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COCKTAILS AND COVID-19: A CASE STUDY OF ALCOHOL BRAND MESSAGING ON INSTAGRAM

Master's thesis

Programme International Business Administration

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently

and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors

have been properly referenced and the same paper

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns prompted higher levels of social media usage and home alcohol consumption than in non-crisis periods. Because of these phenomena, this study aims to categorize alcohol brand messaging on Instagram and develop and validate a framework with which to classify alcohol marketing efforts during both normal times and extraordinary events. Through a case study of four alcohol brand Instagram accounts (Jack Daniel's, Grey Goose, Smirnoff, and Jameson), brand Instagram posts have been classified according to both brand message strategy and brand message content to develop an understanding of alcohol messaging during normal times (March 1 – May 31 2019) as well as the firstc COVID-19 lockdown period (March 1 – May 31 2020).

Analysis of this category coding, as well as application of text network analysis to Instagram post captions, has demonstrated that alcohol brands most commonly use transformational rather than informational message strategies, with brand image being the most common message strategy in both periods and engagement being the most common message content in both periods. However, further analysis shows a sharp decrease in user image message strategy, an increase in informational strategy, a strong increase in corporate social responsibility (CSR) content, and a decrease in seasonal content during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Text network analysis shows changes in the way brand image and engagement are presented between the two periods, as well as a strong correlation between the concepts of alcohol and home during the COVID-19 period across all brands. This suggests that brands have encouraged home consumption more frequently during the 2020 period than the 2019 period, which may potentially correlate with the increase in consumer social media usage and individual home alcohol consumption. Finally, this data validates the message strategy and content framework for use in future research, and provides a beginning point to address connections between alcohol brand messaging on social media and end consumer behavior.

Keywords: brand messaging, message content, message type, Instagram, alcohol brands, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Since then, it spread across the globe, causing mass casualties, overwhelming healthcare systems, and devastating economies. The arrival of COVID-19 can be considered a Black Swan event, a term coined by Taleb in 2008 to refer to an improbable, shocking event with global repercussions (He and Harris 2020). During these times, waves of lockdowns and quarantines affected every country, dramatically elevating stress levels, anxiety, and depression rates (Mensa and Vargas-Bianchi 2020). Home alcohol consumption increased across age and income groups in the United States. At the same time, time spent on social media, and thus time spent viewing promotional content, also increased across age and income groups.

Ample evidence exists to show that exposure to alcohol marketing increases alcohol consumption, with a meta-analysis across studies showing a consistently significant effect (Stautz et al. 2016). However, most studies focus on traditional print media or television ads so there is little information about what kind of alcohol marketing consumers are exposed to on social networks, and there is no existing validated model for alcohol messaging on social media. The lack of a classification scheme is a clear problem and represents a large gap in the available research – without such a scheme there can be no insights into the links between types of messaging and eventual consumer behavior.

There is a clear need to systematize this promotional content and establish exactly what types of marketing strategies and message content alcohol brands are sharing in both baseline/normal circumstances as well as in crises. These marketing messages can later be linked to consumer engagement and eventually consumption, meaning this categorized system of brand messaging can be used to predict what type of content has the largest impact on consumer behavior during various global scenarios. The information generated in this study serves several purposes: first, it is used to validate a message strategy and content model for a specific product category (alcohol) and promotional place (social media) during normal daily life and during a Black Swan event. Second, once validated this model could be expanded to and refined for other vice product

categories, such as online gambling or tobacco. Third, a validated classification scheme can help inform policy makers and guide regulations in order to encourage responsible advertising and limit the impact of alcohol (or other vice) marketing on public health, especially during a pandemic when marketing exposure and negative mental states have both increased. The scope of this study is limited to point one, the validation of a typology model to examine marketing and marketing changes during various circumstances, but this is crucial information to uncover before future works are possible.

Accordingly, this study asks three research questions to establish a baseline systemization of alcohol marketing via Instagram in normal circumstances and during crisis:

RQ1.

What types of brand message strategy and content did selected alcohol brands use in their Instagram posts during the period from March 2019-May 2019?

RQ2.

What types of brand message strategy and content did selected alcohol brands use in their Instagram posts during the period from March 2020-May 2020 (coronavirus pandemic and lockdown)?

RQ3.

Have the most common types of brand message strategy and content changed for any of the brands between these two periods, and if so, are there trends across brands?

As such, this study performs a longitudinal multiple-case study of four alcohol brands' Instagram posts: Grey Goose, Jack Daniel's, Jameson, and Smirnoff. Brand posts are to be collected during matched time periods pre-pandemic and during the U.S. lockdown (March – May 2019, March – May 2020) and analyzed for both message strategy and message content. Typologies developed for brand message strategy in traditional media advertising and brand message content on official company Facebook pages have been selected from the literature in order to classify posts. The analysis aims to validate these typologies for both product category (alcohol) and marketing place (Instagram), as well as generate information about what alcohol brands want consumers to know about the brand during normal/uneventful periods versus during global crises that uniformly disrupt daily life. Ultimately, this study aims to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic

changed alcohol brand messaging on social media and if so, how it changed, while providing a valid model and an empirical dataset that can be used in the future to link messaging and consumer behavior and guide public policy.

The first chapter of this thesis describes the effects of COVID-19 on alcohol consumption and social media usage, and reviews preliminary research regarding social media marketing during the pandemic as well as existing information surrounding alchol marketing. The author next describes the existing literature on brand messages and brand message typologies in order to establish the need for an integrated analytical framework encompassing both message strategy and message content typologies.

The second chapter details the research methodology used to answer the above research questions. In brief, this is a longitudinal multiple-case study, where qualitative data will be collected from the posts of four alcohol brands' Instagram posts during specified periods pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each post from the selected brand during the relevant period will be numerically coded for message strategy and subcategory and then for message content. This coding will then be analysed within brands to determine whether the messaging differs during the two periods, and results will be analyzed across brands to establish whether or not there are industry trends in advertising messages on social media. Brand post captions will also undergo text analysis to determine whether there are any specific textual themes or hashtag campaigns associated with either period.

Finally, the third chapter will discuss the results of the research and interpret the findings. Limitations of the research and future research directions will be discussed.

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1. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND MESSAGING

To place brand messaging in the context of social media marketing, it is first necessary to establish exactly what a brand is. A brand is the foundational identity of an organization, which conveys the culture, values, vision, personality, and character that define it as distinct from others in the industry or product class (Prindle 2011). A brand is a handle on the organization, allowing it to promote brand awareness, spread product information, and shape consumer attitudes and beliefs towards both product and the organization.

Though there are many definitions of social media, a comprehensive view is that social media is a media technology that allows for the communication, co-creation, and sharing of content between businesses and individuals, as well as amongst those groups (Filo, Lock, and Karg 2015). Social media marketing, then, is a two-way conversation between organization and consumer where the organization can communicate and deliver information about their brand, their products, and their community while receiving valuable consumer information in return (Dwivedi, Kapoor, and Chen 2015).

Social media in particular has influenced organizational branding, with nonprofit organizations and individuals engaging in branded communications and particularly the development of the electronic brand, which includes e-word of mouth and online consumer perceptions (Prindle 2011). A strategic message on social network is one that persuades individuals to share and increase message diffusion (Chang, Yu, and Lu 2015), though this has largely been studied from the point of view of the consumer instead of that of the organization. With this in mind, classifying brand messages on social media can provide some insight into organizational values, practices, and responses to external events and individuals.

1.1. Research background

Purchase monitoring shows a 54% increase in alcohol sales in the U.S. for the first week of the lockdown (week ending in March 21, 2019) (Pollard, Tucker, and Green 2020) and online ordering of alcohol increased across all U.S. adult age demographics, with millennials purchasing 66.4% more alcohol online in June 2020 than during normal periods of time (Conway 2020). A U.S. survey from mid-March 2020 to mid-April 2020 showed that 34% of respondents reported binge drinking during lockdown, with 60% of binge drinkers and 28% of non-binge drinkers reporting an increase in overall alcohol consumption (Weerakoon, Jetelina, and Knell 2020). A separate survey conducted in May 2020 yielded 60% of respondents reporting increased drinking compared to pre-COVID rates, with reasons being increased stress, availability of alcohol at home, and boredom (Grossman, Benjamin-Neelon, and Sonnenschein 2020).

Social media usage increased alongside alcohol consumption during the lockdown in the United States. A survey of 609 U.S. respondents showed that social media usage spiked during the March 2020 lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 30% of responders spending 1-2 hours more on social media per day and 20% using social media up to an hour more per day than prior (Tankovska 2021a). Of social media platforms, 78.1% of U.S. adults reported using Facebook while 49.5% reported using Instagram during this period (Tankovska 2021b). However, 43.1% of 425 U.S. survey respondents indicated they would increase time spent on Instagram during any lockdown periods, more than other sites like Facebook or YouTube (Tankovska 2020). Early studies have also shown an increase in social media user engagement of 61% over normal engagement rates during the pandemic, allowing brands unprecedented access and reach (Archer, Wolf, and Nalloor 2020).

Some research has already been conducted on social media marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advertising has shifted, with an increase in emotional appeals and mixed emotions within a single advertisement. Ads featuring nurturance, affiliation, and sorrow have become more prevalent, creating brand messages that foster the relationship between a brand and their consumers/community (Mensa and Vargas-Bianchi 2020). Another common message theme has been 'we're all in this together,' implying social bonds and community building while still promoting a product and attempting to generate revenue (Sobande 2020). The pandemic has forced organizations to develop new marketing campaigns in incredibly short time frames, with consumer buying patterns in upheaval, and many efforts showcase a new and authentic theme of corporate

social responsibility (as in the many manufacturing organizations' switch to producing hand sanitizer, masks, etc.) (He and Harris 2020).

From a strategy standpoint, a study surrounding COVID-19 video advertisements (from social media sites such as YouTube, as well as television) has found that promotional communications have heavily focused on narrative storytelling with emotional appeal towards social behaviors (Deng, Ekachai, and Pokrywczynski 2020). Informational strategies have been less prevalent, possibly because emotional narrative message strategy can be linked to positive brand perception and increased intent to purchase (*Ibid.,* 7). However, a separate study surrounding advertisements during economic crises – something the COVID-19 pandemic also created – have shown a historical trend towards more informational advertising in order to create some social control (Lee, Taylor, and Chung 2011). These findings may be considered somewhat contradictory, although the advertisements analyzed in the COVID-19 study were not specifically focused on financial repercussions. Nonetheless, both Deng and Lee (2020; 2011) have both shown that brand message strategy does tend to change in times of upheaval.

Before the pandemic several studies had been performed on the themes of alcohol marketing on social media. One such study found that alcohol brands on Instagram had several similar features in their promotional content: high production value, product appeals, positive emotional experiences, achievement, individuality, and camaraderie (Barry et al. 2018). This provides some insight into how these brands reach those spending time on social media networks, but there is no overall classification or concept driving this research – these represent selected advertising features instead of focusing on strategy. Even with these findings, there are many gaps in alcohol social media marketing research both pre- and post-pandemic outside of how it may influence underage drinking.

Very little attention has been paid to what alcohol brands are saying on social media and how. There is currently no empirically validated way to categorize these social media posts. They simply exist, occasionally being examined for appeal to youth or engagement statistics, but otherwise unclassified and unexplained. This means there is currently no holistic understanding of alcohol brand messaging on social media, only scattered insights with a hyper-specific focus. This also means there is no way to correlate or link alcohol brand social media marketing with larger cultural forces or events because there is no baseline classification scheme that can simplify the topic with established and empirically proven variables. As Deng (2020) suggests, understanding brand

messaging is the necessary first step to further linking brand strategies with consumer behavior. This study aims to rectify the current lack of a theoretically-based but empirically proven classification of alcohol social media marketing by applying previously generated theoretical models of message strategy and message content specifically to alcohol brands on Instagram across a baseline time period and the COVID-19 lockdown period. This will shed light on how alcohol brands use social media to promote their products by considering the whole of a post, rather than simply mining for one set theme or views per post. A systematized post classification scheme can use established theoretical frameworks to uncover trends and patterns across brands, marketing strategies, and links to external events, particularly gauging how alcohol brand social media marketing has changed with the advent of COVID-19, while providing relevant insights for any selected time period.

1.2. Brand message typologies

Just as in traditional media marketing, advertising content on social media is created share a brand message with consumers and potential consumers. A brand message is the delivery of information that the brand wishes a consumer to understand and ideally respond to, and though brand messages may be individual each one is meant to reinforce a brand's image and perceived attributes (Chitty et al. 2015). A brand message is a strategic advertising tool encompassing both brand information and the delivery method of that information: that is to say, the message content and the message strategy. Social media in particular allows for the delivery of rich brand messages, high in both visual appeal and informational content, which can increase customer engagement with the brand as well as improve an advertisement's persuasive powers (*Ibid.*). There are many minute facets to brand messaging, but below the author focuses on a review of the theoretical underpinnings of both brand message strategy and brand message content.

1.2.1. Strategy typology

Many classifications of advertising message strategy have been proposed throughout the years. An early typology by Rothberg and Simon develops and proposes a series of ten message categories: information, argument, motivation with psychological appeals, repeated assertion, command, brand familiarization, symbolic association, imitation, obligation, and habit starting (Rothberg and Simon 1972). These comprise an exhaustive set of categorical options; however, when applied in

practice the categories overlap and cause difficulty in assigning a main strategy (Fletcher and Zeigler 1978). Aaker and Norris describe a much more simplified typology, breaking strategy into either image/emotional/feeling or informational/rational/cognitive (Aaker and Norris 1982). This is a straightforward dichotomous classification, but advertisements may contain strategic elements from both and the line between the two is frequently blurred. Vaughn likewise develops a scheme breaking apart 'thinking' message strategies versus 'feeling' message strategies, but adds a second axis to distinguish between high involvement and low involvement products (Vaughn 1986). This allows for an advertisement to be placed in one of four quadrants (thinking-high involvement, thinking-low involvement, feeling-high involvement, feeling-low involvement) in a discrete position, where it may be compared to other advertisements either in the same quadrant or in different quadrants. Both axes are a spectrum rather than a defined value and theoretically advertisements can be classified infinitely minutely. However, like the previously developed typologies, this offers an over-broad view of thinking vs. feeling and can not distinguish where the two overlap.

