

# **Auditing the Identity of Regional Wine Brands: The case of Swiss Merlot Ticino**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to propose a method by which to audit winemakers' communication of regional wine brands and to illustrate the method's conceptual basis through its empirical application to the Swiss wine Merlot Ticino.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – The audit is comprised of two parts: one captures producers' intentions regarding the communication of the regional wine brand while the other determines what wineries actually convey through their formal communications. Data about intentions were collected through qualitative interviews and a survey of producers, while data on what wineries convey was based on a content analysis of wineries' communication materials.

**Findings** – The application of the audit to the brand Merlot Ticino shows that the proposed method provides several insights into the brand's personality, possible gaps between producers' intentions and actual communications, the potential target of the communication, the level of consistency of communication content and style, and the expressiveness of wineries in communicating the regional wine brands.

**Research limitations/implications** – The content analysis adopted in this research focuses on formal communications issued by wineries. Adding oral contents and consumer perceptions would considerably improve the audit tool.

**Originality/Value** – This paper provides winemaking regions with a useful tool with which to determine the effectiveness of their brand projections in the collective promotion of their regional wine brands. The paper is of value for academic research because it illustrates that results may be obtained in the wine brand field using methods traditionally used in corporate communication research, like projective techniques and communications audits.

**Keywords** – Communication audit, regional brand, identity, Switzerland.

**Paper type** – Research paper

## **1. Introduction**

Today's wine industry is enjoying growth in production, and consumption is increasing, especially in emerging economies<sup>[1]</sup>. This growth also means increased global competition, and several global brands developed by giant New World producers, as well as emerging small and medium-sized (SME) Australian and Chilean wineries, have begun challenging traditional small European productions.

In the face of such competition, how wine brands are communicated to consumers has become more important than ever (Campbell and Guibert, 2006; Egan and Bell, 2000); however, thus far the majority of studies have focused on understanding consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward regional brands (Rasmussen and Lockshin, 1999; Hall, Lockshin and O'Mahoney, 2001; Thomas and Pickering, 2005), while research on how producers in a winemaking region cooperate, develop, and promote a common brand identity remains limited (Fensterseifer, 2007).

This paper addresses the issue of collective branding for regional wines from a communication perspective. It provides a methodology with which to assess wineries' intentions and how they communicate their regional brands with an empirical application on the brand Merlot Ticino, a Swiss DOC wine produced in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The methodology, a communications audit, determines the intended identity of the brand—that is, what winemakers think and want to communicate—and assesses the projected identity of the brand—that is, what wineries' communications actually project to consumers—in order to find gaps between intended messages and projected messages. In addition to providing an overall picture of the emerging brand personality, the audit determines whether communications are consistent, as well as which target they are most likely to address, and it evaluates the collective result of multiple wineries' efforts to communicate a regional wine brand.

The audit was designed by drawing upon corporate branding and communication literature. The regional wine brand conveys the common identities of all the wines produced in a region, despite differences among individual brands. As a result, referring to literature that focuses on how to develop and communicate a collective brand that comprises multiple products and units seems more appropriate than would drawing on studies that concentrate on single-product brands.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part presents the conceptual framework and describes the design of the audit tool. The second part illustrates the empirical study on Merlot Ticino and provides some insights into the kinds of results the tool generates, as well as its usefulness in developing and managing the communication of the regional brand identity. Final remarks are made and implications are discussed in the conclusion.

## **2. The audit model for regional wine brands: Conceptual framework**

Brands are inputs that contribute to the formation of a distinctive image of a product or company in consumers' minds. The brand promise projects core identity elements used by external audiences to draw inferences about a product and reduce the risk in purchasing it (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). Companies express themselves through brands; they communicate to their stakeholders what they provide in terms of products and services while simultaneously disclosing who they are; the more they reveal about their identity, the more they are likely to appeal to external audiences (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). A favorable reputation is a source of a competitive advantage that triggers a series of tangible benefits, such as the ability to demand

premium prices, lower cost transactions with suppliers, or increase turnover stability (Fombrun, 1996; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999). However, in order to build a solid reputation, companies must project an identity that matches their true nature (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007).

Brands are multi-faceted entities, and the branding literature uses brand elements to classify them according to certain hierarchies (Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1996). Wine brands have a multitude of elements to rely on; beyond product brand and corporate brand, wines can be identified by family brands, retailer brands, and regional and national brands. According to Lockshin, Rasmussen and Cleary (2000) all these elements, rather than pertaining to a hierarchy, form a cluster to be managed depending on the positioning and destination market of the wine brand. Regional brands should aim to express the identity of the winemaking region that is, by nature, encapsulated in the wine because of the strong link between the physical characteristics of the territory and the grapes (Carlsen, Dowling and Cowan, 1997). On the consumer side, it has been demonstrated that the regional brand is an important cue for wine evaluation (Rasmussen and Lockshin, 1999; Thomas and Pickering 2005; Johnson and Bruwer, 2007); the development of a regional wine brand has been particularly rewarding for red wines (Schamel, 2006) and for small winemaking regions that have the typical structure of a “discovery market,” as defined by Christy and Norris (1999: 806). Although the wines of individual producers have a high potential for differentiation, it is difficult for those brands to emerge from the fray, given the cost of broad-based marketing and communication. Creating critical interest through the communication of a collective brand identity and simplifying the task of information processing for wine consumers (Tirole, 1996) by providing a common identity is the key to increasing local consumption and exports of discovery markets.

