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The Importance of Region of Origin in Sparkling Wines: An International Analysis of Consumers' Perception

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Abstract: Consumers' perception of the region of origin represents a critical issue for building a valuable and sustainable business in the wine sector. The aim of this study is to investigate the role of the region of origin in Italian sparkling wines, comparing consumers' perception of emerging wines with a designation of origin in regions not traditionally associated with sparkling wine production (Abruzzo and Romagna), with an affirmed brand (Prosecco) and with generic Italian sparkling wine. The three most important markets for Italian sparkling wines (Italy, the USA, and the UK) are considered. The importance of the region of origin is analyzed within a set of wine attributes, including color and sugar content, applying the conjoint analysis technique to simulate realistic market conditions, offering multiple options for wine attributes. There is no cumulative effect of the perception of wines with a Protected Designation of Origin in the three markets since consumers who positively perceive a specific designation do not extend this positive perception to others in comparison with generic sparkling wine. Positive and negative utilities associated with each designation of origin are calculated and used to discriminate consumers according to socio-demographic variables, consumers' behavior, and attitudes.

Keywords: Protected Designation of Origin; sparkling wines; consumers' perception; brand reputation; conjoint analysis

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1. Introduction

The Italian wine sector has its roots in the system of products with designation of origin, constituting an effective marketing strategy in a world characterized by a significant evolution in wine consumption [1,2]. Designations of origin can represent a valuable business model that promotes sustainable consumption and reinforces territorial development in accordance with the principles of circular economy.

Italy is the major world wine producer, with 55.2 million hectoliters produced in 2021, of which 22.8 million constituted wines with a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and 13.1 million wines with a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). The exported production exceeded 22.2 million hectoliters, and the export of PDO wines was 11.5 million in 2021, valued at EUR 4.7 billion [3], most of which is represented by sparkling wines.

With a bottled quantity of 4.7 million hectoliters, Prosecco—with a production limited to the Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions—is the largest designation in Italy and represents 73% of the total exports of Italian sparkling wines. Its production and exports have increased in recent years [4], and currently, Prosecco represents an affirmed brand in the international market [5]. This designation led to the exceptional growth of exports of Italian sparkling wines, which have grown in quantity from 1.63 to 4.95 million hectoliters between 2010 and 2021 (+204%) and in value from EUR 444 to 1821 million in the same period (+310%). The USA and the UK are by far the major foreign markets for Italian sparkling wines, with 25% and 19% of the total market share, respectively [3].

In recent years, this success pushed operators of other wine-producing regions—traditionally not oriented towards the production of sparkling wines—to enter this growing market. New designations of origin were introduced, or the product specifications of existing designations of origin were broadened to comprehend the category of sparkling wines, with the aim of taking advantage of this trend. Competition with the leader product is based on regional branding, and issues arise concerning consumers' knowledge of the new products and product positioning in the market. Nevertheless, the value of these PDO wines is currently only 5% of the total value of Italian exports of sparkling wines [3].

In the literature, the phenomenon of sparkling wine with designation of origin has garnered notable attention. Existing research has extensively demonstrated that consumers exhibit varied preferences for sparkling wine [6]. Several studies have underscored the significance of the region or country of origin and their accompanying certifications in the context of sparkling wines [7]. Rossetto and Gastaldello [8] recognized a positive influence of the reputation in shaping the loyalty of Prosecco consumers. The growth of Italian sparkling wine, led by Prosecco, prompts an exploration into whether other emerging sparkling wine designations can leverage the success of this wine-seeking recognition in the market. While a considerable body of literature is devoted to consumer analysis of affirmed designations of origin [5,9,10], less attention was dedicated to studies focusing on emerging designations. The objective of this study was to address this gap.

For this aim, two emerging regional wines with a designation of origin, Abruzzo and Romagna, were compared with the designation Prosecco and with generic Italian sparkling wine through a conjoint comparative analysis in the three main markets for Italian sparkling wines (Italy, the USA, and the UK). The choice of the Abruzzo and Romagna designations was because these regions, although characterized by an important wine sector, are not traditionally oriented towards the production of sparkling wines.

In particular, the following research topics were addressed:

- How each designation of origin (representing the production region) impact consumers' perceptions in the three markets.
- Whether the positive/negative perception of one designation produces (or not) a cumulative effect (i.e., consumers who positively perceive a PDO wine extend the positive perception to the others).
- How the positive/negative perception of each designation is influenced by the consumers' perceived knowledge of wine and involvement in wine consumption.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a theoretical background is presented, followed by the materials and methods (Section 3), results and discussion (Section 4), and conclusions (Section 5).

2. Literature Review

According to Charters [11], marketing strategies based on terroir create competitive advantages characterized by unique resources linked with local history and culture, specific knowledge, and organizational and institutional connections among producers. Numerous studies emphasize the effectiveness of business models centered on quality and designations of origin [12,13].

The PDO system represents a form of intellectual property right designed to safeguard the reputation and authenticity of regional and traditional foods. It is particularly important in the European Union, where specific rules—provided by the EU Regulation No 1151/2012, which establishes the framework for quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs—outline the criteria and procedures for obtaining PDO status.

The perceptions of consumers towards the designation of origin encompass the convictions and cognitive and emotional connections, constituting factors influencing the intention to buy a product [14]. Consumers' adoption of a PDO label is prompted by the perception that the label indicates superior product quality [15].

