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THE VALUE OF INTANGIBLE RESOURCES AS A DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY FOR ENTERPRISES: THE CASE OF PGI TABLE GRAPE OF MAZZARRONE

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ABSTRACT

The issues of quality and food safety, as a resource for the enterprise that adopts them, and consequently a source of competitive advantage, they are, today, spread far beyond the borders of Europe and receive progressively greater attention at international level, even in virtue of a widespread and more intense consumer attention towards the content of tangible and intangible services that accompany food.

The importance assumed by the new major global players, the change in lifestyle, the role played by large-scale distribution have made “food” one of the globalizing phenomena in absolute terms and, at the same time, one of the areas of consumption of more hedonistic content.

In particular, the agri-food quality production is a topic of considerable interest, not only within the scientific community and the complex entrepreneurial system called into question with numerous production chains involved, but also for the final consumer.

This paper is divided into two parts, the first part will limit the analysis to the literature, the empirical research, economic models with the aim of creating a framework, which does not have the claim to being exhaustive, but placing the reader in a position to acquire a comprehensive overview on the subject, it is able to put out some critical points.

In the second part we will try to assess the importance of quality certifications from the signs of indication of geographical origin (PDO, PGI), as a competitive advantage factor in the analysis of profitability differentials-competitiveness. In particular, it will be analysed the case of the firms of the Consortium for the protection of PGI table grapes of Mazzarrone with particular reference to access to markets, and the recognition to the firm to pay a premium price for the adoption of the distinctive sign of origin, compared to the selling price of a product not certified.

KEYWORDS

typical products, competitive advantage, differentiation strategy, PGI

INTRODUCTION

The modern consumption patterns are gradually leading to a reduction in spatial segmentation of food products due to a strong push for standardization of productive and social foundations. The effect that globalization has on the various producers in the national and especially international agro-food sector, is to force them to seek more and more competitive advantage to keep the number of national end-users, but also to bring more international consumer, even through e-marketing policies.

Business performance arise from a wide variety of endogenous as well as exogenous variables on these enterprises. Increasingly the source of profitability are resources that are neither financial nor of material type. In this context they are included intangible resources, which have played an increasingly important role in determining the outcomes of competitive of enterprises processes. Most enterprises that are successful in the relevant market, are those that almost exclusively have those resources.

These competitive advantages are increasingly to be found in non-price factors, such as quality assurance and food safety (Chinnici et al., 2014).

The goal is to try to limit the asymmetry of information, which means to allow to the final consumer to verify the differences in the quality of products and, accordingly, to have a reference quality / price system that allows consistent choices with its needs. In other words, the guarantee of quality tools represent a tool with which the production enterprise's can segment the food market, differentiate products, linking them to a specific geographical origin, against undifferentiated mass (Porter, 2000). For consumers, the certification provides an additional guarantee of reliability of the labeling.

The agro-food products marked with quality marks assume, then, importance as a means to enhance agricultural production and a territory, although at times, pose various economic, legal and accurate information to consumers.

Lately there has been a significant increase in institutional and private systems of certification of the quality of food products. They offer the opportunity to respond to the changing needs of end users, and provide them with the products with specific qualities, whether they be related to the characteristics of the product or production method.

These systems certainly represent an additional cost for producers, but also a means to communicate the quality of its products to final consumers.

The EU-regulated certification systems, ranging from compliance with compulsory production standards to additional requirements relating to environmental protection, the implications of climate change, animal welfare, the organoleptic quality of the products, the protection of workers, ethical considerations (such as the fair trade), religious, cultural, production methods and origin of the product (Scuderi et al., 2015).

This paper will try to assess the importance of the certification of quality mark of protected geographical indication (PGI), as a competitive factor for profitability differentials-competitiveness of firms that use this collective mark. Specifically, we analyze the case of firms of the Consortium table grape PGI of Mazzarrone, with particular reference to the benefits derived from the differentiation,

that is, the ability to offer a product/service differentiated thanks to the PGI, so that the final consumer is willing to pay a price quid (premium price) greater than the cost of the implementation of differentiation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intangible resources have always assumed a growing role in indicating the outcome of the competitive process for enterprises. The analysis of intangible resources, their training and development, as well as in the relative measurement has always proved somewhat complex. The first difficulty is in the set of conceptual overlap found in the existing literature, since 1896 some scholars identified intangible resources related to intellectual capital (Dicksee & Galbraith, 1896). Others are to be attributed on one hand to terminological differences, on the other to the use of specific theories of different assumptions.

