Article

Social Commerce in the Wine Sector: An Exploratory Research Study of the Italian Market

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Abstract: The development of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, along with the emergence of wikis, blogs, online communities, and social networks, has rapidly transformed e-commerce. This phenomenon is commonly known as social commerce, an evolution of e-commerce characterized by a strong customer orientation. The aim of this paper is to understand the support of social commerce for e-commerce. We conducted an exploratory analysis of the Italian wine market via in-depth interviews with experts in the wine business: three wine producers and three companies running an online wine business. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed, and their content was analyzed through content analysis. In particular, an analysis grid was created, following a closed procedure, with an ex-ante definition of the categories of analysis. Our results reveal that the COVID-19 outbreak has given a significant boost to digital transformation and online purchases in the wine sector. While some operators in the sector have merely undergone this change, others have been riding the wave, trying to benefit from it.

Keywords: e-commerce; social commerce; wine sector; Italian market; wine producers; online wine businesses

1. Introduction

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and Web 2.0, together with the growing popularity of social media, have radically transformed the world of the Internet and the way of doing shopping [1,2]. In 2021, 4.66 billion people had access to the Internet (+7.3% compared to 2020), among whom 60.4 million were in Italy (−0.2%), and 4.20 billion users accessed social networks (+13%), of whom 41 million were in Italy (+5.7%) [3].

The growing use and popularity of social media have marked the transition of the Internet from a commercial and marketing tool [4] to a facilitator of social interactions, especially business-to-consumer (B2C) and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) [5], with repercussions for the world of e-commerce.

The development of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, along with the introduction of wikis, blogs, communities, and social networks [6–9], has rapidly transformed e-commerce from a product-oriented environment to a customer-oriented social environment [10]. This phenomenon is commonly known as social commerce (SC), characterized by strong customer orientation and owing to which consumers can spontaneously facilitate the sale of products and services through sharing and promoting offers on their social networks, transferring market power from companies to customers [11].

The wine sector, with its winemaking secular tradition and its dynamics [12–16], has been relatively slow to adopt social media marketing strategies, although the transition to the digital marketplace have had an impact on it [17,18].

It should be noted that online wine consumers encounter a few problems when attempting to purchase wine, such as the different state laws governing wine shipments,

taxation, age verification, and the significant heterogeneity of the wine industry [19,20]. Despite these limitations, online sales of wine and spirits are increasing year by year. Although in 2009, they represented only 1% of sales globally in the off-trade channel, in 2019, the share rose to 7% (approximately 2 billion bottles). Furthermore, in 2021, due to the COVID-19 outbreak—which led to the closure of the hospitality industry and made large-scale distribution and e-commerce the major players in the business—online alcohol sales have grown by 42% compared to the previous year.

On the business side, it is possible to highlight the traditional B2B approach of wine companies: those who seek contact with the consumer—and have adopted e-commerce and SC—seem unable to effectively adapt these tools to their overall marketing strategy [21,22]. Considering the business model as the logic with which the company is organized to create value, this point is essential to reflect on the sustainability of the business models of wine companies.

First, the giants of large retailing quickly added an online sales channel. While not specialists in the wine business, they have exploited the competitive advantage of a wide range of wines and solid commercial and logistical skills. In addition, a series of 2.0 distributors specializing in wine and spirits were born from a base of high digital and communication skills. In Italy, these competitors are the leaders in wine e-commerce. Finally, third-party platforms have been created, mainly dedicated to satisfying the enormous demand for information from millions of wine lovers worldwide. These platforms are rapidly changing their business model from information brokers to wine distributors.

In line with the above, this paper aims to understand the support of SC for e-commerce. We performed an exploratory analysis of the Italian market by conducting in-depth interviews with experts in the wine business: wine producers—three family businesses with a secular tradition, who are producers and sellers of fine wines and focalized on the on-trade distributive channel—and three companies running in the online wine business, each following a different business model: (1) traditional, (2) focalized on services, and (3) brokerage.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section consists of a literature review on SC, without claiming to be exhaustive, focusing on the wine sector. In the last 10 years, SC has emerged as a new paradigm. With this term, we do not intend to refer only to the initiatives aiming at integrating sales processes into social platforms, such as in the case of Facebook Shops or shops on Instagram, but also to a much broader and more complex phenomenon. There is no universally accepted definition of SC [2,23–25]. The term was first introduced in 2005 by Yahoo! with the launch of the Shoposphere and the "Pick Lists" feature, a virtual place where people could share experiences, receive advice, find products and services, and, subsequently, buy [26,27].

Jascanu et al. [28] used the term SC for the first time in the literature in 2007, defining it as a new way of carrying out e-commerce that combines commercial activities with online social networking in order to facilitate the sale of products and services. Since then, numerous definitions have been developed that focus on different elements of SC. Some have defined it as a combination of e-commerce and social media sites to facilitate the sale and purchase of products and services [4,10,25,29]. Others defined SC as a new form of e-commerce mediated by ICT and Web 2.0 infrastructures that, owing to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) mechanisms, provides concrete support for the interactions and contribution of the user-generated contents (UGC) [7,10,23,24,26,30–34]. Finally, others have emphasized the social, creative, participatory, and collaborative aspects of SC, which allows people to create and share content, information, and experiences [11,35–38].