Given the significance of origin in consumer choices regarding wine consumption, designations of origin can help firms' capacity for successful differentiation [16]. Origin

is an important factor for brands, and a marketing strategy based on place of production offers opportunities for competitive advantages through territorial differentiation [17–19]. Indeed, the typicity associated with a wine region represents a central concept in wine consumers' perceptions that reflects both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Using a conjoint analysis approach, Payini et al. [20] revealed that the country of origin emerged as one of the most crucial wine attributes for consumers. Ferreira et al. [21] focused on the consumer perception of wine from three regions of origin, pointing out that the region has an influence not only on the hedonic evaluation but also on the willingness to pay (WTP) higher prices, in line with other studies that confirmed the impact of country of origin on WTP [22–24].

Chamorro et al. [25] distinguish between the country-of-origin and region-of-origin effects, demonstrating the role of differentiation at the regional level in determining consumers' preferences for Cava sparkling wines.

Especially in southern Europe, the terms "traditional food" and "brand-name" are associated with the concepts of culture, heritage, and history of a territory [26], and regional authorities use the designation of origin (PDO and PGI) of the products as a strategy to develop a positive region-of-origin effect [25].

Vlachvei et al. [27] showed that producers try to take advantage of PDO/PGI quality signals to build their reputation. The level of designation of origin (from PGI to PDO) affects consumer appreciation of wine [28]. Di Vita et al. [29] showed that the changes in Italian consumers' motivations support a hierarchy among different wine categories, from basic to PDO wines.

The designation can be used as an umbrella brand [30,31], considering the association of "private" brands with "collective" brands [32]. Trestini et al. [33] suggested that the collective reputation of a sparkling wine that holds a designation of origin is more important than brand reputation.

In the context of circular economy, products with a PDO can play a role in promoting sustainability. PDOs do not constitute an environmental tool in itself but can potentially play a positive role in environmental sustainability, limiting intensification and preserving traditional farming systems [34]. The emphasis on maintaining the quality and authenticity of these products is often connected with sustainable farming and environmentally friendly practices. Additionally, wines with a designation of origin are linked to a local production cycle, which can be characterized by a lower environmental impact when compared to the global production chains [35]. From a broader point of view, PDO products play a significant role in a sustainable territorial economy, reinforcing territorial development through local production and the integration with agri-food tourism while contributing to consumer awareness [36] and the creation of sustainable consumption models.

If the presence of a designation of origin represents a necessary factor, it is not sufficient in itself for good market performance [37]. In fact, regional environmental conditions influence the positive perceptions of the quality of designations of origin [38] and play an important role in wine marketing [39] because consumers are willing to consume local and sustainable wine [40]. Moreover, the structural aspects of the designation (i.e., the number of producers and the PDO establishment year), the minimum quality standards, the economic vitality of the territories, and the amounts of investments in marketing, which increase collective reputation are determinants of the PDOs reputation [41].

The role of the designation of origin labels has been analyzed in international literature with regard to wine consumers' perceptions [42]. Espejel et al. [43] analyzed the influence of different quality cues on the satisfaction, trust, and commitment of Spanish consumers of PDO wines, demonstrating that satisfaction and trust are the main drivers of consumers' choices. In a study conducted in Italy, Stanco et al. [44] found that "geographical indication" and "grape variety" are very important attributes, together with "sustainable certification", "vintage", and "price", whereas the attributes related to innovation (e.g., alcohol-free, vegan) were less important. The presence of PDO labels also enhances the impact of sensory attributes on consumer perception [32].

The perception of the designation of origin also varies according to consumers' personal characteristics. Adinolfi et al. [37] suggested that there are consumers who are "sensible" to the meaning and importance of designations of origin and others who are "indifferent". Socio-demographic factors also play a role in the perception of PDO wines [45–47]. According to Capitello et al. [48], consumer attitudes, preferences, wine knowledge, and experience play an even higher role in PDO wine perception than socio-demographic characteristics.

Furthermore, over the last decades, the sparkling wine market growth at the international level [49] was accompanied by a diversification in demand, both concerning a higher range of prices on the market and a diversification in types of consumers and consumption occasions [50]. Differences in consumption habits and preferences by gender and generational cohorts were identified among US sparkling wine consumers [51]. Focusing on younger generations, cultural differences also emerged in the perception of sparkling wines among countries [52]. Consumer characteristics like subjective and objective knowledge and involvement in wine consumption were also identified as aspects influencing the perception of different sparkling wine attributes, like production region, alcohol content, and grape variety, in Ontario wine consumers [53]. However, unexplored areas remain in terms of relationships among sparkling wine attributes perceptions and consumer characteristics, mainly in cross-country analyses.

Even if the literature confirms the role of the attribute "designation of origin" as a quality cue in consumers' perception, it is worth exploring if and to what extent this attribute is able in itself to add value to a generic wine or, conversely, how important is the knowledge of the region of production and of its characteristics, also in relation to more affirmed brands. Furthermore, it is worth exploring if consumers' knowledge and attitudes influence the perception of the designations. This study tries to overcome these issues through a comparative analysis, comparing consumer perceptions of different Italian regional sparkling wines in different markets and investigating the relations between consumers' self-perceived knowledge and involvement in wine consumption and their appreciation of each designation of origin.

The characteristics of a designation of origin are defined in the "product specification", the rules for wine production that guarantee the link between the specific quality of the wine and its territory of origin. In sparkling wines, the color and sugar content are two important intrinsic attributes defined by the product specification that can influence consumer perception and expectations [54–57]. These two attributes, together with the designation, were considered in the present study to simulate more realistic consumer choices of wines that are actually present in the market.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Structure of the Survey

The analysis was conducted in spring 2022 on a sample of 363 wine consumers living in medium-sized or big cities in three markets: Italy, the United Kingdom, and the USA. In the Italian market, which is characterized by strong regional preferences, we selected consumers living in the Northern and Central regions. However, we excluded the areas of production of the regional brands Romagna and Abruzzo to avoid distortive effects. In the UK, the areas of London and Central England were selected. In the USA, the urban areas of the East Coast were chosen. The choice was dictated both by marketing reasons and by the search for a greater homogeneity of the sample.

