

Wine consumption practices and meanings as depicted in Italian TV fiction

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Introduction

*“Wine is the intellectual
part of the meal”*

Renault

Leading Italian market research institutions confirm that past, high wine consumption levels depended primarily on ordinary, everyday consumption. Nowadays, that kind of practice is considered excessive and most people, following the evolution of healthier lifestyles, are inclined to limit their wine consumption to special occasions, with a propensity for higher qualitative standards (Chiodo, 2006). In terms of demand, the Italian wine market reveals a reduction in consumption per capita and an increase in levels of wine drinking outside the home, with a particular tendency towards DOC-DOCG products (Ismea, 2006; Istat, 2007). Wine has become the archetypal drink for special occasions and its hedonistic character can be seen to have acquired increasing relevance. It is evident that wine consumption practices are currently undergoing a period of great change and the main objective of this research is to gain further understanding of this evolution. In particular, we wish to investigate how past and present wine consumption practices have contributed toward and continue to influence this product's symbolic meanings in the contemporary, Italian, cultural context.

What exactly are the symbolic meanings associated with this drink? And how have wine consumption practices contributed to these associations and their evolution? In order to address these basic research questions, this study attempts to combine two different theoretical approaches: the analysis of product consumption practice symbolism (Hirschman, 1988; 1990; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Holt, 1995) and the symbolic representation of products in cultural texts (McCracken, 1986; Otnes and Scott, 1995). In line with the model put forward by Hirschman *et al.* (1998), this paper analyzes the creation and evolution of wine's symbolic meanings, making predominant use of Italian television programs as cultural texts, while observing the influence of historical customs and imagery on contemporary product discourse.

Following a brief theoretical review of the various approaches available for investigation of products' symbolic meanings and an explanation of the methodology employed we then present and discuss our findings, assuming a dynamic relationship between consumption practices and cultural texts. Lastly, we draw attention to the possible limitations and future directions of this research inquiry, proposing certain managerial implications for the implementation of advertising policies.

1. Theoretical framework

Consumer goods can be seen to have significance that exceeds their mere utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests mostly on their aptitude to carry and communicate cultural meaning (McCracken, 1986). Products become significant not in themselves, but rather with respect to their place within the consumer world, or more specifically, as a result of their role in enabling consumers to appropriate his/her desires (Roux and Korchia, 2006). In order for a product to function symbolically, it must have commonality of meaning, such that those in the group of reference have a shared conception of the product (Hirschman, 1981). Nevertheless, meaning in the commercial world is both essential and enigmatic. From product design and packaging to advertising and retailing, marketers continually seek to strategically facilitate meanings that

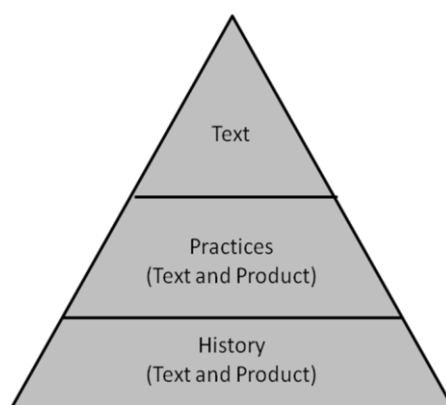
contribute positively to brand image, purchase probability, satisfaction, and so on. On the other side, consumers are constantly acquiring, sharing experiences and disposing in substantial accordance with the meanings they attribute to products, ads, purchase sites, and so forth. However, despite its indisputable role in marketing and consumption activities, meaning remains one of the most complex phenomena to theorize and investigate (Mick *et al.*, 2004). From the literature on consumer behavior, it is possible to identify three main streams of research that investigate products' symbolic meanings.