In the document „Technology and Economy”, the OECD (1992), classified the intangible resources, calling them „intangible assets”, in homogeneous categories, with the aim of simplifying the analysis. In the report there was a distinction between the „main” assets from „secondary” or „extra.” In the „main” were included research and development, applied knowledge, education and training, software, marketing, mining explorations, projects and industrial prototypes, patents, licensing, quality certifications and trademarks and copyrights (Vosselman, 1998). Organizational development, industrial design and design, design and implementation of the database, the funding of innovative ideas, more investment in human resource development, etc., were, however identified as „secondary” assets.

Semantic overlap and different theoretical approaches have emphasized the plurality of definitions of intangible resources. The contributions in literature, in recent years, were numerous and also in different assumptions and theories, not least those arising from organisational theories. Even models suitable to the evaluation of these resources have been numerous, implying a different kind of approaches, not always fit for purpose, lacking a common foundational paradigm.

1.1. Main definition of intangible resources

The involvement towards the assimilation of a common nomenclature on „intangible resources”, has been developed according to several approaches, in some cases using an anti-definition, ie describing what they are not (Lev, 2003).

Several authors have tried to outline the nature of intangible resources and their classification (Choo and Bontis, 2002).

According to the International Financial Reporting Standards, intangible assets are: *“an identifiable non-monetary asset without physical substance. An asset is a resource that is controlled by the entity as a result of past events (for example, purchase or self-creation) and from which future economic benefits (inflows of cash or other assets) are expected”*.

Bontis in 1986 connected the intangible resources with intellectual capital „from the acquisition, coding and dissemination of information, to learning new skills through training and development, the redesign of business processes” (Bontis, 2001). Still Podestà in 1993 spoke of specific intangibles, explaining how „... intangibles goods can enjoy their life and be theoretically separated from the economic process in which they came to life: they have a value in itself, refers for example to patents, trademarks. Distinguishing them from generic intangibles that are represented by the know-how, from administrative skills, business and technology, external environment knowledge, knowledge of the main competitors, etc. (Podestà, 1993).

Guatri in 1989 stated that „the intangible goods are a component of growing importance in determining the success”; always the same author in 1997 revealed the presence of a ghost differential, where the intangible resources are largely generated by the company and only partly acquired through market transactions, and in fact are not very visible in terms of patrimonial size and also in terms of-period variation in the value (Guatri in 1997).

The complexity and multiplicity of definitions of intangible resources are shown, too, by Kristandl & Bontis that in 2007, to which reference is made for further study, they tried to group them.

It is noted, therefore, that in the determination of these resources we can identify two levels; the first one covering the intangible elements present in the productions, that is in the products and services offered to the enterprise; the second relates to the intangible elements inherent in the production processes, and thus in the production-specific factors.

The latter is what has been most thoroughly investigated; the concept of „intangible factor of production”. According to some scholars, the factor of production, tangible or intangible, must always be susceptible to economic valuation, ie measurable through monetary terms, while some intangible resources are not, can also be non-material or non-financial. (Ferraris Franceschi, 1994).

1.2. Intangible resources and other theories

If we consider the intangible resources studied from the point of view of *marketing management*, we can refer to the Resource Based View (RBV), which was developed in the '80s and '90s, it can be explained why some enterprises win sustainable competitive advantage positions and achieve income and others do not (Grant, 1996).

