

Drunkards Versus Teetotallers: The Other Point of View

Sreelata Jonnalagedda and Anand Prahlad

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Under the lock-down, liquor was categorized as non-essential with sales banned for 42 days. When we analysed popular reactions to this ban, two distinct groups emerged. One group strictly in favour of extending the prohibition indefinitely, and another for whom the ban was equivalent to shutting off the internet. While polar opposite views are to be expected when it comes to alcohol policy, the large empathy gap between the two groups can make the middle ground seem lofty. Economic arguments usually form a big part of alcohol policy, we bring forth a sociological perspective that came to light under lockdown.

Among alcohol consumers we can envision three types, the social drinkers, addicts, and habitual consumers. Social drinkers are those who value drinking for the group or social setting, either work or friends. They get more out of the group setting rather than the drinking, and perhaps have a lesser chance of addiction. Under lockdown, the social drinkers seemed to have found a substitute; zoom parties involving communal drinking over video chat (based on twitter analysis of 1123 tweets). The addicts are the ones with high dependence on alcohol, and will likely find themselves drinking alone and face withdrawal symptoms if forced to stop. The habitual consumers have low levels of dependence, even if they are regulars. For the habituals, stopping consumption is mostly an inconvenience and may not come with heavy withdrawal issues. When we extracted and analyzed reader comments on an article that talks about liquor ban (Daiji World [article](#) titled, “Bengaluru: Liquor shops to open for limited hours if lockdown is extended”), there was very little recognition of the spectrum of alcohol consumers.

What came out is two camps: those who drink and the ones who do not. Those who did, appeared to support individual liberty and choice to consume alcohol. The ones who did not, or the dissenters advocated prohibition. Irrespective of the camp the reader belonged to, there was a strong negative sentiment (89% negative score); the reactions were more emotional and analytical than what is normally seen on social media, with scores of 67.1(social media average: 63) and 73.2(social media average: 55). Drinking is clearly a touchy subject for all.

The liberals lamented over the unfairness of the Covid ban, comparing alcohol with products still available under lockdown, like cigarettes and meat. Having legalized alcohol sales, by labelling it as non-essential, they argue that the government has taken a moral stance, essentially calling alcoholism an individual failing while continuing to collect handsome revenue from its sales. There was a diversity of opinion on whether to make alcohol available through MRP shops, home delivery or limited hours of pubs; but they all agreed that the ban had to go. Otherwise, among other concerns people also feared that some may resort to unsafe alternatives to meet their needs.

The prohibitionists on the other hand, held a stereotypical image of an alcohol consumer as a wife beater. They argue that domestic violence will increase if ban is lifted, as families pressed for resources will struggle to deal with buying alcohol now. For prohibitionists the Covid related ban on alcohol was pregnant with opportunity to rid the society of one evil, alcoholism.

As much as one wishes, a top-down government prohibition policy is definitely a non-starter when it comes to being human and navigating temptation. At the same time, to embrace a view that it is all about the individual, is to forgo our social net, a basic privilege of human existence. There undeniably is an individual component to alcoholism, governments can do a lot to help people make better choices. Alcohol policy always inspires vociferous debates, the lock down on alcohol sales and their subsequent resumption has re-opened this again. We are of the opinion that better policies begin with recognizing the *other point of view*.

Authors

Sreelata Jonnalagedda is a Marketing professor at IIM Bangalore.

Anand Prahlad is an entrepreneur and holds an MBA from IIM Bangalore