In a more exhaustive scheme, Frazer proposes seven separate message strategies. These categories comprise generic, preemptive, unique selling proposition, brand image, positioning, resonance, and affective (Frazer 1983). A generic strategy is simply the delivery of a message with general, non-brand specific information that could apply to any other brand in that particular industry category. A preemptive strategy is one that positions a brand as the first in its category touting a specific product quality or benefit, while a unique selling proposition is slightly different in that it delivers the message that the brand is unique amongst competitors due to a quality or benefit but it is not the first in field to make that claim. A brand image strategy is emotional and psychological, aiming to differentiate the brand on an intangible basis. Positioning refers to where the brand sits in the competitive landscape and is typically used to deliver the message to a particular market segment. The resonance strategy is something of brand personification, as the brand presents the message that they are experiencing the same circumstances or feelings as the consumers. Affective strategy is the introduction of ambiguity into the message in order to reel the consumer in and increase engagement (*Ibid.*).

The Frazer typology is certainly exhaustive and relies on a heavily theoretical background. However, when Laskey *et al*. assessed the typology in practice, coders found it difficult to differentiate between several categories and the general disagreements rendered the data noisy and inconclusive (Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989). Because of this, Laskey sought to refine this schema

to create a practically applicable typology. Laskey's criteria for an effective typology include: categories should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive, categories should capture meaningful differences in creative strategies, the categories should not be so granular as to create an unusable number of classifications, and the typology should be applicable to real examples (*Ibid.*). Laskey's framework is a two-step classification, where the message is first assessed for overall category, informational or transformational, and then further classified in a sub-category. Laskey draws from Puto and Wells for the two overarching classes, where informational message strategy delivers factual and verifiable brand information to the consumer while a transformational strategy deals in psychology, emotion, and the creation of a brand experience (*Ibid.*).

The informational subcategories are comparative, unique selling proposition, preemptive, hyperbole, or generic. Comparative content explicitly references or shows a competitor and focuses on the differences between brands. A unique selling proposition message is one that explicitly claims a unique quality or attribute that is factual or verifiably true. This is similar to Frazer's unique selling proposition category, although here Laskey draws the line between implied or inferred uniqueness (unverifiable) and objective uniqueness. The preemptive category also draws on Frazer's conceptions, where an objective consumer benefit or product attribute is claimed without invoking competitors or claiming uniqueness. Hyperbole messages are those which appear to be based in fact, but are unverifiable – in other words, the aspect of delivering brand information without an actual evidential basis to support the claim. The last category is generic-informational, which involve product class rather than individual brand and present information about that product class to consumers (*Ibid.*).

The transformational subcategories are user image, brand image, use occasion, and generic. Messages employing the user image strategy depict who uses the brand, presenting these consumers and their lifestyles with the brand in a supporting role. These tend to be aspirational, showing types of people and lifestyles that prospective consumers would like to emulate or identify with. Brand image messaging showcases the brand itself rather than the idealized or aspirational consumer, presenting the brand with various attributes and an overall personality that sits above user class, type, or situation. This strategy firmly reinforces brand image. The use occasion strategy is correlative, displaying brand use in particular situations or experiences – this strategy relies on showing consumers that the brand is suitable (or even synonymous) with some particular event or circumstance and transcends user identity. The final subcategory is generic-transformational, where just as in the generic-informational class the message is about product class instead of a

brand-specific appeal (*Ibid.*). Laskey's strategy typology performs well in testing, with nearly 900 television advertisements being classified across all product types. 94% of these commercials were classified as informational or transformational consistently by at least four out of five coders, with a high level of agreement (90%) again by four out of five coders in the classifications of the subcategories (*Ibid.*).

1.2.2. Content typology

Social media posts may also be categorized by their content. The literature demonstrates gaps in this domain, with limited studies being performed on single platforms to generate insight. Kwok and Yu (2013) offer some insight, using algorithmic text mining to analyze and classify restaurant posts on Facebook. Their schema, however, divides post content into only two categories: communication messaging and marketing messaging, using those categories to see which type garners more customer engagment (Kwok and Yu 2013). This is an insufficient basis on which to categorize social media posts as it is too broad to capture a complete understanding of content types.

In light of this, Coursaris *et al*. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study on three different Facebook pages, iteratively performing inductive coding on brand posts in order to develop and validate a typology. Message content can be divided into seven archetypes, with numerous subcategories: brand awareness, corporate social responsibility, customer service, engagement, product awareness, promotional, and seasonal (*Ibid.*). Brand awareness refers to content that increases a consumer's knowledge of a brand while corporate social responsibility content bolsters a brand's community image through supporting causes and social actions. Customer service content provides information to consumers via apologies, opening notifications, consumer notices, and the like. Engagement content is meant to drive the consumer to interact with the brand, including content that suggests how to use a brand product, increasing community around the brand, asking questions, asking for 'likes' or other concrete consumer responses, and other calls to action. Product awareness content specifially builds knowledge of one particular product in a brand's portfolio, promotional content offers discounts or other incentives to stimulate consumption, and seasonal content focuses on seasons or events including seasonal products or ways to use products in a seasonal way (Coursaris, Van Osch, and Balogh 2016). These content categories are exhaustive, although not necessarily mutually exclusive. Despite this, message content may be assessed for fit against these categories to establish the dominant theme, and the classifications

have been validated in practice several times against three separate corporate Facebook accounts (*Ibid.*).

1.2.3. An integrated framework

The literature demonstrates a considerable gap in the application of multiple typologies to develop a cohesive framework surrounding a brand's message. However, Taylor has incorporated both Frazer's and Laskey's message strategy typologies into a six-segmented strategy wheel. The wheel is divided into two overall categories, the transmission view and the ritual view as established by Carey in 1975 (Taylor 1999). The transmission view of advertising communication is the process of giving information to consumers, while the ritual view is the construction of a cultural narrative to influence action. Taylor likens this categorization to 'rational' versus 'emotional' approaches (*Ibid.*). Each overarching category contains three further subcategories. In the ritual view, the segments are ego (consumer needs are met with products that fulfill their ego), social (consumers wish to make a statement to others), and sensory (consumers receive pleasure based on at least one of the five senses). In the transmission view, the segments are routine (consumers are encouraged to establish consumption as a habit), acute need (time-limited transformation of information to consumers), and ration (consumers are to be informed and persuaded through rational product information) (*Ibid.*).

Each segment further contains elements of Frazer's and Laskey's message strategy typologies . Ritual-ego contains the affective and user image strategies, while ritual-social contains resonance and use occasion. Ritual-sensory has no assigned typologies. Transmission-routine contains the hyperbole strategy, transmission-acute need introduces the strategy of brand familiarity under the acute need segment. The transmission-ration segment contains the comparative, generic, preemptive, unique selling proposition, and positioning strategy typologies (*Ibid.*). Figure 1 depicts Taylor's conceptual model.
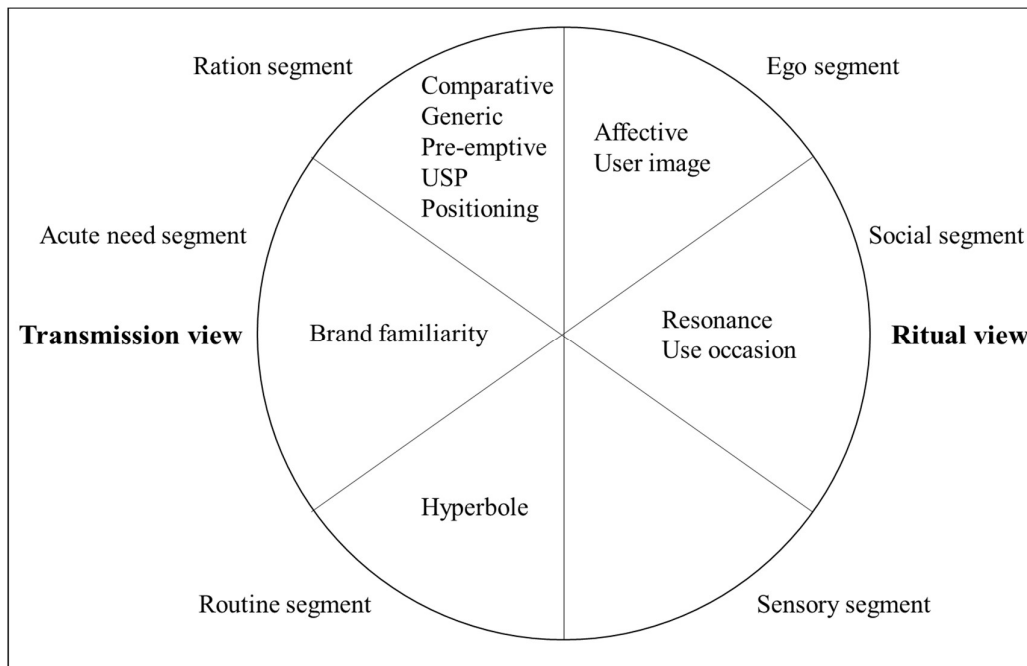
Figure 1. Taylor's six-segment strategy wheel.
Source: Taylor (1999, 12)

However, this integrated framework introduces some difficulties. Taylor acknowledges that a message strategy may belong to more than one segment, meaning that segments are not mutually exclusive and potentially are not subdivided finely enough to capture meaningful differences. Additionally, this integrated framework is missing any inclusion of message content. Finally, the framework positions itself in the consumer perspective, widening out from a message strategy to what the consumer wants: ego fulfillment, social approval, sensory pleasure, and various forms of information. For the purposes of this study, such a framework is insufficient and places the magnifying glass on the wrong subject. In order to focus on the brand, as well as a clear picture of the dominant strategy and content type, the author has adapted both Laskey's and Coursaris *et al*.'s typologies in a similar format to Taylor's wheel as shown in Figure 2.
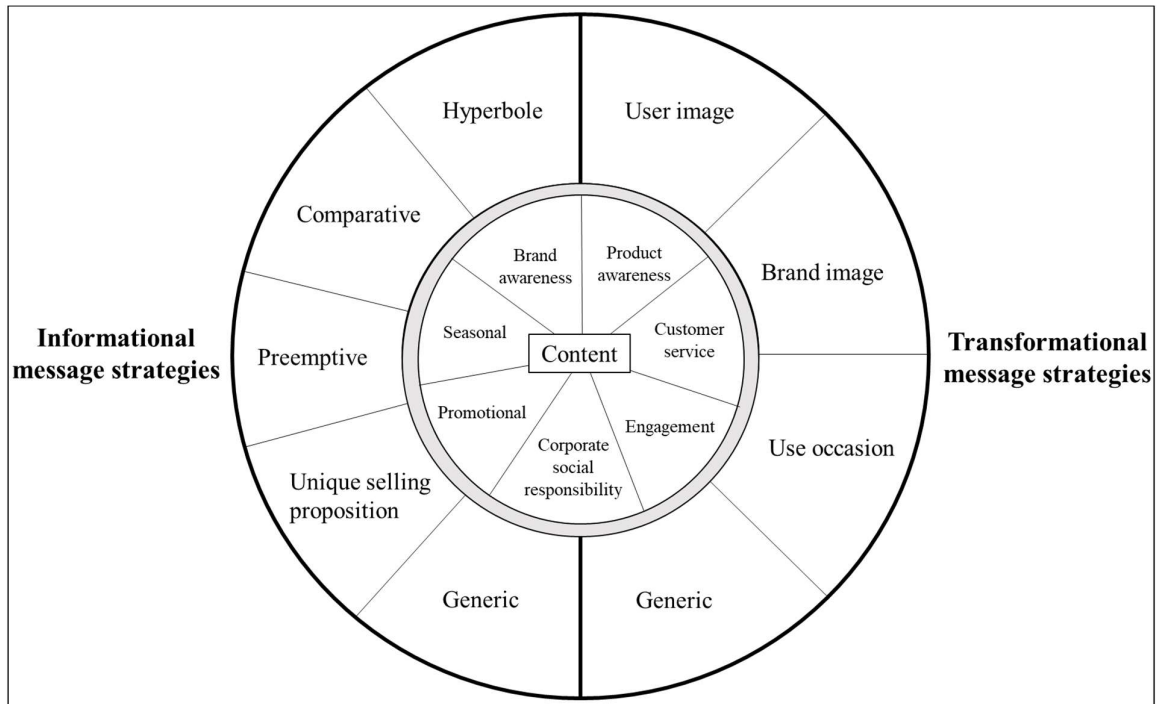
Figure 2. Brand message framework.
Source: Author's adaptation of models from Laskey (1989), Coursaris (2013), and Taylor (1999)

Like Taylor's model, this framework views the division between informational and transformational message strategy as the outer shell of a brand message. That shell can then be subdivided into its individual strategy typology. Message content sits in the middle, as the content is reflective of the strategy and is encapsulated within it; however, no one type of content belongs to any one type of strategy. The usage is simple: the content of interest may first be classified by strategy as transformational or informational, then assigned to the most relevant subtype. Next, the content is assessed to assign the appropriate category. This three-step classification process allows the message strategy type and content type to be pinpointed for any promotional content. The model integrates both the message strategy typology and the message content typology in order to consider a promotional post as a whole – as an outside-in combination of strategy and content.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methodology underpinning the data used to determine whether brand messaging strategy and content have changed during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The author highlights the backdrop of philosophical asusmptions behind the study, the approach to theory development, the methodological choice, the strategy, and the potential ethical issues involved in this research design. The sampling method and data collection are discussed in detail, and finally the analysis methods are presented to describe how the author will draw conclusions to the research questions.

2.1. Research design

This research is informed by an interpretivist philosophy, which assumes the nature of reality to be a complex structure informed by culture and language, with multiple interpretations and constant change in processes and experiences. The role of the researcher is to interpret perceptions or narratives against a theoretical background to arrive at an understanding of a particular phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2015). Interpretivism relies on an inductive approach, where specific information may be generalized outward and data is collected in order to pull out common themes or patterns within a conceptual framework (*Ibid.*).

The author has chosen a mixed methods design, where qualitative data (pictures, videos, text captions) are to be collected and and coded according to the message strategy typologies and message content typologies described above (see Chapter 1.2) to enable quantitative data analysis. The use of a mixed methods design allows for complementarity, where findings may be clarified or linked, and interpretation, to elucidate relationships between variables (*Ibid.*). This study takes the case study strategy in order to develop empirical observation through in-depth inquiry into into a specific real-life phenomenon – liquor brand messaging on Instagram during a global crisis – and employs documentary research to collect data directly from brand Instagram pages *Ibid.*). The

time horizon is longitudinal in order to study whether messaging typologies have changed or developed during different time periods as well as to provide a buffer against confounding variables that may appear throughout the data (*Ibid.*).