Focusing on the characteristics of SC, according to Dennison et al. [23], SC, intended as "the concept of word-of-mouth applied to e-commerce [. . .] the marriage of a retailers' products and the interaction of shoppers with the contents," can be understood as the combination of three factors: products, online UGC and e-WOM, and the interaction

between UGC and consumers. From this perspective, SC mechanisms can only function by offering to users, in addition to product descriptions and specifications, a multiplicity of features that facilitates interaction and the sharing of knowledge, ideas, thoughts, and opinions with others.

Marsden [26], on the other hand, systematically organized SC by identifying six dimensions:

1. *Social shopping*: tools for the simultaneous sharing of online purchases between a plurality of users and at the very moment of the transaction;
2. *Rating and reviews*: independent evaluations referring to a specific product or service;
3. *Referral and recommendation systems*: personal recommendations and referrals within social networks and communities to which certain content belongs;
4. *Forum and community*: reliable platforms and discussion sections that are managed by a moderator and are aimed at facilitating interaction and contact between users and between users and businesses;
5. *Social media optimization*: production and promotion of UGC through social media;
6. *Social advertising and social apps*: content produced by the company and posted on social media platforms in advertising or social applications form.

Furthermore, Liang and Turban [32] distinguished two configurations of SC:

1. E-commerce platforms with social functions: traditional e-commerce sites that have added social features and the possibility of connecting consumers with their social networks. These sites can better understand the needs and requirements of their customers and offer products and services capable of fully satisfying them;
2. Social platforms with transactional features: social media and social network platforms that allow their users to conclude the purchase directly on the reference social platform through the addition of commercial functions.

Finally, Huang and Benyoucef [24] introduced a helpful model for understanding the design of SC sites that consists of four fundamental components:

1. *Individual*: the element that includes user profiles, as well as all UGC (posts, comments, likes, ratings, etc.);
2. *Conversation*: the component through which individuals express themselves through interactions with other users and which allows the multiplication of UGC;
3. *Community*: the place where conversations and interactions between users come to life;
4. *Commerce*: the element referring to all commercial activities typical of traditional electronic commerce: the order, the transaction, and pre- and post-purchase activities.

Given the complexity of the topic, SC is well suited to multidisciplinarity and has been studied in various scientific fields, including psychology, sociology, computer science, and marketing [24]. Analyzing SC in terms of the psychology of social shopping revealed that people are influenced in their online shopping by UGCs in online communities [26]. According to sociological studies, SC concerns the use of web-based social communities by e-commerce companies, focusing on the impact of social influences on user interactions [30]. Shifting the focus to computer science, SC was also examined based on social technologies with interactive platforms [10,39,40]. Finally, from the marketing perspective, SC has been treated as a trend in online marketplaces in which companies use social media or Web 2.0 to support consumers' purchasing process and behavior [41].

Consumer use of social media and online shopping in the wine business has only been marginally explored in the literature. Few studies have focused on SC in the wine sector, and most of the studies on the use of social media have concerned the influence of the purchasing behavior on wine consumers [18,42].

Some studies have analyzed the use of social media from a business perspective, investigating how wineries use these platforms for their business interests [43–47]. Others have involved wineries' use of social media, primarily to inform current customers about upcoming events and to advertise potential customers [48,49]. Some studies focus on

Italian wineries where social media are seen as an opportunity to improve wine branding strategies or as an innovative basis for market segmentation [50], to exploit downloadable applications for mobile commerce [51] or use other software to collect further relevant information on the market [52].

Finally, Leigon [53] focused on the role that social media play in the sale of wine as e-WOM (in the form of recommendations from colleagues, friends, colleagues, etc.), which effectively guides the buying behavior of wine buyers. Some have argued that Twitter can improve the generation of soft value—the sharing of feelings and perceptions about a brand or winery—by wine consumers but not hard value; that is, sales resulting from the use of a particular social medium [54]. Others have demonstrated that Facebook fans of a brand show greater purchase intentions than those who do not use Facebook [45]. It has also been claimed that social media represent an important alternative to search engines in terms of consumers looking for information relating to wine on the Web [22] and that consumers using Facebook want to find product information and images and want to be told by wineries about interesting events and upcoming promotions [55]. Studies that focused on millennials have argued that the use of social media is aimed at getting to know wine brands and reducing the risks associated with purchases [56], while the use of social media has also been shown to influence the purchasing behavior of online consumers and encourages consumers to pay higher prices for a bottle of wine [57].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Objectives

The aim of this paper is to understand the support of SC for e-commerce. We performed an exploratory analysis of the support of SC for e-commerce based on semi-structured interviews conducted online with two small groups: on the side of production, wineries, and on the side of distributors, online wine retailers.

The study comprised two phases:

1. The first involved an exploratory analysis of the modalities of the use (or lack thereof) of e-commerce in general, and SC in particular, by three prominent wine producers;
2. The second involved an exploratory analysis of the activities carried out in terms of e-commerce and SC by three large online wine retailers and their knowledge of the purchasing behavior of the online wine shopper.