The interviews were conducted by administering an online questionnaire to a sample of respondents who simultaneously complied with the following characteristics (checked using screening questions): being of legal age for the purchase of wine and consuming wine at least monthly. A market research company selected the respondents and collected the answers.

The questionnaire was conducted in Italian for the Italian market and in English for the two others, with limited modifications for adapting to specific national differences (i.e., in the school system).

The survey covered the following aspects:

- Socio-demographic aspects.
- Respondents' consumption habits.
- Level of involvement in wine consumption and perceived knowledge of wines.

Consumers evaluated eight wine profiles desirability concerning four different Italian sparkling wines (Prosecco, Abruzzo, Romagna, and generic Italian sparkling wine), two different colors (white and rosé), and two different levels of sugar content (brut and extra-dry). These inputs were analyzed using conjoint analysis (see Section 3.3).

3.2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 1. Females represent the more consistent group in the USA (49.6%, with 4.1% of not declaring people) and in the English markets (52.5%), while in the Italian market, males are the majority (53.3%).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

		Italian Market (n = 120)	USA Market (n = 121)	English Market (n = 122)
Gender (%)	Female	46.7	49.6	52.5
	Male	53.3	46.3	47.5
	Not declared	-	4.1	-
Age (%)	18–35	14.2	23.1	19.7
	36–50	35.8	28.9	27.0
	51–60	30.8	16.5	14.8
	over 60	19.2	31.4	38.5
Education (%)	Undergraduate	61.7	29.8	50.8
	Bachelor degree	12.5	44.6	36.1
	Master degree	20.8	22.3	12.3
	Ph.D. degree	5.0	3.3	0.8
Financial situation of the family (%)	Good	16.7	22.3	16.4
	Normal	59.2	43.8	50.0
	Modest	20.0	21.5	22.1
	Difficult	2.5	11.6	11.5
	No answer	1.7	0.8	-

The largest group by age was the "over 60" age group in the USA (31.4%) and in the English markets (38.5%), while in Italy, it was represented by people aged 36–50 (35.8%).

The educational level of respondents shows a very different picture: in the Italian and English markets, undergraduates represent the highest percentage, with 61.7% and 50.8%, respectively, while in the USA market, the group with a bachelor's degree is the largest (44.6%).

The financial situation was classified as good, normal, modest, and difficult based on the respondents' self-perception, which is considered a good predictor of consumer behavior [58]. A high percentage of consumers declared a "normal" economic status (Italian market = 59.2%; USA market = 43.8%; English market = 50.0%).

3.3. Conjoint Analysis Experimental Plan and Analyses

Conjoint analysis is a multivariate analysis technique that has had great application in recent years, especially in the context of marketing research dedicated to analyzing the perception of products and services [59]. This methodology assumes that consumers perceive a product or a service as a set of intrinsic and/or extrinsic attributes associated with it [60–62]. The scientific literature has different applications of conjoint analysis to the agri-food sector [20,45,46,63–65]. This technique offers a useful tool for analyzing ideal product mixes, that is, the potentially best offer profiles for a given market [66].

In conjoint analysis, each profile is made up of various combinations of some product characteristics, called attributes, which in turn are made up of levels representing the different modalities. When consumers evaluate a product, they associate subjective values from which the partial utilities are extrapolated. Partial utilities are associated with the attributes and levels of the products or services considered [66]. The functional form refers to a specific family of marketing models, known as alternative preference models, which relate the levels of attributes to total utility. Therefore, for each attribute (and level), there will be a score in terms of utility that will attest to the level of importance assigned to the consumer's choice. The conjoint model is a multi-attribute model, which assumes that consumers purchase products based on their attributes with two or more levels (e.g., sweet, tart, bitter) [67]. Then, the individual utility (U) for a multi-attribute product concept can be expressed in a simple way as the sum of the utilities of its attributes [u (a_j)]:

$$U = u(a_1) + u(a_2) + \ldots + u(a_n) \quad (1)$$

where U = utility for a product concept, and u (a_j) = utility for the level of an attribute a_j (j = 1 to n).

Respondents were asked to evaluate, based on their willingness to purchase the products at a generic point of sale, a series of labels with simplified graphics containing the following information, which is compulsory in a sparkling wine label, representing the following attributes and levels:

- Attribute product category. It consists of the following levels: Sparkling (without designation of origin), Prosecco DOC, Abruzzo spumante (the Italian word to indicate sparkling), DOP, and Romagna DOC spumante. In Italian legislation, it is possible to use the abbreviation DOC to indicate PDO wine (hereafter, the PDO term is used). One of these types of wines was presented in each profile.
- Attribute color of wine. It consists of the following levels: White or Rosé.
- Attribute sugar content. It consists of the following levels: Brut or Extra dry.
- Origin: Produced in Italy.
- Quantity of content: 75 cl ℮ (typical content of a bottle).

The origin (Produced in Italy) and content (75 cl ℮) were fixed factors reported in all profiles and were not accounted for in the conjoint analysis.

The full profile method was applied to perform conjoint analysis [46] using SPSS 25.0. The full profile method is based on administering a series of complete scenarios to evaluators, simultaneously presenting all the attributes and relative levels for each profile. With the full profile method, the number of potential profiles grows rapidly with an increase in the number of attributes and levels. The number of potential profiles to be presented was diminished through an orthogonally reduced plan, balanced with sufficient rotation of the different attributes/levels. The potential total number of 16 profiles was reduced to 8, maintaining the proportionality of the attribute/level combinations. Each respondent was asked to assign a score between 1 and 10 to quantify the appreciation of the presented profile.