In some cases, regional wine brands are built and communicated with the support of governmental strategies that are often linked to state tourism promotional plans, such as occurred in Australia (Carlsen, Dowling and Cowan, 1997). In other cases the communication of the regional brand is made by associations of producers that coordinate marketing strategies (Campbell and Guibert, 2006), a strategy especially common in Europe, where associations are in charge of the preservation and promotion of legal appellations of origin and quality. Exemplar cases are the Chianti Classico Consortium, a private association of producers, and the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne, a semi-public organization, both of which have been able to attach a symbolic capital to their brands through external communication, promotion, public relations, lobbying, and commercial protection of their regional appellation (Brunori and Rossi, 2007; Sharp and Smith, 1990). Another example of regional collective branding coordinated by associations is that of Spanish winemaking regions, like La Rioja, that followed a two-step approach: first, the creation and communication of the collective regional brand, followed by company brands that exploited the halo of the regional brand’s reputation (Gil and Sanchez, 1997). Australia has also seen a shift from national branding to regional branding (Johnson and Bruwer, 2007) in which, absent a system of appellations, the focus of associations is on coordination and marketing strategies to create awareness of the regional brand, especially in export markets (Phillips, 1992; Rasmussen and Lockshin, 1999; Turner and Creasy, 2003).

The literature has explored the effect of regional branding on consumer perceptions, but less attention has been paid to the implementation of regional brands. The studies on regional brands have focused primarily on marketing strategies and promotional activities, often analyzing

collaborative practices between the wine sector and tourism. However, as Chaney (2002) remarked, the identification of common themes for communicating the multitude of wineries and wines in a region is challenging, and the literature on wine branding is lacking in this respect.

The difficulty encountered in identifying and communicating the core identity traits of a whole group across the peculiarities of each individual firm may be comparable to the issue of plural identities inside an organization, in which each unit projects its own identity within the comprehensive organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). A key issue for those who want to project a common brand identity is to convey their diversities under an umbrella of core common features projected through a common corporate identity (Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007). Accordingly, the several branches or product lines of a corporation tend to communicate a common visual identity (van den Bosch, de Jong and Elving, 2004) as well as the common traits of a longstanding collective personality (Davies, Chun and Roper 2002).

Organizations want to impress others favorably (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007), and what they intend to project includes a conception of themselves (Goffman, 1959). However, sometimes what they project is not what they intended, and a gap is created that prevents the formation of a good image in external audiences' minds. Consistency in communication is also a fundamental element for achieving a good reputation (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004)—ensuring that corporate communications are aligned across different types of media and different product lines or units. Consistency on brand messages is specifically recommended in the wine industry to reinforce brand equity within the framework of a larger integrated marketing approach (Reid, 2002).

Drawing on corporate identity and corporate branding literature, this paper proposes an audit as a way to investigate regional wine brand identities. The audit includes two parts, the first of which aims to understand winemakers' *intentions* in regard to the brand personality of their regional wine, as well as the narrative themes that they use to communicate the wine's identity; the second part determines which *projections* actually emerge through the formal communications of wineries and provides a picture of all the emerging contents, or brand personality, communicated by the group of regional producers in order to detect *gaps* between intentions and projections (fig. 1). Analysis of projections also helps to define the *target* that communications address and to check for *consistency* in communicated messages. Finally, the analysis of projections reveals the general level of *expressiveness* of the regional brand—that is, to what degree the regional wineries communicate collectively.

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Insert figure 1 about here  
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#### *INTENTION: Auditing producers' intended brand identity*

The first part of the audit aims to understand how winemakers intend to communicate their regional wines in terms of brand personality and narrative themes. Winemakers often recite a narration about their wines using characteristics typical of a person; for example, wines have character, elegance, or warmth. This approach comes from the fact that individuals often associate a set of human characteristics with a product or brand, creating a personality for them (Aaker, 1997; Davies, Chun and Roper 2002). If winemakers describe their own wines according

to personality traits, they might also want to narrate their regional brand identity according to similar attributes. For this reason, the first part of this audit aims to discover which emergent personality attributes winemakers want to use to describe their regional wines. These attributes are then compared to the personality scales developed by Aaker (1997) and Davies, Chun, and Roper (2002) in order to determine which emergent characteristics best describe the regional wine in terms of producers' intentions. Similarly, the audit captures the narrative themes that winemakers use to convey this brand personality to external audiences.