3.2. Sample

Following a purposive sampling procedure, we included two groups in our sample: one composed of three prominent wine producers and the other of three large online wine businesses. For privacy reasons, the names of the interviewees will not be disclosed, and the descriptive data of the companies will be presented in cumulative or mean form. The wine producers are family businesses with a more than secular tradition who are producers and sellers of fine wines and are focused on the on-trade distributive channel. In 2020, there were 106 wineries in Italy, with more than EUR 10 million in revenues [58]. Our sample consists of a top 5, a top 30, and a top 100 winery in Italy, which have a cumulative revenue of EUR 298.8 million, 677 employees, and 37.7 million bottles produced, with a share of 37% in mean revenue in Italy and 63% in exportations and a mean of 120 foreign countries served.

The online wine businesses we interviewed are operators in online wine selling, with a cumulative market share greater than 30%. In 2020, they had a cumulative revenue of EUR 44.7 million and 60 employees and served 460,100 customers. The three online wine businesses were chosen because they follow different business models:

- A traditional online model of distribution (product-intensive e-commerce). This model favors the rationalization of both stocks and logistics, using one or a few warehouses (located in strategic areas) and processing orders based on the availability of the wines in a range of a few working days;

- A model focused on the service (service-intensive e-commerce) concerning the delivery in a very short time and at the correct temperature of even a single bottle to the address specified by the online buyer. This model requires local warehouses, city by city, to be able to sustain the high level of service and cannot sustain the assortment breadth and depth of the previous business model.
- A brokerage model (wine marketplace), of intermediation between supply and demand, similar to Booking.com, in which each winery, based on a standard format, manages its own offer showcase. The marketplace proposes the offer in different countries and manages ordering and shipping. A commission is retained on each sale for all services provided to the winery. This model does not require significant investments in infrastructure other than the technology platform and is rapidly scalable compared to the other two.

The choice to include both producers and companies specializing in online sales in the sample is motivated by the need to have the point of view of all the players involved in SC.

3.3. Questionnaires

Two different questionnaires were used to collect the research data for wine producers and online wine retailers. Following previous studies, for wine producers—who are not very familiar with e-commerce and SC—the interview was mainly centered on the digital transformation and the impact it has had on B2C and business-to-business (B2B) relations and digital marketing. For online wine retailers, the interviews focused on the profiles of online wine buyers, e-commerce, and SC. For SC, the elements investigated were developed based on the four components individuated for planning and understanding an SC system by Huang and Benyoucef [24]. Each questionnaire was composed of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

3.4. Methods (Data Analysis)

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and then transcribed. Subsequently, the contents were analyzed through content analysis, a qualitative research method used to understand the content of textual data through a methodical classification process [59], already used in SC literature [25,60–63]. In particular, an analysis grid was created following a "closed procedure" (i.e., with the ex-ante definition of the categories of analysis), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of analysis.

Description	Categories of Analysis
Wine producers	Digital transformation: vision, strategy, organizational structure, and culture
	Digital transformation: influence on B2B and B2C marketing processes
	Digital marketing operational activities
	Data collection on online wine buyer
Online wine businesses	The online wine buyer's profile in Italy: pre-purchase behavior, during purchase and post-purchase
	Social commerce: vision and strategy
	Social commerce: the active involvement of buyers (dialogue with brands, producers, or each other)
	Operational activities
	Social commerce: operational activities

The analysis of the interview texts was carried out using a thematic approach and was performed first for the interviews with the wine producers, and then for the online wine retailers.

4. Results and Discussions

This section will discuss the results of the analysis for the wine producers and online wine businesses.

4.1. Wine Producers

In this section, the results of the three in-depth interviews with the wine producers are presented in sections corresponding to the category of analysis. We labeled the top 5 winery with 1, the top 30 winery with 2, and the top 100 winery with 3.

4.1.1. Digital Transformation: Vision, Strategy, Organizational Structure, and Culture

In this section, we discuss the opinions of the wine producers regarding the medium- and long-term impact of new digital technologies on their business model, the strategies implemented to seize the opportunities made available by the digital transformation, the explicit responsibilities regarding the corporate digital transformation process and the level at which they are placed (top management or operational, and the proactivity of the company on a cultural level in the process of change or whether there are elements of resistance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led companies to seek and establish contact with the customer, a contact that was previously almost nonexistent (traditionally, the wine producer always had the trader as a direct interlocutor). For some, this happened with the creation of direct e-commerce, and for others, through the creation of a wine club. However, the online shopper was ready for the digital transformation before companies, who are trying to fill this gap with various investments in information and communication technologies. An interviewee highlighted the company's work to establish more immediate and direct relationships along the supply chain—a digital asset management (DAM) project made it possible to formalize and codify information on logistical and packaging aspects concerning its products and marketing.

Businesses have discovered the potential of digitalization and now consider it an opportunity. In fact, new digital technologies make it possible to strengthen relationships through strategic channels, particularly with key wine shops, restaurants, and influencers, but approaching the consumer is still difficult for the wine producer. The interviewed wine producers were forced to turn to social networks and search for specialized resources.