Below is the list of reduced plan profiles administered to respondents.

- Profile 1: Sparkling, Rosé, Extra-dry, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 2: Prosecco, Rosé, Brut, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 3: Prosecco, White, Extra-dry, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 4: Sparkling, White, Brut, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 5: Abruzzo, White, Brut, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 6: Abruzzo, Rosé, Extra-dry, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 7: Romagna, White, Extra-dry, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.
- Profile 8: Romagna, Rosé, Brut, Produced in Italy, 75 cl ℮.

Utility estimates (U.E.) were calculated for each profile of respondent for a total of 349 profiles (the analysis was not performed due to the absence of valid cases for 5 profiles of respondents in the Italian market, 3 in the USA market, and 6 in the English market).

To analyze the impact of the region of origin, the estimated utility in the perception of the attribute "product" concerning each of the three PDO wines was calculated for each respondent. Therefore, for each wine, the sample was divided into two groups: the first group comprised respondents associated with positive utility—resulting from the conjoint analysis (P.U. = U.E. > 0)—towards the product category, such as the specific PDO wine; the second group comprised those with negative or null utility (N.U. = U.E. ≤ 0). The two groups were identified for each wine and were compared based on the socio-demographic characteristics, consumption habits, level of involvement in wine consumption, and perceived knowledge of the sample.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. General Output of Conjoint Analysis

The product category represents the attribute with the highest impact on consumer choices in all the investigated markets (Figure 1). Among the different proposed products, Prosecco wine is by far—as expected given its high international success—the most appreciated component in the three markets (Table 2).

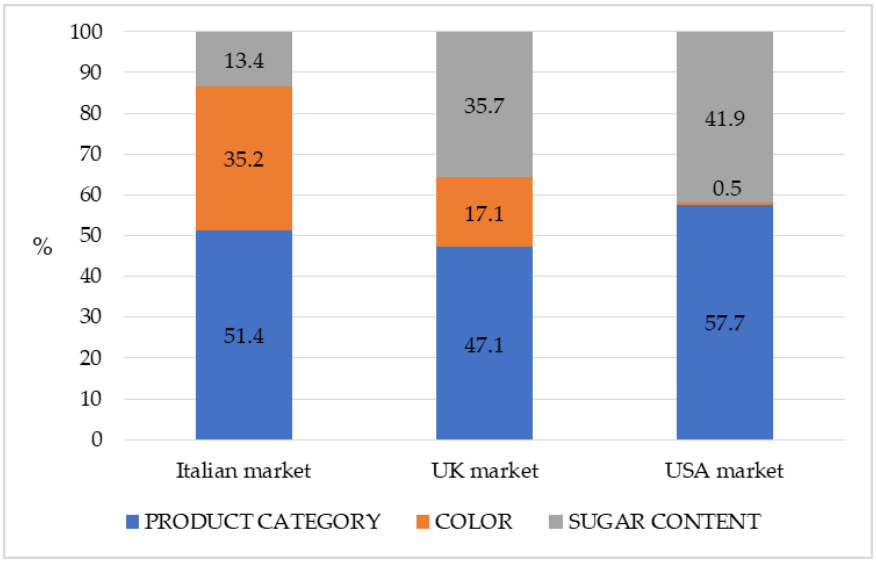


Figure 1. Results of the conjoint analysis of product attributes (%).

Table 2. Results of the conjoint analysis on product levels.

		Utility Estimate (U.E.)		
		Italian Market	**UK Market**	**USA Market**
Product category	Sparkling	−0.128	0.059	0.000
	Abruzzo	−0.137	−0.153	−0.237
	Prosecco	0.541	0.318	0.297
	Romagna	−0.276	−0.225	−0.060
Color	White	0.280	0.002	0.097
	Rosé	−0.280	−0.002	−0.097
Sugar content	Brut	0.107	0.197	0.203
	Extra dry	−0.107	−0.197	−0.203
(Constant)		6.054	6.254	6.336
		Value	Value	Value
Pearson's R *		0.941	0.973	0.957
Kendall's tau *		0.857	1.000	0.714

* All values of Pearson's R and Kendall's tau are significant (sign. < 0.01).

In the Italian market, the product category accounts for 51.4% of the consumer choices, followed by color (35.2%) and sugar content (13.4%). Analyzing the U.E., among the different proposed products, only the Prosecco denomination shows a positive value (U.E. = 0.54). Generic sparkling wine, although showing a negative utility, is perceived better than Abruzzo and Romagna PDOs. Consumers' favorite color is white over rosé (U.E. = 0.28), and the wine characteristic of "brut" is more popular than "extra dry" (U.E. = 0.11).

In the US market, product category accounts for 57.7% of the consumer choices, with higher values than in the Italian market, followed by sugar content (41.9%), while color plays a very marginal role in consumers' choices (0.5%). In addition, in this market, white is preferred to rosé and brut to extra dry. Meanwhile, Prosecco has positive utility, while Abruzzo and Romagna PDOs show negative utilities.

In the English market, the type of product assumes lower importance than in the previously investigated markets (47.1%), followed by sugar content (35.7%) and color (17.1%). A positive utility is associated with the Prosecco denomination and, at a lower level, with the generic sparkling wine. In addition, within this sample, the Abruzzo and Romagna PDOs show negative utilities. Brut wine is preferred to extra dry (U.E. = 0.11), and there are no significant differences between white and rosé.

