logic grounded on the consumption of wine as a healthier alternative compared to distilled spirits, which we will henceforth refer to as *brännvin* to stick to the Swedish vocabulary that had thitherto been the traditional choice.

Our research offers two contributions to the literature in marketing and consumption history. First, we respond to Layton's (2015, p. 565) call to uncover social mechanisms in the generation of action fields associated with marketing systems. In addition to previous studies that advanced a macro picture of how the state intervenes to build marketing systems to stimulate consumption (e.g. Minowa and Witkowski, 2009; Karababa, 2015), we instead take a meso level perspective. As such, we show the tactics implemented by the Swedish governance unit to (re)create a shared understanding about the purpose of the field, its interactions and the set of rules around which a new taste regime is organized. The historical analysis reveals the marketing discourse promoted by the state to reframe the traditional drinking culture focused on *brännvin* as to settle the field into another set of meanings framing consumption associated with wine.

Second, we complement previous historical analyses on state interventions in the field of alcohol. Although different interventional approaches have been taken across different Western countries, ranging from total prohibition to liberalism (e.g. Pennock and Kerr, 2005; Butler *et al.*, 2017; Simpson, 2005), previous studies show that states have chiefly operated to constrain alcohol consumption with the goal of limiting harmful behaviours (e.g. Room, 1999; Warner *et al.*, 2001). We complement this by focusing on how the state can

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strategically stimulate a certain type of alcohol consumption to promote a healthier behaviour.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we offer a brief introduction to the Swedish alcohol field to provide a broader understanding of the historical context from which the strategic action of the state initiated its disruptive effects. We then explain our methodological procedures, data set, which include both historical sources and ethnographic data, and how we conducted our analysis. By drawing on SAF Theory, we conduct an historical analysis of the Operation Vin, presented in two main conceptual stages: framing and settlement. We discuss our findings, reflecting on possible implications for practice and provide tentative conclusions.

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### **The Swedish alcohol field**

Sweden and alcohol have a long history together, ranging from the mead of the Viking era to the beer of the Middle Ages to the brännvin introduced during the 15th century. In the early times, Sweden could be characterized as a drinking culture (De Geer, 2017), and the habit of heavy drinking among the Swedes was identified as a problem early on. A first systematic approach to handle heavy drinking and related problems was taken with the introduction of the temperance movement in 1828. Ever since, the alcohol market has been a contested one, with individual citizens' desire to drink on one side and various entities trying to regulate drinking on the other side. The experienced severity of the drinking-related problems seems to have legitimized the regulation, which is in effect a limitation of people's individual freedom.

The regulation of the alcohol market has been a key approach to tackling problems related to overconsumption (Room, 1999). At first, in 1914, local initiatives were introduced in the region of Stockholm to restrict the amount of alcohol that individuals could purchase. A few years later, in 1917 these initiatives were implemented nationwide (Bruun *et al.*, 1985; De Geer, 2017). This rationing system was the brainchild of Doctor Ivan Bratt, a medical professional who was highly knowledgeable about alcohol and who believed in creating a more sober society Bruun *et al.* (1985). Bratt advocated for strict control of the alcohol industry, including high prices to limit availability and the elimination of private interests (Systembolaget, 2023d). The rationing book, or "motbok", as it was called in Sweden, became the symbol of Bratt's system. Under this system, individuals were only allowed to purchase alcohol from local registered stores by presenting their credentials and having them verified. The alcohol rations differed depending on a person's class and position, with those from the upper classes being allowed to buy more than those from the lower classes. Additionally, women were hardly allowed to purchase any alcohol at all.

In response to decades of criticism of heavy drinking in Sweden and the growing prohibitionist movement in Western countries (Pennock and Kerr, 2005), Sweden held its first alcohol referendum in 1922. The referendum featured two factions: the prohibitionist movement, which argued for stricter alcohol regulations, and the countermovement, which advocated for a less restrictive approach. The countermovement narrowly won with 51% of the 1.8 million votes cast (Systembolaget, 1965, p. 12), but the rationing book still remained as the primary alcohol regulatory system. Despite efforts to control alcohol consumption, the Bratt system faced increasing criticism for its inequitable effects. Furthermore, the system was perceived as bureaucratic and complicated due to the constant addition of new rules from the centralized control board (Franberg, 2001). Other measures were also taken to limit the consumption of alcohol, such as tax increases that raised the cost of brännvin from 1.80 SEK per litre in 1917 to 17.75 SEK per litre in 1954 but still failed to curb alcohol consumption. In 1953, Swedish consumers drank 45 million litres of brännvin, a 25%

increase since the introduction of the Bratt System (Systembolaget, 1965, p. 16). Eventually, the Swedish government took the initiative to change the state of things. As a result, the Swedish government abolished the quota system, the so-called “motbok”, in October 1955 and instead established a state monopoly for the sales of alcohol, Systembolaget (Björkman, 2004; De Geer, 2017). The abolishment of the rationing system and the introduction of Systembolaget had drastic effects on the volume of consumption. Between 1954 and 1956, total consumption rose by 25%, and alcohol-related mortality increased even more (Norström, 1987). The increased volume of consumption directly had consequences on the well-being of the Swedish citizens. Drinking offenses increased by close to 100% during these years, and the annual cases of delirium tremens – severe withdrawal symptoms occurring after extended periods of heavy alcohol consumption – rose from approximately 160 to more than 700 (Boalt and von Euler, 1959; Lenke, 1985).

Today, Systembolaget serves as both a governance unit regulating alcohol on behalf of the Swedish state and the sole retailer of alcoholic beverages in Sweden. The state’s justification for privileging Systembolaget is that selling alcohol without a profit motive can minimize negative health effects. The main policy framework applied by the Swedish state after the abolition of the quota system remained the same: increase the retail cost of alcohol and limit its availability to reduce consumption. However, the policy shifted towards promoting wine as a less harmful alternative to brännvin. From 1957, Systembolaget launched a massive marketing campaign, Operation Vin, with the goal of guiding Swedish consumers towards wine instead of brännvin, which was viewed as a healthier option (Björkman, 2004). In addition, Operation Wine had the aim of demystifying and destigmatizing wine. The concept revolved around making wine more accessible and less elitist. That implies promoting a new drinking culture that emphasized the harmonious pairing of wine with food. As a result, culinary recipes became a central topic in Systembolaget magazines, serving as a cornerstone for a novel approach to alcohol and offering a pedagogical guide on the art of pairing wines with various dishes. The campaign recognized early on that convincing people to choose wine over traditional pairings such as aquavit with herrings or replacing ingrained customs embedded in traditional festivities such as Christmas ham would be challenging. However, as Björkman (2004) observed this sense of hope and positivity truly symbolized Operation Wine as Systembolaget’s goal went beyond simply boosting wine sales while diminishing brännvin. The goal was to persuade the Swedes to shift from their traditional alcohol consumption towards a new drinking culture rooted in a healthier lifestyle. This campaign and its effects are the focus of this research.

### Methodological procedures

To reconstruct the memory of the strategic action Operation Vin and uncover structures of the Swedish alcohol market, we apply historical organizational memory as one of the modes of inquiry of historiographical reflexivity suggested by Decker *et al.* (2021). Following this approach, we contrast historical data from multiple sources with market-oriented ethnographical data and contextualize them in the specific social momentum in which Operation Vin took place (Kipping *et al.*, 2014; Lubinski, 2018; Gorge and Galluzzo, 2022). While an official end point for Operation Vin has not been established, available records suggest that its activities gradually diminished after 1971, when wine sales surpassed those of strong alcoholic beverages and overall alcohol consumption in Sweden declined for the first time since 1960 (Ragnarsson, 2001, p. 42). Despite this, Systembolaget’s propaganda efforts persisted, promoting healthier drinking habits through its prominent “Spola Kröken”

campaign until the first half of the 1980s. Based on this information, we have chosen 1985 as the end date for our data set. An overview of the complete data set can be found in [Table 1](#).