From a strategic point of view, according to wine producers, digital transformation will make omnichannel management more critical. This challenge involves searching for adequate and consistent positioning on all channels without losing brand value. From the point of view of responsibilities, two of the companies stated that they have specific roles dedicated to managing their online presence; these positions are located at the operational level (in one case, a committee for digital transformation has been created). In contrast, the other company does not have someone with the specific role of digital transformation manager. However, the activities are disintegrated between different business functions: sales and commercial (management of third-party online channels), strategy and development (corporate e-commerce management), and communication (management of social channels).

In cultural terms, the change, which will take from three to five years, brings a significant challenge: all company human resources (even those who resist today) will converge toward process integration via the enabling elements brought by new technologies.

4.1.2. Digital Transformation: Influence on B2B and B2C Marketing Processes

In this section, we discuss the opinions of the wine producers regarding the relevance of trade marketing (B2B) and shopper and consumer marketing (B2C) processes aimed di-

rectly at the online wine buyer and final consumer, the objectives expected by the company from the shopper and consumer marketing (B2C) processes, and the influence of the digital transformation in the marketing (B2C) processes.

In terms of trade marketing (B2B), almost all the corporate marketing investments were B2B (for example, tasting evenings, wine dinners, training of the sales network partner, incoming vs. trade and importers).

In terms of shopper and consumer marketing (B2C), the situation is different. Little has been done to engage in dialogue with shoppers/consumers. The COVID-19 outbreak has accelerated the overcoming of any reticence tregarding the (prospective) value of creating a direct communication channel with the online wine buyer/final consumer based on digital technologies. For example, one wine producer stated that, for the first time in 2021, a budget explicitly dedicated to digital marketing was allocated. In another case, a significant investment project was started with a communication agency, an authentic brand communication boutique specialized in B2C, to help the company define a specific language to use with final consumers that is centered on new digital technologies. The last wine producer reported that the digital change concerns the production of content, which has increased exponentially (both in terms of quantity and variety), in line with the increase in the number of channels and the type of target and communication style. Social media played a decisive role: Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter—B2C channels (with differentiated targets); LinkedIn—B2B professional relations; YouTube—educational function; and TikTok—discovering what will happen in 10 years.

4.1.3. Digital Transformation: Digital Marketing Operational Activities

In this section, the operational activities implemented in the company are presented (Table 2) and assigning a score from 0 (absent) to 10 (strategic activity for the company). It should be noted that a blank space means that the respondent did not give an answer.

Table 2. Digital transformation: digital marketing operational activities.

Description	1	2	3
Direct e-commerce	6	8	9
E-commerce on marketplace	3	7	7
Lead generation campaigns	0	8	7
Lead-lists purchase	0	0	5
Blogging and content marketing activities	6	7	8
Video content marketing	6	7	9
Newsletter	1	10	10
Direct e-mail marketing (DEM)	6	10	9
Search engine optimization (SEO)	4	7	9
Search engine marketing (SEM)	1	7	9
Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising	0	8	8
Social media marketing (SMM)	8	8	10
Retargeting	1	7	8
Affiliate marketing (Pay-per-conversion)	0	3	8
Customer relationship marketing (CRM)	3	10	10
Big data for marketing	0	7	10
Artificial intelligence for marketing		3	9
Geo-marketing (geo-localized actions)		9	8
Augmented reality (AR) for marketing		3	8
Virtual reality (VR) for marketing		5	8
Online wine tasting meeting		10	9
Online wine selling meeting		1	9
Other (funnel marketing)			

In terms of operational activities, greater importance was given to social media marketing, which was considered important by all the three respondents (8, 8, and 10). Direct e-mail marketing and online wine tastings receiving the same score in the individual re-

sponses (6, 10, and 9), meaning that they are considered at the same level of importance. Direct e-commerce received three similar scores (6, 8, and 9), suggesting a relatively homogeneous value, and CRM was considered critical by the last two (with a score of 10) and not very important by the first one (with a score of 3). The interviewees assigned little importance to purchasing lead lists: in two out of three cases, the strategy was absent, while the third respondent gave a score of 5.

One wine producer stated that, at present, they do not have databases that profile the data of online wine buyers and that CRM is used in a very superficial and basic way. The information is used mainly for initiatives aimed at specific targets. For the rest, buyer e-mails and the event in which the customer was met are recorded, but no other information regarding the online wine buyer (gender, age, etc.) is collected. For example, if the same person visits the company and then buys online, it is tracked twice, because there is no data integration.

4.1.4. Collection of Data on Online Wine Buyers

In this last section, we discuss the opinions of the wine producers regarding their business experiences with online wine sales, the marketing intelligence processes expressly dedicated to the collection of primary data on their online wine buyers (shoppers), the presence of an explicit definition of the corporate target groups in terms of online shoppers, and the implementation of a form of integration between e-commerce and social networking as part of the company's online marketing and sales activities.

Wineries are far behind on the topic of integrated management of data on online wine buyers. Their marketing efforts and data collection have always been focused on the trade. At a strategic level, price is used as a fundamental positioning tool, ensuring—from an omnichannel perspective—that price also holds up on the other channels.

4.2. Online Wine Businesses

In this section, the results of the three in-depth interviews with the online wine businesses are presented in sections corresponding to the category of analysis. We labeled the traditional online distribution model with 1, the model focused on the service with 2, and the brokerage model with 3.