Because this research is based on public social media data there are no ethical issues associated with data collection. There will be no interaction with either consumers or organizational figures, and all insights are to be drawn directly from the primary data of public Instagram posts. The nature of these posts is publicly communicative between the brand, its consumers, and the general online sphere so there are no concerns regarding privacy, access, or anonymization. However, the author does have several ethical responsbilities, including respect for others and the avoidance of harm to the research subjects (*Ibid.*). The most important principle is that of integrity and objectivity in data collection and processing in order to generate quality research and avoid injecting researcher bias or causing harm to the subjects through erroneous conclusions (*Ibid.*).

2.2. Sampling and data collection

This study employs non-statistical purposive sampling to select appropriate subjects for study, in accordance with guidelines for case study research (*Ibid.*). Subjects have been chosen by homogeneous sampling, which focuses on a group where all subjects have been selected for similar characteristics (*Ibid.*). In this case, the subjects are liquor brands, with the selection criteria described below.

Liquor brands were selected by number of Instagram followers, as brands with larger follower counts have greater reach in their promotional efforts. Initial candidates were identified from a May 2020 Statista report detailing the top ten alcohol brands by number of followers on social media: Jack Daniel's, Smirnoff, Absolut, Jägermeister, Captain Morgan, Jameson, Rémy Martin, Grey Goose, Malibu, and Maker's Mark (Tankovska 2021c). The follower counts for these Instagram pages were assessed in December 2020 to generate the current top liquor brand accounts. Jack Daniel's had the most page followers, trailed by Grey Goose, Smirnoff, and Jameson.

Amongst these candidates, number of posts in each relevant time period was counted to ensure that posting frequency was similar both within and between brand to avoid skewing the data. All

brands fit within the mean post count plus or minus two standard deviations for both periods (36 ± 12 in 2019, 42 ± 29 in 2020, numbers rounded to whole posts). Overall, a paired t-test shows there is no statistical difference between the post quantity from 2019 and the post quantity from 2020 (p = 0.95).

The selection was limited to four brands due to both time constraints and brand page follower counts declining rapidly in the rankings after Jameson. However, Saunders *et al.* (2015) do suggest that four subjects constitute an adequate sample for homogeneous case studies.

Table 1. Selected brand Instagram accounts

Instagram account	Number of followers	Content of analysis	Number of posts March 1 – May 31, 2019	Number of posts March 1 – May 31, 2020
Jack Daniel's, @jackdaniel's_us	545,000	Posts and captions	35	55
Grey Goose, @greygoose	342,000	Posts and captions	37	32
Smirnoff, @smirnoff	206,000	Posts and captions	30	25
Jameson, @jameson_us	199,000	Posts and captions	42	51

Source: Author's table

The date selection is based on Center for Disease Control (CDC) data, which shows that 42 out of 50 states in the U.S.A. issued mandatory stay-at-home orders (also colloquially referred to as lockdown or quarantine orders) during the period from March 1 – May 31 2020 (Moreland et al. 2020). Because the orders were so ubiquitous during this period, brand communications are likely to reflect the changing circumstances during these dates. The matched period from March 1 – May 31 2019 was chosen as a reference point to collect data on brand messaging pre-COVID-19. This period was selected to allow for direct comparison between years and to minimize differences in seasonal events, holidays, and other confounding factors that could be introduced when analyzing a different period of the year.

Data collection involves aggregating screenshots of each Instagram post made by each brand during the periods stated above, as well as transcribing the text caption of each post.

2.3. Analysis methods

Analysis of this qualitative data is performed through content analysis, "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Saunders *et al*., 2015, p. 608). The adapted wheel model (above, Figure 2) will be used as an analytical tool to enable this study by first examining each Instagram post – both image/video and caption together – to assign one of the overall message strategy typologies (informational, transformational) then its subcategory (comparative, unique selling proposition, preemptive, hyperbole, generic-informational, user image, brand image, use occasion, and generic-transformational). Next, each post will be assessed against the inner circle of the wheel to determine the message content typology (brand awareness, corporate social responsibility, customer service, engagement, product awareness, promotional, and seasonal). This three-level categorization allows themes to emerge, such as what content types tend to correlate to which strategy types, and whether the strategy and content have meaningfully changed between the selected time periods.

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the breakdown of strategy and content types within each brand over both time periods, with contingency tables describing the combinations of strategy and content. Text captions are subject to additional text network analysis using InfraNodus to determine any common textual themes and linkages, including words, phrases, and hashtag campaigns, that are interpreted qualitatively to increase understanding of brand messaging. InfraNodus is an open source text network analysis tool that cleans text by reducing words to their most basic form (e.g. cocktails becomes cocktail) to reduce redundancy and removing bridge words such as "is" and "the". Each cleaned word in the text becomes a node, which is then assessed for its connections with other nodes. Words that appear most often in combination with other nodes are considered more influential and are displayed as larger nodes on the resultant graph. InfraNodus next algorithmically analyzes the node network to determine which words tend to occur together in the text, resulting in a topic cluster that is differentiated by color on the graph (Paranyushkin 2019). This visualized text network provides a combination of quantitative and qualitative data that can be used to illuminate any emergent trends across brands.

3. RESULTS

In this chapter, the author analyzes the data as described above to determine answers to RQ1, 2, and 3 in Chapter 1. First the message strategy, message content, and combinations thereof, both within and across selected brands' Instagram content during March 2019 – May 2019, are reported, discussed, and interpreted. Next the author performs the same analysis for the period of March 2020 – May 2020. Finally, trends across brands and changes between the time periods are interrogated in order to determine possible effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on Instagram alcohol brand messaging.

3.1. Brand message strategy and content pre-COVID-19

Each brand has been analyzed for message strategy, message content, and combinations therof during the period of March 2019 – May 2019. Because the number of posts during this period varies by brand, all results are reported as percentage of brand posts rather than absolute number in order to enable comparison.

All posts have been characterized first by overall strategy (informational, transformational) and then by subcategory and content, as previously described in Figure 2. Posts were viewed holistically, considering both the visual post (photo or video) and the accompanying written text caption. However, no brand posts fell under the strategy subcategories of comparative or unique and no posts used the promotional content type so these have been omitted from the below tables and charts for clarity.

3.1.1. Brand message strategy March 2019 – May 2019

The strategy breakdowns for each brand in 2019, by percentage of posts, is displayed below in Figure 3, with tabulated values available in Appendix 1.
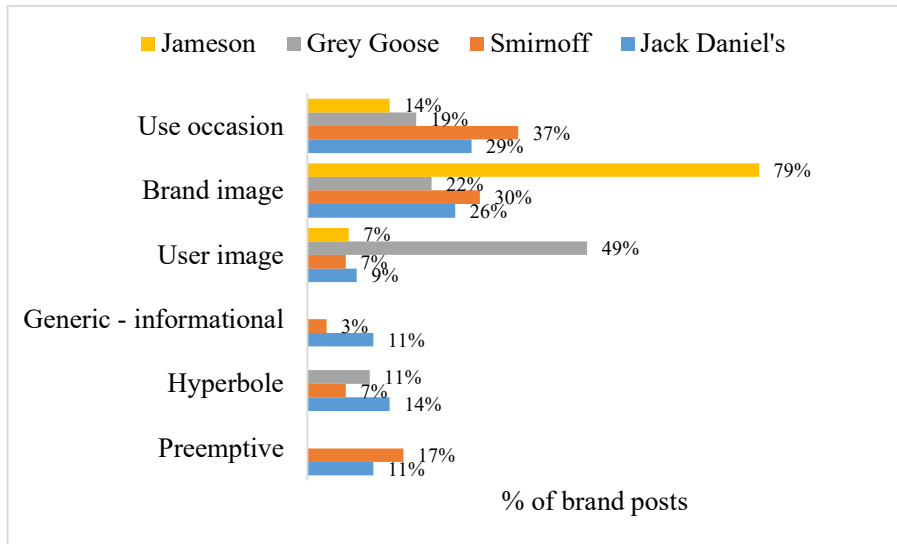
Figure 3. Percentage of brand Instagram posts by message strategy category during March 2019 – May 2019
Source: Author's calculations

One overall trend clearly emerges from this data. Transformational strategies (user image, brand image, use occasion) account for 82.64% of total posts across brands, while informational strategies (preemptive, hyperbole, generic) tally only 17.36%. This is unsurprising, as Instagram's primary visual media delivery is highly compatible with establishing branding through images of the brand, its users, and the contexts in which it can be used. Instagram is less suited to the delivery of factual information, which necessarily places the emphasis on words and text instead of photos and videos. Instagram content is also meant to be consumed quickly as a user scrolls through their feed, so messages need to be short and visually arresting in order to draw user attention. Print media, or television ads, are more appropriate for the delivery of informational strategies, as they have a longer engagement time and can rely more heavily on written or spoken fact.

The most common transformational strategy for both Jack Daniel's and Smirnoff during this period is use occasion (28.57% and 40% of posts, respectively), suggesting these brands intend to link their products with situational contexts and lifestyles. This may be to encourage users to consume their products in ways they have not previously considered, as well as to provide an aspirational image of what a consumer's life could be like should they use the product as suggested. Both of these brands are mid-range, so distinguishing their message by usage might be more believable than distinguishing by price or quality to project the image of an upscale brand with upscale users. Both brands suggest their products are highly suitable for outdoor, social occasions (barbeques,

beach days, parties, picnics, porch gatherings, etc.), perhaps encouraging consumers to feel that social standing and impact can be improved by including these products in their leisure activities.

Nearly half of Grey Goose posts during this period (48.65%) employ the strategy of user image in their brand messaging. Grey Goose presents as an upscale brand and is often considered the gold standard for accessible but high quality vodka. By showing a range of user images, Grey Goose can more effectively suggest that their upscale products are suitable for a broad population of consumers. However, their user images typically depict young (late 20s – 30s) individuals with some disposable income, visual appeal, and attractive backdrops, which may encourage comsumers to both identify as the post subjects and aspire to be the post subjects. Grey Goose also heavily focuses on a hashtag campaign - #LiveVictoriously – during this period, and posts real user content to correlate user successes (running a marathon, buying a house, publishing a novel, etc.) with the Grey Goose brand.

Jameson is remarkably consistent in their message strategy, as 78.57% of posts use brand image. This means Jameson is heavily invested in a cohesive branding approach, opting to characterize the brand personality moreso than who uses the product or when the product should be used. They frequently take a cheeky tone (ex.: a call-out campaign for friends who cancel on St. Patrick's Day plans) and show an adventurous nature (posts depicting traveling, the outdoors, etc.). Jameson takes a neutral position on users – possibly encouraging more consumers to identify with the brand than if the user image were more targeted to a specific demographic or socioeconomic stratum. By only presenting what Jameson wants consumers to know and feel about the brand, they leave their role in users' lives open to the user's interpretations and projections. This approach means the brand can always be appropriate in any situation, for anyone – the meaning is supplied by the user.

When looking at posts across all brands, the most common message strategy is brand image at 40.97% of all posts during the period, potentially due to Jameson's outsize impact. However, as a visual medium, Instagram presents an ideal opportunity to tell a micro-story about brand aesthetic and personality. The second most common strategy is use occasion with 23.61% of all posts, suggesting that Instagram is a good venue to suggest ways to incorporate products into a consumer's life. User image is the third most common, with 18.06% of posts; directly identifying users may be less suitable for social media as anyone can view and browse content and to specify a type of user could be seen as more broadly alienating. The remainder of posts are informational, with hyperbole occupying 7.64%, preemptive at 6.25%, and generic – informational at 3.47% of

total posts. The hyperbole strategy is one in which a brand presents an untestable claim of benefit or superiority, preemptive is the presentation of verifiable information without claiming uniqueness or comparing to other brands, and generic is simply information about the product type without regard to brand. No brands employed a comparative strategy (directly mentioning a competitor) or a unique selling proposition (explicitly claiming to be unique) in any of their posts during this period, suggesting that these brands see social media as a place to differentiate based primarily on aesthetic and personality rather than product attribute. Additionally, it appears that brands prefer to keep consumer focus on their branding rather than invoking competitors even if the comparison is meant to be favorable. Example images of the selected brands' dominant message strategies are displayed in Appendix 2.

3.1.2 Brand message content March 2019 – May 2019

Content has proven decidedly more difficult to assess, as many Instagram posts are a combination of content messages. For the purposes of this study, the dominant type of content – the main point of the post, both image/video and caption – was recorded. The content types used across brands during March 2019 – May 2019 are displayed below in Figure 4, with tabulated values available in Appendix 1. Customer service content did not appear during the 2019 period. Promotional content – content offering discounts, specials, or purchase-related contests – did not appear in any brand's posts in either time period and has been omitted from the below graphs.
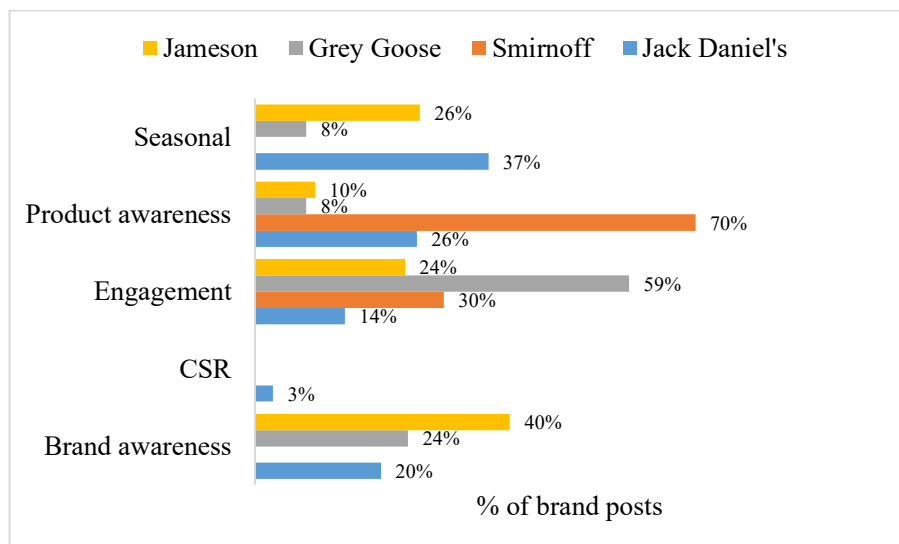

Figure 4. Percentage of brand Instagram posts by message content category during March 2019 – May 2019
Source: Author's calculations

Jack Daniel's focuses heavily on seasonal content, with 37.14% of their posts featuring content directly related to seasons, holidays, or other temporal events. This may be to firmly establish Jack Daniel's products as appropriate for any and all occasions, be they International Women's Day or Memorial Day. When considered in the context of their most dominant message strategy, use occasion, featuring seasonal content makes sense to reinforce the brand's suitability and ubiquity for any possible season, event, or situation. Seasonal content also keeps the brand Instagram feed varied – with plenty of opportunity for expressing appropriate sentiments or showing seasonally-tailored aesthetics – and presents the brand as current, reflecting cultural forces in real time.