The first focuses on analysis of the symbolism of product consumption practices by addressing consumers directly. Studies available on this topic (among others Belk, 1988; Belk *et al.*, 1989; Rook, 1985; Sherry and McGrath, 1989) clearly emphasize the fact that consumers purchase products and services not only for their functional characteristics but also increasingly for the meanings they communicate on a personal and social level. Through consumption activities consumers seek not only to satisfy their utilitarian needs but also communicate with others in the sense that products and services are capable of conveying user-image and self-expression. For example, consumers clearly make use of goods such as clothes and cosmetics not only to meet certain needs but also to demonstrate their sexuality, social status, values, opinions, life styles and other features of their personal identity. In turn, these same people tend to judge others through observation of their consumption choices. In this way, consumers create and consolidate sets of symbols and non-verbal signals in order to express their individual and group identities.

The second research stream focuses on the interpretation of product symbolism through an analysis of cultural texts such as movies, television shows, novels, advertising, etc. The available literature (among others Hirschman, 1988; Hirschman, 1990; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Holbrook *et al.*, 1989) demonstrates how products are used to emphasize specific character traits such as personality, social status, etc. For example, in the American television series Dallas, the character of J. R. Ewing is shown living in huge, luxurious houses or staying in magnificent hotels, not in modest apartments; he travels by private jet or limousine, never economic cars; he customarily has business lunches in fine restaurants, not in domestic settings and he usually drinks scotch, brandy or champagne, never beer. In these cases, products and consumption practices clearly have the function of outlining primarily the character's social status but also certain key personality traits such as selfishness, arrogance and materialism. The basic tenet of this type of research is that such cultural products are firmly embedded in popular culture. Songs, plays and novels (Friedman, 1985; 1991), as well as movies or television shows are dependent on the meanings, symbols and values that stem from the culture that produces and consumes them, and hence, can be considered an important source of information for the purposes of consumer research.

More recently, a third theoretical stream of research has emerged that attempts to combine the two outlined above. A number of studies (among others Hirschman *et al.*, 1998; McCracken, 1986; Otnes and Scott, 1995), demonstrate how different cultural texts and consumption practices interact to define product symbolism. As McCracken (1986) observes in the case of advertising, it is possible to assign products with specific meanings linked to particular cultural contexts. Subsequently, consumers appropriate these meanings by way of product rituals such as possession, exchange, grooming and divestment. In line with this research, our study aims to investigate the symbolic meanings of wine in the Italian context using the theoretical model put forward by Hirschman *et al.* (1998), outlined below (figure 1).

Figure 1 The foundations of texts about products (Hirschman *et al.* 1998)



Our decision to adopt this model rests on the fact that it allows for an understanding of the evolution of products' meanings from a temporal viewpoint, that is, how these were originally created, and subsequently negotiated and modified. This would appear to be especially important in the case of wine given the great changes its associated consumption meanings have undergone in the last decade.

The starting point of this analysis model is the cultural text that features the product. This is founded on the consumption practices established within in a particular socio-cultural context whence the text originates. Given that the text has been created taking product consumption practices into consideration, it is also possible to better understand these through analysis of the text. In addition, consumption practices are constructed and modified over time in consequence of particular events such as the product's introduction within a new socio-cultural context or its adoption by certain individuals or groups. Identification and consideration of all these steps is essential for understanding the historical evolution of consumption practices to date.

The grounds for justifying the relevance of consumption practices in an analysis of products' symbolic meanings is based on the theoretical assumption, made by the relevant authors, that these practices are the sole means of conveying meaning from a particular cultural context to the product placed within it. A product acquires symbolic meaning as a direct consequence of its consumption practices, and so the modification of this connotation is strongly related to the historical evolution of these practices.

2. Methodology

For the purposes of this study's aim of investigating wine consumption practices we have chosen to examine cultural texts in the form of Italian TV programs, such as "fictions"¹. Firstly, from a market perspective, we should note that 95, 5% of Italian families own a TV (Istat, 2007). We can also observe that, in Italy, the most popular programs in terms of biggest audience share goes to Italian movies (Anica, 2007). Furthermore, television movies have already attracted the attention of consumer researchers (Chang and Roth, 2000; Stevens and Maclaran, 2000).