*PROJECTION: textual narration and visual communication*

The second part of the audit determines how the identified intentions for projecting a common brand personality are pursued in reality. To this end, both the textual and visual messages of formal communications are audited through a content analysis. The codebook is developed in regard to three objects: wine, wineries, and destination (fig. 1), and the content analysis examines communication materials such as brochures, labels, back labels (Charters and Lockshin, 2000), websites (Stevens and Burns, 2005), advertising, press releases (Chaney, 2000), logos, and packaging (Jennings and Wood, 1994). The audit of formal communications is intended to reveal the projected identity of the brand, which is the input that external targets actually receive and interpret to form an image of the regional wine brand. As shown in table 1, the codebook is structured to evaluate:

- the textual narration of wines and wineries
- the visual communication of wines and wineries
- the textual narration and visual communication of the destination.

*Textual narration of wines and wineries.* The codebook captures the personality attributes of the brand that emerge from winemakers' narrations of their wines and wineries. The personality projected is compared to the personality that producers have in mind, that is, the personality attributes that emerge in the first part of the audit.

The audit also reveals the narrative of the regional wine as collectively narrated by regional producers by capturing all the themes used in the narration and coding them as functional or representative (de Chernatony, 2001). Brands are multidimensional concepts that, depending on the proportion of functionality to emotion that is communicated, try to influence consumers toward either a performance-oriented or a symbol-oriented choice (De Chernatony, 2001). The literature on wine branding underscores the importance of communicating both the functional and the symbolic dimensions of developing wine brands (Lockshin, Rasmussen and Cleary, 2000). Therefore, the codebook determines whether communications project the functional attributes (the technical features of wine, such as taste, color, grape, and growing and winemaking processes) or the representative (symbolic) attributes (emotional features of wines, such as the atmosphere of consumption or passion in production) of the brand.

Indirectly, this analysis also allows for the description of the target likely to be attracted by the brand communication. Generally speaking, representative communication targets consumers who want an emotional or symbolic relationship with the product, while technical communication addresses consumers who either seek technical details because they are highly knowledgeable in the field or seek commodity products (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). Lockshin, Rasmussen and Cleary (2000) suggested that "aspirational" drinkers and "enjoyment" drinkers

focus mainly on symbolic brand cues when purchasing wine, while connoisseurs and beverage wine consumers seek primarily functional brand cues. It is clear that the proportion of functional and representative brand attributes that are communicated can attract or exclude certain segments of consumers.

TEXTUAL			VISUAL	
OBJECT	CATEGORY	VARIABLES	CATEGORY	VARIABLES
WINE	PERSONALITY	(exclusive, traditional, elegant, etc., <i>as emerged from preliminary phase</i> )	LABEL DESIGN AND TYPEFACE	REASSURING (harmony, proportion, not elaborate)
				INNOVATIVE (elaborate, not natural, moderate harmony)
	NARRATIVE THEMES	FUNCTIONAL (organoleptics, vines, grape-growing, winemaking, certifications, etc.)	PACKAGING	REASSURING (Bordelaise bottle, cork seal, etc.)
		REPRESENTATIVE (atmosphere of production, atmosphere of consumption, etc.)		INNOVATIVE (bizarre bottle and label shape, bright and multiple colors, etc.)

<b>WINERIES</b>	NARRATIVE THEMES	FUNCTIONAL	(vineyards, facilities, competence, investments, etc.)	LOGOS AND TYPEFACES	REASSURING	(harmony, proportion, not elaborate)
		REPRESENTATIVE	(passion, customer orientation, etc.)		INNOVATIVE	(elaborate, not natural, moderate harmony)
<b>DESTINATION</b>	NARRATIVE THEMES	INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES	(geographical elements, climate attributes, facilities, etc.)	PICTURES	INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES	(geographical elements, climate attributes, facilities, etc.)
		HOLISTIC ATTRIBUTES	(social interaction, sense of the place, landscape, experience, etc.)		HOLISTIC ATTRIBUTES	(social interaction, sense of the place, landscape, experience, etc.)

*Table 1.* Codebook structure

*Visual communication of wines and wineries.* As Olins and Selame (2000: 5) suggested, formal communications like packaging and logos are “the most significant” way in which visual brand identity emerges. The analysis of packaging facilitates assessment of the consistency of visual projections of the product (labels, bottles, corks) and producers (logos), as well as the packaging’s consistency with narrations.