The main sources of archival data are located in Systembolaget's online historical archive ([www.systembolagethistoria.se](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se)) and in two physical sites: Spritmuseum, the museum of spirits located in Stockholm, Sweden and Centrum för Näringslivshistoria, the Centre for Business History, one of the world's leading business archives that helps a large number of Swedish companies with their archives. Systembolaget's archival data is composed of digitalized copies of the original communication materials produced by the Systembolaget ([www.systembolagethistoria.se](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se)). We consider pertinent to this project the material produced between 1957 and 1985 that had a specific relation to the communication campaign aimed at promoting wine consumption, the so-called Operation Vin. This set of data is mainly composed of advertising material (e.g. billboards, posters in various formats, TV commercials), printed materials (e.g. company's and product's in-store brochures, consumer information, sales regulations), company's internal and external correspondence (e.g. annual reports, board memorandum, stores and internal training manuals). We also inspected the original physical copies of such materials kept in the archives of the Centre for Business History. The Spritmuseum was founded in 1967 to preserve the memory of the alcohol culture in Sweden, which enabled us to observe another set of historical materials concerning the relationship between alcohol consumption and Swedish customs and traditions. This set of archival data was useful to facilitate the understanding of the historical cultural background of alcohol consumption in Sweden. We visited the Spritmuseum two times, and we carried out two interviews to augment our understanding of the archival data and seek alternative oral accounts of history ([Decker et al., 2021](#)). In the historical data set, we included pamphlets, original ration books and objects that we collected during the field work as they constitute "traces of the past" ([Kipping et al., 2014](#), p. 312) to access the historical knowledge embodied in such material artefacts ([Golder, 2000](#)).

Since historical data may be mediated by the social contexts in which they emerge ([Lubinski, 2018](#)), we combined this set of historical records with market-related ethnographic data ([Arnould and Price, 2006](#)). We conducted one year and nine months of field work, gathering passive observations to scrutinize consumers' practices in Systembolaget's retailing stores. This data was recorded using field notes and photos. We complement this data set by interviewing consumers that were recruited based on two criteria. A first cohort was selected based on their age and memory about the abolition of the *ration book* in Sweden. We thus interviewed this cohort of three individuals to collect verbal accounts of the memory of the Operation Vin and how it impacted their own drinking habits. A second cohort was selected among younger generations that were not born during the abolition of the *ration book* and that had no previous knowledge about it. The access and recruitment of the second cohort commenced via personal connections. Additional participants were enlisted using purposive snowballing techniques, which entail asking the participants whether they could recommend other people for us to interview, resulting in a diverse group comprising individuals of varying genders, nationalities, and professional backgrounds. The interviews with this second cohort aimed at exploring the long-term consequences of Operation Vin, as we wanted to understand how individuals reproduce the established rules of the field as an effect of a historical process ([Decker et al., 2021](#)). In addition, we interviewed wine importers, producers and journalists specialized in the wine sector to broaden our understanding at a market level. All interviews were structured according to [McCracken's \(1988\)](#) procedures for "long interviews" of around 30 to 120 minutes' duration and ranged from spontaneous conversations to formally arranged meetings ([Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007](#)). A complete list of informants is found in [Appendix 1](#). The ethnographic dataset also consists of media

Table 1.  
Summary of data  
collection

Index	Sources	Data set	Scope
Interviews with market actors	Consumers (9) Wine importers (3) Wine producers (4) Press (1)	17 interviews	Phenomenological understanding of how the consumption of wine has changed because of the Swedish state's initiatives from different market actors
Interviews with Spritmuseum	Intendent of Museum Expert is the history of Swedish drink	2 interviews	To augment understanding of archival data and seeking for alternative oral accounts of history
Archival data from netnographic sites	<a href="http://www.systembolagethistoria.se">www.systembolagethistoria.se</a> ; <a href="http://www.filmarkivet.se">www.filmarkivet.se</a> ; <a href="https://slakthistoria.se">https://slakthistoria.se</a> ; <a href="http://www.handelshistoria.se">www.handelshistoria.se</a> ; <a href="https://motdrag.se">https://motdrag.se</a> ; <a href="https://popularhistoria.se">https://popularhistoria.se</a> ; <a href="http://www.bizstories.se">www.bizstories.se</a> ; <a href="https://spritmuseum.se">https://spritmuseum.se</a> ; Spritmuseum, Stockholm Centrum för Näringslivshistoria	47 webpages 3 podcasts	Published materials and records available on internet on the history of the Swedish alcohol policy and Systembolaget
Archival data from physical sites		Authors' pictures and notes Advertisement (Ö1-2) Printed material (L1-12) Annual Reports (D4) Internal Correspondence (E7) Board Memorandum (B 6c) Sales Manual (B5) Store Manuals (B4a) Internal Training (B4b) 7 objects	Historical data of Operation Vin
Historical cultural artifacts	Original ration book (1954), pamphlets, advertising, billboards Examples: "Vin&Sprit 1917-2008"; "Chateau vadå?"; Handbook of Enology"; "Fredagskväll"; "Uppdrag vin: en introduktion till vin och vinprovning"; "Atlas över världensviner", Svensk Alkoholhistoria		Historical knowledge embodied in material artefacts
Books on wine-related topics		12 books	Historical and current understanding of the field of wine with a specific focus on Sweden

(continued)

Index	Sources	Data set	Scope
Newspaper articles (including videos)	Expressen, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, SVT Nyheter; storytel.se; open.spotify.com; sverigesradio.se	63 articles	The wine context Media discourse on wine consumption and alcohol policy in Sweden
Wine Blogs and Specialized magazines	Diderot.se; vinology.com; ohmansmatovin.com; bkwine.com/sv; vinifierat.se; svensktvin.se; Decanter, Winemag.com	(Posts from April 2018 – March 2022) 41 threads 10:29 h	The broader wine context Perspectives of professionals on wine market
Ethnographic observations	Audio notes Jot notes Pictures	7 pages 549 pictures	First-hand observations of consumer's practices in the Systembolaget's retails
Corporate and Market data	Alcohol consumption in Sweden, Corporate marketing documentation (e.g., Systembolaget launch plan, responsibility report) and documentation directed to consumers (e.g. flyers, pamphlets, brochures)	329 pages 34 objects	General understanding of the institutional field (organizational structure, culture, in-store communication)
<b>Source:</b> Authors' data collection			

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Table 1.



data such as magazines and newspaper articles, wine blogs and books on wine-related topics, including corporate and market data to expand our understanding of the context of wine, including media discourse on wine consumption and alcohol policy in Sweden and perspectives from professionals operating in the wine market. Based on these multiple sources of information, we were able to not only provide a snapshot picture of how wine consumption is structured today, but we can also trace trajectory of how the consumption of wine has changed as a consequence of the Swedish state's initiatives. In so doing, we reconcile with [Fligstein and McAdam \(2011, p. 199\)](#) methodological consideration about the need for providing "dense accounts of how fields evolve".