4.2.1. The Online Wine Buyer's Profile in Italy: Pre-Purchase Behavior, Purchase Behavior, and Post-Purchase Behavior

In this section, we discuss the opinions of the online wine businesses regarding the demographic, socio-economic, product knowledge, and behavioral profiles of online wine buyers in the pre-purchase phase, in the purchase phase (mobile vs. laptops purchases, average time spent on e-commerce, average expenditure per bottle, per purchase—average cart—and per year), and post-purchase (satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement).

From a demographic and socio-economic point of view, the online wine buyer is a man (with a 60% probability, on average) who is 40 years old (with an interval ranging from 20 to 70 years) with a medium-high income. Online buyers generally live in the city center and are graduates, typically freelancers, entrepreneurs, and consultants (white- and blue-collar).

On average, the online wine buyer is not very competent in wine, as one respondent stated that they ask for assistance via the chatbot to get advice and understand the differences among the vintages and the various products.

Moving on to the behavioral profile in the pre-purchase phase, Table 3 shows the relevance given to each element by the three online wine businesses. A blank space means that the respondent did not give an answer.

Table 3. Behavioral profile in the pre-purchase phase.

Description	1	2	3
Pre-purchase psychological involvement (complexity of the decision-making process)	2	2	8
Relevance of breadth and depth of the assortment offered	5	5	7
Relevance of "peer-to-peer" influence in the decision-making process (credibility)	6	7	10
Relevance of "the expert" influence in the decision-making process (reliability)	6	3	9
Relevance of winery's brand	4	4	8
Relevance of the wine's name	2	6	7
Relevance of price	5	6	8
Relevance of promotional campaigns	3	0	10
Relevance of e-commerce site design	6	8	10
Relevance of e-commerce site response speed	5	8	10
Relevance of delivery times	6	9	8
Relevance of brand's reputation (e-commerce)	7	9	9
Relevance of the guarantee/possibility of returning a "defective" bottle	3	4	9
Other			

The most significant relevance was given to brand reputation (scores of 7, 9, and 9), while the lowest was assigned to pre-purchase psychological involvement. In the latter case, wineries 1 and 2 considered it not very important (with a score of 2), while the third respondent considered it almost critical (with a score of 8).

Regarding behavior in the purchasing phase, the three companies represent three different profiles, in some ways complementary and which reflect their business models:

- The first was biased in favor of the desktop (70% desktop vs. 30% mobile);
- The second was biased in favor of mobile (95% vs. 5% for purchases);
- The third company had an almost balanced view (55% desktop, 40% mobile, and 5% tablet).

The average time spent shopping online is 5 min, with an average expense of EUR 13 per bottle, EUR 81 per purchase (average cart), and with an average annual expense (in terms of repurchases) that varied significantly among the three respondents (from a few loyal customers with three purchases per year, to many loyal customers with eight purchases per year).

In terms of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement, the responses were somewhat heterogeneous:

- The first company stated that, compared to the first years of activity, it stopped couponing to generate reorders, investing instead in the strength of the (store) brand. This is in contrast to the wine producers' brands, who aim to build store loyalty. The company's vision is that the market is very fluid, their customers have them as their primary reference point, but not infrequently—especially during a flash promotion—their customers shop on the e-commerce websites of their competitors;
- The second respondent stated that they ensure customer satisfaction by keeping promises made to customers. They have a "loyalty program" based on an internal virtual currency and a series of actions that allow customers to collect "rewards" to be spent on their app to purchase additional bottles. The main actions for collecting these rewards are buying, telling others about their experience, and participating in the challenges they organize. Furthermore, the company never uses the price lever directly to incentivize new orders but offers customers many opportunities to pay less and/or have something more;
- The third interviewee stated that their company has few tools at the moment but is creating some to bring their customers closer. They have active promos, newsletters,

and chatbots that offer the sommelier's advice and are planning guides, gift cards, cellar discounts, gadgets, etc.

4.2.2. Social Commerce: Vision and Strategy

In this section, we discuss the opinions of the online wine businesses regarding their vision of the medium- and long-term impact of SC on their business models and the strategies that are or will be put in place to support and implement a competitive advantage by seizing the opportunities made available by SC.

The first online wine business expressed an interesting position on SC: "if SC means a sales activity on social media, then the wine business is definitely cut off." In general, as with all other sectors, people who decide to spend time on a social platform do so with the intent of entertainment and not for purchase. Therefore, it is a different concept of "consumption," oriented toward content rather than objects. In the case of wine—and other alcoholic products—it must be considered that the most populous platforms on the planet have a policy that does not allow the sale of alcoholic beverages without distinction between different ones (i.e., beer, wine, and spirits). Therefore, social media represent a different channel on which brand building and storytelling activities must be carried out. It is a commercial platform where elements related to assortment, quality of services (primarily logistics), and price are valid, all compatible with a "store loyalty" policy. If SC means support for e-commerce, a type of channel for generating traffic to e-commerce, then the interviewee prefers to talk of "info commerce," but clarifies that there are no sales. From this profile, Instagram is the main conversion channel as far as the company is concerned. Furthermore, Instagram can create a much more specific community. On Facebook, however, it is not easy to gain visibility without costly advertising campaigns.