The importance of genre identification lies in the fact that the structure and theme of texts are governed by shared conventions (Fiske, 1987) that serve as a set of codes uniting producers, texts and audiences. Classification is performed by analyzing a text's conformance to the genre "rules" that drive interpretation by viewers who have learned to

¹ According to dictionary definitions, this genre of TV movie has a plot that is developed over the course of more than one episode. Each episode forms part of a main original history that depicts everyday life events (De Mauro, 2008).

deduce meaning over the course of their television viewing (Barthes, 1982). Analysis begins with the identification of a text's basic attributes to determine its genus of drama, story or poem. TV "fictions" are classified as dramas on the grounds of performance, given that they "show" rather than "tell" actions (Wells, 1989). There is a long tradition of the study of TV fictions, with researchers focusing on the examination of soap operas and drama series and their implications for social representation or impact as cultural products (Ang, 1985; Liebes and Livingstone, 1998; Moran, 1998; Caughie, 2000; Tufte, 2000). Genre conventions identify fictions as a form of realistic drama which depicts society in a way that is easily understood by the common viewer (Stern and Russell, 2004). Fictions incorporate consumption as a structural element and placed products feature prominently in episodes that represent consumption practices in a naturalistic way, depicting settings and actions that appear realistic to the average viewer (Hirschman *et al.*, 1998).

The settings and consumption acts depicted in these programs can be considered as representative of real life. As observed by mass media researchers, it is precisely because of this realism that Italian TV "fictions" or "series" have enjoyed such popularity in Italy, in that consumers are able to identify easily with the characters (Fumarola, 1999). This is not true in the case of comparable, foreign produced programs, such as "The Bold and the Beautiful"². Whereas the settings depicted in Italian TV series are similar to those encountered in real life, in the case of foreign counterparts Italian viewers are forced to project themselves within "un-real", imaginary environments (Pivato and Tonelli, 2001). Wells and Gale (1995) observe that the settings typically depicted in TV movies closely correspond with those of real, everyday life, particularly in terms of the products featured, even if these predominantly represent the experiences of the middle and upper social classes. In any case, it is clear that the products and consumption practices represented are utilized to represent reality and fulfill consumer expectations. Based on these assumptions, we can be fairly confident in our use here of TV movies as a means of better understanding wine consumption practices.

Our sample consists of 11 Italian TV series: "Montalbano"; "La Squadra"; "Il Maresciallo Rocca"; "Turbo"; "Incantesimo"; "Il bello delle donne"; "Angelo il custode"; "Vivere"; "100 Vetrine"; "Un posto al sole" and "Ricominciare" (see table 1). We recorded each of these programs for a total of 4 months and then proceeded with analysis. Three researchers, first individually and then collectively, watched these programs and singled out all the scenes featuring wine products and consumption practices, which after this preliminary process numbered 128. Each researcher analyzed scenes individually, made notes (on product type, consumption contexts and occasions, associated foods, drinking manner and consumer characteristics) and then compared their observations with the others. Several main themes were identified and then interpreted through the selected theoretical model as shown in the next paragraph.

² Aired in Italy by way of the title "Beautiful", this is a US produced program which has become the most viewed TV show in the world. It reaches about 300 million viewers in 110 countries, daily (Tobin, 2002).