Following [Kipping \*et al.\* \(2014\)](#), data analysis was conducted as an iterative process consisting of three interrelated elements. Firstly, we established trustworthiness of the sources, as archival data was in legitimate locations (Systembolaget's online historical archive and the Centre for Business History), which render data verifiable. Secondly, we triangulated activating different lines of action ([Flick, 2009](#)), such as adopting multiple methods (archival research and ethnography) to generate multiple data sets. We then combined different insights from different sources to reduce the potential bias of one single authoritative voice. This is important since the main historical voice of Operation Vin consists of Systembolaget's documentation. We strategically exploited the different cultural backgrounds of the research team (Italian and Swedish) to avoid cultural blindness ([McCracken, 1988](#)). Thirdly, we applied hermeneutic interpretation. The use of multiple and heterogeneous sources helped us broaden the context for the analysis and thus to interpret the Operation Vin campaign in relation to other sources (e.g. books, media, and ethnographic materials), which constitute the broader context in which they are understood ([Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009](#)). This approach, combined with multiple sources of information, facilitates a more objective interpretation of the organization's history ([Kipping \*et al.\*, 2014](#); [Golder, 2000](#)).

## Findings

### *(Re)framing the Swedish alcohol market as a strategic field*

The main goal of Operation Vin was to disrupt the alcohol market from within and evolve the existing alcohol policy, which focused on restricting the consumption of brännvin and promoting wine as a less harmful alternative ([Björkman, 2004](#)). It is important to note, however, that Operation Vin did not represent a major departure in how Swedish alcohol policy was conducted, since tax increases on alcoholic beverages still remained the primary regulatory mechanism. For example, the cost of one litre of the brand Renat brännvin increased from 18 to 27 SEK per litre between 1956 and 1958 ([Systembolaget, 1965, p. 22](#)) in an effort to reduce consumption. Instead of the hard regulations of tax increases, Operation Vin injected some dynamism into policymaking by promoting self-regulation amongst consumers by encouraging the consumption of wine as an alternative to brännvin. Before Operation Vin, wine consumption in Sweden was mainly limited to the upper class ([De Geer, 2017](#)). For example, in 1910, only 4 litres of wine were sold in a liquor store in Stockholm, which at the same time sold a total of 4 million litres of other spirits ([Björkman, 2004, p. 6](#)). Working-class Swedes predominantly consumed brännvin ([Ekström, 1962](#)). The Operation Vin initiative helped changing the status quo and allowed working-class consumers to access wine, both economically, as wine was offered as less expensive compared to brännvin, and culturally, promoting wine as part of a modern and progressive lifestyle. As we look closely on how governance units leverage on social skills to change field dynamics, we pinpoint two main tactics exploited by Systembolaget in the (re)framing of the new alcohol policy: setting the agenda and changing field routines.



### *Setting the agenda: wine as a less expensive alternative*

Fligstein (2001, p. 114) refers to “agenda setting” as that line of action in which social actors use determined social skill to convince other actors with different interests and preferences to converge towards a particular common agenda. To successfully facilitate such agenda, especially in a culturally laden arena such as alcohol, “discursive framing that resonate with underlying cultural currents must take place” (Kjeldgaard *et al.*, 2017, p. 53). The “underlying cultural current” that Systembolaget’s campaign resonated with was the pragmatic attitude of Swedish consumers to be sensitive to the cost of alcohol. The early campaigns thus focused on showing that wine was a less expensive choice compared to the traditional brännvin. An original Systembolaget poster published in 1957 states: “For circa 3 Swedish Krona [bold in original; krona, SEK, is the Swedish currency] you can have a whole bottle of good wine” (authors’ translation) (see Figure A1 – Appendix 2).

Importantly, Systembolaget presented the offering of wine, specifically focusing on a broad range of products at a lower price. For example, in the brochure “What should we take? More than 500 different wines at Systembolaget” (authors’ translation) (Systembolaget, 1969), the common understanding according to which wine “seems far too expensive” is counter-argued and is instead affirmed that “on the contrary! There are many sparkling wines at relatively low prices. For example, the new demisec Carneval (about 9 SEK). A spirits-based drink is always much more costly.”

This connection between the relatively lower cost of wine compared to other alcoholic drinks also became a source of critique from those worrying that this would entice new groups to start drinking, especially when paired with attractive images portraying wine consumption as socially desirable. One prominent critic was Einar Rimmerfors, a Swedish politician for the liberal party and a pastor in the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, who published an op-ed in *Expressen*, one of the major tabloids in Sweden (January 9th, 1958), where he raised these concerns:

I [ask] for guarantees that propaganda would not take a form that could contribute to expanding the drinking culture and attracting new age groups to start consuming alcohol that may not stop at just wine. Additionally, the large wine advertisement on December 18th promotes this idea. The ad features a beautiful and appealing image of young people discussing good wine to pair with ham and sausage. The ad claims that drinking wine requires no special ceremony and for about 3 kronor, you can get a whole bottle of good wine (Systembolaget, 1958b, pp. 12-13).

The fact that these connections between lower costs of wine and increased consumption was getting critiqued is a sign that Systembolaget was tapping into an important cultural understanding of alcohol in Sweden. Eva Lenneman, the curator of the Spritmuseum, explained that “in Sweden the value of alcohol is much more important than the taste. This is because alcohol in Sweden is costly”, thus reinforcing the idea that Systembolaget was indeed tapping into an important discursive framing. The cultural pervasiveness of the connection between alcohol and money finds further support in the ethnographic material. Consumer respondents sometimes referred to the cultural acronym APK (alcohol-per-krona):

APK means that I want to spend the least amount of money on the alcohol that I buy. Back in the day, for instance, we had this Italian wine that was very popular because at Systembolaget it was the strongest wine that you could buy for the least amount of money [...] Roughly it was 18 alcohol/centiliters per krona or something like this [...] (Oscar).

In their account of SAF theory, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, p. 13) postulate that “material resources (i.e., money) remain a powerful weapon in the struggle to shape the broad cultural contours of the emerging field”. Our empirical findings show how using the culturally embedded connection between money and alcohol served as a tool to gain acceptance for

this new practice. Systembolaget's original message that "wine = less expensive alcohol" has found its way into the contemporary consumer vernacular, for example, in the form of the APK acronym.

### *Changing field routines*

Operation Vin was part of a new Swedish alcohol policy aimed at disrupting established field routines. Two ways in which this was done were by presenting wine as closely connected to food and culinary experiences and by shedding wine's connections to the upper class and consequent snobbish associations. Systembolaget's brochure *Vinkar: Tips and news for Systembolaget's customers* (authors' translation) that was distributed in stores from 1964 played a significant role in promoting wine as a new drinking habit. It provided customers with news and tips to help them navigate the world of wines, for example, by highlighting food recipes that paired well with different wines. Since traditional Swedish recipes were not always suitable for wine, the recipes presented were intended to encourage new eating and drinking habits that were better suited, in essence promoting a new culinary culture.

In the spring issue of *Vinkar* (Systembolaget, 1966), customers were told that even the average Swede, colloquially referred to as Svensson, was becoming aware of wine and had learned to appreciate the bouquet of a good red wine and its nice aftertaste. Offering a good wine instead of the traditional snaps, a shot of brännvin, was no longer considered snobbish. This message, reinforced by the presence of well-known authorities and Swedish celebrities, was consistent in all communication channels where Operation Vin was promoted. The clear ambition was to educate people on how to drink properly and why wine was a more modern, healthier, cheaper, and tastier alternative to spirits.