The audit also determines whether the visual communication is designed to be “reassuring” or “innovative” in terms of consumers reaction. When the packaging and other visual elements (e.g., logos, pictures) are prototypical, they are more easily recognizable by consumers, who can place them in a familiar category (Veryzer and Hutchinson, 1998). Such “reassuring” packaging elements for wines are those designed in a traditional manner, following the approaches of the European wine tradition. For instance, the bordelaise bottle for red wines and the cork seals suggest tradition (Jennings and Wood, 1994; Murray and Lockshin, 1997). Meanwhile, innovative and experimental designs may appear threatening to consumers, or they may induce curiosity or a sense of adventure (Cox and Cox, 1988), so they tend to be appreciated by consumers who seek novel experiences (Veryzer and Hutchinson, 1998). The use of multiple colors or unusual shapes for labels and bottles, such as those typical of New World wines (Egan and Bell, 2002), is an example of innovative wine packaging designs.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Visual design</b>	
Natural	“reflects the degree to which the design depicts commonly experienced objects,” is <i>representative</i> (realistic and typical) and <i>organic</i> (natural shapes, irregular curves).
Harmony	“is a congruent pattern of arrangement of parts that combines <i>symmetry</i> and <i>balance</i> and captures good design from a Gestalt perspective.”
Elaborate	“is not simply intricacy, but appears to capture the concept of design richness and the ability to use simple lines to capture the essence of something. It is comprised of <i>complexity</i> , <i>activeness</i> , and <i>depth</i> .”
Proportion	“is the relationship between the horizontal and vertical dimensions. One of the best known examples of proportion is the golden section.”
<b>Typeface</b>	
Natural	<i>Abc - Abc - Abc</i>
Harmony	<b>Abc</b> - @bc - Abc
Elaborate	@bc - <b>Abc</b> - <b>ABC</b>

Table 2. Variables for assessing label and logo design and typefaces. Source: Henderson and Cote, 1998: 16-17. Henderson, Giese and Cote, 2004: 68-69.

The analysis of the visual representation of the brand evaluated here analyzes label and logo designs by applying Henderson and Cote’s (1998) guidelines for corporate logos. These guidelines help assess whether a design facilitates recognition and/or creates familiar meanings and affect. When recognition and familiar meanings occur in consumers’ minds, the visual design is reassuring because it is easily codified and evokes consensual meanings. When affect is aroused, it is generated by moderately elaborated stimuli that are engaging but not too difficult to code, meaning

that the visual design lies between reassurance and innovativeness. Typeface design also conveys reassurance when they are not elaborate, are moderately natural, and are highly harmonious (Henderson, Giese and Cote, 2004). Table 2 provides a description of the variables used in the codebook to analyze label and logo design and typeface.

*Textual narration and visual communication of destination.* Finally, the audit examines how the *destination* is communicated through narrations and visuals that connect the wine to the regional image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). This approach is supported by a wide range of studies on the role of wine tourism and of regional attractiveness as a support to regional wine branding (Hall and Mitchell, 2000; Lockshin and Spawton, 2001; Williams, 2001; Getz and Brown, 2006). Of particular interest to the current study is Williams' (2001) image analysis of wine-tourist destinations. Williams analyzed images projected by wine-tourist destinations (by both winemakers and tourist agencies), positioning them along a continuum ranging from "individual" to "holistic" attributes (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). Individual attributes refer to the characteristics of the territory (climate, technical infrastructures, agricultural and winemaking activities, etc.) that are useful to tourists in making a rational evaluation and comparison of potential destinations. Holistic attributes (landscape, type of interaction with winemakers or with regional community, social experiences, sense of the place, etc.) convey a sense of the destination, making it unique in the perceivers' minds. Using this distinction, the codebook determines first whether the destination is communicated collectively by winemakers and then whether it is communicated using attributes that are more individual or more holistic. Williams' attributes are also used on the textual narration of the destination to determine the level of consistency between the narration and the visual communication about the destination. The results of using Williams' attributes also reveal the level at which regional wineries exploit the potential for communicating their territory, especially by conveying it as a winemaking destination.

### **3. Empirical case: Audit of the Merlot Ticino brand identity**

This empirical case demonstrates the application of the audit tool and it provides a concrete example of the feasibility of the audit and of the strategic potential of the results achieved for developing a collective communication of the regional wine brand. Ticino has been selected because the area has a winemaking industry structure typical of small Old World winemaking regions (Campbell and Guibert, 2006) and because, as a winemaking region, Ticino is in the challenging position of the young wine producer next to Old European giants like France and Italy.

#### *Methodology*

The methodology follows the structure of the communication audit presented in figure 1. Data were collected from February to May 2006.

The first phase lasted two months and consisted of thirteen semi-structured qualitative interviews (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) with representatives of winegrowing and winemaking associations, some members of the regional tourism and gastronomy associations, and the regional wine promotion agency. The purpose of this phase was to identify producers' intentions regarding the brand personality of Merlot Ticino, so metaphoric associations were used to discover producers' perceptions of the current and future personality of the wine (Davies, Chun and Roper, 2002). For example, winemakers were asked questions such as "if Merlot Ticino were a car, what type of car would it be and why?" and "if Merlot Ticino were a person, what type of person would it be and why?" Interviewees were also asked to provide a narration of Merlot Ticino in order to elicit the narrative themes interviewees use to tell the story of their regional wine. Interview transcriptions

were reduced using thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and analyzed using researcher triangulation (Denzin, 1978), where the comparison of different data interpretations enhances validity.

This qualitative step provided some preliminary material for the development of a survey (Czaja and Blair, 2005) that asked the entire population of 130 winemakers to verify the personality attributes and narrative themes that emerged from the interviews. Respondents were asked to rate personality attributes on a 5-point scale and to choose three narrative themes that they would use to tell the story of Merlot Ticino. Data on Merlot Ticino production, sales and communication activities were also collected through the survey. The response rate was 75 percent (table 3). Using the interviews and surveys helped reveal the producers' intentions in communicating the Merlot Ticino brand.