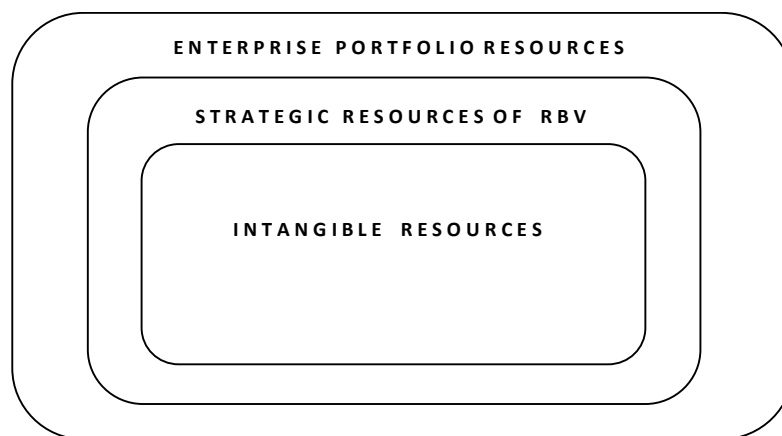
Analysis model that has its roots, and above all, in the enterprise's expansion theory of Penrose (1959), although official dates are related to the article of Wernerfelt 1984.

In this line of research, the enterprise is at the core of the analysis, the company's resources and / or skills are considered the determinants of growth differentials, which arise from critical resources called *firm-specific*. The resources and the enterprise's ability can be a source of competitive advantage and revenue, to the extent that benefit from some features such as the duration, the heterogeneity, the stillness and the inimitability (Barney 1991, 2011; Peteraf, 1993).

From this point of view, a scarce resource can generate a competitive advantage on condition that is idiosyncratic and difficult to imitate, or otherwise difficult to replace by other resources

A theoretical model, which tends to consider the importance of the resources held by enterprises, for obtaining and maintaining competitive advantage and success.

The analysis of intangible assets through the theoretical lens of RBV of firms, is not an easy task. These intangible resources can be confined, as a subset of strategic resources related to RBV, which in turn are a subset of all resources in the portfolio, as shown in Figure. 1.



(Source: our elaboration)

Figure 1. Hierarchical levels of enterprise resources

One progress to the RBV theory is given by the theory of „dynamic capabilities” advanced by Teece (1997), who argues that the competitive ability of enterprises is the joint expression of a plurality of intangible and tangible resources, interacting, using organisational processes routines, which are able to optimize its use.

Enterprises must, therefore, follow the change, adapting, integrating, by reconfiguring the skills and the external and internal resources possessed, as effectively as possible in order to obtain a competitive advantage

That advantage does not consist merely in only extricate the competitive game as claimed Porter, but as a whole of factors and means available to the enterprise and how these factors can be used in a constantly changing market (Teece et al., 1997).

Teece, Pisano e Shuen (1997) define the dynamic capabilities such as the ability of an enterprise to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external expertise in order to rapidly adapt to environmental changes.

The ability to make competition by the enterprise may refer, therefore, to:

- capacity, defined in terms of the resources available;
- capability in terms of particular skills or core competencies that differentiate the enterprise from its competitors by making it more competitive.

The above theory puts together the business functions, such as research and development, technology transfer, intellectual potential of human resources and specific skills (difficult to imitate resources), with the trade secrets, know-how and facilities in 'field of the production.

One other theory, that for the rest of this work is of great importance, is that of the „Conventions” that is based on reputation, an asset of immaterial for enterprises, especially those that produce high-quality goods, the value is given by the recapitalization of price premiums. In fact, maintaining high quality promise is assured by the fear, the same, losing specific capital dedicated to it (Pacciani et al., 2001).

For Shapiro (1983) reputation is associated with an initial investment, the enterprise has to meet to enter the market with high quality, in order to make known their products to final consumers.

Klein and Leffler (1981) relate, however, the reputation of the asset value to specific investments, non-recoverable, made by undertakings on the basis of high quality products. So the level of the high quality of the product price (thanks to the presence of the premium) attracts new enterprises, but its demand is rigid and the generated competition, can not be the price (consumers associate the low prices of low-quality products) . Enterprises are driven off specific investments (brand equity, unrecoverable inputs, expenses in advertising) in order to improve their communication skills to the final consumer of the high quality they offer.

Therefore, the basic hypothesis, related to the conventionalist thought is that enterprises need to coordinate effectively, following common rules, created by a collective cognitive process.

The conventions include a large number of interlocutors. These are composed of a set of people with similar characteristics, that decide to respect the indications that the conventions require them.

In fact, the conventions are reflected in the systems of rules that prescribe the behavior depending on certain circumstances. These rules are necessary to enterprises in order to exchange and produce. There are several types of conventions, but in all cases they involve benefits for economic operators that adopt them, such as reducing the so-called „transaction costs”.