However, the process of acculturation to new drinking habits required adapting to the cultural norms in place at the time (Wilson, 2005). In Sweden, the consumption of brännvin had long been deeply ingrained in the daily lives of many people, linked to various recreational activities and customary traditions. Therefore, the shift from brännvin to wine as the preferred alcoholic beverage created some cultural turbulence, which Systembolaget's marketing communication aimed to address. As Douglas (1987/2003) notes, the pairing of food and alcohol is not simply a matter of taste but rather an enactment of symbolic cultural practices, such as the tradition of celebrating national festivities. This was the case with the pairing of wine instead of brännvin with the traditional Swedish foods consumed during major holidays. The Spritmuseum's intendent, Eva Lenneman, explains how the promotion of wine and food pairing was carried out during Operation Vin:

They [Systembolaget] did a lot of propaganda. In the shops they tried to make this connection between food and wine by saying "try wine and you can have a much nicer food experience". But the problem was that brännvin is very much connected to the tradition of the Swedish food like herring, salmon [ . . . ] the traditional Swedish smörgåsbord.

Systembolaget thus tried to change the established consumer rituals of pairing brännvin with the traditional Swedish food and substituting it with wine. Figure A2 (Appendix 2) shows promotional material that encourages consumers to have a "Merry Christmas, without alcohol". In Swedish, the word used for "Merry" is "God", which means good, so the copy plays on the idea that consumers will have a good food experience if they drink wine rather than numbing their taste buds with brännvin.

This suggestion of substituting brännvin for wine is not without complications. The eclectic mix of tastes characterizing the traditional Swedish smorgasbord, served as a buffet style menu with multiple hot and cold dishes including both meat and fish, presents a challenge for those trying to find a wine that would accompany the entire meal. On top of

this, there is a ritual script of downing the brännvin in one go, many times preceded by a song. With such culturally engrained practices ranging back hundreds of years, it is not an easy feat merely substituting one drink for another.

The employees at Systembolaget also speculated on the effects of the Operation Vin campaign and whether it had any effect on the consumption of wine *vis-à-vis* brännvin. In a memorandum dealing with the sales of alcohol during the Christmas season of 1957 (Systembolaget, 1958a), several managers of Systembolaget stores were concerned with an alleged delay in the distribution of the campaign material, especially pamphlets intended to be delivered to customers. According to store managers, by the time the customers received the pamphlets, they had already made their purchases of alcoholic beverages for the holidays, or at least decided on what and how much to buy. They suggested that the pamphlets may have had a greater effect had they been distributed a couple of weeks earlier. Some also questioned the effectiveness of the campaign altogether, such as one manager responsible for a district who was quoted saying, “It will take a considerable amount of time before a dent can be made in the culture of drinking spirits”, adding that he also had opinions about the means of communication: “It seems that advertising has had a greater impact than the pamphlets”. This signals that the Operation Vin campaign did not pass unnoticed but rather was debated quite heavily from various angles. The overall spirit by the Systembolaget employees, however, was that they seem to have been rather positive towards the campaign.

In this section, we have illustrated how Operation Vin attempted to change field routines by lowering barriers to buying wine instead of brännvin. This was done both by lowering prices and by trying to educate the customers about the suitability of wine as a drink consumed with food, even of the traditional Swedish kind. The effectiveness of these attempts was, however, questioned by various actors.

#### *Settlement: Stabilizing the new Swedish alcohol field*

About 10 years after the launch of Operation Vin in October 1957, the results of the strategic action were controversial. The controversy had its roots in the observation that overall alcohol consumption did not decrease as much as expected, but the consumption of wine increased significantly. This indeed indicated a change in the dynamics of the alcohol field, with the addition of wine rather than a substitution of brännvin for wine. According to Systembolaget (1965, p. 34), alcohol consumption decreased slightly from 8.3 litres per inhabitant above the age of 15 in 1953 to 8.2 litres in 1964. However, wine consumption increased from 2.3 liters in 1953 to 5.3 litres in 1964.

This trend has continued to the present day, with wine consumption accounting for 44% of total alcohol consumption in 2021, according to Centralförbundet för Alkohol och Narkotikaupplysning (CAN) (Trolldal, 2022). Ethnographic observations confirm the long-term success of Operation Vin, as historical sources had predicted. Systembolaget’s stores today offer a larger selection of wines, with a total of 12.280 wine labels in its product range and wine sales constituting 50% of its revenue (Systembolaget, 2021). The proliferation of wine associations where Swedish consumers can learn about wines, as well as the trend of travel companies offering wine-tasting holidays, also suggest a growing interest in wines in Sweden [1]. Today, wine can be considered part of Swedish everyday life, as indicated by the fact that all the major newspapers, ranging from national to regional ones, have dedicated journalists that regularly write about wine, both covering the assortment of Systembolaget and wine news more generally.

However, field settlement was a long process that took place over an extended period, during which the state worked to converge on a large consensus “regarding the rules of conduct and membership criteria that routinize interaction in pursuit of common aims” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 92). Of particular interest is how the Swedish state was able to settle the field by imposing a system of rules regulating the status of membership and a code of conduct while simultaneously promoting a new collective identity that could resonate with a broader set of actors, all united in the aim of stabilizing the alcohol field around a new cultural order that promoted wine as the new taste regime.

### *Negotiating field rules*

Operation Vin was also seen to potentially widen the customer base of alcohol consumers, reaching groups that were traditionally not considered patrons of Systembolaget. This can be considered as a way to include new members to the field of alcohol consumption. To purchase wine at Systembolaget stores, individuals must present identification, as buying alcohol is only permitted for those over the age of 20, in accordance with the Alcohol Act, 3kap. 7§ (SFS 2010:1622, 2023). This policy was implemented due to concerns that young Swedes would engage in drinking and cause disorderly behaviour following the abolishment of rationing after the “October Revolution” in 1955 (Systembolaget, 2023e). From April 1st, 1963, Systembolaget personnel were instructed to check identification documents to verify customers’ age, as there was no photo ID at that time (Björkman, 2004, p. 5). Still today, anyone under the age of 25 must present identification at the checkout without being prompted, despite legal age in all other domains being attained at age 18 in Sweden (see Figure A3 – Appendix 2).

These concerns around young people and drinking were heightened by the Operation Vin campaign since critiques said that it would appeal to young people and women, who were at the time not considered groups of consumers inclined to drink alcohol. The Temperance Movement Press Service managed to get articles published in both *Skaraborgs Läns Tidning* and *Östra Småland*, where they voiced concern that Operation Vin was “Dangerous Propaganda” (Systembolaget, 1958b, p. 5). Similarly, the journalist Hugo Brolin from the national tabloid paper *Expressen* wrote that “It is not reasonable for Systembolaget to help Spanish, French, and German wine agencies in Sweden to teach young people how to drink wine through a large-scale advertising campaign.” (Systembolaget, 1958b, pp. 9–10). Here Brolin is voicing concern towards Systembolaget for potentially enticing young people into becoming alcohol consumers and towards unfairly favoring certain suppliers, consequently giving them an overly prominent place in the overall field.

Concerns about rules of the field can also be detected in various regulations restricting access to Systembolaget stores. Although Systembolaget is a governance unit and a retailer, its opening hours differ from most other retailers in Sweden and the shops are today closed on Saturday afternoons, Sundays and during public holidays. During a period of time, the stores were also closed during the entire Saturdays. This was decided after a controversial dispute in 1982 between trade unions, political parties and Systembolaget, resulting in the Swedish parliament declaring the “*Lördagsstängda*” policy, which mandated Saturday closures (Figure A4 – Appendix 2). However, in 2001, the parliament relaxed this policy and allowed Systembolaget stores to remain open on Saturdays for part of the day, including the option to hold public beverage tastings and auctions.

