



The importance of wine attributes for purchase decisions: A study of Italian consumers' perception

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ABSTRACT

The importance of extrinsic and intrinsic attributes of wine for purchase decisions is the object of a lively debate. As a matter of fact, in recent decades, the shift of consumption motivations from nutritional purposes to drinking for pleasure has caused a persistent decrease in the overall demand. However, the increasing number of product varieties and brands of domestic and imported wine, as well as the increased diversity in wine styles and prices, make the identification of wine purchase drivers difficult. This article investigates the importance of product attributes for Italian consumers when choosing wine. Specifically, a class of statistical models for ordinal data, namely CUB, is taken into consideration. This type of model allows the comparison and clustering of the rating distributions that consumers express about wine features and the detection of significant similarities and differences. In addition, this technique generally helps to relate the subject's preferences to covariates which typically summarize the socio-demographic profile, the purchase and consumption behavior.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades in traditional wine producing countries, the motivations of wine consumption have been changing moving from nutritional purposes to the pleasure of drinking. Wine is consumed on special occasions and for socializing both outside and at home so that consumption behavior has turned into a more occasional drinking. The demand is consequently moving from everyday to quality products causing a persistent decrease in the volume of the overall consumption.

Understanding key drivers of wine choice and the underlying motivations is, therefore, important for wine companies in order to achieve their alignment with consumer preferences across their different market segments. But, the increasing number of product varieties and brands of domestic and imported wine, as well as the increased diversity in wine styles and prices, make the identification of purchase drivers difficult. This severely affects the producers ability to forecast consumer product preferences in the wine market.

Such a situation is largely due to the noticeable variability of the range of features characterizing a specific wine and the different mix and level of each attribute (Orth et al., 2007). In this regard, Lockshin and Hall (2003) reviewed over 75 articles concerning wine choice behavior. They noticed that most investigations exam-

ined consumer ratings of the following items: taste, type, alcohol content, age (of wine), color, price, brand, label/package, usability for purpose, and region of origin. In particular, price, region of origin and brand seem to be the most influential attributes which are considered in literature (see, for instance, Verdu Jover et al., 2004).

Moreover, the wine market suffers from information asymmetry: producers and purchasers have different sets of information concerning quality. The former ones pursue objective quality (related to wine production and sensory characteristics) whereas the latter usually make inferences about quality from extrinsic cues (which can be judged independently from tasting) and, only within certain limits and given the accumulated experience and involvement, from sensory evaluation at the first consumption (Lockshin and Rhodus, 1993). This makes label information, the design and other aspects of the bottle very important when choosing wine (Sáenz-Navajas et al., 2013).

Finally, lifestyle, culture and traditions influence consumption behavior across countries and, consequently, the relevance that purchasers give to the various wine characteristics (Goodman et al., 2007, 2008; Goodman, 2009).

Consumer's perception about a product is typically studied by means of survey data: interviewees are requested to judge a list of attributes or to express their level of agreement about some statements by using a Likert type scale. They are often requested to provide information about latent factors driving their purchase behavior by answering indirect questions. The subsequent analysis of ordinal data poses, therefore, methodological problems due to the discrete nature of the random variables describing ratings

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and to the specific nature of the judgment process (Agresti, 2010; Powers and Xie, 2000; Franses and Paap, 2001; Tutz, 2012). Various approaches have originated in the literature from considering ordinal data either as generated by a latent continuous variable or as an intrinsically discrete phenomenon. Specifically, several statistical models, proposed within the Generalized Linear Models (GLM) framework, estimate cut points in order to transform the unobserved continuous latent variable into a discrete one.

The present work moves from a different stand. The importance of wine attributes for Italian consumers is investigated by means of a probability model based on a mixture distribution, known as CUB. This class of models still relies on latent variables, but the knowledge (or estimation) of cut points is not needed. For this reason, for a given ordinal data set, the CUB parametric formulation is often more parsimonious than GLM. Furthermore, CUB models allow the comparison and clustering of the rating distributions that purchasers express about various items and the detection of significant similarities and differences.