The findings regarding the importance of the region of origin are consistent with those of prior studies by Müller [68], Thiene et al. [69], and Verdonk et al. [70].

The reputation of Prosecco, which is the first PDO in terms of production in Italy and older than the Romagna and Abruzzo PDOs, is reflected in the notoriety of the brand and appreciation of the market. The structural characteristics of the designation increase its reputation [41], and the case of Prosecco seems to confirm this aspect in accordance with previous studies [5].

For further analysis, the sample was divided into two groups, one composed of respondents who associate P.U. with a specific PDO wine and the second by those who associate N.U. Previous studies have mainly focused on the analysis of a single PDO wine [5,45,46,71], while this study covers multiple PDO wine evaluations that allow for comparative analyses among products. Through the partition into positive and negative utility groups, this methodological framework provides a tool for PDO brand comparisons that goes beyond the main outputs of conjoint analysis (i.e., the level of importance for each attribute/level).

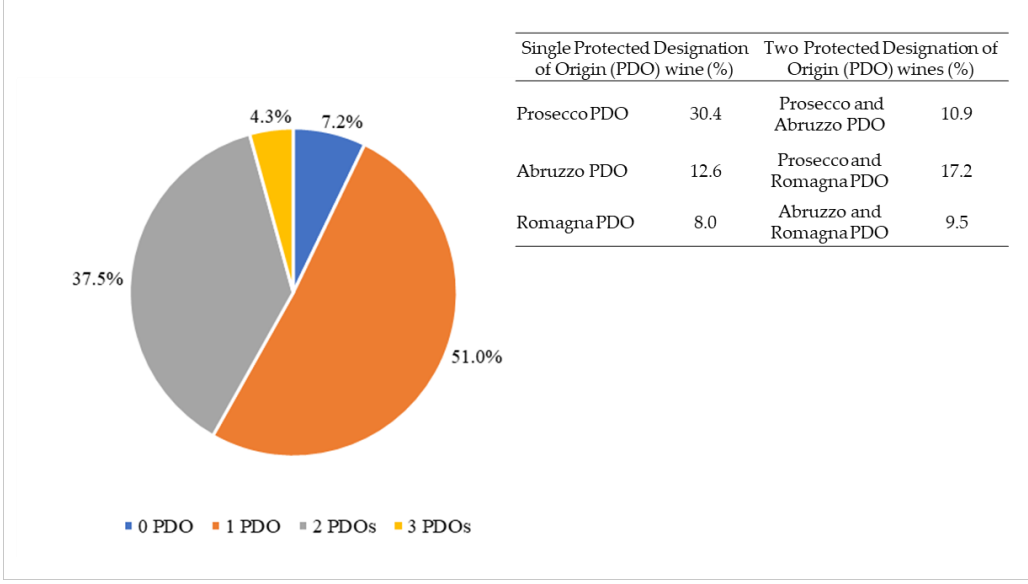
Most of the respondents belonging to the P.U. group were associated with a single PDO wine (51.0%), whereas only a few cases were associated with all three PDO wines (4.3%). This reveals that the perception of the PDO brands does not have a cumulative effect (Figure 2). This result is confirmed in all the analyzed markets: the single PDO preference is 52.2% in the Italian market, 53.4% in the USA market, and 47.4% in the UK market.

The groups with P.U. associated with a single PDO expressed major preferences for Prosecco (30.4%), followed by Abruzzo (12.6%) and Romagna (8.0%). Regarding the P.U. associated with the respondents to two PDO wines, Prosecco and Romagna PDO represent the couple with the highest percentage (17.2%).

4.2. Influence of Socio-Demographic Factors and Frequency of Consumption on Utility Values

Table 3 compares the respondents with P.U. and N.U. for each designation of origin in relation to their socio-demographic characteristics. For the Prosecco wine, consistent with the conjoint analysis results, respondents with a positive perception prevailed over the respondents with a negative perception (P.U. group = 219 respondents; N.U. group = 130), while consumers in the N.U. groups were the majority for the other two wines (Abruzzo: P.U. group = 130 respondents and N.U. group = 219; Romagna: P.U. group = 136 respondents and N.U. group = 213).

For Prosecco wine, positive utilities are located mainly in the Italian market (36.1%), for Abruzzo wine in the US market (35.4%), and for Romagna wine in the English market (39.0%).



Single Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) wine (%)		Two Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) wines (%)	
Prosecco PDO	30.4	Prosecco and Abruzzo PDO	10.9
Abruzzo PDO	12.6	Prosecco and Romagna PDO	17.2
Romagna PDO	8.0	Abruzzo and Romagna PDO	9.5

Figure 2. On the left is the percentage of P.U. values of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) brands by number, as expressed by the respondents. On the right are PDO brands with single and double P.U. (percentage over the total).

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (groups with P.U. and N.U. values).