The *Lördagsstängda* policy has significantly impacted Swedish consumers, who have adapted their drinking habits in an ambition to plan ahead. For example, a group of students

interviewed for this research revealed that the opening hour policy affected their alcohol consumption practices:

Nils: "The opening hour policy means trouble! I mean, for instance, if you are invited for a dinner on a Saturday afternoon, you are fucked! Because you go to the Systembolaget, and it is closed!"

Interviewer: "I mean, can't you go somewhere else to buy wine?"

Nils: "No [...] I mean you can always buy a non-alcoholic beer at the supermarkets. They are open 24/7. But if you want some alcohol, well, there are no other options. So, the policy makers are basically saying, 'You should plan your alcohol consumption ahead of time'."

The message sent out through the various policies is thus that alcohol consumption should be a carefully planned activity, leaving little room for spontaneity during the times when alcohol consumption is most likely to occur, most notably during evenings and weekends. All in all, we see here a continuous concern from legislators as well as critical voices in the media of how to include the right customer groups in the field of alcohol consumption and how to get them to consume in a responsible manner, not only trying to control what is purchased but also by whom and when.

### *Promoting a new taste regime*

Taste, according to [Bourdieu \(1979/2001\)](#), is an aesthetic disposition that is embedded in cultural capital and prioritizes form over function. Taste regimes serve thus as boundary-making mechanisms that shape preferences for objects, the activities performed with them, and the meanings associated with them ([Arsel and Bean, 2013](#)). Operation Vin, from this perspective, strategically leveraged the aesthetics of wine as distinct from brännvin. However, for consumers lacking cultural immersion in the world of wine, choosing from among many different wines can be a daunting task. Many labels look similar, and there is a complex lingo regarding types of wine, different grapes, wine regions, etcetera, making specifics around wines difficult to both understand and remember. To translate the seemingly complicated world of wine for Swedish consumers, thus lowering the barrier to substitute brännvin for wine, Systembolaget took several initiatives.

Firstly, Systembolaget created a phonetic guide to aid Swedish consumers in pronouncing these foreign names when ordering wine. Various experts were consulted, and the basic principle for Systembolaget was to state the same pronunciation as in the original language. A script was created so that a person could directly get a picture of how a sound-adapted Swedish pronunciation of the foreign name would sound. For example, the Chateaux Latour wine was depicted in the wine list with its Swedish phonetic pronunciation as "schatå 'latór'" (see [Figure A5 – Appendix 2](#)). However, the phonetic guide and the Systembolaget strategy to translate wine names authentically were also at times puzzling. Should one, for example, accept that the famous champagne Bollinger should be pronounced "båll'inger", as suggested by Systembolaget, or should one stick to the genuine French pronunciation "bållinsché"? ([Systembolaget, 2023c](#)).

Familiarizing the Swedish consumers with the lingo of wine was, however, merely the first step towards integrating wine into Swedish culture. It was also deemed necessary to create a system to inform consumers about different wine taste characteristics. This was done through the introduction of the so-called *smakklockor* (sensory clocks) (see [Figures A6 and A7 – Appendix 2](#)). *Smakklockor* are taste descriptors introduced by Systembolaget's Vice President, Jan Thagesson. The basic idea was to make it easier for customers to orient themselves across the multiplicity of wines, beers, and ciders sold in the stores



(Systembolaget, 2023a). *Smakklöckor* are depicted as circular diagrams to classify wine taste according to three standardized dimensions: sweetness, fullness, and fruit acidity. In the following excerpt, Markus Berg, product category manager of a large Swedish alcohol importer, explained the importance of *smakklöckor* in understanding wine from a consumer perspective:

Swedish consumers love these sensory clocks that represent the acidity, sweetness, and the richness of the taste [...] that is something that the Swedish consumers really appreciate because they [Systembolaget] make it easier for the consumers to understand a wine [...] because they are increasing their knowledge [...] for instance, when a Swedish consumer says “I don’t like wines with too high acidity” it is very easy for them to look at those clocks and say “oh I don’t like it!”

Alcoholic beverages available at Systembolaget, including wines, are characterized according to the dimensions captured by the *Smakklöckor*. According to our ethnographic studies, they have been widely adopted by consumers and are e.g. used in interactions with store personnel when purchasing wine. They are also frequently used both by specialized magazines and more mainstream media when writing about and/or promoting wines. This way of classifying wine taste became a new “institutional settlement regarding field rules” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 10), as field settlement is achieved when actors comply with the rules imposed by the state and act routinely to reproduce those rules.

In strategic actions, a major challenge is to mobilize a large number of actors with different preferences and priorities to collaborate towards a common interest. Layton (2015, p. 561) refers to the formation stage when “there is an emerging sense that we are in this together”. This process of aggregation involves creating a new collective identity that can catalyse divergent interests towards a common project (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 52). The aggregation of actors can thus be described as the “bandwagon effect” because “once a number of actors come on board, then others will follow” (Fligstein, 2001, p. 114). The general purpose of the Operation Vin campaign was to introduce wine into Swedish culture in order to nurture a healthier relationship to alcohol. However, this campaign was not the only initiative taken by Systembolaget in order to reach this goal. It worked in tandem with other initiatives, one of which created the type of bandwagon effect described by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). The campaign “Spola kröken [Swedish slang for stop drinking]: you drink a little less and feel much better” was launched in 1971 with a series of film commercials featuring Swedish actor Janne “Loffe” Carlsson (Dahlberg, 1973). The aim was to encourage people from different social classes and interests to drink more moderately and have a healthier view of alcohol. The campaign was promoted in a very pervasive way through below-the-line marketing activities such as shirts and hats with the printed slogan *Spola Kröken*. The items were produced in yellow, which became the iconic colour of the campaign (see [www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Spola-kroken/](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Spola-kroken/) examples of the campaign material). After a few years, surveys showed that nine out of ten Swedes had been reached by the *Spola Kröken* campaign (Rågsjö Thorrel, 2019). The sports movement, the music industry, and the Swedish military participated together with Systembolaget in the campaign, which came to include a long list of Swedish celebrities, such as Ingemar Stenmark, Linda Haglund, Toini Gustafsson, Ronnie Peterson, Cornelis Vreeswijk, and Torgny Mogren. The campaign lasted until the first half of the 1980s.

## Discussion

The case illustrates the strategic action of the state, Operation Vin, that took place between 1957 and 1985. Operation Vin was orchestrated to change the alcohol market field from the inside. We follow Layton (2015) in framing marketing history from a SAF perspective



(Fligstein and McAdam, 2012), as we pay particular attention to the ability of the governance unit – Systembolaget, the state-owned alcohol retailer – to promote a new cultural order regarding the consumption of alcohol.