Table 1 Italian TV programs³ considered in the analysis

Format	Title	Channel and air time	No. of episodes	Plot description
Soap opera	Incantesimo	Rai 1 / Rai 2, daytime	1170	<i>Revolves around a medical clinic in Rome with an emphasis on the family life, personal relationships, sexual drama and emotional and moral dilemmas of the doctors, nurses and lawyers working there.</i>
Soap opera	Vivere	Canale 5 / Rete 4, daytime	2100	<i>Revolves around the life of several families from various middle and upper-class backgrounds, in the context of Como, a provincial town in northern Italy.</i>
Soap opera	CentoVetrine	Canale 5, daytime	1660	<i>Revolves around a shopping centre in Turin with an emphasis on the family life, personal relationships and business conflicts of the different types of people (owners, sales clerks, etc.) working there.</i>
Soap opera	Un posto al sole	Rai 3, prime time	2500	<i>Italian version of Australian soap 'Neighbors' that follows the lives of families living in a middle-class suburban street. A format re-adapted and modified for Italian viewers, including local peculiarities, stories and characters strongly connected with Naples. Storylines explore the romances, family problems, domestic squabbles, and other key, life events affecting the various residents.</i>
Soap opera	Ricominciare	Rai 1, daytime	10	<i>Revolves around the wealthy Vallesi family who own a publishing house in Perugia.</i>
Mini-series TV	Angelo il custode	Rai 1, prime time	8	<i>Revolves around the daily lives of characters who work in a sports club in a small, countryside town.</i>
Mini-series TV	Il bello delle donne	Canale 5, prime time	12	<i>Revolves around the friendships and relationships of female characters that frequent a hairdresser's saloon, located in a small Umbrian town.</i>
TV Series	Il maresciallo Rocca	Rai 1, prime time	30	<i>Follows the daily life of a Marshal, revolving around both his professional role, solving dramatic cases, and his somewhat complicated private life (widow with three children, involved in a difficult relationship with a divorcee). Set in Viterbo,</i>
TV Series	La squadra	Rai 3, prime time	221	<i>Set in the Sant'Andrea police station, Naples. The first police procedural TV show in Italy with a format very similar to the 'The Bill' in Britain. La Squadra is in fact an unusual police show: its serial format focuses not on one particular area of police work but on the professional and private lives of patrol and response officers.</i>
TV Series	Montalbano	Rai 1 / Rai 2, prime time	18	<i>Revolves around the daily life of Police Officer Salvo Montalbano, and the members of his team. Set in Sicily (near Ragusa)</i>
TV Series	Turbo	Rai 2, prime time	2	<i>Italian version of the Austrian 'Kommissar Rex, revolving around the investigations of a group of policemen supported by a German shepherd, Turbo, an exceptional dog that helps in solving difficult cases, finding evidence and people.</i>

³ In general, the soap operas and TV series selected for analysis focus on everyday characters and situations, are frequently set in working or middle-class environments and explore realistic, social storylines such as family discord, marriage breakdown and financial problems.

3. Findings

3.1 Wine and its primary consumption practices

Analysis of TV program clips reveals a number of interesting, thematic issues regarding wine and its consumption practices, such as *places and times, occasions and consumer characteristics*, each of which are illustrated below and based on the reference model used for analysis in identifying the wine's related symbolic meanings. However, we should first remember that up to around the mid 20th century, the history of food and drink consumption is noticeably marked by polarized oppositions – rich vs. poor, city vs. countryside – with certain extra features, depending on the geographical, local and cultural contexts. Clearly, there has never really existed one pervasive alimentary consumption model, but rather several, very different realities. An over generalization would risk masking the evidently enormous variety of these past situations, and so as to avoid this, we attempt to allow for and take account of this wide range of consumption models, by taking a historical perspective to understand present day practices.

3.1.1 *Places and times*

The TV clips showed wine drinking primarily in domestic settings (62% of cases) rather than the contexts outside the home. In particular, home drinking usually occurs in closed settings, expressly in the dining room or kitchen. It is also important to specify that in these places - typical for lunch or dinner – wine is predominantly associated with food. However, we should not overlook the fact that wine can also be consumed in the lounge in certain circumstances and at particular moments of the day, such as the appetizer, preceding a meal and the moment of conviviality at the table.

In contexts outside the home, wine seen to be drunk primarily in association with food, mostly at restaurants or in “trattoria”, and less frequently at bars or wine bars. It is worth noting that just as certain places are deemed suitable for wine drinking, others are most definitely considered inappropriate. In the home, these include the more private settings, such as the bedroom or bathroom, whilst outside the home; there are more modern catering outlets, such as fast food or pizza restaurants and sandwich bars.