In the second step, the contents of actual communications from the 43 percent of the winemakers that provided them (table 3) were analyzed (Neuendorf, 2002) using a codebook (Weber, 1985). The content analysis was applied to brochures (textual and visual contents), corporate logos (visual) and bottle front labels (visual). Labels were analyzed as visual, rather than visual and textual, because the textual content on front labels and back labels (where present) were the same as the text in the brochures, which were the most complete medium for analyzing text. Other communication materials, such as websites, advertising, merchandising and press releases, were not considered because most of wineries did not produce them and, if they did, they did not keep archives. The statistical analysis of quantitative data was made using SPSS; considering the descriptive aim of the study and the nature of the database (mostly categorical variables), data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The use of multiple sources (Yin, 1994) and multiple methods (qualitative and quantitative) allowed the inclusion of contextual factors and a deeper understanding of the case of Merlot Ticino. The replicability of the methodology used increases the trustworthiness of the results and provides an analytical generalizability, rather than a statistical one (Eisenhardt, 1989).

	<b>Participants N.</b>	<b>% of participants</b>	<b>Population N.</b>	<b>% of population</b>	<b>Response rate of population</b>
<b>SURVEY</b>					
QUINTALS					
15 - 30	22	23%	34	26%	65%
31 - 100	33	34%	43	33%	77%
101 - 250	14	14%	21	16%	67%
251 - 500	14	14%	15	12%	93%
>500	14	14%	17	13%	82%
TOT	97	100%	130	100%	<b>75%</b>
<b>CONTENT ANALYSIS</b>					
QUINTALS					
15 - 30	6	11%	34	26%	18%
31 - 100	17	30%	43	33%	40%
101 - 250	12	21%	21	16%	57%
251 - 500	7	13%	15	12%	47%
>500	14	25%	17	13%	82%
TOT	56	100%	130	100%	<b>43%</b>

Table 3. Participation in survey and content analysis

## Results

### *Merlot Ticino: the context*

Merlot Ticino is a red wine produced in Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland. Commercial winemaking is a relatively young practice in this region, considering that growers planted the first vines of Merlot grapes in 1906; in fact, only since the 1970s have people recognized the wine industry in Ticino. In the 1990s, an impressive development in the quality—thanks to the introduction of new growing techniques and to an improvement in vinification processes—and quantity of wine produced shaped the contemporary landscape of Merlot Ticino production (Ferretti, 2006). Merlot grapes constitute 82% of Ticino's production, with the rest made up of other red grapes (11%) and white grapes (7%) (Ferretti, 2006).

<b>Production and sales</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
<b>Number of wines produced</b>		
Wineries producing from 1 to 5 wines	62	63.9
Wineries producing from 6 to 10 wines	24	24.7
Wineries producing from 11 to 30 wines	10	10.4
Wineries producing more than 30 wines	1	1.0
<b>Number of Merlot Ticino produced</b>		
Wineries producing 1 Merlot Ticino	27	27.8
Wineries producing 2 Merlot Ticino	24	24.7
Wineries producing 3 Merlot Ticino	21	21.6
Wineries producing 4 Merlot Ticino	10	10.3
Wineries producing more than 4 Merlot Ticino	15	15.6
<b>Influence of Merlot Ticino on wineries' turnover</b>		
100% - 81%	38	40.9
80% - 61%	33	35.5
Less than 60%	22	23.6
<b>Sales in Ticino</b>		
100% - 81%	43	44.3
80% - 61%	17	17.5
60% - 41%	17	17.5
40% - 21%	12	12.4
20% - 1%	8	8.2
<b>Sales in German speaking Switzerland</b>		
100% - 81%	2	2.7
80% - 61%	8	10.7
60% - 41%	15	20.0
40% - 21%	16	21.3
20% - 1%	34	45.3
<b>Sales in French speaking Switzerland</b>		
100% - 81%	1	55.3
80% - 61%	3	31.9
60% - 41%	2	4.3
40% - 21%	15	6.4
20% - 1%	26	2.1
<b>Sales in Germany</b>		
20% - 0%	20	100%
<b>Sales in Italy</b>		
20% - 0%	11	100%
<b>Sales in other markets</b>		
20% - 1%	13	100%

Table 4. Survey results: Merlot Ticino production and sales

Ticino produces approximately 60,000 hectoliters of red wine each year (Ferretti, 2006) and sells its wine primarily on the local market and in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (table 4). For almost all the wineries that make wine in the region, Merlot Ticino represents the greatest part of turnover (table 4). While competition from imported wines is also increasing in the Swiss market, the structure of the production system—consisting primarily of numerous small wineries and a few medium-sized wineries that together provide more than 80 percent of the annual wine production—makes investments in communication and marketing by individual companies difficult. Most wineries produce no more than 5 wines, and the channels used for promotion—principally brochures and direct activities like participation in trade fairs and collaborations with restaurants—are limited (Table 5). Thus, a collective regional effort is necessary to promote Merlot Ticino. Ideally, the regional promotional agency (Ticino Wine) should project the shared attributes of Merlot Ticino’s identity while communications from each individual winery align to this collective communication.