The quality is also studied in the context of the economy of conventions and contracts (Sylvander, 1991).

In this framework, research is developed to propose to endogenous quality, studying the processes of economic development agreements called „quality conventions” (Eymard-Duverney, 1995).

Several interlocutors come to a mutual agreement of the concept of quality. The quality is therefore determined by an external coordination composed of different powers (industrialists, scientists, doctors, consumers and State).

Convention theory asserts, therefore, that there is almost always a gap between perceived quality and product features. Therefore, the quality of conventions can reduce the uncertainty about the definition of the products traded, and resize if not reduce the transaction costs. So the quality can:

- be referred to the standards (industry-standard coordination);
- produce lasting links between economic actors (domestic coordination);
- arise from an adhesion of group of actors in a body of social principles (Civic Convention);
- arise from the operation of the market (commercial coordination).

2. RESULTS OF A SAMPLE SURVEY: THE CASE OF THE DISTRICT OF PGI TABLE GRAPES OF MAZZARRONE

For a long time the economy did not give importance to the issue of quality as it is assumed that the market competition among sellers would guarantee the best quality of goods. The only quality judges were the final consumers, that assessed it according to the utility that it originated them.

Achieve high quality in the agri-food industry has become the main goal, driven by increasingly strong competition and greater consumer interest. In addition, other factors such as the saturation of markets, the expansion of industrial transformation, internationalization and liberalization of trade have contributed and contribute to make it more and more an important factor.

To accentuate the issue of quality also involved the differentiation of goods, as the final consumer is increasingly informed by the producer / seller on the quality of the good. The exchange is therefore asymmetric, resulting profound disturbance to competition mechanisms.

According to Akerlof (1970) to settle the issue should need the help of the institutions, which, thanks to clear rules (guarantees, labeling and quality certification), limit or circumscribe the doubt on the quality.

According to a survey conducted by Ismea, the 79% of consumers believe that products with a quality mark, whether DOC, PGI, DOC or IGT, have added value due to more checks and offer higher quality.

Actually, this work builds on the study in question and analyses the firms that are part of the PGI table grape of the District of Mazzarrone, in order to identify the main causes leading Sicilian wine firms examined to shape their behaviour according to the marketing oriented schemes, it was conducted an *ad hoc* study, based on analysis of marketing techniques.

The table grape growing has had its greatest development in Eastern Sicily, becoming a key part of a wider territory and representing the prevailing culture both in employment terms that income.

The economic importance of such cultivation has emphasized the territory in which it is grown due to the appreciation of consumers, are able to recognize it for its best qualities: color, acinus size and other characteristics such as sweetness and crispness (Timpanaro et al., 2013).

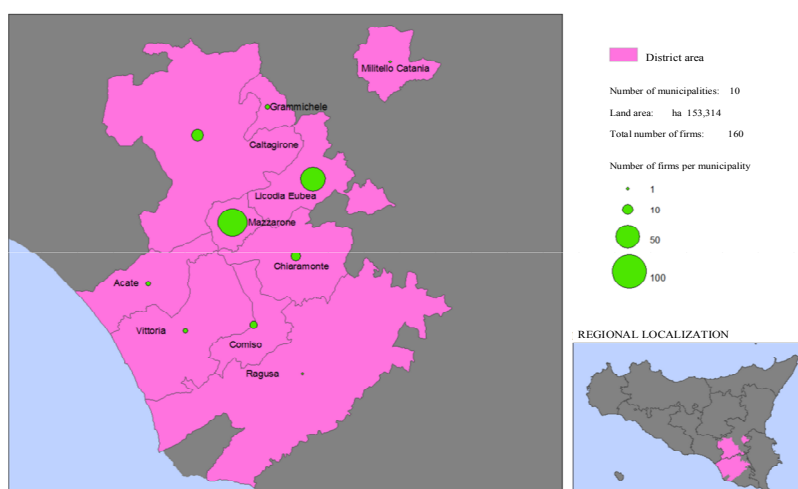
It is in the second half of the 90s, that in order to obtain recognition of these qualities, the process of Community recognition of the name “table grape of Mazzarrone” started. It is constituted the table grape Consortium of Mazzarrone and with the emanation of EC Reg. 617/03 by the EU it has the distinctive mark quality PGI. Finally, it recognizes, the typical product “table grape of Mazzarrone”, which is written in its register of protected designations of origin and protected geographical indications.