Returning to times of day, undoubtedly wine drinking most frequently accompanies the two main meals, lunch (40%) and dinner (43%), and takes place much less so during the appetizer (remaining 17%). Wine's close association with food obviously links it with the table, where eating times are characterized as occasions of sociality, reunion, conviviality. As expected, we can see a clear wine-food association during these two main consumption moments, and a lesser presence in the case of the appetizer.

This prompts the question of how these consumption practices have been established. What has led to wine drinking becoming almost exclusively limited to lunch and dinner times, both within and outside the home? Although wine has always been a domestic drink, linked to the private sphere, at the same time it is also drunk in public. However, from a historical viewpoint we are dealing with dimensions that have been examined separately, given wine's greatly different evolution in the two spheres.

In discussing domestic consumption, it is important to specify that the canonization of the gastronomic hour and present day consumption of food and wine at the table are extremely distant from the customs of early 20th century, traditional, agricultural society. Notably, little change has occurred over the same time period in the consumption behavior of more well-to-do families” (Teti, 1999). Generally speaking, the number of meals eaten daily was inversely proportional to the wealth of those at the table; whereas the well-off ate twice a day, at lunch and dinner, the popular classes consumed a much larger number of smaller meals (Storchi, 1999). In particular, peasant workers customarily had more smaller meals or snacks over the course of the day, particularly during the summer months

when the working day could last up to 18 hours, most of which were consumed in the workplace. The latter aspect creates an interesting opposition, besides the differing caloric levels, between a rural diet of cold meals and a genuine, hot and varied cuisine, rich with ingredients, typical of urban and bourgeois consumption.

Although held by all to be the ideal accompaniment to food due to its intensity of taste, the drinking of wine was by no means habitual in the countryside. It was consumed in great moderation and often more for its nourishing qualities rather than the pleasure it brought. Undoubtedly, this custom derived not from lack of enjoyment, but the fact that production was destined almost entirely for sale. Indeed, for peasants, wine represented a great potential income, second only to wheat, which was often heavily relied on in precarious economic circumstances, and so they ended up drinking a light wine obtained from soaking water in the marcs after emptying (Taddei, 1998).

This problem did not present itself to the higher Italian classes, on whose tables a good bottle of wine was never absent. Only in the 50's do the historical distinctions between city and country begin to crumble and the urban bourgeois consumption model can be seen to extend to the entire peninsula. A high caloric alimentary regime based on the introduction of meat and fruit began to permeate the still traditional Italian diet dominated by cereals and legumes. However, before long we see the dissolution of this type of alimentary tradition formed during the Italy's early years of affluence and growth, and in the 80's, we see new types of alimentary consumption, including a drastic reduction of previously typical products – wine, oil, pasta, bread, meat – accompanied by the introduction of new food products, that typically display little or no trace of their origin and connection with the past and tradition (Capatti *et al.*, 1998). The presence of wine on the everyday table becomes much less frequent, but drinking remains a ritual for out-of-the-ordinary gastronomic occasions, with increased sensibility to product quality.

This examination of wine drinking, from a historical viewpoint, allows us to affirm that this drink is and has always been considered as the gastronomic beverage *par excellence*, the ideal accompaniment to food, capable of enhancing the sensorial enjoyment of a meal. For years, poverty may have limited the wine consumption, but there is no doubt that everyone considered a meal more complete in its presence. As observed by Johnson (1991), wine “due to its intensity of taste and the natural volume of a sip (roughly half that of beer) is the ideal accompaniment to food, adding flavor as a condiment, removing greasiness from fats, making meat seem more tender, and easing the deglutition of dry legumes and unleavened bread without bloating the stomach”.