Communication channels	Frequency	Valid Percent
Price list	54	55.7
Brochure	45	46.4
Video	6	6.2
Advertising	33	34.0
Trade fairs	43	44.3
Agents	17	17.5
Direct promotion outside wineries	34	35.1
Collaboration with restaurants	47	48.5
Collaboration with tourist agencies	32	33.0
Direct marketing	20	20.6
Gadgets and merchandising	16	16.5
Interviews	27	27.8
News release	17	17.5
Speakers at conferences	18	18.6
Membership in non-professional associations	20	20.6
Website	39	40.2
Newsletters	17	17.5

Table 5. Survey results: communication channels used by respondents to promote Merlot Ticino

*Merlot Ticino brand personality: A traditional, elegant and exclusive wine.* Eight attributes describing the identity of Merlot Ticino emerged from the qualitative interviews: *traditional, exclusive, versatile, with character, elegant, innovative, Latin, and niche wine*. Most interviewees intended to communicate Merlot Ticino as *traditional* and *exclusive* and to associate it with the historical characteristics of Ticino’s tradition—namely, the “grotto,” a rustic regional restaurant—and with the first competent regional winemakers who made the history of Merlot Ticino. It was also associated with crystal glasses, luxury hotels and restaurants on Lake Lugano. Many interviewees also intended to communicate Merlot Ticino as a *versatile* wine; if it were a car, it would be a Porsche, but it could also be a good sedan car for a daily use. These three attributes—*traditional, exclusive, and versatile*—were confirmed to a large extent by survey respondents, who also rated *elegance* and *character* as important (Table 6a). Comparing these attributes with the attributes of the brand personality (Aaker, 1997) and corporate personality scale (Davies, Chun and Roper 2002), Merlot Ticino is intended by its producers to be communicated as a competent and reliable brand that is technical and tough, but at the same time chic and prestigious. Table 7 shows

the complete list of attributes that emerged from the interviews and that were used in the survey, and their qualitative matching with the attributes of the brand and corporate personality scale.

<b>Personality attributes</b>	<b>Valid responses</b>	<b>Median</b> (1= not at all; 5=absolutely yes)	<b>Mean</b> (1= not at all; 5=absolutely yes)	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Traditional	97	4	3.77	1.026
Elegant	97	4	3.77	.930
Versatile	97	4	3.34	1.257
With character	97	4	4.02	.841
Exclusive	97	3	3.14	1.315
Niche	97	3	3.21	1.450
Innovative	97	3	3.05	1.121
Latin	97	1	2.55	1.299

Table 6a. Survey results: personality attributes.

<b>Personality attributes</b>	<b>Valid responses</b>	<b>Median</b> (1= not at all; 5=absolutely yes)	<b>Mean</b> (1= not at all; 5=absolutely yes)	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Traditional	56	2.5	2.661	1.541
Elegant	56	2.0	2.339	1.379
Exclusive	53	2.0	2.170	1.397
Versatile	56	1.0	1.890	1.436
With character	56	1.0	2.179	1.350
Niche	56	1.0	2.179	1.350
Innovative	56	1.0	1.839	1.075
Latin	56	1.0	1.750	1.180

Table 6b. Content analysis results: personality attributes.

<b>Merlot Ticino personality attributes</b>	<b>Brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997)</b>	<b>Corporate personality scale (Davies, Chun and Roper, 2002)</b>
LATIN	<b>Sincerity:</b> Cheerful	<b>Agreeableness:</b> Warmth (friendly, pleasant, open, straightforward).
INNOVATIVE	<b>Excitement:</b> Up-to-date	<b>Enterprise:</b> Adventure (up-to-date, innovative),
TRADITIONAL	<b>Competence:</b> Reliable	<b>Competence:</b> Conscientiousness (reliable, secure, hardworking), Technocracy (technical).
ELEGANT, EXCLUSIVE, NICHE	<b>Sophistication:</b> Upper class Charming	<b>Chic:</b> Elegance (charming, stylish, elegant), Prestige (prestigious, exclusive, refined).
<i>No matching</i>	<b>Ruggedness</b>	<b>Ruthlessness</b>
VERSATILE		<b>Informality:</b> Casual, Easy-going
WITH CHARACTER		<b>Machismo:</b> Tough

Table 7. Matching of Merlot Ticino personality attributes with personality scales attributes.

In the results of the content analysis, the attributes the producers intended to communicate are highly fragmented (table 6b), and there was a gap between winemakers' intentions in regards to the brand Merlot Ticino and what they were able to communicate (fig. 2). *Tradition* was the most projected attribute, followed by *elegance*; yet each one was projected by less than 50 percent of the brochures. *Exclusivity* was also projected; however, this attribute should be treated with caution since, according to Davies, Chun and Roper (2002), exclusivity is not that far from elegance, yet it is also close to snobbery, which contrasts with tradition. Other attributes producers strongly intended but failed to communicate included *character* and *versatility*; referring again to the corporate personality scale, these attributes convey a sense of masculinity and informality, respectively, that apparently are not in line with the main attributes producers intended or projected. Further qualitative investigations with producers should assess the deep origins of these attributes in their perceptions and these attributes' potential value in the communications of the regional brand Merlot Ticino.

