

Wine critics at the time of digital transformation: the case of wineries involved in an attractiveness strategy

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WINE CRITICS AT THE TIME OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: THE CASE OF WINERIES INVOLVED IN AN ATTRACTIVENESS STRATEGY

Abstract: The objective of this research is to study the proximity of judgments between experts and consumers in a wine market which is restructuring, particularly in terms of wine tourism attractiveness. More precisely, we question wine critics amateur and professional's assessments standards convergence and their ability to influence the popularity of wineries on the Internet. The relevance of cicerones, as judgment devices, at the time of the digital transformation is studied in this article. The results obtained on 200 French wines reveal a partial proximity of judgments and an inability of ratings to influence the popularity of the winery on the Internet.

Keywords: digital transformation; judgment devices; wine.

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media

Introduction

This last 20th November, the first national wine tourism conference was held organised by Atout France, the French tourist development agency, and the Conseil supérieur de l'Oenotourisme. At the end of this event, 20 actions and measures in favour of the development of wine tourism were taken. Among these, the improvement of the readability and accessibility of the wine tourism offer through digital technology was highlighted.

The reputation of a wine and a terroir is a linchpin for wine tourism since it makes a winery more attractive to wine tourists. This reputation is, in part, built by professional wine critics who have become more accessible these recent years. These critics, whether they work for guides, newspapers or specialized magazines, evaluate the wines by assigning them ratings. However, recently, the relevance of these ratings has been discussed in the wine news. Indeed, with the development of new technologies, any consumer can nowadays evaluate a wine and his experience of visiting a winery. These consumers are also increasingly referring to blogs, social networks and mobile applications to get recommendations from others consumers. According to the latest Sowine¹ study from 2018, 34% of French people follow pages dedicated to wines and spirits on social networks (compared to 20% in 2016) and 34% have at least one application dedicated to wine (compared to 9% in 2016), in short, a clear increase in the use of new technologies while the figures about paper guides are not changing. Some wine producers, involved in the digital transformation of their winery, are also beginning to encourage consumers to write opinions on their own Facebook page or on online opinion sites such as TripAdvisor.

Consumers looking for information about a wine or winery now have a choice in terms of prescription devices. Consequently, is the power of professional wine criticism weakening? Considering that ordinary consumers are inspired by the experts' assessments techniques and standards widely popularized by clubs or other tasting guides, we can wonder if there is a judgments proximity between consumers and experts. Also, at a time of relations digitalisation between producers and consumers, we can wonder if a wine's reputation has an impact on the appreciation of a winery expressed on the Internet. More precisely, our research aims to answer the following questions: (1) do consumers rate wines in the same way as experts? (2) Does wine critic, whether amateur or professional, influence the popularity of

¹ Sowine study 2018: http://sowine.com/barometre_2018/

wineries on the Internet? The answers to these questions could, in particular, give indications of the weight to be given to critics in the context of a wine tourism strategy developed by producers.

This research begins by defining the concept of judgment devices, and more precisely cicerones, and by presenting the literature on the relationship between the consumer and expert judgments. Then, this article approaches the field by explaining the methodological choices. Finally, it details and discusses the results of the research.

1. Cicerones, a Form of Weakened Authority

Wine rating is a recent phenomenon that has emerged following the democratisation of wine culture. According to the theory of the singularity economy, this practice constitutes a judgment device belonging to the cicerone family. This judgment device "gathers critics and guides which propose specific assessments of particular goods and services. They represent a form of soft symbolic authority whose influence, when it meets with the consent of users, reduces or deletes torments of individual choice" (Karpik, 2007, p. 70). Consumers use these judgment devices, which are intended to provide them knowledge, to help them make reasonable choices. However, as Karpik (2007) underlines it, to be relevant and credible, cicerones must have the support of consumers.

Wine critic emerged in the 1970s. Three events particularly marked its beginnings (Fernandez, 2004, p. 35-36): the publication of the first lists of addresses of good suppliers in general books on wine, the publication of the first wine assessment in the *Gault-Millau* magazine and the introduction in France of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of wine tasting. Then, it was in the 80s and 90s that wine critic developed, thanks in particular to oenologists such as Emile Peynaud who actively participated in the democratisation of wine tasting by writing numerous books for non-professionals. It was also during this period that wines began to be rated with the publication of guides and magazines used as informational support by consumers (Chauvin, 2005).