Referring to the concept of SC, the second online wine business stated that past experience has shown that the various social experiments in the world of wine have not gone very well. Even if we take the most successful case, the Vivino app, we realize that sharing and sociality have never taken off. It is currently a label rating and scanning platform. According to the interviewee, a particular integration between e-commerce platforms and some social dynamics will be present and will grow. However, the interviewee does not believe that we can imagine the birth of social verticals (dedicated to wine) and integrations inside the e-commerce business. This dynamic can only be imagined at the level of tiny market niches, so small that they fall into the model of digital wine clubs (see, for example, the VinConnect case in the USA).

Finally, the third company stated that the introduction and increase in the use of new technologies and opportunities for interaction through social media and e-commerce platforms are increasingly essential tools for getting in touch with wine buyers at home and in the workplaces. Hence, the concept of commercial transactions is changing. These networks are increasingly sustainable in the long term because the opportunity to engage on a more personal and equal level is available to customers, regardless of their location and identity. For the company, this shows an ever-growing trend of online wine buyers engaging with fine wine producers and business platforms (similar to theirs) to make informed decisions from home. This is reflected in their current business model of their market and their social media presence, and they aim to be both a shopping space and a resource for learning about wine and wine practices. Online wine buyers are increasingly knowledgeable and seek transparency and equality in their numerous daily choices. Therefore, the company will continue to follow the agenda of making wine more accessible and the wine industry fairer for producers and buyers in a modern and cost-effective way for all parties.

4.2.3. Social Commerce: The Active Involvement of Buyers (Dialogue with Brands, Producers, or between Each Other)

In this section, we examine the opportunities available for online wine buyers to converse with (1) the company, (2) the wineries, and (3) other online wine buyers; the content marketing strategies used to create posts that direct potential users from social

platforms to their e-shop; the conversion performance from social platforms to the e-shop; and the methods used by the company to monitor the value of the "online social influence" in the performance of online wine selling.

Joint positions emerged on the side of the dialogue between online wine buyers and brands: 24-h services, brand touchpoints, helpdesk chat, social media activities (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter), and encouragement of feedback. Regarding the direct dialogue between online wine buyers and wineries and the horizontal conversation among online wine buyers, these are not encouraged, and are sometimes even avoided.

In some cases, concerning the interactions among online wine buyers, there are communities restricted to only the top clients (lovers), made up of those who participate in the events that companies organize and who can create mini trends, even daily. For example, the company can ask these clients to focus on posting images of and commenting on the wines of a specific winery on a specific day, thus triggering virality mechanisms. Therefore, this very loyal group of customers helps the company sell their products using highly targeted digital visibility services. Finally, there are also Facebook groups dedicated to interactions with buyers.

According to one of the companies, the activities concern specific areas and are aimed at a group of wineries. If the wineries tag the online wine partner in their posts, the company can republish them. This is to build a community and increase mutual visibility. The online wine business companies encourage wineries to use their e-commerce platform as their own by incorporating the link of their e-shop on their website. Furthermore, conversion performance is a dynamic and ever-fluctuating process. As there is more coherent and engaging content (which they emphasize), their follower base is constantly growing, driving traffic to their e-shop. Obviously, the goal is to acquire new customers and have them return to buy and interact. This familiarity has grown, and the company promote it through consistency across all their social platforms. A customer can see some posts on Instagram, and then later, when choosing where to buy wine for an upcoming party, for example, they will be reminded of the company's e-shop.

4.2.4. Online Wine Businesses: Operational Activities

In this section, we examine the implementation of the operational activities in the companies (Table 4), assigning a score from 0 (absent) to 10 (strategic activity for the company). A blank space means that the respondent did not give an answer.

The most significant relevance was given to blogging (scores of 5, 7, and 10) and content marketing activities and SEO (scores of 6, 6, and 10). The lowest value, 0, was assigned to lead-lists purchases, augmented reality, and virtual reality (i.e., strategies not implemented by the company).

4.2.5. Social Commerce: Operational Activities

In this section, we present the social platforms on which the companies are present (Table 5), assigning a score from 0 (absent) to 10 (strategic activity for the company). A blank space means that the respondent did not give an answer.

Table 4. E-commerce: operational activities.

Description	1	2	3
Offline advertising campaigns (newspapers, TV, radio)	2	9	7
Lead generation campaigns	8	2	10
Lead-lists purchase	0	0	0
Landing pages creation	6	4	8
Blogging and content marketing activities	5	7	10
Video content marketing	5	7	8
Newsletter	7	2	6
Direct e-mail marketing (DEM)	7	0	7
"Transparent on site" couponing/discount campaigns	3	0	9
"Reserved" couponing/discount campaigns through one-to-one channels	7	4	8
Search engine optimization (SEO)	6	6	10
Search engine marketing (SEM)	6	3	10
Pay-per-click (PPC) Advertising	7	2	5
Retargeting	7	3	0
Affiliate marketing (pay-per-conversion)	6	2	0
Customer relationship marketing (CRM)	5	7	6
Big data for marketing	6	5	0
Artificial intelligence for Marketing	5	7	8
Geo-marketing (geo-localized actions)	5	8	6
Augmented reality (AR) for marketing	0	0	0
Virtual reality (VR) for marketing	0	0	0
Online wine tasting meeting	5	0	5
Online wine selling meeting	2	0	0
Other			

Table 5. Social commerce: active platforms.