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Insert figure 2 about here  
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*Merlot Ticino: Narrating a functional brand.* Merlot Ticino is mainly narrated through the *vineyard* theme (55 percent of brochures), followed by *production techniques* (39 percent of brochures) (fig.3). These themes emerged during preliminary interviews and were further investigated in the survey when winemakers were asked to select the themes they would use to narrate Merlot Ticino. The vineyard theme was widely described in qualitative interviews: "we tell a territorial and technical story," one interviewee said, while another added, "we tell of vineyards and of the origin of wine, of the places where grapes grow and where wine is produced." Vineyards were also chosen as the first theme for narrating Merlot Ticino by 62 percent of the survey respondents. In this case, intentions and projections are perfectly aligned in the will to communicate technical and functional aspects of the brand.

However, representative characteristics, like emotions, atmospheres, history and landscape, were projected by very few producers and were also absent from their intentions. The content analysis produced an unexpected result regarding organoleptics (color, smell, taste); most producers did not communicate such information, and the few who did were not able to convey a consistent description of Merlot Ticino's taste, smell, or color. This result is unexpected because information about organoleptics—a technical feature of wine—is the information consumers request most often (Charters, Lockshin and Unwin, 2000).

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Insert figure 3 about here  
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*Packaging and visual design: Reassuring and innovative.* The content analysis on visual communications shows that the visual projection of the Merlot Ticino brand is partly reassuring and partly innovative (fig. 4 and tables 8 and 9). On one side are the shapes of Merlot Ticino bottles (bordelaise for 89 percent of survey respondents), cork seals (used by all producers), logo designs, and typefaces that are highly reassuring. The bordelaise bottle and the cork seals are linked to a tradition of wine (Jennings and Wood, 1994; Murray and Lockshin, 1997) and project the traditionalism of Merlot Ticino. According to the guidelines developed by Henderson and Cote (1998), wineries' logos are *harmonious* and *proportioned*, rather than *natural* or *elaborate*. These

characteristics make them recognizable and give them significant potential for evoking familiarity. The logos of Merlot Ticino producers appeared traditional and reassuring and, as a result, appeal to connoisseurs and wine aficionados.

A similar consideration applies to typefaces, which appeared to be very *harmonious* and without much of an *elaborate* character and so provide consumers with a sense of prominence and likeness that are reassuring (Henderson, Giese and Cote, 2004). On the other hand, the design and shape of Merlot Ticino labels were in line with New World producers’ experimentation, innovation and distinctiveness. The label designs were highly *elaborate* and moderately *harmonious*, but not *natural* (Henderson and Cote, 1998), which makes them recognizable neither within the European tradition nor as Merlot Ticino labels. The labels are all distinctive as single wines—not even as individual wineries. Producers were aware of this result; in fact, the issue was raised during the interviews. Some considered the recognizability of individual products to be positive, while others believed that the individualism predominant in the Merlot Ticino production system is negative because it can create obstacles to the recognition of the Merlot Ticino brand. Similar considerations held for the shape of labels, which—in the vast majority of cases (70 percent of respondents to the content analysis)—were different from the traditional dimensions of European red wines (Jennings and Wood, 1994).

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 Insert figure 4 about here  
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<b>Label typeface</b>	<b>Frequency</b> (n. of brochures displaying typeface variable)	<b>Valid Percent</b> (% of brochures displaying typeface variable)
Harmony	34	61.8
Naturalness	15	27.3
Elaborateness	13	23.6
<b>Logo typeface</b>	<b>Frequency</b> (n. of brochures displaying typeface variable)	<b>Valid Percent</b> (% of brochures displaying typeface variable)
Harmony	26	76.5
Naturalness	10	29.4
Elaborateness	8	23.5
<b>Packaging</b>	<b>Frequency</b> (n. of brochures displaying packaging variable)	<b>Valid Percent</b> (% of brochures displaying packaging variable)
Bordelaise bottle	50	89.3
Cork seal	55	98.2
Unusual bottle shape	6	10.7
Unusual label shape	32	57.1
Bright and multiple colors	15	26.8

Table 8. Content analysis results: typefaces and packaging

<b>Label design</b>	<b>Valid responses</b>	<b>Median</b> (1= absolutely yes; 5=not at all)	<b>Mean</b> (1= absolutely yes; 5=not at all)	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Harmony	39	3	3.3	1.0
Naturalness	39	4	3.3	1.7
Elaborateness	39	2	2.8	1.6
Proportion	39	3	3.3	1.0
<b>Logo design</b>	<b>Valid responses</b>	<b>Median</b> (1= absolutely yes; 5=not at all)	<b>Mean</b> (1= absolutely yes; 5=not at all)	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Harmony	36	2	2.8	1.3
Naturalness	36	4	3.8	1.3
Elaborateness	36	4	3.6	1.3
Proportion	36	2	2.1	1.0