Today, with the democratisation of wine culture, the theme of wine has obtained its own shelf in most French bookshops, books dedicated to wine tasting are more attractive and the number of digital platforms (blogs, social networks, mobile applications...) dedicated to wine continues to increase. Also, the number of tasting clubs, in which wine assessment techniques are taught, is constantly increasing. This is the case, for example, inside most French

universities and schools such as Sciences Po, HEC or Polytechnique. Finally, we have also seen an increase in the number of diplomas related to the wine sector where wine tasting is important. Last July, *La Revue du Vin de France* identified nearly a hundred diplomas related to wine production and wine trade². In this way, consumers have now become able to make an independent judgment about wine quality. They have also become able to challenge professional critics on their own field, in particular by discussing their wine tasting methods, which they think lack independence. Indeed, the independence and objectivity of professional critics are often criticised because assessments are "the economic expression of the wine world in which they actively participate in the symbolic construction and, indirectly, in the economic functioning" (Olivesi, 2016, p. 5).

2. Toward a Convergence of Tastes between Consumers and Experts on the Wine Market?

The proximity of tastes between ordinary consumers and experts has been the subject of a lot of researches in the cinema field. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1979), Holbrook (1999) studied the link that may exist between expert judgments and popular appeal of motion pictures. His work shows that critics and consumers do not mobilise the same assessment standards, but a low positive correlation exists between expert judgments and popular appeal reflecting a shared taste system. In addition, the subsequent empirical research has also led to a significant, but low link between expert judgment and popular appeal in the arts and entertainment industry.

Dellarocas, Awad, and Zhang (2004) replace popular appeal, often measured by a satisfaction scale, with user ratings expressed on websites such as IMDb. This measure expects that an important volume of scores will influence the movie's appreciation and the recommendation (Holbrook, 2005). Their results reveal a low correlation, confirming their choice to use the judgments of the audience rather than experts to study the influence of amateur critics on the commercial performance of movies.

Plucker, Kaufman, Temple and, Qian (2009), by studying the link between the experts and novices' assessments, found moderate correlations suggesting a partial convergence of tastes. The work of Holbrook and colleagues (Holbrook, Lacher and, LaTour, 2006; Holbrook

² La Revue du Vin de France, les principaux diplômés et écoles permettant de faire carrière dans le vin : <https://www.larvf.com/vin-secteur-viticole-formations-diplomes-sommelier-vigneron-consultant-importateur-degustateur-oenologue-vins,4404168.asp>

& Addis, 2007) confirms the interest of considering ordinary audience assessments which are not be used in previous studies.

We question the generalisation of these results to the wine market. Some research has shown that novices and experts used different descriptive to describe wines on the basis of sensory criteria. So, they do not seem to get the same cognitive structures (Lawless, 1984; Solomon, 1988; Morrot, Brochet, and Dubourdieu, 2001; Urdapilleta, Parr, Dacremont, and Green, 2011; Parr, Mouret, Blackmore, Pelquest-Hunt, and Urdapilleta, 2011). However, the increase these recent years of the number of various devices enabling consumers to learn the art of wine tasting inspired by the experts' assessment standards may suggest a proximity of taste between both parts.

3. Methodology

In terms of methodology, we collected, from February to April 2018, all available information about 200 wines (46.5% red, 28% white and 25.5% rosé) from four major French wine-growing regions (22% from the Bordeaux region, 20% from Burgundy, 28.5% from Languedoc and 29.5% from Provence). We also collected information on the level of bottle production, the number of wineries' fans on Facebook and the ratings (in volume and valence) left by members of the social network, as well as the ratings (in volume and valence) left by Internet users on the online opinion site TripAdvisor. These wineries are all involved in an attractiveness strategy since they offer wine tourism activities. Finally, all these wines are rated by three different cicerones: a mobile application used by consumers and two guides published by experts. Concerning wines sample, we have only selected wines whose price is less than 20 euros in order not to exclude consumers who cannot taste wines above this price.

Regarding the mobile application used by consumers, we chose the *Vivino* application, which is wine application the most downloaded in the world with more than 29 million users. With this application, consumers can search information about wines by scanning the labels of the bottles and rate the wines tasted. For each wine, it is thus possible to consult the average rate and the number of rated assigned by users. In our sample of 200 wines, wines received an average of 57 ratings for an average rating of 3.7 out of 5.

Regarding the devices published by the experts, the ratings come from two wine guides with a similar readership, namely a readership looking for good value for money: the *Guide Hachette* launched in 1985 and the *Guide Bettane & Desseauve* launched in 2007.