Description	1	2	3
YouTube	1	4	0
WhatsApp	3	1	0
Facebook	5	9	10
Instagram	7	9	10
FB Messenger	0	4	10
Twitter	0	2	9
LinkedIn	2	7	9
Skype	0	0	0
Pinterest	0	1	0
Snapchat	0	1	0
TikTok	0	1	0
Other			

The most significant importance was given to Instagram—considered critical for all the respondents (with scores of 7, 9, and 10)—followed by Facebook—considered critical by the last two respondents (with a score of 9 and 10) and not so important by the first one (with a score of 5). None of the companies used Skype as an SC platform, and all of them assigned a very low importance to Pinterest, Snapchat, and TikTok, to which only the second respondent gave a score of 1.

Table 6 presents the operational activities implemented by the online wine businesses to capture the integrative potential of SC, assigning a score from 0 (absent) to 10 (strategic activity for the company) for each activity. A blank space means that the respondent did not give an answer.

Table 6. Social commerce: operational activities.

Description	1	2	3
Evolution of social feeds towards window shopping		2	8
Use of gifts or personalized offers to promote engagement	3	0	8
Creation of small demonstration videos of the products for sale on their social pages	3	5	8
Enabling content generated by followers (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) on their social pages	3	3	10
Incentive/stimulus of followers to share content (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) on their social pages	4	8	9
Reward/remuneration of followers for sharing content (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) on their social pages	4	8	7
Enabling content generated by followers (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) directly on the e-shop	1	1	7
Incentive/stimulus of followers to share content (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) directly on the e-shop	1	4	8
Reward/remuneration of followers for sharing content (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) directly on the e-shop	1	8	6
Use of a buyer feedback system for each product that is visible to new potential buyers	1	0	10
Use of counselling systems to guide the choice of buyers	1	8	7
Building experiences to support e-commerce activities to guide the choice of buyers	3	6	9
Use of the "lookbook" feature to present new lines and new vintages	1	0	7
Enabling the sharing of content (on social media or via mail) from the e-shop (sharing articles, product sheets, etc.)	1	8	7
Incentive/stimulus of followers to share content (on social media or via mail) from the e-shop (sharing articles, product sheets, etc.)	1	3	8
Reward/remuneration of followers for sharing content (on social media or via mail) from the e-shop (sharing articles, product sheets, etc.)	1	9	6
Use of couponing/discount initiatives directly on social feeds	1	0	8
Use of campaigns with horizontal influencers (generalists, with very high notoriety) to drive traffic and conversions	1	7	7
Use of campaigns with vertical influencers (specialists, with very high credibility in the wine category) to drive traffic and conversions	2	3	7
Use of group selling campaigns	1	0	5
Use of suggestions for upselling and cross-selling	3	6	5
Creation of comparison areas between buyers directly in the e-shop (forum, e-EOM)	0	0	8
Creation of contests/competitions between social users in order to create interest, attention, and conversions	3	8	6
Use of AI systems directly on social networks to collect data and/or provide personalized offers and advice	0	8	4
Other			

The most significant importance was assigned to the incentive/stimulus of followers to share content (comments, reviews, unboxing, etc.) on their social pages: this operational activity is very important for the last two respondents (with a score of 8 and 9, respectively) but not so important for the first one (with a score of 4). Conversely, the lowest value has been assigned to group selling campaigns, presenting a level of importance quite heterogeneous: absent in the strategy of the second company, not critical for the first one (with a score of 1), and not so important for the last (with a score of 5).

5. Conclusions

With the spread of the effects induced by the COVID-19 outbreak, 2020 was a growth year for online wine businesses. The wine sector was affected by the digital transformation; while some operators in the sector have merely undergone this change, others have been riding the wave, trying to benefit from it. The results of our analysis confirm this trend.

5.1. Wine Producers

Table 7 shows the elements that emerged from the analysis of the interviews of the wine producers for each category of analysis.

Table 7. Key elements emerged from interviewing the wine producers.

Categories of Analysis	Key Elements
Digital transformation: vision, strategy, organizational structure, and culture	- The readiness of the online wine buyer for the digital transformation, before the companies - The forcing of the COVID-19 outbreak on companies to open up to this new world and make investments - The beginning of the payoff of investments - The awareness of digital transformation as an opportunity for businesses - The choice of the omnichannel as strategy, with a preference for traditional channels - Expansion/adaption of the organizational structure with the inclusion of job positions or activities dedicated to digital transformation
Digital transformation: influence on B2B and B2C marketing processes	- Carrying out trade marketing activities in a traditional way - B2B: the use of digital technologies by restaurants, wine bars, influencers - B2C: the identification of a specific language to be used with the online wine buyer - The use of social media to establish a "direct" relationship with online wine buyers
Digital marketing operational activities	The shift of the focus from cellar visits to digital marketing activities caused by COVID-19
Data collection on online wine buyers	- The focus on what happens before the bottle is opened - Not facing the problem of communicating directly with online wine buyers by companies - The backwardness of wine companies on the issue of integrated management of online wine buyer data

