

Origin based agro-food products: how to communicate their experiential value online?

Origin-based
agrofood
products

1845

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the experiential dimension of certain Italian agrofood products' websites, which are seen as exemplifying best practices in the terms of the representation of the brand-land relationship, including their link with the territory of origin in the sense of terroir.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was conducted after the conception and experimentation of a model (called SOBER), the fruit of detailed studies of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999a, b). The model was tested using the user-based focus group technique (Mich, 2007) and verified with reference to certain consortia brands considered to reflect best practices in communication of the brand-land connection.

Findings – The analysis made it possible to identify the key elements for expressing both the experiential dimension and the brand-land relationship of traditional agrofood products, ensuring their effective online communication.

Research limitations/implications – Although the research uses a benchmarking technique, it focuses on specific case studies; thus, the outcomes can be generalised by means of an extension of the analysis.

Originality/value – The value of the analysis carried out lies in the creation of a model aimed at the assessment of agrofood products and, more generally, their link with the territory of origin in the online context. In addition, the marketing literature on the experiential dimension applied to website tools is still limited. For this reason, this work may stimulate future in-depth analysis with reference to the proposed model.

Keywords Agrofood products, Brand-land relationship, Country-of-origin effect, Experiential evaluation model, Experiential website

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Traditional food products (TFP) constitute an important element of European culture, identity and heritage (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999; Nosi and Zanni, 2004), with substantial product differentiation potential for producers and processors (Avermaete *et al.*, 2004).

TFP form the basis of a high-quality offer, the fruit of know-how and innovative technology that shows the solidity and flexibility of the expertise on which they are based. There is also a synergistic link, in terms of characterisation and promotion, between these authentic agrofood products and their region of origin, reflecting a deep and holistic vision.

The cognitive values of origin-based products (otherwise known as brand-land products, whose characteristics will be explained in greater detail in the next section) mean that they are "information intensive" (Watson *et al.*, 2000), and are thus likely to benefit from the implementation of so-called experiential marketing strategies (Schmitt, 1999a, b; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The latter aim to emphasise the degree to which the product is rooted in the region ("roots" being a metonym of traditions, places, forms of



production and people), which can become a substantial element of differentiation (Antonelli, 2006, 2003; Caroli, 2006), thereby generating a competitive advantage for those products.

Theoretical background

The geographical, cultural, historic and social components of authentic products mean that they are categorised as “hedonistic” (Holbrook, 1980; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Indeed, they tend to occupy – in the dynamics of consumption – a space that is not definable as the mere satisfaction of a need. They are also – and above all – characterised by the full involvement of the consumer, which transcends the product and has complementary effects, linked to the sensations and emotions targeted by experiential marketing. The customers thus become the protagonists of their own experience of consumption, expressed in their curiosity to learn about and visit the places of production, to participate in “memorable” events and to enjoy unique and unrepeatable experiences (Pencarelli and Forlani, 2006; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999a, b).

Origin-based products: the brand-land connection

In the last few years there has been an increased interest in foods that are linked with a place or region of origin (Tregear *et al.*, 1997; Verbeke, 2009). Consumers increasingly demand foods with a traditional character or image, which are often perceived as higher quality (Chambers *et al.*, 2007; Fandos and Flavián, 2006), and more sustainable foods (Asebo *et al.*, 2007; Risku-Norja *et al.*, 2008), which fulfil a need for cultural identity and ethnocentrism (Chambers *et al.*, 2007; Chrysochoidis *et al.*, 2007; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008). According to the literature, a TFP is characterised by territory, culture and cooperation between the individuals operating in that territory (Bertozzi, 1998). A sociological definition suggests that a traditional product must be linked to a specific territory or region and it must also be part of a set of traditions because this will ensure its continuity over time (Jordana, 2000). Authentic products, in French known as *produits du terroir* (Arfini *et al.*, 2010), are products characterised by a close and indissoluble link with a specific terroir, i.e. with the geographical and human identity of their region of origin. In this sense, it is clear that authentic agrofood products are as much the fruit of the physical resources existing in the region as they are of the human factor. The latter is associated with production methods, which in turn reflect the co-evolution of the experience (the historical, cultural and social dimensions) of the place of origin, i.e. the process by which knowledge becomes heritage (Bérard and Marchenay, 2004).