However, when considering the historical evolution of wine drinking outside the home, our attention cannot but be focalized on the public house, where a kind of sacralizing of the wine cult occurred. As observed by Pivato and Tonelli (2001), whilst the factory becomes a “specialized place of work”, the public house is established as a “specialized place of free time”, fostering one of the preferential uses of workers’ free time: getting drunk. The public house was the primary meeting place of the urban working classes for whom drinking wine represented a form of escape from everyday difficulties and strict rules imposed by the mechanization of society. It was also the place of the creation and communication of a culture that gave expression to the popular class’s sense of opposition to the dominant power. Anarchists, socialists, republicans and other fringe group subversives elected the public house their preferred place of aggregation. To better understand wine’s symbolic meaning in this consumption context it is of interest to note that during the same period, the public house as typically proletarian, subversive location, based on the wine cult, was contrasted by the café, a characteristic middle-class and aristocratic place of integration, where primarily coffee and other, non alcoholic beverages were consumed (Malatesta, 1997). Thus, a counter-position was created between the

intoxicating qualities of wine, and the sobering nature of coffee; between the incapacity and inactivity of wine drinkers and the industriousness of coffee drinkers. Wine and coffee respectively stimulate the properties and capacities that their associated social classes consider to be of more importance, in that coffee stimulates the intellect, rationality, sobriety, and individualism, whereas wine fosters the proletarian virtues of collectivism and solidarity⁴ (Schivelbusch, 1999).

Nevertheless, the subsequent economic boom and modernization cancel every trace of the coffee culture as well as that of the public house, eliminating wine's identity as strictly tied to this place; bars lose their strong elements of distinction, becoming public spaces where modern beverages are consumed and the role of wine is somewhat marginal. New found affluence also brings about the establishment of new forms of use of free time, largely characterized by "eating out". Increased disposable income, new labor dynamics which oblige women to work further away from the home and increasingly reduced family sizes loosen the traditional association between food and home. The increase in eating and drinking outside the home is without doubt one of recent history's most notable phenomena (Sfogliarini, 2000), yet once again, wine is closely associated with food, reinforcing its value described above regarding domestic consumption.

A historical review allows us to understand how present day times and places of wine drinking result from important evolutions in the motivations for and ways of its consumption, as a consequence of the passage from a society tied to poverty and subsistence to one connected with well-being. There is a clear reduction in the alimentary/medical use of wine and all-male, escapist drinking at the public house is all but abandoned with new associated forms of conviviality and sociality being established.

3.1.2 Occasions

The material gathered presents a wide range of possible motives that bring the various protagonists to drink wine. Its use is prevalently as a *drink of pleasure* capable of enhancing the sensorial aspects of a good meal, rather than as a simple *everyday drink* (around 28% of cases). Wine drinking appears to be rather excluded from everyday life, whilst being a ritual at the restaurant or on more "festive", domestic occasions when no other drink seems capable of taking its place.

We can identify occasions of everyday, domestic, wine consumption during main meals, as for example, on the television soap "*Un posto al sole*". In these cases, wine is often drunk in simple glass beakers and poured from carafes, in accompaniment to food as well as discussions on the more or lesser complicated issues of everyday life. However, above all, wine is ever present on less ordinary domestic occasions, such as lunches or dinners with relatives or friends, a celebration or romantic encounter. Outside the home, wine is always present at simple dinners with friends at the "trattoria" or after work meetings with colleagues (in "*Vivere*"), which often provide opportunities not only for getting together to pass a pleasurable evening in company but also toasting those present for a wide variety of reasons. A further occasion that often involves wine consumption outside the home is the classic, intimate dinner for two.

Therefore, participation in wine drinking primarily occurs in group or couple situations and thus on occasions of socialization. Wine and food are consumed, given the association described above, in company and around the table where relationships and friendships are formed and consolidated. In all these cases, it is important to specify how the scenes clearly portray the pleasure of being at the table and the importance of rediscovering

⁴ Obviously, as already pointed out above, it is not that the middle classes banished alcohol completely, but its consumption was moderate and above all prevalently limited to private contexts (home, private club, etc.). Public and excessive drinking were considered improper.

traditional flavors, times and spaces in a society more often characterized by speed and efficiency. Scenes of people drinking wine alone are much rarer and, when present, involve exclusively male characters, represented with stronger or weaker negative associations. For example, lone wine drinking is depicted in “*Commissario Montalbano*” in a classic scene of alimentary and existential loneliness, whereas in “*Cento vetrine*” this accompanies a moment of individual relaxation, with a young man relaxing on the sofa, in the lounge, sipping a glass of white wine to forget a tiring and stressful day.