Smirnoff strongly leans into product awareness, with 70% of their posts displaying a specifically named brand product. Many posts advertise Smirnoff seltzers or flavored vodkas, frequently paired with a recipe or a suggestion for use. Smirnoff clearly wants consumers to know about their varied product portfolio, and by linking these products using cohesive branding they may be trying to ensure that Smirnoff is the brand that comes to mind across product categories. Their dominant strategy of use occasion paired with dominant content type of product awareness suggests that the brand particularly wants to emphasize that they have a perfect product for any occasion – not one product for all occasions. This suggests Smirnoff as more of an umbrella brand than a product class, and implies that their aesthetic and personality are especially important to ensure consumers can recognize the brand even across different products.

Grey Goose features engagement in 59.46% of their posts. Their approach to engagement is not typically along the lines of 'leave a comment' – instead, they largely post cocktail recipes using their products. These recipes can be seen as a call to action, encouraging consumers to use their product and recipe to enhance their experience with the brand. When considered against the dominant strategy of user image, the high percentage of engagement content suggests Grey Goose adopts an aspirational line and provides recipes and other content to help consumers become the ideals shown in their posts. Their content is meant to make the consumer feel a certain way about themselves through their use of Grey Goose products, which is common amongst higher end/more upscale brands.

Jameson's most common content type is brand awareness, covering 40.48% of their posts. Brand awareness content is content meant to build the brand presence, and can be expressed through sponsorships or cross-promotions, information about brand background, operations, or employees, and anything that focuses specifically on bringing attention to the brand rather than its products.

Jameson does include photos of product in their posts, but the product serves to amplify the brand rather than the reverse (as with Smirnoff). Jameson's dominant message strategy – brand image – is perfectly correlated with their brand awareness content, demonstrating a cohesive approach to Jameson as a strongly characterized entity rather than a brand that produces several whiskeys. The name and the brand are synonymous, and Jameson uses their Instagram presence to tell a story about what Jameson is and means.

Across all brands, the most common content type is engagement, with 31.94% of total posts. This is immediately understandable, as higher engagement with content boosts a brand's Instagram presence and leads to their content being shown more frequently to both established and prospective consumers. In social media, engagement with branded content is a high value currency that can boost presence as well as provide a company with a wealth of data regarding consumer base, campaign efficacy, and insight into what approaches receive more favorable consumer attention. The second most common content type is product awareness, with 25.69% of total posts, and the third is brand awareness, with 22.92% of total posts. The placement of these content categories is also logical; social media is an ideal venue to display products and tell brand stories due to opportunity for rich media, frequent individal posts, and the ability to display individual posts as parts of a larger story on the brand's Instagram profile. Seasonal content occupies 18.75% of total posts, likely reflecting the need for brands to recognize events or holidays their users experience. Only 0.69% of posts contain content relating to corporate social responsibility (CSR) – clearly, these selected liquor brands do not have user bases that push for CSR as a regularly practiced corporate value. No brands posted customer service content in 2019, which is unsurprising as liquor brands are unlikely to post information about physical premises or service announcements. The lack of promotional content is also notable, as Instagram provides a reasonable venue for contests and giveaways and this content is frequently employed across other product categories on the platform. A likely reason is the complicated nature of regulations and policy surrounding acceptable alcohol advertising, and companies may err on the side of caution by not posting any purchase incentive content that could violate laws in various locales. Example images of the selected brands' dominant content strategies are displayed in Appendix 2.

3.1.3. Cross-tabulated strategy-content combinations March 2019 – May 2019

A clustered bar chart depicting the overall message strategy-content type populations across all brands by post percentage may be seen below in Figure 5.
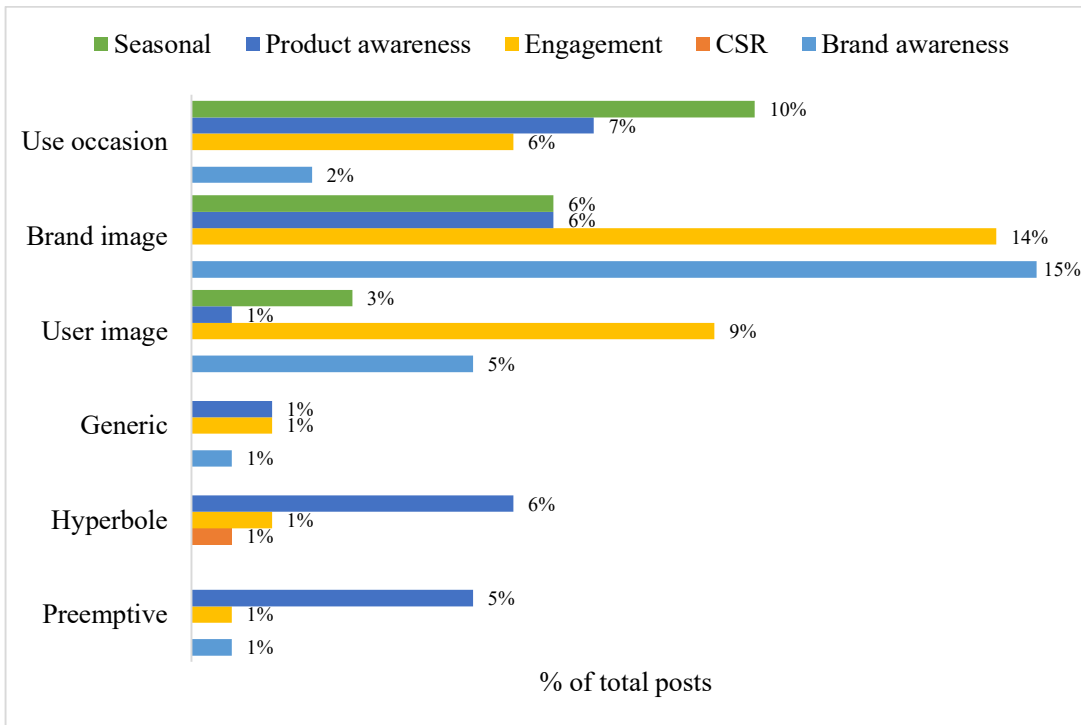
Figure 5. Percentage of Instagram posts across all brands by message strategy-content combination during March 2019 – May 2019
Source: Author's calculations

The most common strategy-content combination across all brands during March 2019 – May 2019 is brand image-brand awareness, with 14.58% of total posts. The second most common is brand image-engagement, at 13.89%, followed by use occasion-seasonal at 9.72%. User image-engagement is the fourth most common combination, representing 9.03% of posts. There are 21 demonstrated strategy-content combinations, though the top four account for nearly 50% of total posts during the period. These combinations are intuitively sensible. Brand image-brand awareness pushes the brand's story, brand image-engagement makes consumers feel like part of the brand, use occasion-seasonal demonstrates just how that brand is suitable across a wide variety of situations, and user image-engagement tells consumers who they can be if they engage with the brand. Contingency tables describing populations across brands may be viewed in Appendix 3.

3.2. Brand message strategy and content during the first COVID-19 lockdown

3.2.1. Brand message strategy March 2020 – May 2020

The strategy breakdowns for each brand in 2020, by percentage of posts, is displayed below in Figure 6, with tabulated values available in Appendix 1.
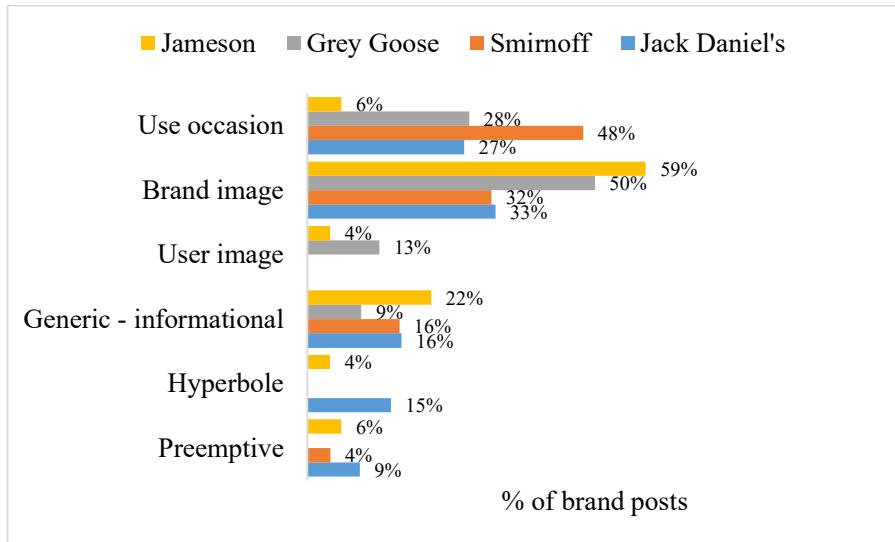

Figure 6. Percentage of brand Instagram posts by message strategy category during March 2020 – May 2020
Source: Author's calculations

Only two brands, Smirnoff and Jameson, have maintained their dominant strategy from 2019 during the period of the first COVID-19 lockdown. Smirnoff has continued to lean on use occasion, which is depicted in 48% of posts as compared to 40% during the 2019 period, although the nature of the occasion has changed. They now suggest using their products for things like virtual happy hours, nights on the couch, or even an "at home bar crawl," demonstrating that though their strategy may not have changed, their suggested use has been tweaked and updated to align with current events. Jameson has continued to deploy brand image in the majority of their posts, although brand image posts have decreased to 58.82% of posts in the 2020 period from 78.57% in 2019. This is unsurprising, as both their strategy and content in the 2019 period demonstrate that Jameson is hyper-focused on their own branding. Jameson nods to current events, with captions such as "Whiskey distancing" and images depicting a FaceTime call featuring drinks made with their product, but remains focused on developing and reinforcing their own story and image.

Jack Daniel's has moved from use occasion in 2019 to focus a third of their posts (34.55%) on brand image. A common theme is "Made our way for drinks your way," which emphasizes their methods of production to bolster brand image as one of care and quality. They also feature photos of products set against their aging casks, reinforcing the idea that their products are not mass-produced in a factory but instead require time and effort to deliver the highest possible results. Jack Daniel's tends not to focus on current events in their brand image posts, instead deciding to paint a picture of reliable quality across time. This may be to encourage users to see them as a constant, something that will remain the same even as times change and society faces new circumstances.

Grey Goose has also switched from user image, which encompassed 40% of their 2019 posts, to brand image in fully 50% of their 2020 period posts. Many of these posts feature their product or cocktails artfully arranged in a tablescape accompanied by a recipe in the text caption. They do mention "at home bartending," virtual happy hour, and other nods to the COVID-19 lockdown; however, most brand image posts are simply focused on aesthetics and may present a form of escapism to consumers at home.

The most common strategy by percentage of total posts across all brands during 2020 is brand image, with 44.17% of posts. This is unchanged from 2019, although the strategy context in many cases has changed to reflect current events. Use occasion remains the second most common message strategy with 23.93% of posts, but the third most common strategy – generic-informational – has taken that position from user image with 16.56% of posts. Most of these informational posts communicate what the brand is doing to assist with COVID-19 relief efforts, be that manufacturing hand sanitizer or donating money to various funds. These posts are likely meant to give consumers confidence that these brands care about current events and are making a positive impact; in a way, this is a managing of brand image even if the strategy is informational rather than transformational. Example images of the selected brands' message strategies during the 2020 period are displayed in Appendix 2.

3.2.2 Brand message content March 2020 – May 2020

The content types used across brands during March 2019 – May 2019 are displayed below in Figure 7, with tabulated values available in Appendix 1.
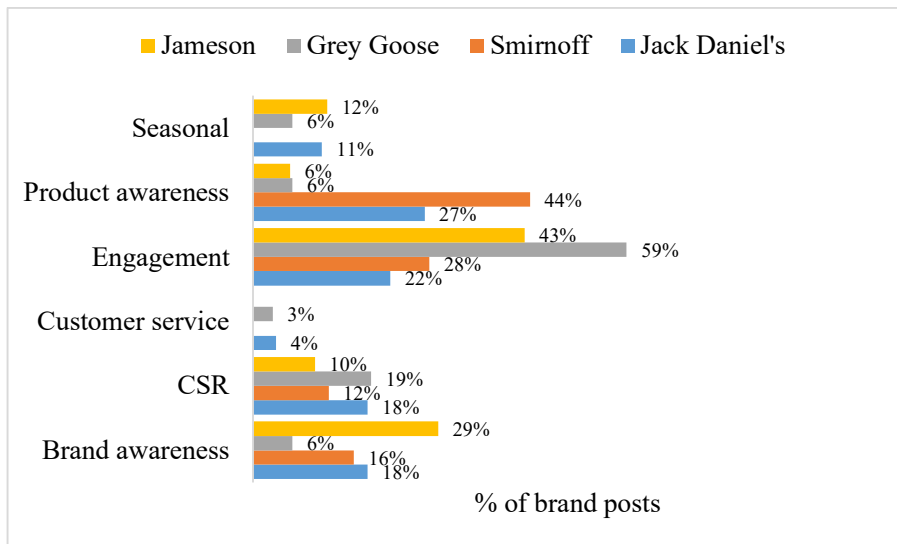
Figure 7. Percentage of brand Instagram posts by message content category during March 2020 – May 2020
Source: Author's calculations

Neither Smirnoff nor Grey Goose deviate from their main 2019 content type in the 2020 period – Smirnoff continues to feature product awareness, with 28% of posts, and Grey Goose uses engagement in 59.48% of posts. Smirnoff's product awareness content remains largely the same as the 2019 content, again featuring their seltzers, flavored vodkas, and ways to use them. However, they incorporate many nods to the COVID-19 lockdown, suggesting using their whipped cream-flavored vodka in the lockdown Instagram trend Dalgona coffee or getting their seltzers delivered via a courier service. Grey Goose continues to mainly use cocktail recipes for engagement, though has introduced some content such as "Comment one thing below that made you smile this week".