On all of this depends the deep-seated link (here called the brand-land relationship) that such products have with their respective place of production in the wider sense, since the features that make them authentic are not replicable or “exportable” beyond that specific context (Mastroberardino, 2004; Maizza *et al.*, 2003). The identity of a region (place-identity – Siano, 2001; Siano *et al.*, 2008), from which the specific character of the products arises, is the direct consequence of its traditional economic activities (place-personality), which determine the place-image. The latter needs to be suitably communicated to consumers, so as to ensure consistency with both the place-personality and place-identity. In this way a single construct is created, identifiable in the brand-land connection, so that the consumer associates the authentic features of the product (and thus of the brand) with those of the relative region of origin (i.e. the land), as demonstrated by numerous studies of the country-of-origin effect

(Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Usunier and Cestre, 2007; Maizza and Iazzi, 2011). In this way land and brand become synonymous and thus, via consumer loyalty, they are able to create equity for a plurality of subjects.

The experiential content of authentic products – the theoretical model of reference

The considerations set out above resonate with the principles of experiential marketing (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999a, b), since they enable a change of perspective: it is no longer a question of promoting just the company product or service, but the experience that can enhance its value, which then becomes “unique and unrepeatable” for the consumer (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999a, b).

By adopting this approach, which falls within the scope of customer experience management (Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006), companies create and implement a strategy for managing the consumer’s experience of the product, in which contexts of use and consumption are analysed, designed and proposed. In order to achieve this experiential involvement, it is essential to emphasise the product’s historical, cultural and social components so as to involve customers by establishing a stable relationship with them, i.e. brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

An interesting model with which to analyse and understand consumer experience has been proposed by Schmitt (2003). It is based on the combination of five strategic experiential modules (SEMs) and various experience providers (ExPros). The modules represent different kinds of consumer experience and the relationship between the customer and the object (company, brand, product, etc). They include: sense, experiences involving sensory perception; feel, experiences involving feelings and emotions; think, creative and cognitive experiences; act, experiences involving the physical dimension; relate, experiences resulting from relating to a group. Experience starts with ExPros, which are nothing but the stimulus – communication, visual identity, design, co-branding, website or social media, people – which enables the formation of an experience for the consumer. Analysing the experiential dimension of the customer means building a relational platform that revolves around the experience of the customer and benefits from it in terms of brand loyalty.

Research hypotheses

This paper is based on the following logical construct: in order to become well-known, authentic agrofood products must express their link with their region of origin by means of forms of online communication that recall experiential aspects and emphasise the brand-land connection.

In accordance with the literature on customer experience management (Schmitt, 2003) this study therefore aims to analyse the experiential dimension of the websites of brand-land products, to see how they ensure that the consumer perceives such products as specific and authentic (Gilmore and Pine, 2009). It is assumed that the implementation of marketing and communication strategies based on “experience-providing” websites (Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006) can enable the local dimension to enter the global context. This makes it possible to create a virtuous circle between virtual and real worlds in which brand notoriety is consolidated and becomes self-sustaining, enabling the region itself (the land) to become a brand.

Specifically, the research focused on websites, considering their importance in company communication (Berthon *et al.*, 1996a, b) given the information transmitted to the consumer and the emotions it can stir (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Rodgers and Thorson, 2000). The presence of both elements (informative and emotional) appears to

be fundamental for creating full involvement and establishing a stable relationship with the consumer (Bezjian-Avery, 1998; Novak *et al.*, 2000).

The present analysis, based on brand-land products, which carry within themselves a cognitive-hedonistic component, focused on the experiential aspect of company websites, seeking to understand what characteristics are perceived most strongly.

This study is therefore based on the following hypothesis.

The company website represents a means of communication between the consumer and the company, which must also be able to create consumer involvement (measurable by means of specific factors such as the duration of the visit, return visits, etc.). The recourse to an experiential logic in web communication can facilitate/emphasise the brand-land connection, increasing the brand's notoriety (a pre-condition for competitive success) and the competitive capacity of authentic (brand-land) agrofood products. This logic also takes account of the factors that prompt the consumer to visit a website; the formation of their perceptions (Rodgers and Thorson, 2000; Rodgers *et al.*, 2007); and the potential significance of the emotional dimension for products with a high cognitive content.

In order to verify this hypothesis, an answer was sought to the following question.

What are the key elements for transmitting the experiential dimension and the brand-land connection of authentic agrofood products in online communication?