		Prosecco PDO		**Abruzzo PDO**		**Romagna PDO**	
		P.U. Group (n = 219)	**N.U. Group (n = 130)**	**P.U. Group (n = 130)**	**N.U. Group (n = 219)**	**P.U. Group (n = 136)**	**N.U. Group (n = 213)**
Market (%)	Italy	36.1	27.7	32.3	33.3	27.2	36.6
	UK	31.5	36.2	32.3	33.8	39.0	29.6
	USA	32.4	36.2	35.4	32.9	33.8	33.8
Gender (%)	Female	48.9	48.5	52.3	46.6	55.1	44.6
	Male	49.3	50.8	46.2	52.1	44.1	53.5
	Not declared	1.8	0.8	1.5	1.4	0.7	1.9
Age	Mean	49.9	50.3	50.2	49.9	47.3 ^{a**}	51.8 ^{b**}
	Median	50	51	49	50	47	53
	Std. deviation	14.75	15.84	14.89	15.33	15.34	14.79
Education (%)	Undergraduate	45.2	47.7	44.6	47.0	44.1	47.4
	Bachelor's degree	31.1	32.3	33.1	30.6	36.0	28.6
	Master's degree	20.5	16.9	20.0	18.7	19.9	18.8
	Ph.D. degree	3.2	3.1	2.3	3.7	0.0 ^{a*}	5.2 ^{b*}
Financial situation of the family (%)	Good	19.6	16.9	14.6	21.0	20.6	17.4
	Normal	53.9	46.9	47.7	53.4	49.3	52.6
	Modest	18.7	23.8	30.0 ^{a*}	15.1 ^{b*}	19.9	21.1
	Difficult	6.8	11.5	6.9	9.6	9.6	8.0
	No answer	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.9

Pearson Chi-square test was used for socio-demographic variables; a *t*-test was applied for "age". Different letters mean statistically different scores (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$).

Considering gender, there is a higher percentage of females with a positive perception of the Abruzzo and Romagna wines, while for Prosecco, there are no gender differences. With regard to age, in the case of the Abruzzo and Prosecco wines, there are no substantial differences, while in the case of Romagna wine, consumers with a negative perception of the brand have an average age of over 50 years (51.8), while the age of those who have a positive perception are aged around 47 years. A university education (master's degree)

seems to positively affect the perception of the PDO brands for all wines, while a bachelor's degree positively affects the perception of the Abruzzo and Romagna wines.

Prosecco wine is preferred by people with a "good" and "normal" family economic status. For the Abruzzo wine, there is a higher percentage of P.U. among people with a "modest" financial situation, while the Romagna wine is preferred by people with a "good" economic status.

According to previous studies, socio-demographic factors influence wine perception [29,47,72,73].

The Pearson Chi-square test was applied to socio-demographic variables comparing the P.U. and N.U. groups. Statistically significant differences were found only for a small number of variables, such as education for the Romagna PDO wine (absence of respondents that have a doctoral title in the P.U. group) and financial condition in the Abruzzo PDO output (higher values of people with a modest economic status in the P.U. group). The *t*-test applied to age reveals statistically significant differences in the Romagna PDO output with older respondents in the N.U. group.

4.3. Influence of Attitudes towards the Wine Sector on Utility Values

Figures 3–5 compare items indicating the perceived knowledge (items from I_1 to I_5 in the Figures) and involvement in wine consumption (items from I_6 to I_10) for the P.U. and N.U. groups of each PDO brand, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (=not at all) to 5 (=very much).

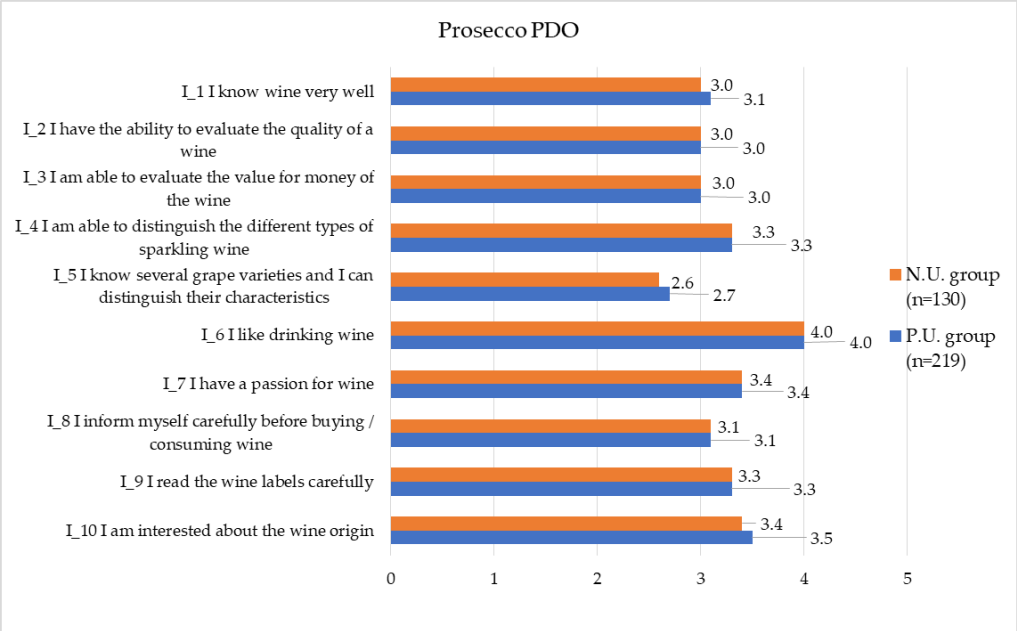


Figure 3. Average values of items related to perceived knowledge and involvement in wine consumption for the P.U. and N.U. groups for the Prosecco PDO (Likert scale with values from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much), the *t*-test applied between groups reveals no significant differences for all statements.

For Prosecco and Abruzzo, the differences between the P.U. and N.U. groups are very low and not statistically significant for all the items related to the perceived knowledge (I_1: very good knowledge of wine; I_2: ability to evaluate its quality; I_3: its value for money; I_4: capacity to distinguish the different types of sparkling wines; I_5: capacity to distinguish the different grape varieties) and for the items indicating involvement in wine consumption (I_7 "I have a passion for wine", I_8 "I inform myself carefully before buying/consuming wine", I_9 "I read the wine labels carefully", and I_10 "I am interested about the wine origin").