Table 9. Content analysis results: Label and logo design

*Ticino as a wine destination.* The interview phase of the research highlighted how the relationship between wine and tourism is an important issue for both wineries and tourist-sector associations. However, the content analysis detected very few projections of the territory as a tourist destination (fig. 5). At both the textual and visual levels, the most frequently communicated elements were individual attributes of the destination, rather than holistic images. In line with the communications about wine and wineries, the destination was described mainly through the *technical aspects* of *grape growing* and *winemaking*. The only element that emerged on the holistic side was the visual *valorization of the landscape*. Paralleling the individual/holistic distinction in the destination image literature (Williams, 2001; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993) with the functional/representative distinction in the brand literature (De Chernatony, 2001), we again draw the conclusion that Merlot Ticino is projected mainly as a functional brand.

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 Insert figure 5 about here  
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*Definition of potential target.* The collective communication of Merlot Ticino projected a primarily functional brand, with the risk of excluding consumers who are accustomed to choosing products in terms of an emotional relationship with the brand (De Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). The Merlot Ticino brand identity is communicated with a product-driven branding strategy (Mowle and Merrilees, 2005) that focuses primarily on functional dimensions, while a few symbolic attributes attempt to convey prestige. This communication targets consumers who know wines and are searching for extrinsic cues in regards to quality.

*Consistency.* The results also show that the winemakers' perceptions about their products are not always what they are able to communicate; in some cases, inconsistencies occur between intentions and projections. Textual communications consistently provide a functional projection of wine, wineries, and the tourist destination, whereas visual projections are inconsistently divided among traditional European standards and New World experimentation. In some cases, this discrepancy undermines the coherency between the traditional narration and the visual representation.

*Expressiveness.* More importantly, the contents of communications are extremely fragmented, so their impact on consumers is limited. Even when there is consistency in narrating the technical story of Merlot Ticino, each producer highlights different aspects of the story. A great number of producers use brochures only as a "business card" with which to provide contact information; in the

large majority of cases, brochures use few words to describe the product—a weak level of expressiveness of the Merlot Ticino brand that does not help establish a strong or clear reputation.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has proposed an audit model for evaluating the collective communication of regional wine brands. The purpose of the audit is to determine the brand identity that emerges from communications by individual wineries in the region and to verify the effectiveness of those communications in projecting a consistent and coherent regional brand.

The audit detected gaps between what was perceived or intended by producers in terms of their regional brand identity and what was actually projected to consumers by their communications. The content analysis portion of the audit assessed the emergent personality of the brand, the type of consumer that this kind of brand is likely to attract, the consistency of wineries' communications, and the overall level of expressiveness that the local producers achieve.

These results show that the communication audit is a useful tool in verifying the effectiveness of communication efforts and providing a basis for strategic planning for the collective promotion of regional wine brands. The results align with previous findings on wine-branding practices in SME wineries. The fact that the wineries in Ticino project mainly the functional features of the brand—along with a few symbolic dimensions that focus principally on prestige—is in line with Mowle and Merrilees' (2005) definition of the product-branding strategy used in SME Australian wineries. Clearly, a communication audit of this kind can be a useful tool in supporting the development or adjustment of brand roles and strategies in the wine market.

In the context of increasing global competition, the audit model illustrated in this paper could serve as an effective evaluation tool for comparing the intended and projected brand communications in other winemaking regions that seek to promote a regional wine brand. The overall audit structure can be usefully replicated in those regions where—as is the case in Ticino—production and communication is fragmented. Applying the whole audit model to a region's winemakers could lead to collective reflection on the identity of the regional wine and on the strategic promotion of those shared elements of the wine that make it unique compared to other wines and winemaking regions. In addition to practical implications, the audit model shows how research findings related to corporate identity and corporate branding can be adapted to wine-branding studies, which have traditionally been more influenced by consumer behavior and marketing research.

Incorporating oral content—that is, what winemakers say directly to consumers—into the analysis of projections would represent a considerable improvement of the audit tool. In fact, the literature on wine marketing underscores the growing importance of face-to-face interactions in wine promotions; cellar-door activities and selling are fundamental for small wineries' survival (Mowle and Merrilees, 2005), and winery visits play a central role in the development of wine tourism (Chaney, 2000; Getz and Brown, 2006).

This audit model may be perceived as incomplete because it focuses only on the projection side, without considering the receiver side—the effect that brand communications have on external audiences. However, this is a tool specifically aimed at enhancing producers' awareness of what they are communicating, especially in cases that involve multiple communications from numerous sources. Only after achieving this kind of awareness can producers strategically agree on a communication that is based on common values and that has the potential to project a consistent image of the regional wine brand. Of course, a subsequent evaluation of the impact of this

communication—and of the image formed in consumers' minds—would also improve producers' projections.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://winemarketer.com/wine-consumption-to-exceed-262-billion-liters.html>