Jack Daniel's moved from seasonal content in the 2019 period to product awareness in 2020, tallying 29.09% of posts. This may be due to the inability to congregate in groups: the 2019 content heavily featured social gatherings, such as picnics and barbeques, and various holiday celebrations. Consumers were unable to host or attend these kinds of events during the COVID-19 lockdown period, making depictions of them both unrelatable and potentially irresponsible. The pivot to product awareness has no such pitfalls: making consumers aware of the breadth of Jack Daniel's products, from Jack Apple to Jack Daniel's Rye to ready-to-drink Country Cocktails, presents them with the opportunity to enjoy multiple different products while remaining brand loyal. Many of these product awareness posts emphasize the product attribute – Jack Apple is "refreshing" and

"crisp," while Jack Rye is "spicy" and "bold – and any cocktail recipes are minimal, keeping the focus on the product. This content is generally not reflective of the COVID-19 lockdown, and could be placed in any time period or context. The timelessness of the content serves to emphasize their dominant strategy of brand image, developing the brand as a constant and reliable source for quality products in consumers' minds.

Jameson primarily uses engagement in the 2020 period, with nearly half (43.14%) of posts in the category as compared to the dominant content type brand awareness (40.48%) in 2019. They emphasize making staying at home fun with such engagement concepts as The Stay Inn, where the brand presents online quizzes with the opportunity to win branded merchandise. The hashtag campaign #JamesonConnects is used in multiple engagement efforts, such as a collaboration with musicians and an online radio station or a live broadcast demonstration of Jameson recipes created by bartenders around the world. They encourage users to tune in and connect with the brand through these events while further developing their brand image as fun, current, and relatable.

The most common content type across all brands is engagement with 36.8% of total posts during the period, up from 31.9% in 2019. Brand awareness and product awareness are the next most common types, each with 19% of total posts. These categories both saw a decrease in post percentage from 2019. CSR saw the most dramatic change, from 0.07% in 2019 up to 14.7% in 2020. These results are consistent with expectations. Engagement became more prevalent as more people spent more time on social media, with brands attempting to create fun events and activities for fans and consumers in lockdown. Brand awareness and product awareness also make sense, as developing the brand identity and creating brand narratives through the pandemic while offering consumers new ways to use products. The increase in CSR content, of course, reflects brands' efforts to 'pitch in' to the community by manufacturing hand sanitizer, holding benefit concerts, and encouraging fans to donate to various relief funds and small businesses. This is consistent with the desire to appear in solidarity with consumers and to create positive brand image and perception. Example images of the selected brands' message content during the 2020 period are displayed in Appendix 2.

3.2.3. Cross-tabulated strategy-content combinations March 2020 – May 2020

A clustered bar chart depicting the overall message strategy-content type populations across all brands by post percentage may be seen below in Figure 8.
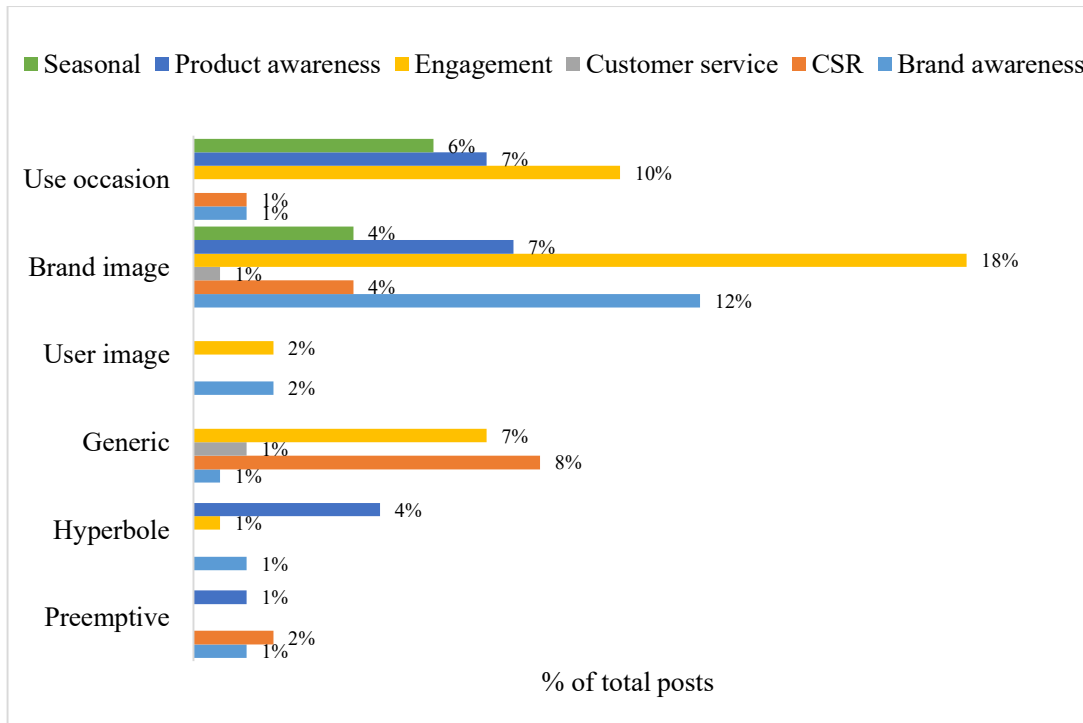

Figure 8. Percentage of Instagram posts across all brands by message strategy-content combination during March 2020 – May 2020
Source: Author's calculations

Because the dominant strategy and content types have shifted for multiple brands, so too have the strategy-content populations. The most common combination in 2020 is brand image-engagement, with 17.79% of total posts, followed by brand image-brand awareness (11.66%), use occasion-engagement (9.82%), and generic-informational-CSR (7.98%). As in 2019, the top four combinations make up nearly half of total posts during the period (47.24%). Several things are immediately obvious from this data. First, there are more strategy-content combination in 2020 than in 2019. Second, CSR makes a much larger contribution to post count in 2020 than in 2019. This is clearly correlated with the COVID-19 pandemic – as brands seek to connect with consumers over social media and control their image, messages of social responsibility during crises are key to retain consumer faith, trust, and positive feelings. Third, customer service shows up in combination with brand image and generic-informational, mostly due to information about

facility closures during the lockdown. Contingency tables describing populations across brands may be viewed in Appendix 3.

3.3. Changes and trends across brands

Because this is an evaluation of four brands across two different time periods with two multilevel dependent variables (message strategy and message content), it is difficult to definitively pull out changes between the years and interpret trends. Nonetheless, there are some very clear shifts in message strategy and message content, as well as differences illuminated by text network analysis.

3.3.1 Message strategy

Message strategy can be assessed by the percentage of posts from each brand and graphically summarized in the box-and-whisker chart below (Figure 9).
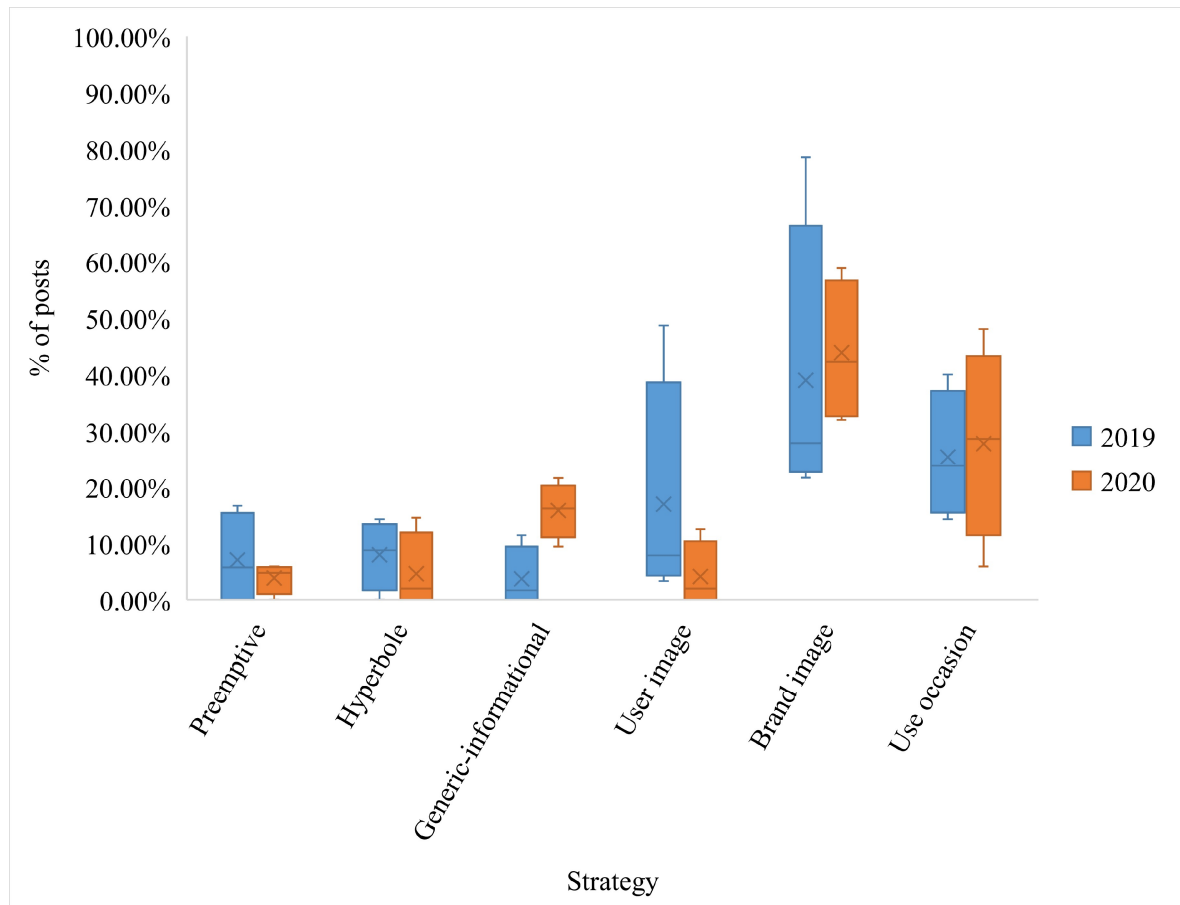
Figure 9. Percentage of Instagram posts across all brands by message strategy in March 2019 – May 2019 and March 2020 – May 2020
Source: Author's calculations

Though not statistically significant, partially due to the small sample size of four brands, a few trends become clear from this figure. As far as informational message strategies, preemptive has decreased from 2019 to 2020 while generic-informational has increased. This indicates brands are less concerned with presenting informational claims about their products and more concerned with sharing non-product information – in this case, information relating to COVID-19 and the brand's own COVID-related actions. This takes the form of sharing policy guidelines (stay home, stay distanced) as well as sharing information about the manufacturing of hand sanitizer or relief events for bartenders or musicians.

The most dramatic shift is that of user image, which became considerably less prevalent in 2020 than in 2019 across all brands. This may be due to the aspirational and social nature of the user image strategy – when consumers are all stuck at home, do depictions of young, successful, attractive people socializing around the product resonate as strongly? Or on the reverse side, does showing the reality of current users – people in pajamas on their sofa with a drink – make consumers or potential consumers want to buy the product? Reflecting the unglamorous nature of reality may be relatable, but it is not aspirational and does not increase positive brand perception. Both user image strategies – aspiration and reality – are inappropriate for the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis.

In light of this, it seems all four brands have collectively decided to shift their emphasis from the user to the brand image or use occasion. These are much safer ways for brands to acknowledge current events while elevating their image. The brand image strategy allows brands to leverage their brand story and personality to reflect events with humor, style, or reliability, solidifying consumer perceptions and displaying consistency even in a global pandemic. The use occasion strategy allows the brands to explore new use occasions – virtual happy hours, at home bartending, online events, brunch at home – and encourage consumption on a personal, rather than social, level. This is also crucial because as bars closed there was a significant drop in the wholesale/distributor market, meaning individual consumer sales became a much larger percentage of revenue. These strategies also align with Deng's (2020) findings that advertisements during COVID-19 are transformational, rather than informational, often incorporating humor and

packaging the message with social elements. Finding new ways for consumers to use these products, or portraying ordinary use occasions (a weekend at home) as fun and exciting, can be used to drive individual sales.