The article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we describe the main variables object of investigation and the plan of the survey. In Section 3, we briefly illustrate the statistical methodology. In particular, the CUB model is introduced and, then, a clustering technique for ordinal data based on Kullback–Liebler divergence is presented. Section 4 discusses the results and main findings. The final section contains some concluding remarks.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. The attributes affecting wine choice

Some recent contributions have examined the relevance of various wine attributes for consumer preferences with reference to the Italian market (Coppola et al., 2000; Seghieri et al., 2007; Hertzberg and Malorgio, 2008; Benfratello et al., 2009; Lai et al., 2008; Casini et al., 2009; Tempesta et al., 2010).

Wine packaging, especially the label, is crucial to selling wine since it establishes the identity of the product and gives cues to purchasers about what they should expect to find inside the bottle. For this reason, the European Union has special rules concerning labeling which specify compulsory and optional information. The regulation aims to harmonize label information among the State Members in order to help wine buyers make an informed choice while purchasing and reduce the asymmetry in the market. The sales designation of the product, the nominal volume, the actual alcoholic strength by volume, the name of the bottler or importer, the presence of specified additives are the main compulsory items which must be shown on the label. Additional information concerns traditional specific terms, the region of origin, the grape variety, the vintage year, the designation of origin. Moreover, the EU wine regulation defines two broad categories: wine with and without geographical indication (GI). The former can be further qualified with the protected designation of origin (PDO) and the protected geographical indication (PGI). These are equivalent to the Italian denomination DOC/DOCG and IGT, respectively. The latter can show, under suitable conditions, the harvest year and the grape variety on the label.

Furthermore that all the packaging cues play a relevant role for consumers' decisions since they convey the image of wine which is strictly related to price and reputation. Charters and Pettigrew (2007) remark that medium/high involvement drinkers are more likely to perceive packaging as part of quality. This is also enforced by the motivation for consumption, the image and status that they wish to project to others. Of course, these findings depend heavily on the oenological traditions and on the culture of the country where the study is performed.

Table 1

Wine attributes.

Grape variety
Region of origin
Protected geographical status
Producer
Wine complexity or taste
Aroma/bouquet
Alcoholic degrees
Color
Drink's pleasantness
Food-pairing
Wine features described by the label information
Bottle shape
Brand name and label aspect
Quality–price ratio

In order to investigate the key drivers of wine purchase decisions we have considered a list of extrinsic and sensory attributes (see Table 1).

2.2. The questionnaire and the sample characteristics

The study refers to a sample of 192 subjects who were interviewed during spring 2011. To increase the range of competence and the level of knowledge about wine, half of the respondents were randomly selected among visitors to Vitigno Italia and Vinitaly (2011 edition) during the general admission days. All the recruited interviewees consumed wine and, in addition, were in charge of the purchases of the product for themselves and their family.

Each interviewee was asked to rate the importance of a certain wine attribute in determining his/her purchase decision on a 7 point Likert scale (where 1 denoted “not important at all” and 7 “extremely important”).

Moreover, in order to understand the level of wine drink involvement, the respondents were asked to give a self-assessment of their expertise. As a matter of fact, the accumulated knowledge about similar products affects the way in which purchasers process information concerning quality (Beattie, 1992). Consumers, who usually inform themselves about wine characteristics, tend to utilize more information in their selection and develop an intense bond with the product (Perrouy et al., 2006; D'Hauteville and Perrouy, 2005; Lockshin et al., 2006). Finally, the socio-economic status and the purchase or consumption behavior were surveyed.

Table 2 illustrates the main variables characterizing the sample. It includes mostly men with a generally high level of education (only 10.9% have exclusively completed the compulsory education)

Table 2

Sample features.

Variable	Level	%
Age (years)	18–24	6.3
	25–34	26.2
	35–49	38.2
	50–64	22.5
	≥ 65	6.8
Gender	Female	25.1
	Male	74.9
Education	Compulsory school	10.9
	Upper secondary level	45.8
	University level	43.2
Settlement size (population)	≤ 5000	14.1
	5000 – 30,000	31.2
	30,000 – 200,000	32.3
	> 200,000	22.4

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