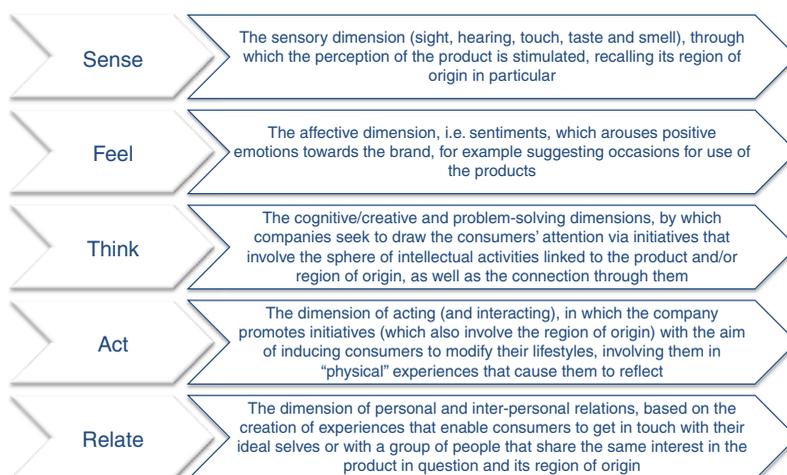
Methodological approach

In order to determine and assess a website's experiential dimension, whose purpose is to highlight experiential aspects and emphasise the brand-land connection (ExPro) the SObER model (selection, observation, evaluation and ranking) was conceived. The method is divided into the following steps:

- (1) Identification and selection of the key elements with which to assess a website's experiential dimension (selection), on the basis of each SEM. In order to observe the value attributed to brand-land products by web users, the SEMs were arranged as follows (Figure 1).
- (2) Observation of the behaviour of consumers (observation), in order to analyse:
 - the use of content, via navigation on the website;
 - the perception of the experiential aspects, via comparative assessment of the key elements identified in point 1; and
 - the degree of involvement that follows from these elements.

For this purpose, a user-based focus group (Mich, 2007) was set up, with the participation of web marketing experts and people with knowledge of the agrofood sector, consisting of: two consumers, two food journalists, two entrepreneurs and two marketing professors. The user-based focus group lasted 100 minutes and took place in May 2015. Participants were told the research objectives and asked to give an evaluation on a five-point scale (see point 3). This led to a final evaluation of the experiential dimension, which expressed the interviewees' summary verdict.

- (3) Processing of the opinions expressed by the interviewees (evaluation and ranking), useful for ranking the experiential content of the websites considered. The SEMs were evaluated by consumers on the basis of a Likert's scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important). In this way it was possible to quantify the degree of importance assigned to the experiential dimension of each website[1].



Source: Our elaboration

Figure 1.
Strategic experiential
modules (SEM) for
brand-land products

This model was tested by analysing the communication strategies of certain consortia brands considered to reflect best practices in communication based on the link between the product and its region of origin. These cases of excellence were identified with reference to previous research that studied in detail the salient aspects of web communication. Specifically, this study looked at the Consortia[2] responsible for: Chianti Classico, Parmigiano Reggiano and Prosciutto di Parma (for further details see: www.chianticlassico.com; www.parmigianoreggiano.com; www.prosciuttodiparma.com; Maizza *et al.*, 2013; Scorrano, 2013; Fait *et al.*, 2013; Scorrano *et al.*, 2013; Fait and Trio, 2011a, b).

This phase was conducted in accordance with the case study approach (Gummesson, 2000; Yin, 2013) and an information-oriented selection perspective, which makes it possible to maximise the usefulness of information from small samples and single cases selected on the basis of expectations about their information content (Flyvbjerg, 2004). The selected case is paradigmatic, suitable for validating the model, since it makes it possible to explore a phenomenon by means of a specific context whose key elements can be considered, by analogy, to be relevant to the phenomenon in question (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siggelkow, 2007). While recognising the limits of this method, whose results cannot be generalised, it can still be considered suitable for generating a qualitative information flow that serves to enhance learning (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and test the created model.

The experiential content of web communication in the best cases of the brand-land combination

From the observation of user behaviour (surfing) and the comparison of users' responses it emerged that the attention of consumers (perceived topics/ SEMs) is focused mainly on the presentation of the product in a holistic and regional key (the common thread linking the five SEMs). Indeed, the descriptions of the products proposed by the websites analysed stress their authenticity and uniqueness, and hence their non-reproducibility outside the region in which they are made; in the mind of the consumer this connects and indissolubly

binds the identity of the brand to the place of production (the land and the raw materials).