First, our research has identified two simultaneous lines of actions, framing and settlement, through which the governance unit was able to exploit its social skills to induce other actors to cooperate in the refashioning of the field and in accepting the new cultural order based on wine. In this capacity, the case of Operation Vin shares some important similarities with previous studies illustrating the existence of a marketing system in fields traditionally dominated by the direct intervention of the state (Tadajewski and Stole, 2016; Papushina, 2020) or in which the state has adopted marketing practices to stimulate consumption (e.g. Minowa and Witkowski, 2009; Carpenter and Luciano, 2021). Just like these studies, the Operation Vin case illustrates that the state may play an important role in fostering consumer culture (see also Karababa and Ger, 2011). Yet, the Operation Vin case allows us to delve deeper into how the governance unit Systembolaget was particularly efficient in using social skills to first dismantle existing cultural frames and then (re)frame the field into a new system of rules and routines. They did so by catering to the self-interests of different sets of actors in such a way that these actors would frame their courses of actions to converge with the interests of both other actors in the field and with Systembolaget, thereby bringing about cooperation. As our findings illustrate, Systembolaget was able to exploit its social skills in pursuing a set of tactics to set a common agenda that resonated with underlying cultural norms and dismantle pre-existing field routines by creating cultural turbulence that the strategic campaign aimed at reconciling. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) suggest that skilled social actors are not moved by self-interest but instead focus on producing meanings for others (see also Fligstein, 2001). Similarly, Systembolaget was motivated to act in the interest of the health of the Swedish citizens. As such, they focused on producing a new set of meanings (such as making the drinking of wine a new habit instead of the drinking of *brännvin*) for the benefit of *other* actors (most directly consumers, but in extension also the Swedish social security system that would, according to the prevailing logic, have to handle less alcohol-related issues). To the degree that these justifications resonated with the public, Systembolaget also produced its own *raison d'être*, to protect the Swedish citizens. What we see here is that once the governance unit was able to converge a broader set of actors into a new frame, social skills were exploited to forge a new routinized order. This order built on a relatively stable consensus around a set of rules and by instilling a new taste regime that would come to dramatically change the market for alcohol over the years to come.

Second, in relation to state interventions specifically in the field of alcohol, historical research is inclined to illustrate alcohol policies as a pendulum between authoritative power and liberalism, but always aiming at prescribing rules and regulation (Butler *et al.*, 2017). Pennock and Kerr's (2005, p. 384) historical analysis defines the American government's Alcohol Policies as "a patchwork of varying policies to regulate the manufacture, marketing and sale of alcoholic beverages". Another example can be drawn from the handling of the so-called Gin Epidemic (1720–1781), where various interventions and actions between field actors are described as "a constant jockeying" (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2020, p. 974; see also Waterson, 2000). In 1757, after years of fluctuating results, the British Parliament took the extreme decision to prohibit the production of any distilled spirit, which put a definitive end to the gin craze (Warner *et al.*, 2001). The case of Operation Vin illustrates another story. The general approach by Systembolaget has continued to be to govern the field of alcohol with the justification that they assume responsibility over the Swedish citizens' drinking habits. The way in which they have done this, however, is an intricate mix of authoritative power

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using regulations as a tool—such as taxation, regulation of opening hours for the Systembolaget stores, and age restrictions—and what can be described as soft power. This soft power has entailed strategic marketing actions to convince various actors—consumers, Systembolaget employees, wine producers, journalists, lobby organisations, etcetera—to cooperate in pursuing the goal of caring for the health of the Swedish citizens. In essence, the Swedish government has used their soft power approach to grow a consumer culture of wine consumption in Sweden. This soft approach is quite different from the approach taken by the state in order to change the Swedish citizens smoking habits where hard measures, especially in comparison with other European countries, were taken (Linnansaari *et al.*, 2022). Since there is relative consensus regarding the negative effects of cigarette smoking and since it is not entangled in so many other cultural practices in Sweden, the state has greater degrees of freedom to enforce such hard measures. If the state would have taken a similar approach concerning alcohol consumption, there would most likely have been a debate regarding the legitimacy of the state to enforce such measures since alcohol consumption is part and parcel of both everyday life and many traditional celebrations in Sweden.

The Operation Vin campaign analysed in this paper gradually turned the Swedes into wine drinkers. This transformation was not without friction, however, as illustrated by the ethnographic observations where we see consumer anxieties and frustrations in the process of acculturation, whereby wine was made part of the Swedish culinary system. These frustrations partly emanate from the process whereby the new artifact wine had to be integrated into adjacent fields, especially food, where alcohol consumption is deeply embedded. The oral accounts of contemporary consumers and the market data show how wine has become an integral part of Swedes' alcohol habits today. It must be noted, though, that Operation Vin coincided with a time period when the Swedes' consumption patterns changed overall as part of developing a more modern, consumption-oriented lifestyle (Askegaard and Östberg, 2019; Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015; Knibbe *et al.*, 1996). Partly this had to do with increased exposure to other countries in Europe, for example, by increased travelling as more people were going on holidays abroad, where they were exposed to more continental drinking habits. It is well documented that drinking habits converged in Europe during the decades after the second world war in such a way that wine drinking increased in the north at the expense of beer and distilled spirits (Knibbe *et al.*, 1996; Smith and Mitry, 2007). While there was an overall trend towards increased wine drinking in northern Europe, the soft power initiatives in Operation Vin nevertheless managed to integrate wine into the everyday lives of the Swedes in a way that has now made it an element of the cultural fabric.

In evaluating the relative effectiveness of Operation Vin, it is instructive to compare it to the other Nordic countries since they have a somewhat similar drinking culture. Throughout the 20th century all these countries, with the exception of Denmark, have carried out alcohol policies with high taxes and the restriction of availability as central components (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2002). Various measures – such as changing opening hours, restricting the number of retail outlets, having more outlets for beer and wine than for distilled spirits, and surveying consumers to monitor problematic drinking habits – have been used to control consumers' purchasing and consumption habit. The effects of these measures are varied, and it seems hard to draw any general conclusions, except for the finding that the “liberalization of alcohol policy has the greatest effect on those whose behaviour was most restricted by the policy, which has often meant heavy drinkers” (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, it appears that the effect of policy changes is softened if there are alternative sources of alcohol, such as

moonshining in Norway, consumption of non-beverage alcohol amongst heavy users in Finland, and more generally bootlegging and cross-border trade (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2002).

In trying to assess the success of Operation Vin, one could look at the effect in the short run, where statistics from 1950 to 1959 show that consumption of wine in Sweden rose from about 1 litre per capita to more than 3 litres per capita, whereas the culturally similar neighbouring countries stayed at a steady level, Denmark at 3 litres and Norway at 1 litre (Ekström, 1962). The Swedes thus appear to have been more inclined to increase their wine consumption during this time period. When taking a longer perspective, we can also see that wine consumption rose heavily in Finland between the years 1950 (0.5 litres) and 2010 (26 litres) (Smith and Mitry, 2007), but in contrast to Sweden, where consumption rose from 1.1 to 17 litres during the same time, Finland did not see as drastic a drop in the consumption of distilled spirits (WHO, 2008), thus adding wine to what was already consumed rather than shifting consumption from other alternatives to wine. This also indicates that Operation Vin might have been effective in changing consumer habits rather than just adding one more ingredient to the overall consumption cocktail. Part of the success of the campaign can be attributed to the fact that it managed to sever the ties between wine consumption and the upper class, making wine a choice of preference across a broader set of Swedish consumers (De Geer, 2017). This, furthermore, had an impact on women's drinking since wine was not part of the traditional "Nordic intoxication-oriented drinking cultures" (Törrönen *et al.*, 2017, p. 131), but rather was coded as more of a social drink for both sexes. In the media, however, the increased wine consumption amongst women was quickly portrayed as dangerous and potentially out of control (Bogren, 2011).