The Consortium aims to “protect, enhance and treat the interest on PGI “table grape of Mazzarrone”, according to the approved specifications approved by the competent authorities, to enhance the production of the Consortium members, to organize a control system according to the purpose of the PGI, to promote technological innovation, to activate and use applied research” (Marotta, 2013). The area of production PGI table grape of Mazzarrone, includes several municipalities of two provinces, as shown in Figure 2, a production area which has its center of gravity both geographical and socio-economic in the municipality of Mazzarrone.

The area bounded by the product specification of the table grape of Mazzarrone covers over 18,000 hectares, with a surface area of around 13,000 hectares.

The activities that the Consortium proposes to implement its consortium members, ranging from the organization and implementation of measures aimed at enhancing the product, the promotion of initiatives aimed at the promotion and dissemination of the mark of table grape PGI Mazzarrone.

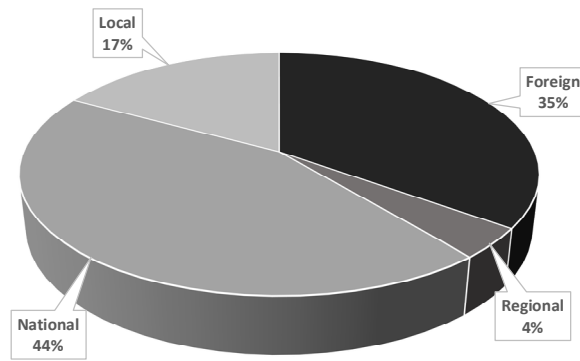
Today, after having captured the local and regional market, the distribution and the relative commercialization of table grape of Mazzarrone, it has also managed to cross national borders, supported by intense commercial cooperation relationships established between different economic operators of its production chain.



(Source: Spanpanato D. Timpanaro G., 2007)

Figure 1. Localization of Grape District PGI Mazzarrone

Moreover, thanks to the participation in fairs and exhibitions, both nationally and internationally, the Consortium has managed to expand sales markets, to the point of being present on several European markets such as Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain, Benelux, Austria, Denmark, France and Russia and outside Europe like Canada. The distribution of the product is represented in Figure 3.



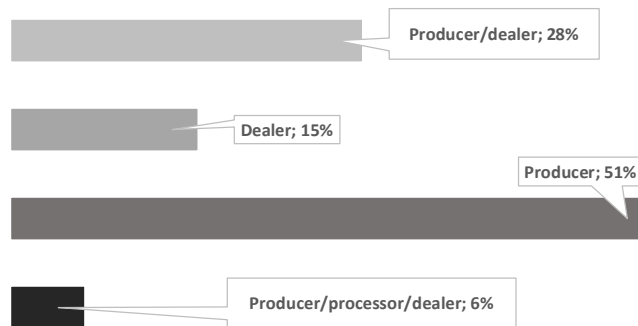
(Source: our elaboration from data collected through direct surveys)

Figure 3. Sales markets for the firms consortium

The first and necessary step to analyse the investigated context is the definition and identification of the reference sample. A survey was in fact developed through two distinct stages, however, they are complementary and overlapping. The first was the acquisition of documentation concerning general characteristics of marketing, considering mainly the elements of the marketing mix of the investigated firms taken in order to implement its strategic choices, in relation to its marketing plan. A plan, which is essential to improve their competitiveness in a market in constant evolution, in order to achieve, for each firm, the corresponding value chain, through the integration of the different stages of the production chain (production, processing, transformation packaging), where it can deliver a substantial proportion of the value added of the sector and, within the territory in which it is located, generate employment and income, including through the promotion of the enhancement processes, consisting of industrial and / or service (market studies, applied research, tourism, crafts, etc.) (Bellia & Pilato, 2014).

The second phase, of greater size and commitment, was only launched with a specific methodology, using *ad hoc* questionnaire, which was administered to a sample of wine-growing firms located in the production area investigated. The method and the results of this survey, was conducted in the second half of 2016, which it has been dedicated to this part of the study.