The consumption practices illustrated above clearly reveal the prevalence of the idea of wine as a *drink of sociability*, perfectly integrated in all social occasions involving food. The symbolic significance of wine is also reinforced by examination of consumption practices from a historical viewpoint. For example, in early 20th century rural Italy, the peasant community were allowed more substantial lunches on festive occasions such as religious holidays, weddings and particular work events than throughout the rest of the year. As noted by Sorcinelli (1999), these latter festivities generally coincided with the annual threshing or grape harvest when peasants celebrated by replacing the everyday maize “polenta”, legumes, salads, whole-meal or corn bread and light wine with pasta with meat sauce, birds or small animals and, above all, the most precious and delicious wine. However, for the more well-to-do social classes formal lunches and banquets were much more recurrent, featuring very elaborate dishes that not only had the task of satisfying guests and displaying luxury, but also of drawing out the meal’s duration, where yet again, the role of wine was central (Storchi, 1999). Therefore, we can see that the aspect of sociality connected to wine is also reinforced by a historical examination of drinking practices. Lastly, it is interesting to observe how wine’s symbolic value, in being commonly shared by both rich and poor, rural and urban society, allows for removal, if only occasional, of the more typical polarizations of alimentary consumption models.

3.1.3 *Consumer characteristics*

Wine is seen to be consumed by both male and female subjects, although women’s approach to this product is frequently mediated by the male figure, with exclusively female consumption being somewhat rare. This can be explained by the fact that, historically speaking, wine consumption has always had characteristically masculine connotations, with associated values connected to virility and differentiation from the female sex. There is also a difference between men and women in relation to alimentary consumption; indeed, women were not allowed certain foodstuffs. Wine, for example, was generally prohibited except during pregnancy, and the custom of serving men at the table meant that, in any case, a woman’s diet was limited to cold dishes (Visceglia, 1991). With regard to age, we are confronted with a consumer sample that can be defined as “adults” of between 20 and 60 years old. For example, “*Un posto al sole*” regularly features a group of young friends drinking wine, while in “*Angelo il custode*” we frequently see older subjects interacting with this product.

It is of interest to note that although wine is now considered a typically adult product, for many centuries it has also been considered an excellent tonic, an effective remedy against illness and for combating anemia and general weakness and for these reasons was also given to young children. Until fairly recently, a number of parents were in the habit of wetting their newborn child’s lips with red wine, in the belief of not only rendering him more robust, but also because it “kills germs”. Also, as a kind of initiation to the adult world, it was common for an adolescent boy to be taken to the pub where his father would make him drink from his glass, saying: “drink, it does you good!” (Sorcinelli, 1999).

In terms of social status, our sample also allows us to affirm that wine consumers belong to all social classes. The lower classes can be seen to be represented in “*Il bello delle*

donne”, where a man and woman, who are members of a clan involved in the trafficking of prostitutes, drink red wine while discussing their shady business. The middle and upper social classes are also present, such as in “*Vivere*”.

Our sample demonstrates that wine consumption transcends difference of sex, age or social class, and as such, it appears to be a kind of “diffuse” ritual that everyone is free to appropriate as their own. However, despite this ubiquity, it is possible to distinguish people by way of their consumption practices, associated language use and product quality, all of which allow them to communicate certain messages to the outside world. For example, in “*Incantesimo*” an acculturated approach to wine is demonstrated at the restaurant by the ordering of a particular, high-quality bottle and comments with the sommelier on its characteristics, using a language of expertise. As previously mentioned, wine consumption in the past was also diffuse among all the social classes, although, whereas the well-to-do classes could allow themselves high quality products, peasants and the popular classes had to be content with “light wines”, obtained by soaking water in the marcs that no longer produce must, and then pressing. Therefore, social difference in the past is revealed by wine quality rather than consumption practices.