3.3.2 Message content

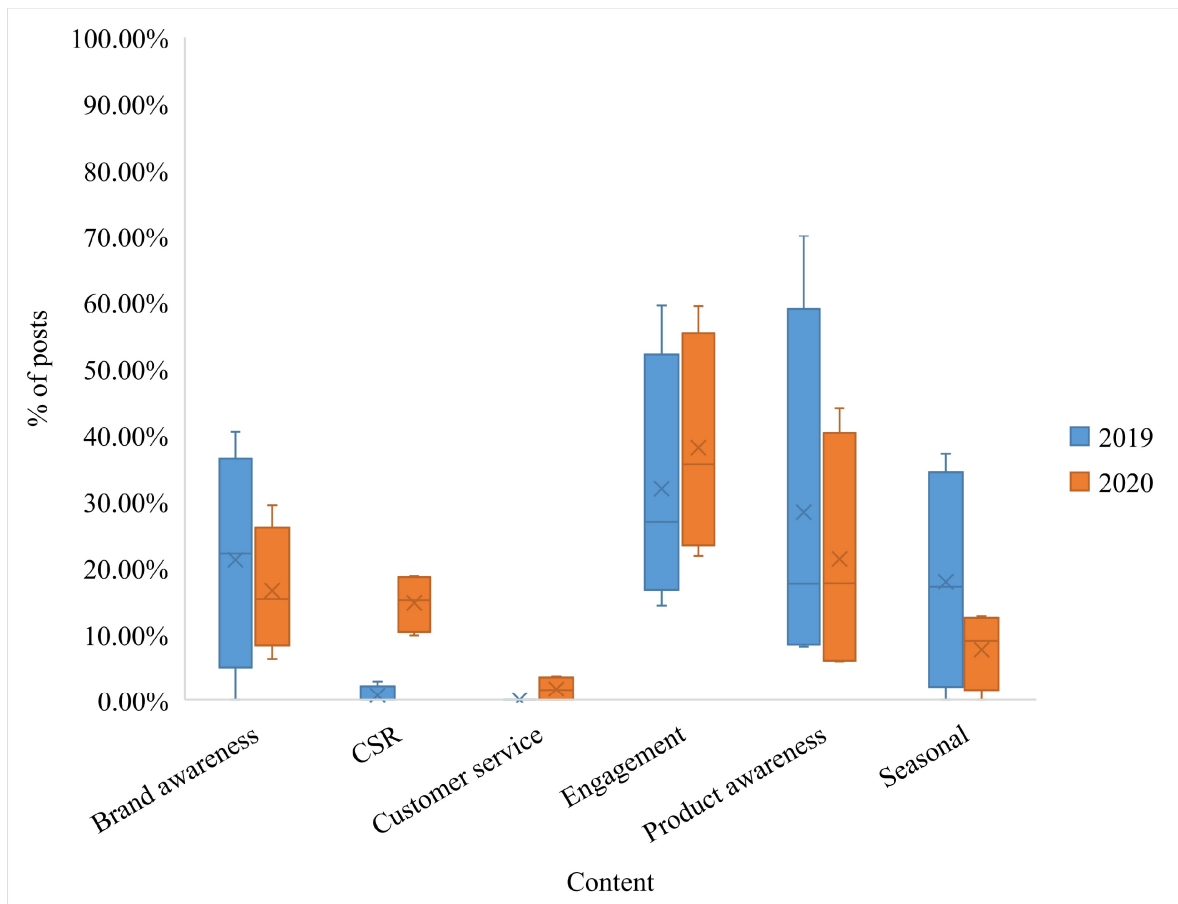Message content can be visualized the same way, as in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10. Percentage of Instagram posts across all brands by message content in March 2019 – May 2019 and March 2020 – May 2020
Source: Author's calculations

As with message strategy, there are some obvious changes in content between time periods. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) received almost no attention in 2019, showing up in only one post across all brands (or only 0.69% of total posts). By contrast, 14.72% of posts in the 2020 period used CSR as their dominant content type. The cause can definitively be attributed to the

COVID-19 pandemic, as all CSR posts focused on sharing policy guidelines, relief funds, donation efforts, and the shift from manufacturing consumer alcohol to manufacturing hand sanitizer. Companies – not just these four selected alcohol brands, but all companies – simply cannot ignore events that drastically change life for the entirety of their consumer base. By sharing efforts to help healthcare workers by manufacturing hand sanitizer, or campaigns to donate to bartenders or musicians out of work due to the pandemic, brands can make consumers feel good about purchasing their products. The appearance of care and participation in the community – whether genuine or simply marketing – is crucial for consumer brand perception during such globally-felt events. Additionally, blatant commercial appeals during crisis can turn consumers off from a brand (Seo et al. 2018). Increasing the amount of perceived authentic communication and decreasing naked product promotion is a sensible change to drive a sense of community and increase a consumer's positive feelings towards the brand (*Ibid.*).

Most other content categories remain largely unchanged, with the exception of seasonal content. In the three brands that had posted primarily seasonal message content in the 2019 period (Jack Daniel's, Jameson, Grey Goose), the percentage of seasonal content decreased in the 2020 period. For Jack Daniel's, the shift was from 37.14% to 12.73%, and for Jameson it was 26.19% down to 11.76%. This may be partially explained by the increase in CSR content across the board, but is also likely related to the increase in engagement content. During the 2019 period, brands posted about holidays, seasonal gatherings, and other such occasions – all things that involve groups of people coming together for social reasons. This content obviously would not resonate during the COVID-19 lockdown, where people were prohibited from gathering in groups and were mostly confined to their own homes. Depicting such gatherings could be seen as irresponsible, or make people feel more negatively towards their current circumstances, which could translate into perceiving the brand as out-of-touch or uncaring. By boosting engagement content instead, brands made use of the fact that people at home were using social media more frequently and for longer periods of time to direct them to spend time interacting with the brand. Any increase in brand interaction is a positive opportunity to solidify brand image and relationships with current and prospective consumers.

3.3.3 Post caption text network analysis

Post caption text was analyzed and visualized using InfraNodus to determine word linkages and differences between the 2019 period and the 2020 period. These network maps may be viewed in Appendix 4.

A comparative network analysis between Jack Daniel's post captions in 2019 and 2020 literally includes the word "COVID," and contains a linkage between the words "temporarily" and "suspend," which refers to visitor operations being closed due to lockdown. More interestingly, the word "cocktail" does not appear in the 2019 post captions but appears six times in the 2020 captions, linked to either a product (Country Cocktails) or ideas about bartending at home. The association of cocktails with home in 2020 is likely meant to not only increase home product consumption, but to unconsciously persuade consumers that Jack Daniel's can help elevate their experience in lockdown by emulating the feeling of going out to a bar and ordering a cocktail. Jack Daniel's also has a large cluster surrounding the word "benefit," with key words being "relief" and "fund," suggesting that in 2020 they have emphasized corporate social responsibility

Jameson also mentioned "cocktail" in 2020, but not 2019, as part of the topic cluster surrounding their online Stay Inn pub quiz engagement efforts. This directly ties into their message that staying home can be fun, and that previously nightlife-limited events like a pub quiz can be translated into home life to create a new kind of experience. Another cluster in 2020 not present in 2019 is the connection of "healthcare," "time," and "home". This is obviously a COVID reference, but the inclusion of "healthcare" promotes the idea that Jameson cares about medical workers and consumers. This also suggests that Jameson wants consumers to feel that the brand has a role to play in pandemic relief and that they are socially conscious and socially responsible.

For Grey Goose, comparing 2019 and 2020 networks revealed COVID-related differences such as "home", which is linked to many different post captions, and words like "make," "hand," and "sanitizer," which are all connected. This appears to be a similar strategy to Jameson's, where the brand projects the image of compassion and responsibility and wants consumers to believe the brand is helping people during a difficult time. These topical clusters are meant to inspire positive feelings towards the brand and reinforce the "we're all in this together" appeal that humanizes Grey Goose from just a vodka brand to a social entity. However, there are more differences in the 2019 and 2020 text than feel-good corporate social responsibility. One interesting node is "@cocktailcourier," which suggests Grey Goose used the COVID-19 lockdown to promote online and app-based alcohol ordering and delivery. This is aligned with reality – many consumers did not want to travel to a grocery or liquor store during the lockdown – but also suggests Grey Goose believes in modern convenience and wants to make product consumption as easy as possible.

There is little meaningful difference between Smirnoff's 2019 and 2020 caption text, possibly because in both time periods they focus heavily on product awareness and the product promotion remains relatively static. However, there are two new topic clusters in 2020 that nod to the lockdown: one containing "virtually," "video," and "hangout," and one containing "background" and "download". These two clusters are linked through the word "hangout". Even without viewing Smirnoff's posts these clusters show an increased reliance on technology and contain the suggestion of online socializing rather than in-person. Rather than bringing the bar feeling home with cocktails, like Jack Daniel's or Jameson, Smirnoff wants consumers to connect with each other over video chat with branded Smirnoff backgrounds. This positions Smirnoff as a social facilitator and suggests they are a brand that can bring people together to socialize and have fun, even if it's virtual, even during a pandemic. This kind of upbeat attitude may resonate with consumers who are searching for ways to connect in isolation. The visual cue of a branded video chat background is a reminder to all video chat participants that Smirnoff is fun and Smirnoff is helping to make it happen – so why not enjoy a Smirnoff product during the chat?

When considered as a whole, across brands, it appears that they have generally employed positive emotional language appeals largely concerning either social responsibility or how product consumption can improve staying at home and make consumers feel closer to the 'normal' state of 2019. These appeals support Vargas and Bianchi's (2020) study demonstrating increased use of emotion and togetherness in advertising. Caption text touting healthcare or hand sanitizer can make consumers feel that the brand is contributing vital support during a difficult time, inspiring positive associations and the feeling that supporting the brand is supporting their COVID-19 campaigns. In other words, supporting the brand can make a consumer feel good about their purchase and consumption choices and increase the perception of responsible consumer behavior. This aligns with the findings of He and Harris (2020) that promotional communications during COVID-19 are meant to create bonds between brands, individuals, and community.

Captions that focus on bringing the bar experience home with cocktails and virtual events and promote a social feeling during isolation are also common across all four brands. This is a potent appeal, as it creates a sense of gathering and community and positions the brand as a catalytic member of that community instead of an outsider simply selling a product. As people have felt increasingly isolated and alienated during the pandemic, anything promising a social experience is an attractive option. And with pandemic-related anxiety, stress, boredom, and depression also correlating with higher alcohol consumption levels, seeing marketing depicting that consumption

as a form of 'togetherness' could make consumers feel good about their alcohol consumption habits and reinforce them. This aligns with the concept that drinking is a social ritual that engenders community, as well as an escapist tool to inject some fun into a stressful daily life (Treise, Walburg, and Otnes 1999).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic created a genuine global crisis, sweeping across borders and disrupting daily life the world over. The widespread mental health effects of the pandemic increased alcohol consumption during the subsequent lockdown. During this time, people also spent more time on social media than ever before. Studies have shown that exposure to alcohol marketing increases intent to drink – so what were alcohol brands saying on social media during this unprecedented amount of social media traffic and engagement?

To determine this, it was first necessary to adapt a theoretical framework from the extant literature in order to classify alcohol brand messaging. Using a message strategy typology developed by Laskey *et al*., and a message content categorization scheme from Coursaris *et al*., posts from a purposive sample of alcohol brands (Jack Daniel's, Smirnoff, Jameson, Absolut) were coded by both strategy and content. This coding was performed for posts during the period of March 1 – May 31 2019 to verify the appropriateness of the typologies, as well as establish a baseline understanding of what types of messaging alcohol brands use during normal times. Coding was also performed for the period of March 1 – May 31 2020, corresponding to the first COVID-19 lockdown, to determine what, if anything, had changed. The dominant message strategy and content types were assessed both within and across brands for both periods, and cross-tabulation was performed to determine which combinations of strategy and content were most common. Finally, text network analysis was performed on all Instagram post captions in order to pull out textual themes and linkages in both periods and find any differences between them.

In terms of message strategy, all brands employed mainly transformational strategies rather than informational in both time periods. This suggests alcohol brands are far less concerned with presenting factual product information than with brand stories or emotional appeals on social media. The most common strategy subtype by percentage of total posts across brands in the 2019 period was brand image, largely used to either develop a brand aesthetic or to create and strengthen a brand personality. The most common content type was engagement, which is unsurprising, as

social media marketing efforts heavily focus on creating opportunities for consumers to interact with brands. Individually, the most common strategy and content types by percentage of each brand's posts were: a) Jack Daniel's, use occasion strategy and seasonal content, b) Grey Goose, user image strategy and engagement content, c) Smirnoff, use occasion strategy and product awareness content, and d) Jameson, brand image strategy and brand awareness content.

The dominant strategy and content type by percentage of total posts across brands did not change in 2020 – strategy remained brand image, and content remained engagement. However, the ways in which these were deployed did change. Brand image became a way for brands to tell consumers that they, too, were affected by the pandemic, and brand image shifted to include more corporate social responsibility and present a caring, reliable personality. Engagement evolved from standalone recipes or simple "tag a friend"-type approaches to encourage consumers to attend online events, concerts, radio shows, and other virtual social opportunities. The idea was clearly to bring some fun into lockdown, and to encourage consumers to associate the brand with community and socialization even when forced into isolation. The most common strategy and content types by percentage of each brand's posts were: a) Jack Daniel's, brand image strategy and product awareness content, b) Grey Goose, brand image strategy and engagement content, c) Smirnoff, use occasion strategy and product awareness content, and d) Jameson, brand image strategy and engagement content.

More notably, informational posts increased during the lockdown as brands shared non-product information about their corporate social responsibility efforts or public guidelines surrounding staying home. The strategy of user image decreased dramatically from 2019 to 2020, suggesting that previous marketing pushes showing aspirational, idealized users was not a good fit during a pandemic. Many user image posts show users, real or fictitious, engaged in social activities and living full, active lives – images that would not resonate with consumers stuck at home during a pandemic. Nor do consumers want to be reminded of their reality – a campaign showing people stuck at home on the couch would be less likely to encourage consumers to buy a product than it would be to associate that product with their boredom, anxiety, and isolation fatigue. Because both aspirational user image and real user image became unappealing, user image became an inappropriate strategy.

Seasonal content decreased as well, as it primarily exists to showcase holidays and other events that involve large gatherings of family or friends – something completely inappropriate during the

lockdown. As already mentioned, CSR content became far more prevalent, with brands sharing their efforts to manufacture hand sanitizer instead of product, posting relief funds, and presenting benefit events for various impacted employment sectors. This is a way for brands to showcase their relevance to current events, corporate generosity, and project an image of caring and community, taking a 'we're all in this together' approach.

Text analysis revealed some key differences between 2019 and 2020, again highlighting the prevalence of CSR concepts. However, the most interesting difference was the linkage between 'cocktails' and 'home,' a connection that occurred across several brands and frequently in conjunction with virtual events. The suggestion to bring the bar home, as it were, means brands are encouraging consumers to treat being at home as a social event, to allow home consumption to occupy the social space that bar consumption used to fill. Brands have used this to create both a sense of normalcy as well as promote home consumption as an opportunity for community and togetherness, which could be correlated to the observed phenomenon of increased alcohol consumption during lockdown. Text trends across brands during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown show positive emotional language appeals about social responsibility and how product consumption can foster community, create a social atmosphere, improve staying at home, and make everything feel a bit more normal.