We have interviewed only firms registered in the Consortium of PGI table grape Mazzarrone, and these which proved to be certified. The selected sample include n. 70 enterprises, which carry out various activities, and as shown in Figure 4, 51% are firms that carry out production only, 28% are both producers and traders, only 15% of the sample commercialize and the remaining 6% operate in all sectors of the industry (production, processing and commercialization).



(Source: our elaboration from data collected through direct surveys)

Figure 4. Main activities carried out by entrepreneurs

The *ad hoc* questionnaire consists of several and integrated sections, and it is structured in the following areas:



(Source: our elaboration from data collected through direct surveys)

Figure 5. Main sections of the questionnaire administered to firms

Through the questionnaire, there was proposed to identify, in addition to general structural data, information relating to the environment and emotional relationship, which essentially derive the learning processes, the dissemination of knowledge and innovations.

Data analysis showed how important it is by respondents, the level of confidence in the quality certification system, as an intangible resource, able to differentiate the product by creating a development process in the system under investigation, hence the reason why it is important to educate (potential) customers about a product. Séraphin, Butcher and Korstanje (2016), refer to this approach, as a subtle marketing strategy. Here, we summarise the key data resulting from the questionnaire, leaving out important information such as the structural characteristics of the firms interviewed, the market characteristics and cultivation.

With regards to competitive factors and strategic decisions, results about the analysis of skills and resources owned by firms under study, show the intention of the entrepreneurs to expand into new markets, 79% said they would place the product in new markets (national and / or international), the remaining 21% would be satisfied with the markets where they are present and do not want to get into other systems. Preferred markets appear to be those forming part of the European Union, but a certain percentage of entrepreneurs would try and expand in non-EU markets, such as Switzerland and Russia. Regarding the strategic choices was asked to the entrepreneurs what factors turn out to be decisive for the success. Figure 6 shows the main results, which point out how the quality of the product (30,2%) the most important competitive factor for entrepreneurs, confirming the absolute goodness of grapes produced.

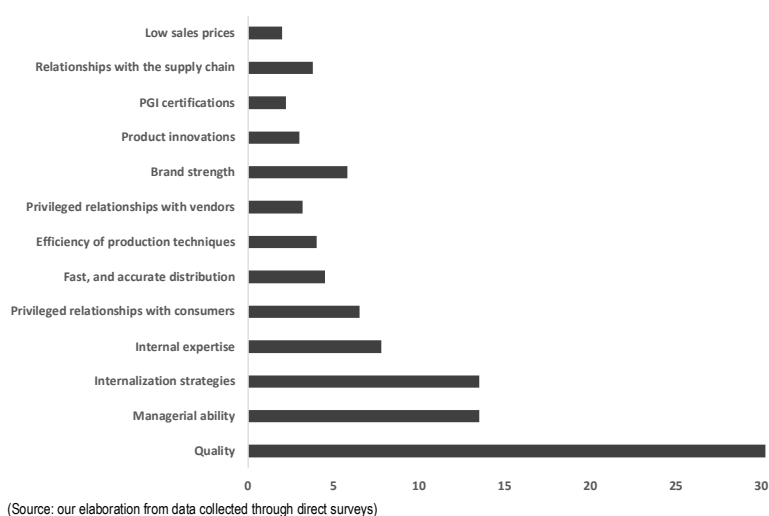


Figure 6. Classification of strategic choices provided by the entrepreneurs interviewees

One point to be noted is that the PGI quality certification (2,2%), it would not seem to be a strong point for the entrepreneurs interviewed.

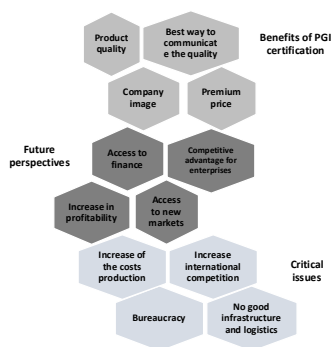
Other important factors are the managerial skills and the internationalization strategies with 13,5%, demonstrating the importance of foreign markets, following internal skills (7.8%), and gradually other strategic decisions.

Concerning the value of certification as an intangible resource, it was implemented a Swot analysis. A technique developed by more than 50 years, in favor of the definition of business strategy, which has evolved to support territorial diagnosis and also how to support the choices of public intervention (Community, national and regional programmes).