3.2 Symbolic meanings of wine

Given that the previous paragraphs identify the practical, consumption principals associable with wine, it can be useful at this point to address the product’s various symbolic meanings that are deducible from this. These meanings are defined by a process aimed at analyzing how wine is integrated in consumption practices relevant in a given social context, capable of assigning particular symbolic values to it.

Social beverage: wine is an inimitable instrument of sociality and conviviality; the table, food and wine are seen as essential elements for the success of an evening in company, among friends or with loved ones, for the savoring of the, at times forgotten, pleasures of traditional values. It is around the table, with a glass of wine in hand, that we talk and relate to each other, rediscover a more natural and friendly dimension and establish relationships and bonds.

Adult beverage: given wine’s alcoholic component, it usually begins to be consumed in adulthood, and in fact, the vast majority of scenes analyzed show that children are excluded from this consumption, even when present at a feast.

Beverage of distinction: despite the presence of consumption by subjects from across the social class range, this does not negate the fact that different consumption patterns do exist in relation to various levels of economic and cultural capital. It is precisely these that most directly influence the product’s presentation and consumption practices. We can note that for the lower levels wine is drunk in everyday situations using simple glass beakers, whilst for those higher it is drunk in an elegant fashion during formal dinners and accompanied by important services. Notably, the product may be the same, if with differences in quality, but it is that which surrounds it that makes the difference.

Predominantly masculine beverage: both wine’s alcoholic nature as well as related traditions continue to give it masculine connotations. We see that wine consumption by women often takes place in company, never in isolation, as can occur for men, and that this does not condition their femininity.

Finally, it is important to add a fundamental objective feature of wine that closely interacts with these social meanings. Wine can be said to be an “*ubiquitous*” drink in consideration of its consumption practices in relation to both place and occasion. Regarding place, we have seen how we are confronted by wine consumption both within and outside the home, and we have also observed that it can be drunk on occasions that

differ greatly from one another. From the classic everyday domestic consumption of main meals, when wine is often drunk in simple glasses and poured from decanters, in accompaniment to food as well as everyday discussions, to the more extraordinary domestic occasions, such as lunches or dinners with friends or relatives, specific celebrations or romantic dates. Similarly, on occasions outside the home, wine can accompany simple dinners among friends in “trattoria”, as it can more formal gatherings. Therefore, it is clearly apparent that no other drink (with the obvious exception of water) is capable of being present in so many situations and places.

4. Conclusions

In line with the model proposed by Hirschman *et al.* (1998), this study commenced with an analysis of our chosen cultural text in the aim of understanding wine consumption practices. We have made use of historical sources to reveal the fundamental elements required to account for the evolution of alimentary habits and validate the consumption practices identified. This analysis has allowed us to identify and classify a number of wine consumption practices that are widespread in the current socio-cultural context and the associated symbolic meanings deriving from them. We consider this knowledge to be of fundamental, potential importance to managers of marketing, advertising or communication policies, working within companies and public institutions. A greater understanding of a particular product’s consumption contexts and practices could prove to be of use in avoiding consumer misunderstanding of advertising campaigns and costly company error in financing ineffective campaigns.

In addition, we should also take into consideration some of the limitations of this study. Firstly, we have made use of only one type of cultural text, that is, TV fiction. It may be of interest to compare our results with others derived from the analysis of different cultural text genres, such as movies or novels released in a particular time period. Further research in this area could possibly be needed.

It could also be valuable for further development of the present study to examine a wider range of commercial texts about the product, such as extending the analysis of wine ads to different media (generic and specialized magazines, television, radio, internet, etc.) in order to better understand their relationship with consumption practices and the related product meanings consolidated in a particular culture. In this way, as Hirschman *et al.* (1998) indicate, differentiating advertising’s place from television programs, news or films in a cultural discourse about a product, could lead to progress in educating the public about the functions of advertising in the formation of consumer practices. It is of vital importance that researchers increase their awareness of the inter-textual context in which cultural discourses establish their meaning.

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