This study faced several limitations that must be acknowledged. The scope of the selected sample is, though appropriate for a case study, relatively small and only includes two different types of alcohol that occupy relatively similar market price points. This leads to a lack of diversity and a small dataset, which could affect the appearance and interpretation of trends as well as skew results in one direction or another. The same limitation applies to the selected time periods. The 2019 period was selected as a sort of baseline, to provide a point of comparison for brand messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, monitoring posts over the course of an entire year, or multiple years, would provide much more information and a stronger baseline understanding of what kind of messaging alcohol brands typically use. Another limitation is the lack of independent third party verification for Instagram post coding. This lack means all coding is the result of the author's judgement alone and thus the results are subject to unconscious bias. Finally, the content coding structure does not reflect that an Instagram post may have multiple different pieces of message content – for example, a post may include product awareness, engagement, and seasonal content at the same time. The dominant purpose of the content was selected during coding – if the picture and caption emphasize the product over the engagement or other content, a post was

marked as 'product awareness' – but this leads to some confounding information as well as the discarding of potentially relevant information.

Future studies would ideally address all of these limitations. This study could be expanded to include popular brands of all varieties of alcohol, from low price to luxury, as well as popular beer, wine, and ready-to-drink brands. This would create a more full dataset that could further refine the strategy and content models, and perhaps modify them iteratively to adapt the analytical framework specifically to the overall product class (alcohol). Selecting a longer time frame for analysis would also increase confidence in the results and would tend to minimize confounding factors. All coding should be performed by both the principal investigator as well as supporting researchers so agreement between coding results could be assessed. This would lend confidence to the dataset and reduce the influence of unconscious bias. The content coding structure could also be modified. It may be possible to further subdivide the categories such that each post falls under only one unique content subcategory, but it may perhaps be more useful to consider that some posts contain multiple types of content and record those posts as such. Performing correlation analysis and looking at the relationships between all content types – as well as their connections to strategy types – may uncover some other trends.

Finally, once a robust dataset and model has been achieved, it is possible to compare the brand's actions with consumer actions and look for correlations between brand messaging and consumer behavior. This information could be generated for both the general case (as in the March – May 2019 period) as well as the crisis case (the first COVID-19 2020 lockdown), and could help guide public health organizations, policy makers, and others to understand what types of social media messaging are most effective at instigating alcohol purchase and consumption in a variety of situations. This could inform a public messaging strategy aimed at mitigating the behavioral effects of large-scale events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as potentially introduce new guidelines or regulations for alcohol marketing. From the brand's perspective, establishing a causal link between type of Instagram post and consumption could also prove valuable for honing marketing efforts and zeroing in on what specifically encourages consumers to purchase and use their products. Brands are of course actively monitoring their social media analytics and tweaking their approach based on the results, but a comment on Instagram does not necessarily mean an increased likelihood to purchase. Having a large promotional dataset cross-referenced with and correlated to purchase and use behaviors would prove invaluable for more effective targeted social media advertising.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Message strategy types and content types as percentage of posts per brand

March 2019 - May 2019			Jack Daniel's	Smirnoff	Grey Goose	Jameson
Strategy	Informational	Preemptive	11.43%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
		Hyperbole	14.29%	6.67%	10.81%	0.00%
		Generic	11.43%	3.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	Transformational	User image	8.57%	6.67%	48.65%	7.14%
		Brand image	25.71%	30.00%	21.62%	78.57%
		Use occasion	28.57%	36.67%	18.92%	14.29%
Content		Brand awareness	20.00%	0.00%	24.32%	40.48%
		CSR	2.86%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
		Customer service	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
		Engagement	14.29%	30.00%	59.46%	23.81%
		Product awareness	25.71%	70.00%	8.11%	9.52%
		Seasonal	37.14%	0.00%	8.11%	26.19%

Source: Author's calculations

March 2020 - May 2020			Jack Daniel's	Smirnoff	Grey Goose	Jameson
Strategy	Informational	Preemptive	9.09%	4.00%	0.00%	5.88%
		Hyperbole	14.55%	0.00%	0.00%	3.92%
		Generic	16.36%	16.00%	9.38%	21.57%
	Transformational	User image	0.00%	0.00%	12.50%	3.92%
		Brand image	32.73%	32.00%	50.00%	58.82%
		Use occasion	27.27%	48.00%	28.13%	5.88%
Content		Brand awareness	18.18%	16.00%	6.25%	29.41%
		CSR	18.18%	12.00%	18.75%	9.80%
		Customer service	3.64%	0.00%	3.13%	0.00%
		Engagement	21.82%	28.00%	59.38%	43.14%
		Product awareness	27.27%	44.00%	6.25%	5.88%
		Seasonal	10.91%	0.00%	6.25%	11.76%

Source: Author's calculations

Appendix 2. Example posts of most common message strategy-content types by brand

Jack Daniel's: use occasion strategy, seasonal content (March 2019 – May 2019)

Source: Jack Daniel's Instagram (@jackdaniels_us)

Jack Daniel's: brand image strategy, product awareness content (March 2020 – May 2020)

Source: Jack Daniel's Instagram (@jackdaniels_us)

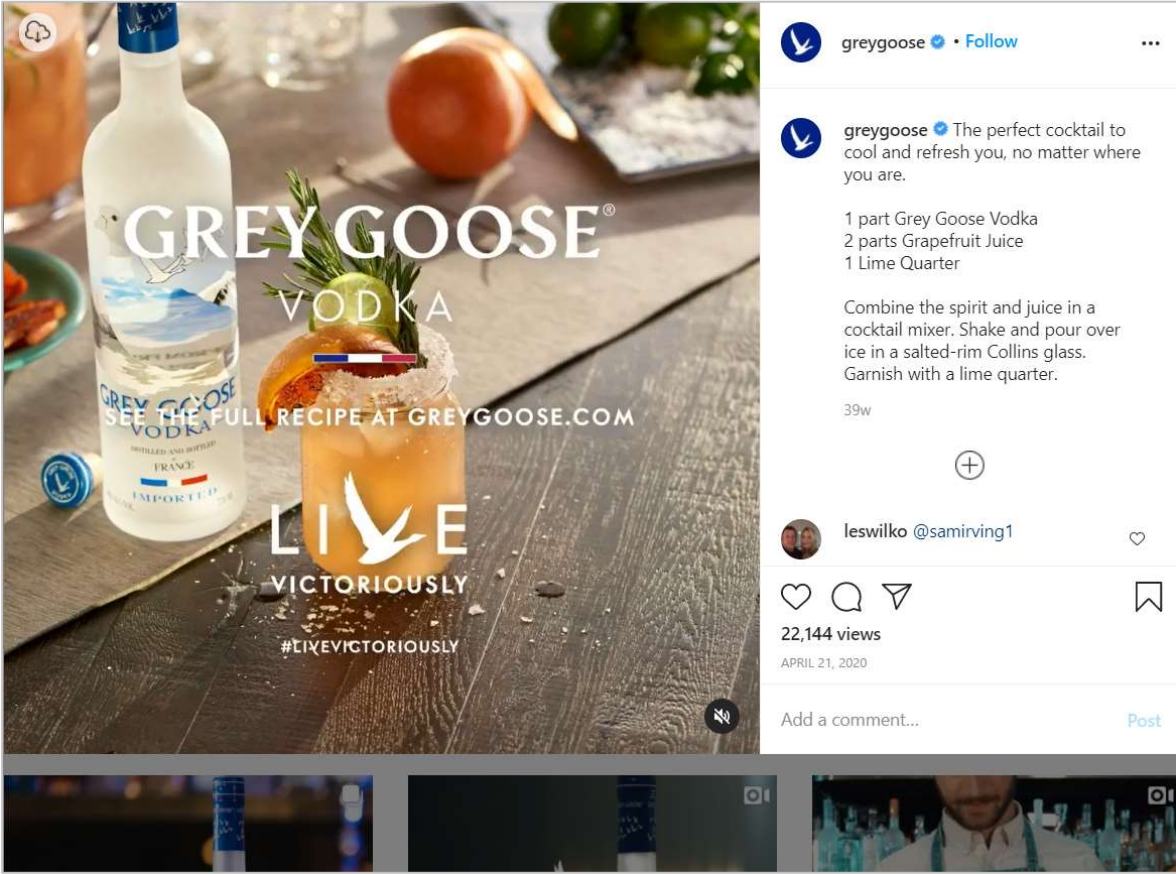Smirnoff: use occasion strategy, product awareness content (both March 2019 – May 2019 and March 2020 – May 2020)
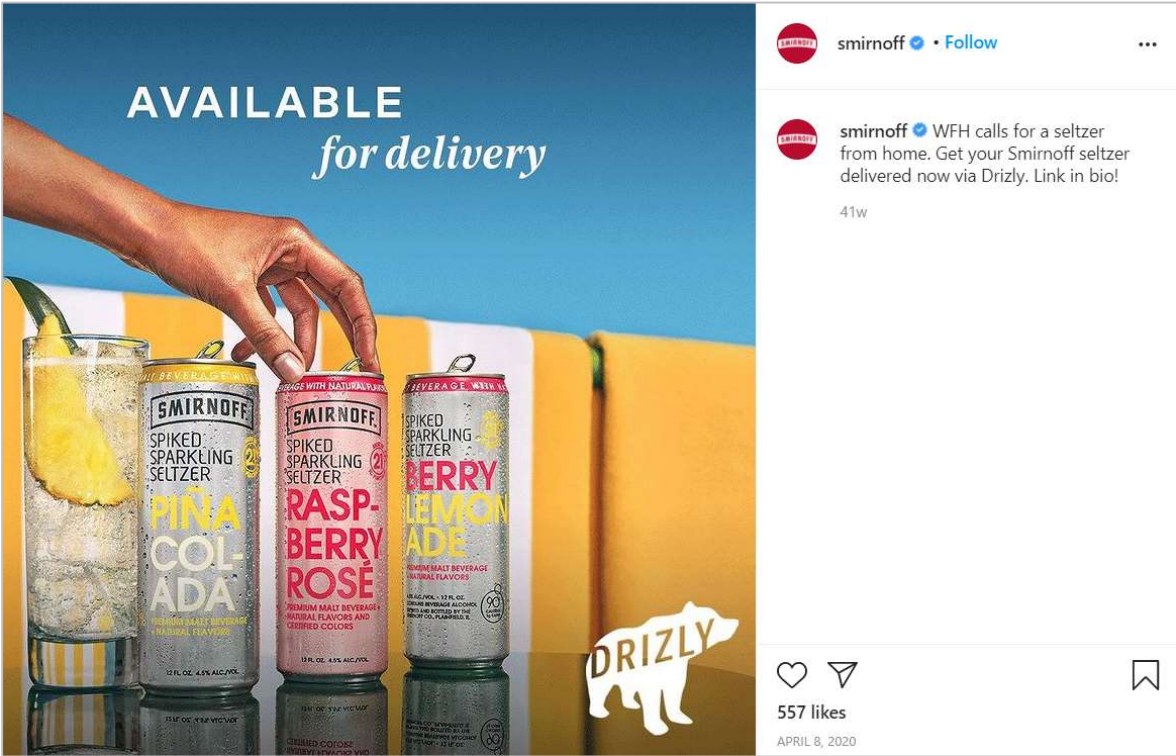
Source: Smirnoff Instagram (@smirnoff)

Grey Goose: user image strategy, engagement content (March 2019 – May 2019)

Source: Grey Goose Instagram (@greygoose)

Grey Goose: brand image strategy, engagement content (March 2020 – May 2020)

Source: Grey Goose Instagram (@greygoose)

Jameson: brand image strategy, brand awareness content (March 2019 – May 2019)

Source: Jameson Instagram (@jameson_us)

Jameson: brand image strategy, engagement content (March 2020 – May 2020)

Source: Jameson Instagram (@jameson_us

Appendix 3. Cross-tabulated message strategy type-content type populations across brands as percentage of total posts

March 2019 – May 2019		Strategy						
		Informational			Transformational			
		Preemptive	Hyperbole	Generic	User image	Brand image	Use occasion	**Total**
Content	Brand awareness	0.69%	0.00%	0.69%	4.86%	14.58%	2.08%	22.92%
	CSR	0.00%	0.69%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.69%
	Customer service	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Engagement	0.69%	1.39%	1.39%	9.03%	13.89%	5.56%	31.94%
	Product awareness	4.86%	5.56%	1.39%	0.69%	6.25%	6.94%	25.69%
	Seasonal	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.78%	6.25%	9.72%	18.75%
Total		6.25%	7.64%	3.47%	17.36%	40.97%	24.31%	100.00%

Source: Author's calculations

| March 2020 – May 2020		Strategy						
		Informational			Transformational			**Total**
		Preemptive	Hyperbole	Generic	User image	Brand image	Use occasion	
Content	Brand awareness	1.23%	1.23%	0.61%	1.84%	11.66%	1.23%	17.79%
	CSR	1.84%	0.00%	7.98%	0.00%	3.68%	1.23%	14.72%
	Customer service	0.00%	0.00%	1.23%	0.00%	0.61%	0.00%	1.84%
	Engagement	0.00%	0.61%	6.75%	1.84%	17.79%	9.82%	36.81%
	Product awareness	1.23%	4.29%	0.00%	0.00%	7.36%	6.75%	19.63%
	Seasonal	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.68%	5.52%	9.20%
Total		4.29%	6.13%	16.56%	3.68%	44.79%	24.54%	100.00%