For the *Guide Hachette*, the blind tasting sessions bring together, for each appellation, committees of professional tasters, which may be producers, sommeliers, merchants or oenologists. The *Guide Hachette* delegates its assessment work to wine professionals and therefore does not intervene in the elaboration of the judgment allowing professionals to assign a rating out of 5 to wines from the same terroir as them. Consequently, "the construction of legitimacy by delegation to experts underlines the problem of the partiality of these experts who, alone or in a committee, promote a conception of taste and quality that reflects the importance of dominant economic interests at the local level" (Olivesi, 2016, p. 15). In our sample of 200 wines, wines received an average rating of 2.97 out of 5 in the *Guide Hachette*.

For the *Guide Bettane et Desseauve*, wines are, most of the time, tasted by Michel Bettane and Thierry Desseauve themselves, which makes it more an auteur than a collective. The ratings out of 20 then tend to reflect their personal taste and often focus on wines already consecrated, which is, however, assumed by the authors (Teil, 2001). In our sample of 200 wines, wines received an average rating of 14.7 out of 20 in the *Guide Bettane and Desseauve*.

Concerning the presence of wineries on the Internet, 86.5% of them have a Facebook fans page in order to provide information on the winery or to extend the wine tourists experience.

In order to homogenise the overall ratings assigned by these various devices, the data have been standardized. The data analysis was carried out through correlations whose comparison threshold was set at 0.05.

4. Results and Discussion

Our main results reveal (1) a proximity of tastes between consumers, and the *Guide Bettane et Desseauve* and (2) an inability of ratings to influence the popularity of wineries on the Internet.

First, our results show a low significant positive correlation ($p = 0.03$ and $r = 0.154$) between the ratings of the *Guide Bettane and Desseauve* and the ratings left by users of the *Vivino* mobile application. Consumer judgment is therefore closer to this auteur guide, which is more pedagogical, rather than the *Guide Hachette*, the leading sales guide, which is relying on a blind collegial tasting. By allowing their emotions express themselves more explicitly, and by being above all journalists and not stakeholders in the wine market, the tasters of the

Guide Bettane et Desseauve make wine less technical and elitist which can explain their close proximity of taste with consumers who are tired of being constantly downgraded on the cognitive level (Karpik, 2007). Thus, this result is coherent with the theories of convergence of tastes which advocate a proximity of tastes between experts and consumers.

In addition, the assessments of the *Guide Bettane and Desseauve* and *Guide Hachette* are not linearly correlated. These results can thus be explained by the *Guide Hachette*'s desire to preserve its reputation and leadership position on the guides market by deliberately distinguishing itself from its competitors but also by the fact that these two guides offer two different tasting approaches. On the one hand, Bettane and Desseauve assume their personal taste while on the other hand, *Hachette* favours a standardized taste built by a hundred anonymous tasters whose talent and legitimacy can vary.

The results also reveal that wines from wineries with a small community on social networks, and in particular on Facebook, tend to be rated higher by the *Guide Hachette*. Indeed, there is a low significant negative correlation ($p = 0.046$ and $r = -0.152$) between the ratings in the *Guide Hachette* and the number of wineries' Facebook fans. In addition, the *Guide Hachette* tends to rate more favourably wines from wineries with the lowest level of mobilisation on TripAdvisor. There is, in fact, a low significant negative correlation ($p = 0.003$ and $r = -0.344$) between the ratings in the *Guide Hachette* and the number of ratings left about a winery on TripAdvisor. Regarding the *Guide Bettane and Desseauve* and the *Vivino* application, there is no correlation with the number of Facebook fans and the number of ratings left about a winery on TripAdvisor. Thus, these results show that a good rating in one of these devices would not contribute to the winery's appreciation on Facebook and its popularity on TripAdvisor. The relevance of ratings in an attractiveness strategy is, therefore, questioned here.

Finally, there is a significant positive correlation between the number of Facebook fans and the number of ratings left on TripAdvisor ($p = 0.012$ and $r = 0.293$). Thus, at the managerial level, the best strategy for producers is to actively publish on Facebook and encourage wine tourists to publish an opinion on TripAdvisor in order to make their winery more attractive rather than hope to get a good rating on the *Guide Hachette*. A digital transformation of the winery is therefore more than necessary in order to improve the presence of the wineries on the Internet and thus make their wine tourism offer more readable and accessible.

Concerning the main limits of this research, the judgments of mobile application users may not represent real judgments because they are deferred, argued and can be inspired by other assessments (Debenedetti & Larceneux, 2011). Finally, the price category chosen in this study is a limit because beyond 20 euros the results could be different. Several research ways results are possible, including, for example, an analysis of the content of written opinions in order to better understand and order the judgment criteria used by experts and consumers.

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