The purpose of the analysis carried out by us has tried to define the opportunities for the development of a territorial area, resulting from the enhancement of strengths and a containment of weaknesses in light of the opportunities and risks arising from external factors.

It was asked to the entrepreneurs what message would derive from the use of the PGI product certification.

The Figure 7 shows the result, which highlights that motivation absolutely pushes firms to get certified in order to communicate the quality of the product, followed by a business' image and raising the possibility of obtaining a premium price, resulting from differentiation strategies related to the use of the PGI mark.



(Source: our elaboration from data collected through direct surveys)
 Figure 7. Value of PGI certification provided by the entrepreneurs interviewees

The PGI quality certification is considered by entrepreneurs as an important differential strategy, however, would entail an increase in production costs for obtaining a superior quality. Other critical issues for the territory and for the Consortium firms to protect table grapes PGI of Mazzarrone, would result from too much bureaucracy, and a level of infrastructure and the logistics highly in deficit.

CONCLUSION

With the evolution of the economic system towards liberalization of agricultural trade, particularly with European countries that overlook the Mediterranean and North African ones, with the European and Italian market ever more deeply affected by crisis and deep transformation process, it was necessary to create organisational structures to share and compete each other.

In order to ensure the authenticity of production methods of these agricultural products, particularly for food use, which bind very strongly with a specific geographical area were introduced in the 90s, at EU level, the PDO, PGI or TSG, as well as organic farming. In this paper, starting from the various definitions of intangible resources, we have placed emphasis on differentiation strategy related to the use of quality certification as a factor of competitive advantage for enterprises that adopt them.

Business performance arise, increasingly, from a wide range of endogenous as well as exogenous variables to the same companies. The origin of profitability are resources that are neither financial nor of material type. Intangible resources have acquired an increasingly vital role in specifying the outcomes of competitive processes (Lombardi et al., 2013). Most enterprises that are successful in the market are those that almost exclusively have such resources. In Italy there are 287 recognized products with PDO, PGI and TSG, about 22% of the total of the denominations and indications registered in the EU registers, which are in total in 1351 (2016 data).

The ability to differentiate with higher levels of quality is the only possibility of comparison with competitors that are larger, have a tangible and intangible resources more and are able to have the lowest production costs.

The differentiation strategy is based on the enterprise's ability to offer products with unique features or at least highly distinctive. There is a tendency to sensitive consumers to quality products and willingness to pay a premium price for goods with superior characteristics.

The major difficulties in using this strategy are: a) the few investments in research and development needed to achieve the quality due, b) the communication process of the qualitative difference to consumers, c) the vulnerability to imitation strategies and competition d) the continuous changes in consumer preferences.

The empirical analysis showed that there are consumers who seek gratification in tangible and intangible goods which can not be found in the so-called "commodities", but in specialty and typicity. In this scenario it takes place a gradual differentiation of taste that has led to the appearance and consolidation of increasingly personalised scales of perception, connected to life styles and various types of pursued gratification from the possession / consumption of certain goods (Pilato et al., 2015).

It is in this scenario that is placed the consumption of local products, capable of ensuring high organoleptic and sensory quality, appropriate health and hygiene guarantees as well as links with territories rich in history and tradition. This goal has been achieved by the EU thanks to the quality certification (PDO, PGI, TSG) which guarantee to the product those special security features, healthiness and traceability that otherwise could not be proved.

In conclusion, the grapes production in Sicily, in recent times, has been confronted with major new challenges, such as managing the productive and commercial problems in an increasingly complex and competitive context.

The Consortium for the protected table grape of Mazzarrone, since its establishment, has managed to win certain challenges, in fact, has led to a qualitative change, wanted, primarily by the consortium members. This direction has led to an improvement of the conditions of production and of commercialization, with obvious economic advantages achieved especially with exporting to new markets.

The internationalization and globalization of markets has accentuated a phenomenon of hyper-competition between both firms belonging to the same geographical area as well as at different areas.

The analysis that we conducted on the Consortium of PGI table grape of Mazzarrone has highlighted that focusing on the PGI quality certification of the table grapes product has been, and in future will still play a major competitive advantage for enterprises that adopt it, although there are significant problems at infrastructural and logistical level.

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