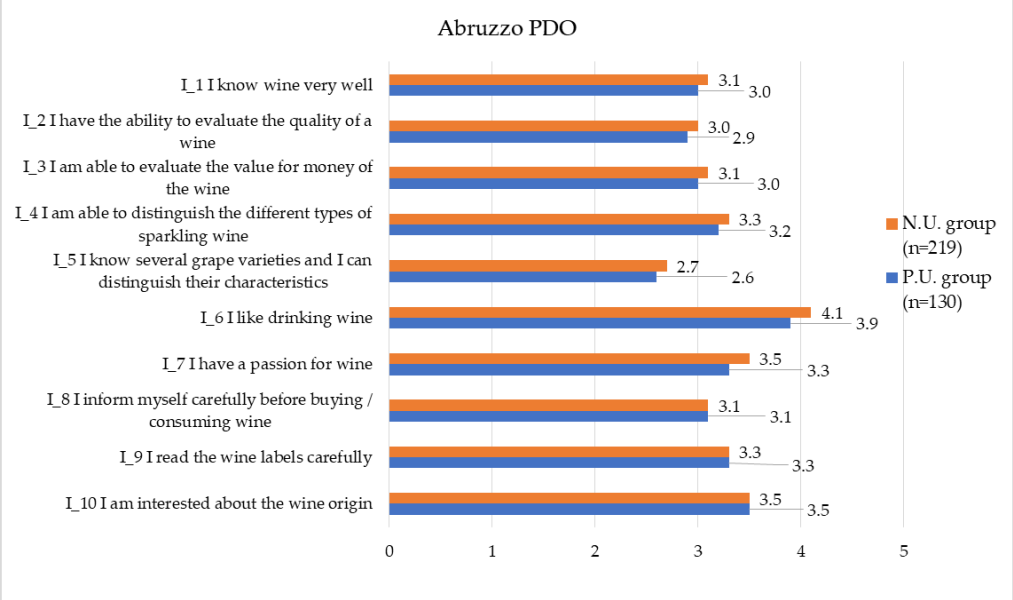


Figure 4. Average values of items related to the perceived knowledge and involvement in wine consumption for the P.U. and N.U. groups for Abruzzo PDO (Likert scale with values from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much); the *t*-test applied between groups reveals no significant differences for all statements.

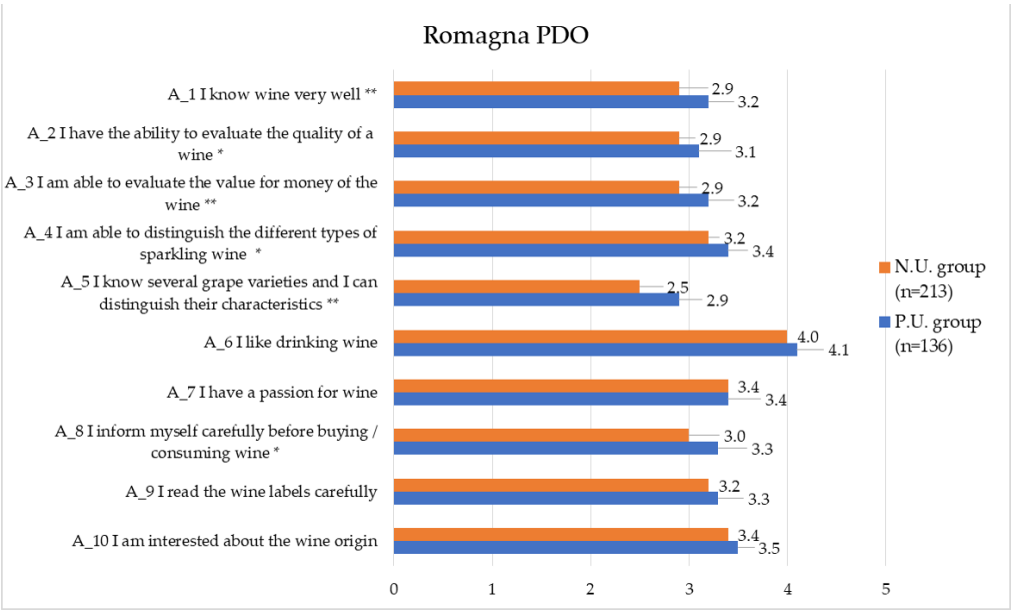


Figure 5. Average values of items related to the perceived knowledge and involvement in wine consumption for the P.U. and N.U. groups for Romagna PDO (Likert scale with values from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much); the *t*-test applied between groups reveals significant differences in some statements (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$).

Concerning the Prosecco PDO, both groups express high interest in wine origin (I_10: μ P.U. group = 3.5; μ N.U. group = 3.4), careful reading of wine labels (I_9: μ P.U. group = 3.3; μ N.U. group = 3.3), a passion for wine (I_7: μ P.U. group = 3.4; μ N.U. group = 3.4) and enjoyment of drinking wine (I_6: μ P.U. group = 4.0; μ N.U. group = 4.0). The knowledge of grape varieties presents lower values (I_5: μ P.U. group = 2.7; μ N.U. group = 2.6), while average values are expressed for the ability to evaluate the wine value for money and wine quality (I_2 and I_3: μ P.U. group = 3.0; μ N.U. group = 3.0).

Similar findings are revealed from the analysis of Abruzzo PDO consumer characteristics, with higher values for the items indicating involvement in wine consumption than for items indicating knowledge.

