Online wine ecosystem: the digital narrative of Sangiovese

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how grape varieties are narrated online by non-winery-owned sources in four countries: Australia, Canada the UK and the USA. This study focuses on Sangiovese, the most important varietal of Italy.

Design/methodology/approach – Texts collected on the Internet underwent a software-assisted semantic clustering procedure based on text-mining techniques. Identified clusters were then qualitatively analyzed by content.

Findings – The digital narrative on Sangiovese is mainly technical and conveyed by adopting a professional slant that is suitable for knowledgeable consumers but less effective for common and unexperienced wine drinkers. Online information is concentrated in few websites that act as information gatekeepers.

Research limitations/implications – The study contributes to the wine-related managerial literature on grape varieties, which are considered one of the most powerful factors in addressing consumer wine choice. Additionally, the investigation sheds light on the online wine ecosystem, by providing insights on how information is provided and the contents that are conveyed on the Internet. The findings of this study may be useful for Italian operators willing to promote Sangiovese-based wines in foreign markets.

Originality/value – Though explorative in nature, this study represents one of the first attempts to investigate the online narrative of grape varieties by presenting a marketing perspective and examining the characteristics of non-winery-owned online information which may shape wine consumers' behavior.

Keywords Digital narrative, Grape variety, Non-winery-owned information, Online wine ecosystem, Sangiovese, Wine consumer

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Wine is considered one of the most complex products – requiring high levels of product knowledge on the part of consumers – rich in attributes and boasting a multiplicity of brands that individuals can buy among consumer goods (e.g. Bresciani *et al.*, 2016; Mattiacci *et al.*, 2010; Nosi, 2012). Lockshin and Hall (2003) have actually paralleled the complexity of wine to that of a car, pointing out, however, that cars are not purchased with a frequency comparable to that of a bottle. In addition, the variety of wines available at the point of sale is extremely high and growing over time. In the mid-2000s, Horowitz and Lockshin (2006) showed that in a standard supermarket, for each product category, three to ten different brands and approximately 50–70 product variants were available. In the wine category, there was a minimum of 300 brands and product variants, which could exceed 1,500 labels in specialized retail outlets. More recent data (Cinelli Colombini, 2016) tell us that in large-scale retail outlets, the number of wine bottles on the shelves has more than doubled in the last 20 years, reaching the very large figure of 3,600 labels.

Both product complexity and the plethora of existing wine brands end up overwhelming consumers, especially those with low product-knowledge, in their buying process. This is why, in the wine choice decision, consumers rely on multiple product cues and different information sources to reduce the perceived risk associated with their purchase experience (Barber *et al.*, 2007; Famularo *et al.*, 2010).