In the perception of the users who were interviewed, the experientially richest website is that of Parmigiano Reggiano (with a score of 5/5), followed by Chianti Classico (4/5) and then Prosciutto di Parma (3/5).

The analysis conducted shows that sense is the “module” that is most intensely perceived by users – as predicted by Pine and Gilmore (1999): “the more sensory an experience, the more memorable it will be”. This is achieved above all by recourse to visual cues, but also to smells and flavours. Indeed, the textual, visual and audio-visual content focuses on:

- the region of origin, the product and the link between the two, by means of the description and images of the terroir (sight sense), its history and its comuni (districts) of production (see Chianti Classico: vines, hills, woods, fields in bloom, traditional rural buildings); and the structural and visual characteristics of the product and its production processes, highlighting its authenticity and uniqueness and educating consumers’ smell/taste senses as to how they can recognise it (see Chianti Classico: vintage, bunch of grapes, colour of the product);
- the sounds of the production process (hearing sense), especially regarding the transformation of the product, therefore linked to both the region of origin (see Chianti Classico: sounds of nature, conversations of farmers busy harvesting the grapes) and the product (see Chianti Classico: bottle of wine being opened, serving the wine, clinking of bottles during the production process; images of the winery that evoke the silence and tranquillity of the locations; auditory analysis of the maturity of the cheeses of Parmigiano Reggiano); and the sounds of tradition (traditional feasts, special events, etc. – see Chianti Classico, Parmigiano Reggiano);
- the main “tangible” components (touch sense) that distinguish the product and make it immediately recognisable (for experts and ordinary consumers alike) (see Chianti Classico: consistency of the soil and bunches of grapes; Prosciutto di Parma: delicacy of the slice; Parmigiano Reggiano: master cheese-makers processing the raw material in order to transform it into the finished product in accordance with traditional rules); and
- the description of the product’s aromas and fragrances (smell/taste sense), which are associated with the place of production understood in terms of its physical characteristics, i.e. the soil, climate, history and culture (see Chianti Classico: authenticity and uniqueness of the wine’s bouquet; Parmigiano Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma: processing and fire branding; olfactory analysis of the maturity of the product; appeal to the cool and natural state of the places where the product is matured).

The latter are hard to convey via the web but are communicated by videos which (e.g.) show the product’s associations and the distinctive features of the region of origin in a wider sense, or teach the basic notions for correctly performing a sensory analysis of the product in an educational framework (the feel SEM). In this sense, all three case studies analysed effectively implement the above-mentioned stimuli, although the Chianti Classico website is held to be the most engaging (with a score of 5/5; Parmigiano Reggiano, 4/5; Prosciutto di Parma, 4/5).

A further element, held to be fundamental and particularly appreciated by the users, is the presentation of occasions in which the product can be used (again corresponding to the feel SEM). These are often linked to values that are particularly important to an individual, i.e. family and friends and self-fulfilment, which derives both from the recognition of one's identity, following a clearly defined lifestyle, and from being recognised and appreciated as such, becoming part of a group. As demonstrated by the score obtained, the Parmigiano Reggiano website contains numerous instances and appeals to this SEM (in which the Consorzio excels), which were readily perceived by the interviewees (with a score of 5/5). Note that this module has numerous inter-connections with the relate sphere (on which the verdict for Parmigiano Reggiano was also positive; a score of 5/5). Here, together with Chianti Classico (with a score of 5/5), the users were impressed by the events and the Academies, which seek to interest enthusiasts of the brand and its relative land, as well as to arouse the curiosity of potential new consumers.

With reference to the last modules to be examined, i.e. think and act (which were considered together given the substantial similarity of the two modules in the present case), it was seen that thanks to the appeal to the product's health properties and the Mediterranean diet, together with the promotion of a healthy lifestyle by means of events and the involvement of sports personalities, Parmigiano Reggiano again scores highly (5/5). In addition, the site provides the user with numerous angles from which to approach the "storytelling" of the product, which, together with the other SEMs cited above, creates engagement for the user.

The Prosciutto di Parma website was also highly appreciated, for emphasising the healthy aspect of the product.