Source: Author's calculations

Appendix 4. InfraNodus text network maps

Jack Daniel's post caption differences between 2019 and 2020
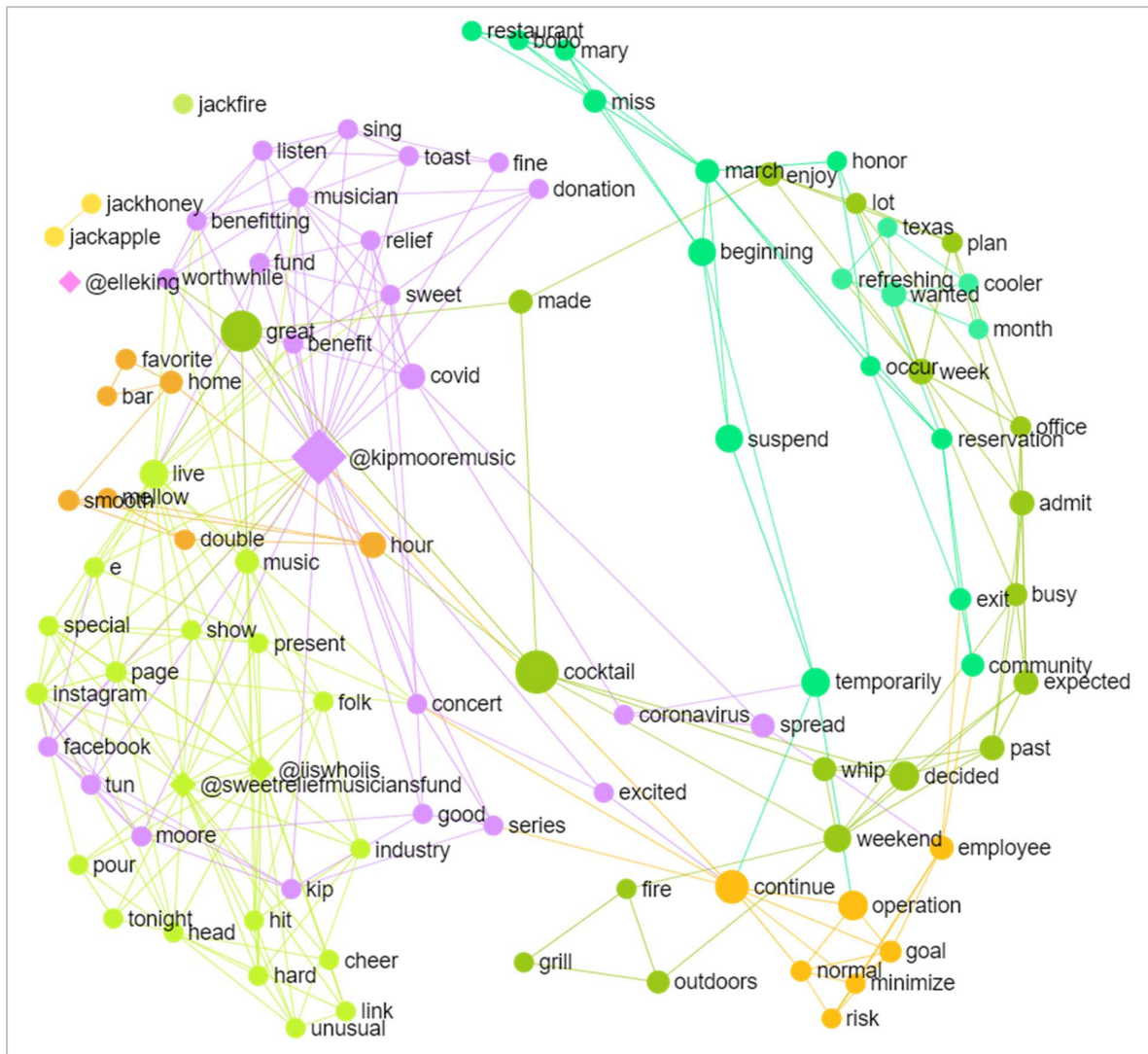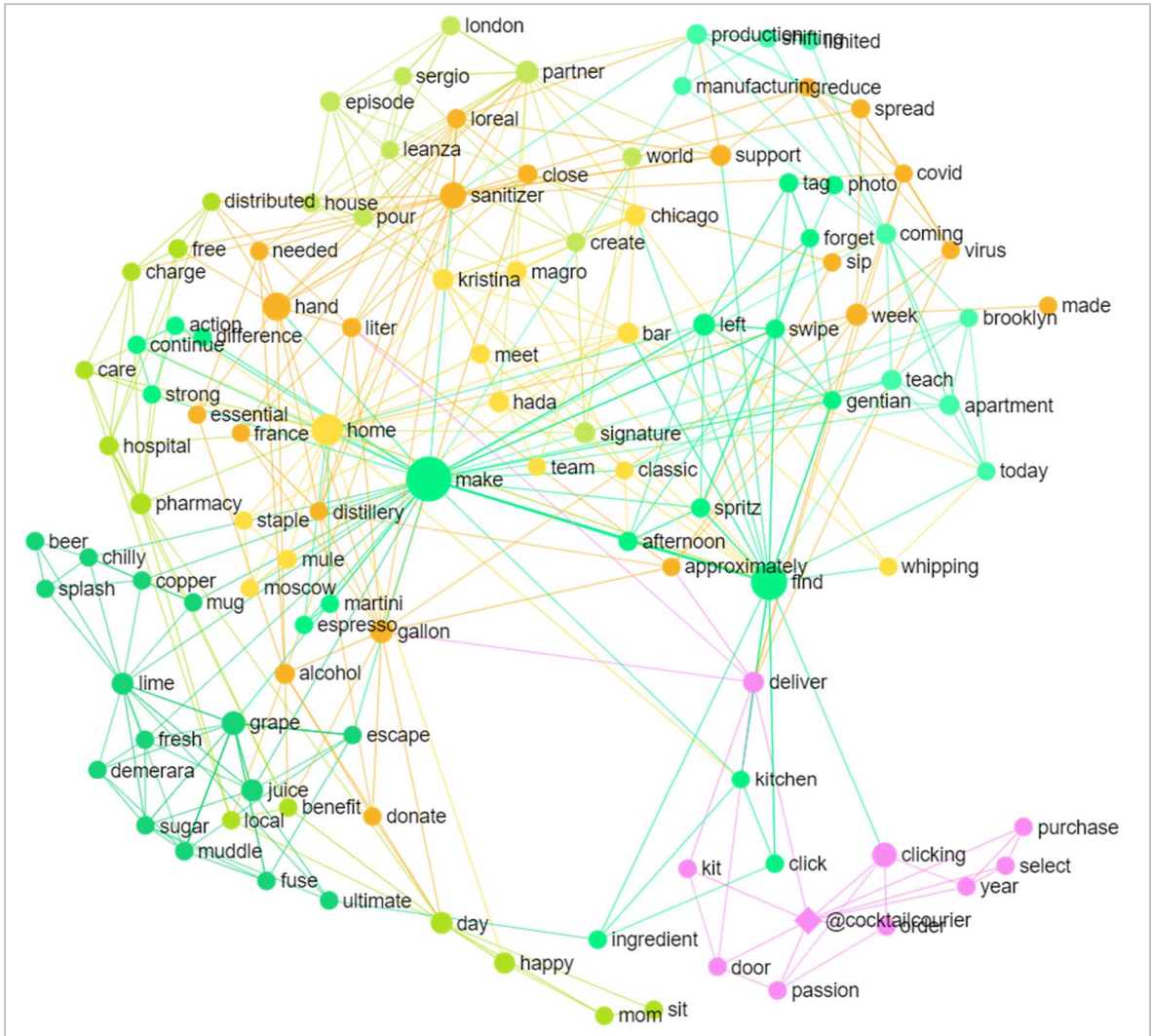

Source: Jack Daniel's Instagram (@jackdaniels_us), author's analysis via InfraNodus

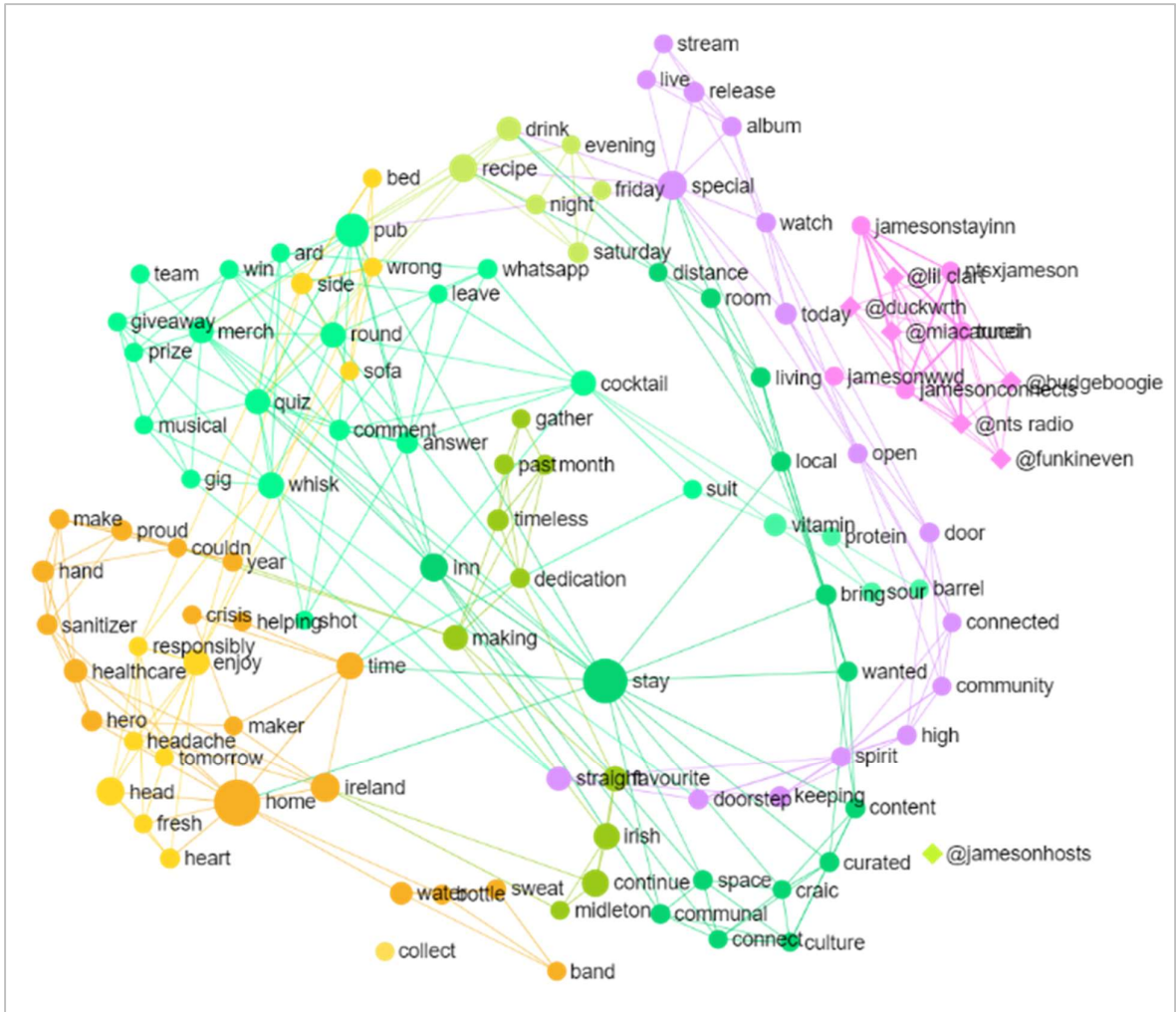Smirnoff post caption differences between 2019 and 2020
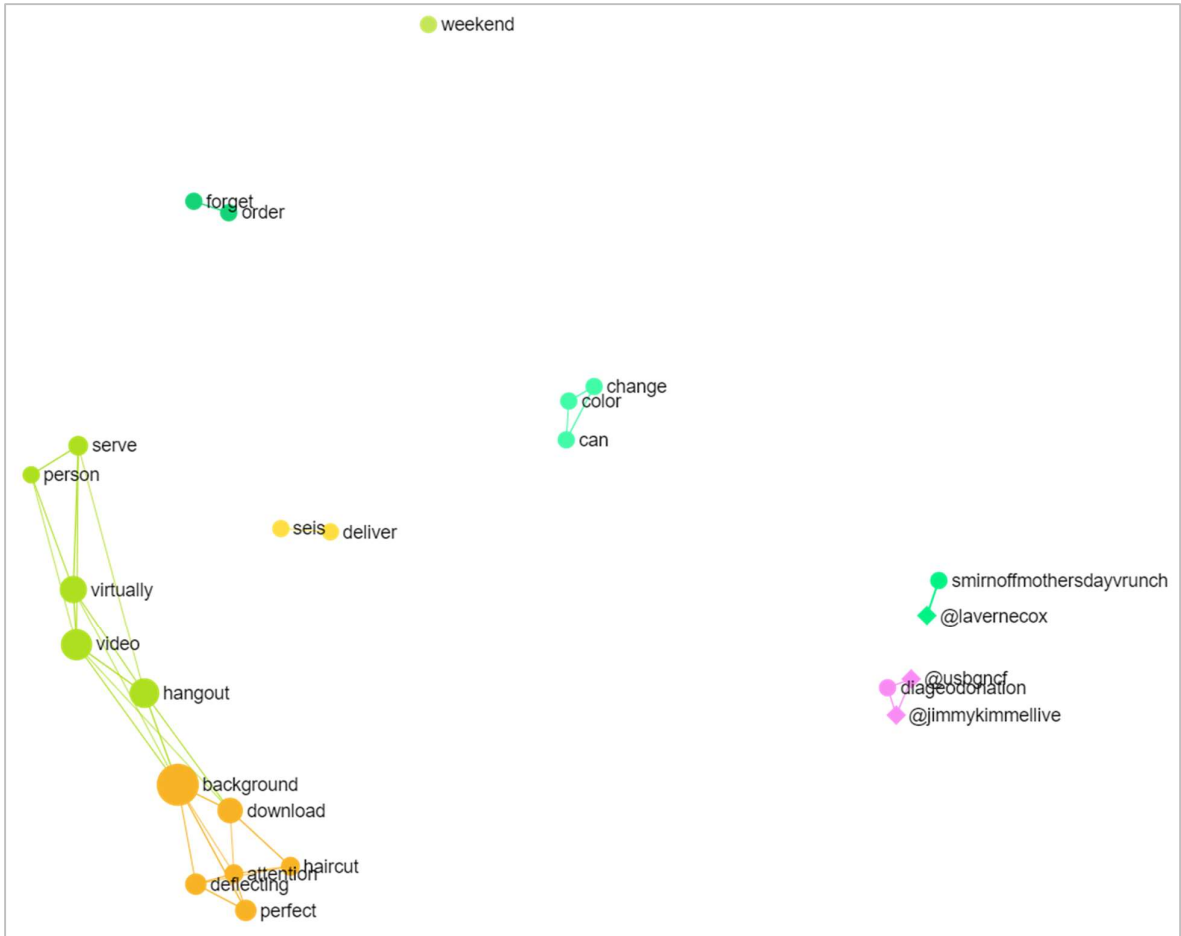
Source: Smirnoff Instagram (@smirnoff), author's analysis via InfraNodus

Grey Goose post caption differences between 2019 and 2020

Source: Grey Goose Instagram (@greygoose), author's analysis via InfraNodus

Jameson post caption differences between 2019 and 2020

Source: Jameson Instagram (@jameson_us), author's analysis via InfraNodus

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