## Conclusions and implications

In this paper, we have followed the various initiatives that led to market changes that, in effect, turned Swedish citizens from consumers of brännvin and beer into wine drinkers. The market changes were profound and have a sustained effects both on the demand side, as Swedish consumers have increased their wine consumption to approach the levels in continental Europe, and on the supply side, as one of the world's broadest assortments of wine is sold through the state monopoly Systembolaget (Systembolaget, 2023b; whether this is true or not is debated by those skeptical of the alcohol monopoly; see Svensson, 2021). In following the market dynamics that led up to this, focusing on the governance unit Systembolaget's endogenous shock to the system, we see how various actors were softly coerced into collaboration towards this goal. One of the reasons for the Swede's willingness to accept the state's interventions into what is many times portrayed as an individual consumption choice is the particular implicit contract that the Swedish state has with its citizens. In their treatise on Swedish statist individualism, Berggren and Trägårdh (2015) explain how the Swedish state has a particular role in comparison with many other countries in that they take upon themselves to protect the Swedish citizens against various archaic structures, such as the family. In the case of alcohol, it is well documented that increases in alcohol consumption have a direct correlation with increases in domestic violence, which was reported right after the abolition of the Swedish rationing system on alcohol in 1955 (Boalt and von Euler, 1959). The ground was thus fertile at the time for state interventions aimed at reducing the negative effects of the new (relatively) free market for alcohol.

In this paper, our objective is not to take a definitive stance on the merits or drawbacks of Sweden's monopoly or the measures implemented to alter consumer consumption habits. Instead, we aim to use this case as an exemplar to illustrate how a state can effectively influence market dynamics within a specific domain. It is worth noting that the ongoing

debate about the alcohol market has resurfaced, given the growing concern about the dominance of “big alcohol” in the industry (Wilt, 2022). This discussion is particularly relevant in the context of considering how the regulation of soft drugs like marijuana should be approached to mitigate health issues reminiscent of those associated with alcohol consumption.

Considering these issues and similar concerns, we aspire for this paper to offer valuable insights into how a state, as a governance entity, can shape consumer culture through a strategic blend of various regulatory measures, both gentle and forceful. We emphasize the pivotal role of social skills in fostering cooperation during the implementation of a new alcohol policy. The effectiveness of these social skills can also be illustrated by the fact that Systembolaget, despite the fact that they are *de facto* limiting Swedish consumers’ access to alcohol by employing a paternalistic policy of restricting access, enjoys very high rates of approval by the Swedish population. Over 80% still support the monopoly, according to a survey commissioned by Systembolaget but carried out by an independent actor (Systembolaget, 2022). Furthermore, in the yearly measurement of the companies that the Swedes have the highest trust in, Systembolaget ends up in first place, with 71% stating that they have high or relatively high trust in the company (Medieakademin, 2022). These rates of approval can be interpreted as a testament to the coercive effect of the soft social skills applied by Systembolaget. These social skills serve the purpose of educating a fresh consumer culture by fostering compromise identities that resonate with diverse groups (Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Interestingly, the cultivation of a novel alcohol culture involves not just consuming less but also consuming with greater mindfulness, incorporating food into the daily drinking ritual, as both food and drink are integral components of culture (Gusfield, 1987; Wilson, 2005).

## Note

1. The most prominent wine association in Sweden, munsänkarna ([www.munsänkarna.se/sv/start/](http://www.munsänkarna.se/sv/start/)), that promotes knowledge about wines and awareness for good and moderate drinking habit, was started in 1958. They size of the organization has grown continuously since then, and from the year 2002 to 2022 membership grew from 13 411 to 28 935 members.

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	Informant names	Age <sup>a</sup>	Occupation	Market actor
	Oscar	27	PhD student	Consumer (1)
	Nils	30	PhD student	Consumer (2)
	Molly	27	PhD student	Consumer (3)
	Helene	42	Post-doc	Consumer (4)
	Kerstin	70	Retired	Consumer (5)
	Lasse	65	Retired	Consumer (6)
	Karin	67	Retired	Consumer (7)
	Vasco	40	Sales manager	Consumer (8)
	Elina	38	Service manager	Consumer (9)
	Markus	n/d	Product category manager	Wine importer (1)
	Christian	42	Financial manager	Wine importer (2)
	Hanna	36	Marketing manager	Wine importer (3)
	Franco	n/d	Wine maker	Wine producer (1)
	Ugo	n/d	General manager	Wine producer (2)
	Tiziano	n/d	Export manager	Wine producer (3)
	Nicola	n/d	Export manager	Wine producer (4)
	Nadja	n/d	Drink Expert, Spritmuseum	Institution
	Eva	59	Intendent, Spritmuseum	Institution
	Alessandro	n/d	Journalist, editor	Press

**Table A1.**  
List of key informants

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Respondent's age indicated refers to their age when interviewed, between 2014 and 2016  
**Source:** Authors' data collection



– Ja, där sa du något förnuftigt, Anders. Tänk Brita, om vi skulle göra likadant – ingen sprit i jul. Ett gott vin i stället till skinkan och korven och...

– Det tycker jag låter bra. Så gör vi!

**D**etsamma tycker och tänker allt flera människor inför den stundande helgen.

Man har kanske tråkiga erfarenheter från tidigare jular, eller man vill spara på kostnaderna för julfirandet. Och så är det modernt att gå över från sprit till vin.

Vad det nu beror på, visar årets försäljningstiffror att det köps allt mera vin i stället för sprit.

**För ca 3 kr får Ni en helbutelj gott vin**



**Att dricka vin**  
kräver inga särskilda ceremonier. De traditioner och sedvänjor som förekommer behöver man inte alla känna sig bunden av; de flesta viner kan drickas till praktiskt taget vad som helst.

**Några exempel på goda och billiga viner**

	nr	1/1-but.
<b>Rödrin</b>		
Montrose .....	nr 2239	3:-
Vino Tinto .....	nr 2760	3:-
Chianti Vecchio ..	nr 2380	3:75
Médoc .....	nr 3932	4:75
<b>Vitt vin</b>		
Castelo, torr ....	nr 2606	2:75
Vino Bianco, söt ..	nr 2785	3:-
Vin Blanc, halvtorr	nr 2276	3:25
Soave, torr .....	nr 2466	3:75
<b>Starkvin</b>		
Sherry Palido Liger	nr 8204	7:50
Madeira Fine ....	nr 7832	7:75
Red Portwine ....	nr 8159	8:-
<b>Alkoholfritt vin</b>		
Grapillon, rött och vitt	ca	3:80
Merlino, rött och vitt	ca	3:95
<b>Mousserande alkoholfri svensk festdryck</b>		
Ca. de Grawenstein .....		3:40
<b>Glögg</b>		
Alkoholrikt glögg .....		3:-
Alkoholfri glögg (1/2 lit.) ..		2:50

**SYSTEMBOLAGET**

Source: Systembolaget Historia, [www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Operation-vin/](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Operation-vin/) (accessed 1 June 2022)

Figure A1.  
Systembolaget  
advertising print,  
1957

The main copy reads:

- Yes, there you said something smart, Anders. Imagine, Brita, if we would do the same thing – no booze this Christmas. A good wine instead to accompany the ham and the sausage and [...].
- That sounds good, I think. Let's do it!

The text above the 4 bottles of wine reads:

For circa 3 *Swedish krona* [bold in original; krona, SEK, is the Swedish currency] you can have a whole bottle of good wine.

**EN GOD JUL UTAN BRÄNNVIN...**

Ja, om vi vill lägga tonvikten på *god*. Den erfarna husmodern vet att vällagad god mat och alkoholstarka drycker inte passar särskilt bra ihop. Smaknerverna dövas och bordets läckerheter kommer inte alls till sin rätt.