To summarise, from the users' assessments it emerges that experiential content is an essential tool for establishing, strengthening and broadening the company-customer relationship. However, it prompts users to purchase (especially products that are representative of the brand-land connection), via the "sense", "feel" and "relate" SEMs, when it supports the creation of a fully fledged "culture of the product", which is probably partly thanks to the meaning that food has in the Italian context and more generally in the Mediterranean area. The experiential dimension must therefore encompass the region of origin, with the goal of inducing the consumer to enjoy the moment of consumption not solely of the product, but in a broader and more complete vision of the product-region relationship, i.e. brand-land.

Concluding summary and managerial implications

The observation that provided the starting point for this study concerns the importance for authentic agrofood products of showing their experiential aspects via the connection with their region of origin, in order to become well-known and increase their competitiveness (Mattia, 2004; Mattiacci and Zampi, 2004).

In this sense, the purpose of the research was to identify and evaluate the essential variables used to communicate the brand-land relationship using the web, and the consumer's ability to recognise, assess and recall the experiential aspects (sense, feel, think, act, relate) which emphasises it. In order to generate shared value, marketing strategies must operate in such a way that the differential effect of brand knowledge on the part of the consumer (Keller, 1993) does not depend on the value that the individual enterprises, products or regions have for the consumer in themselves, but rather on the recognisability of the synonymy of brand and land, i.e. the strong link between certain products and their place of production (Fait, 2010; Maizza and Iazzi, 2011; Maizza *et al.*, 2013).

The above-mentioned objective was achieved by means of the SOber model, the fruit of detailed studies based of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999a, b), which was tested using the focus group technique (user based) and verified with reference to certain consortia brands considered to reflect best practices in communication of the brand-land connection (Parmigiano Reggiano, Chianti Classico and Prosciutto di Parma).

The model highlighted the existence of certain more intensively perceived aspects, which were thus considered to be the drivers of online experiential communication: the “sense”, “feel” and “relate” SEMs. Indeed, the examination showed that they support the creation of a fully fledged “culture of the product”, as they are essential for establishing, strengthening and broadening the company-customer relationship with the goal of inducing the consumer to enjoy the moment of consumption not solely of the product, but in a broader and more complete vision of the product-region relationship.

It is easy to see that the internet can play a fundamental role in the marketing of these products via the sharing of experiential content by the producing companies, based on the “experience of production” (Rullani, 2000); the users, based on the experience gained in the physical place (whether this be the store or the production site). By adopting this approach in communication it is thus possible to involve other potential consumers via online and offline word-of-mouth communication (Prendergast *et al.*, 2010; Solima, 2010; Riva, 2010), increasing the visibility of the products and their regions of origin in the international arena. This can have a positive impact on the behaviours and purchasing decisions of consumers and tourists alike (Lau and Ng, 2001).

Consider other similar initiatives (e.g. “Eataly”), whose objective is to involve consumers in an evocative atmosphere in which product and location combine to generate an original, emotional and memorable experience so that they may become, thanks to word-of-mouth communication, both producers and consumers of information.

To summarise, the study made it possible to verify that the emotional element can be communicated and perceived (even unconsciously), thereby enabling products with a high cognitive and experiential content (as in the case of place-based products) to gain a high profile and thus greater competitiveness in the international context.

The application of the chosen methodology is argued to be replicable in contexts other than the one investigated here, since it makes it possible to first identify the basic elements of the experiential dimension and then assess them by means of user-based focus groups. Indeed, has been pointed out that in online communication, experiential content represents a new frontier, generating opportunities (enhanced by the evolution of computer technology) that appear to be numerous and fruitful for both marketing studies and managerial applications.

This paper is part of a recent group of studies analysing the emotional perception of website communication. It may thus be affected by the limited empirical verification of the proposed model, which will continue to be refined in subsequent studies.

Notes

1. The final score was obtained by calculating the median of the scores assigned for each case study. The median expresses the central value of an ordered set of non-parametric data. It is not affected by the presence of extreme data, i.e. outliers with reference to the distribution of the data values (De Luca, 2007).
2. The Consortia are producers’ associations responsible for safeguarding and promoting authentic food products. In Italy, they defend the characteristics of local products and promote a range of elements and traditions from a managerial perspective, in both the local and the global context (Fait and Trio, 2011a, b; Scorrano, 2013).

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