Otherwise, the perception of Romagna PDO reveals statistically significant differences between the P.U. and N.U. groups for some statements, mainly related to wine knowledge. The P.U. group indicates a higher knowledge of grape varieties and characteristics (μ P.U. group = 2.9; μ N.U. group = 2.5) and a greater capacity to evaluate wine value for money (μ P.U. group = 3.2; μ N.U. group = 2.9). Additionally, the P.U. group slightly outperforms in the ability to evaluate wine quality (μ P.U. group = 3.1; μ N.U. group = 2.9) and exhibits a significantly higher knowledge of wine (μ P.U. group = 3.2; μ N.U. group = 2.9). In addition, the P.U. group exhibits a substantially higher inclination for gathering information before purchase/consumption (μ P.U. group = 3.3; μ N.U. group = 3.0).

In previous studies, the area of origin appears significant for individuals exhibiting high involvement in wine consumption [74]. Bruwer et al. [75] findings indicate that consumer involvement has an influence on the utilization of intrinsic wine cues. While existing research generally aligns with the notion that expertise influences consumer wine evaluations [72] and knowledge helps in distinguishing product features [76], this study indicates that self-perceived knowledge has an impact on only one of the three analyzed designations of origin. Further investigations are needed to understand the role played by personal knowledge and involvement in PDO perceptions.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the consumer perceptions of emerging regional wines with a designation of origin. Wines from two regions traditionally not oriented towards sparkling wine production, Abruzzo and Romagna PDOs, were compared with a well-established product (Prosecco PDO) and with a generic Italian sparkling wine. The consumer perception of the region of origin of these sparkling wines was analyzed in three markets, Italy, the USA, and the United Kingdom, considering the product category and two other intrinsic attributes (color and sugar content). The methodology used in this study tried to simulate more realistic market conditions using conjoint analysis with multiple options for wine attributes. The designation of origin of the product was introduced as an attribute of the product profile, maintaining full compliance with regulatory provisions, thereby maintaining the greatest possible fidelity to real market conditions. This methodological issue can be extended to other PDO wines and other intrinsic/extrinsic attributes.

The conjoint analysis showed that the product category is the factor that, in the set of investigated variables, mostly influences consumer perceptions in all three markets, with higher values in the US, followed by color in the Italian market and the sugar content in the other two markets.

The comparison of consumer perceptions of designations with different market positioning allowed us to explore further the role of the product category in relation to sparkling wines. Even if the importance of the region of origin is coherent with the consolidated literature, this study tries to offer new insight into our comprehension of the role of emerging designations, moving beyond well-established brands to explore consumer perceptions of novel designations. Abruzzo and Romagna are emerging brands for sparkling wine, while Prosecco is a widely recognized Italian sparkling wine in Italy and the international market. This aspect led to the consideration of whether its notoriety could also extend to other emerging products.

This study also offers new insight into the impact of novel wine designations of origin compared with generic sparkling wine without geographical information. The emerging designation of origin labels tested are not at the moment perceived as an additional value compared to the label of a generic sparkling wine without designation. This element is evidenced by the conjoint analysis results, in which the emerging designations of origin do not score better than the generic Italian sparkling wine.

The wine consumer's perception is dynamic and will depend on the ability of PDO brands to grow in market reputation and notoriety. This means that proper marketing strategies are needed for these emerging designations, even considering that PDO wines normally have a higher price than wine without designation of origin.

These findings underscore the need to employ effective strategies for enhancing the visibility of emerging PDO wines, ensuring a clear distinction from wines without a designation of origin. This nuanced understanding of consumer behavior contributes to the broader discourse on the complexities of marketing and branding in the wine industry.

Moreover, through the partition into groups of respondents with positive and negative utilities, it emerges that there is no cumulative effect on the perception of PDO Italian wines: most of the P.U. values of the respondents are associated with only one PDO wine, mainly Prosecco. This means that consumer perception is associated with the reputation of each PDO wine, and even if statistics show a dragging effect of Prosecco on Italian sparkling wines in general, this effect is not applicable directly to the reputation of the other Italian regional sparkling wines. The recognition of a territory as a designation does not in itself imply an upgrade in consumer preferences. PDO wines have the potential to realize sustainable business models that strengthen territorial development through local production cycles and promote consumer awareness of sustainable consumption. However, the territorial systems must make an effort with appropriate communication actions in order to improve brand knowledge and consumer awareness.

The culture of the different countries, even if it is considered in the literature as an important factor that influences food choice, in this case, did not seem to differentiate the analyzed markets in a strong way in relation to the investigated variables. Consumer characteristics and perceptions of the different wines seem quite similar across the three investigated countries, suggesting the presence of an international wine market for sparkling wines. Furthermore, this study examines the interplay between the consumers' perceived knowledge of wine, their involvement in wine consumption, and the perception of each designation of origin. The analysis indicates some distinctions in the perceived knowledge and involvement in wine consumption between the P.U. and N.U. groups, but this aspect cannot be generalized and depends on the specific designation.

In summary, this research provides insights into consumer perceptions of PDO sparkling wines but also contributes to broader discussions on wine market dynamics and consumer behavior.

The major limitations of this study are the small dimensions of the sample and the fact that other variables that can affect product choices are not considered. It represents a preliminary analysis, and the results should be confirmed using a large number of respondents in these three markets. In addition to the variables used, other attributes could be investigated in future research, but always maintaining compliance with the regulatory aspects of the PDOs labeling in the wine sector. These variables could be, for example, the presence of private brands, the alcohol content, and the labeling of specific ingredients or allergens.

Other promising research paths could be the comparison between the consumers' perception of the wine products and their knowledge of the territories of production in terms of reputation about wine quality, environmental aspects, local history and culture and/or other issues connected with food or territory in general.

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