Men varför bjuda på starksprit när det finns så många utmärkta viner att välja bland i systembutikerna. Och till så mycket billigare priser!

**GODA VINER TILL LÅGA PRISER**

Montrouge (MANGRO'SCH) röd	3:25
Castello del Monte (KASTELLA DALL MANTO) röd	4:00
Beaujolais (BASCHALIS) röd	6:50
Villafraña (VILLAFRANKA) halvsvet, vit	3:25
Soave (SAA'VE) torr, vit	4:25
Mâcon Blanc (MAKANG BLANG) torr, vit	6:25
Rotlack (MATLACK) röd, alkoholfri	3:75
Weisslack (VAISLACK) vit, alkoholfri	3:75

**SYSTEMBOLAGET**

**BJUD GOTT - BJUD PÅ VIN I STALLET**

Figure A2.  
Systembolaget  
advertising, print,  
1962

Source: Systembolaget Historia, [www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Operation-vin/](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/Operation-vin/) (accessed 1 June 2022)

The text printed over the picture reads “Wine [...] much better”, the two headlines below read “A Merry Christmas without brännvin [...]” and “Good wines at low prices,” and the text at the bottom reads “Serve good – serve wine instead”

The role of the state in consumer culture



**Source:** Systembolaget (1965) 1955-1965 10 År utan motbok

**Figure A3.**  
Systembolaget  
advertising, print,  
1963

The main copy reads “Of course we have photo ID” and then the text explains that the Swedish parliament has passed a law requiring IDs used at Systembolaget should have a photo. For a period of time, before everyone was expected to have gotten a proper photo ID, Systembolaget also issued their own photo IDs.



**Source:** Systembolaget Historia, [www.systembolaget-historia.se/Teman/Butikerna/De-lordagsstangda-aren/](http://www.systembolaget-historia.se/Teman/Butikerna/De-lordagsstangda-aren/) (accessed 1 June 2022)

**Figure A4.**  
Systembolaget  
advertising, print,  
1982



The text reads: “According to a decision by the government our stores are closed on Saturdays from July 3rd 1982. Systembolaget”.

Propaganda-annons i fackförbunds- och kvällspress september 1968.

Här är några goda märkesförslag. Om ni är systemkund, klipp gärna ur kupongen till nästa inköp.

<b>Röda viner</b>	
2759 Rioja Tinto (riá'cha) . . . .	4:55
2896 Egri bikavér (egri' bikave'r) . . . .	5:70
9615 1962 Ch. Plaisance (schatá' pläsa'ngs) . . . . .	8:75
9564 1962 Ch. de Barbe (schatá' dö barb) . . . . .	9:—
<b>Vita viner</b>	
2958 Weisses Rössl (vajses rössel), halvtorrt . . . . .	6:—
7107 Reiler vom heissen Stein (ra'jler fäm ha'jsen stajn), halvtorrt . . . . .	8:25
<b>Alkoholfritt alternativ</b>	
1750 Weisslack (vajslack), vitt halvtorrt . . . . .	4:40

**SYSTEMBOLAGET**

Figure A5.  
Systembolaget  
advertising, print,  
September 1968

Source: Systembolaget Historia,  
www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Kampanjer/  
Barda-rosch/ (accessed 23 March 2023)



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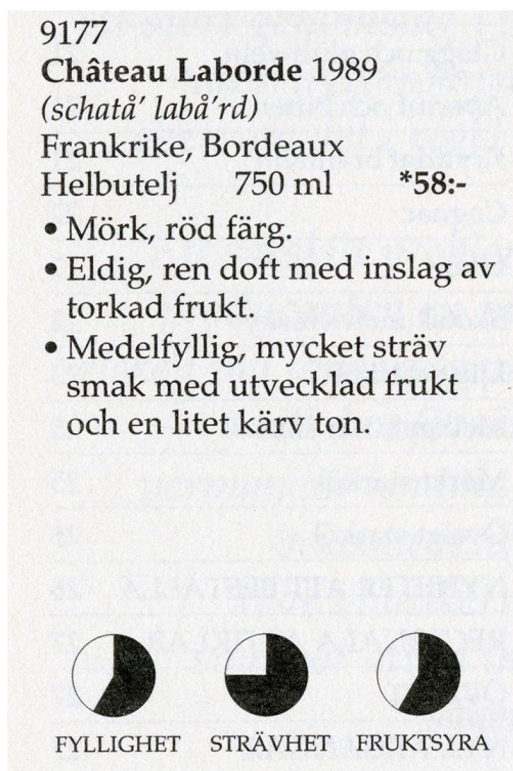
The copy in the comic reads:

- I only thought it was classy to drink red wine, but dammit it's good too!;
- Cheers!; and
- We're skipping booze and go for wine!

Below are some suggestions for wines including Swedish phonetic pronunciation.

The role of the  
state in  
consumer  
culture

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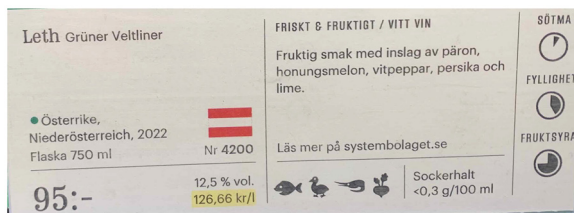


**Source:** Systembolaget Historia,  
[www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Uppdraget/  
Att-skapa-en-maltidskultur-kokbocker-smaklocka-  
och-digital-radgivning/](http://www.systembolagethistoria.se/Teman/Uppdraget/Att-skapa-en-maltidskultur-kokbocker-smaklocka-och-digital-radgivning/) (accessed 23 March 2023)

**Figure A6.**  
Systembolaget wine  
catalogue, print,  
(presume) 1990s

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On the bottom of the picture there are the three smakklocka (sensory clocks) depicting wine fullness (Fyllighet), roughness (Strävhet) and fruit acidity (Fruktsyra).



**Source:** Authors' picture, March 2023

**Figure A7.**  
Systembolaget, retail  
store, Stockholm,  
2023

Systembolaget in-store shelves labels depicting (on the right of the picture) the three smakklocka (sensory clocks) describing Sweetness (Sötma) fullness (Fyllighet), and Fruit acidity (Fruktsyra).

### About the authors

Luigi Servadio is Assistant Professor of Business Administration, specializing in Marketing. He earned his PhD at Stockholm University in 2018 with a thesis about wine consumption from a ritual perspective. His current research activity is about the understanding of markets from a historical and sociocultural perspective. Luigi is a member of the Nordic Consumer Culture Research Group, and of the Forskarskola, Management och IT (MIT), Uppsala University. Servadio is also involved in disseminating his research in the civil and business society and writes in the Jönköping University blog. Luigi Servadio is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [luigi.servadio@ju.se](mailto:luigi.servadio@ju.se)

Jacob Östberg is Professor of business administration, specializing in marketing. He earned his PhD at Lund University in 2003 with a thesis that was subsequently awarded the Academia Gastronomica Scaniensis research price. Since then he has taught at the Business Schools at Lund and Stockholm University, and as visiting distinguished professor of marketing at Aalto University School of Business in Helsinki, Finland and a visiting scholar at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. After Östberg earned his docentship in Business Studies he chose to broaden his scope by taking a position at The Centre for Fashion Studies at the Faculty of the Humanities, Stockholm University. After he earned a docentship in Fashion Studies he realized that he could no longer escape his academic fate as a marketing scholar and returned to Marketing proper at Stockholm Business School.