Focusing on wine producers, they have undergone a digital transformation. For them, the traditional channel comes first. In fact, the online wine buyer was ready, before the companies, for the digital transformation. Only in recent times, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, have begun making an effort to adapt to the change and look for an online channel, which they say would only integrate into their business model; *the digital transformation is seen as an opportunity for the expansion of sales channels.* The strategy to be adopted will be the omnichannel, always with a preference for traditional channels. At the organizational structure level, the wine producers are in some way adapting/expanding the organizational structure with the inclusion of figures or activities dedicated to digital transformation: two out of three interviewees stated that their companies have employees responsible for the digital transformation, their roles positioned at an operational level. *The adaptation of companies to the digital transformation has been*, thus, *a response to the needs of online wine buyers.*

Our results also revealed that, despite the fact that wine is indisputably a consumer product—and companies should therefore try to create a relationship with the reference market—almost all of the marketing investments related to the placement lever were oriented according to a B2B logic toward operators of the hospitality industry (mainly restaurants), specialized distribution (wine shops), and modern distribution. Furthermore, the investments in trade marketing have almost ignored the different competitive logic of the nascent online wine retailers who, for a long time neglected by wineries, have pivoted to buying their products from wholesalers without any direct relationship with the producers. The latter understood with a significant delay that they had to change their commercial policy; in the meantime, transactions were taking place online, which persuaded producers to switch from an operational to a strategic plan, affecting the perceived positioning of their brands among an increasingly vast audience of online wine buyers. In fact, trade marketing is still managed on a traditional level. At the B2C level, little has been done to encourage dialogue with online wine buyers. This reveals *the difficulty of the wine producers to talk to the online wine buyers*. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, accelerated this process. Until recently, wine producers had never faced the problem of establishing a direct relationship with the consumer. During the pandemic period, companies were forced to use social media, and the primary problem they encountered was finding the best language for communicating with the consumer: *social media could allow direct communication with the*

online wine buyer; to date, this is the only viable path in the wine sector. In fact, social media are used only as a means of communication with the consumers to provide them with information related to products and vintages and not for grasping the company's strategic potential. Therefore, *the need to identify a "language" to talk to online wine buyers emerges*.

In terms of operational activities, greater importance was given to social media marketing, direct e-mailing, and online wine tasting, while CRM has been implemented in a superficial and basic manner, without a database that profiles the buyer. Businesses are only now adopting the integrated collection and management of consumer data. In this sense, *digital marketing has been an opportunity in B2C commerce*. The strategic objective of wineries is to create and manage, from a relational marketing perspective, a community with their loyal customers through which to accomplish the following: implement their knowledge on purchasing and consumption behaviors; increase direct selling volumes; and increase wine purchases by investing in hospitality through the creation of synergies between online and "on land" assets (visits to the cellar, tastings, overnight stays at the vineyard, experiences during the harvest, etc.). The formula currently most explored by the interviewed wineries is that of the online wine club. In fact, COVID-19 has shifted the focus from cellar visits to digital marketing activities.

5.2. Online Wine Businesses

Moving on to the analysis of online wine businesses, a series of further insights into the purchasing behavior of online wine buyers emerged. Table 8 shows the results of the analysis for the interviews of the online wine businesses for each category of analysis.

Table 8. Key elements emerged from interviewing the online wine businesses.

Categories of Analysis	Key Elements
The online wine buyer's profile in Italy: pre-purchase, during-purchase, and post-purchase behavior	▪ The emergence of inexperienced online wine buyers, for whom services offered by web companies is more valuable than the product itself ▪ The focus on impulse purchases by web companies
Social commerce: vision and strategy	▪ The enhancement of personal brand ▪ Loyalty programs
Social commerce: the active involvement of buyers (dialogue with brands, producers, or each other)	▪ Avoiding reviews, as well as the "voice of the expert" ▪ The usefulness of wine clubs for web companies ▪ The lack of effectiveness of social media in the wine business
Social commerce: operational activities	▪ Paid viral marketing campaigns, digital visibility services ▪ The provision of marketing services to businesses (especially small businesses)

The typical online wine buyer is a 40-year-old male with a mid-range income and education, living in the city center and who is not an expert, makes impulse purchases, and is easily influenced in their choice of wine. An inexperienced online wine buyer emerged, for whom the service offered by web companies is worth more than the purchased product. *Focus is*, thus, *on the experiential attributes of the product.* This gives power to web companies that increasingly focus on the experiential attributes of purchasing, creating brand loyalty.

Furthermore, in terms of behavioral profile in the purchasing phase, the online wine buyer places great importance on the brand's reputation (in the case of online wine businesses), the site's navigation speed, and the site's design. This enhances the personal brand. In terms of customer satisfaction, somewhat heterogeneous positions emerged from the analysis: (1) the elimination of coupons to generate reorders in favor of strengthening the store's brand loyalty; (2) keeping the promises made to consumers; and (3) promotions, newsletters, and chatbots. The dialogue with buyers and the brand takes place through 24-h services, brand touch-points, helpdesk chats, social media activities, and encourage-

ment of feedback. Conversely, the dialogue between buyers and between buyers and wine producers is not encouraged and is sometimes even prohibited. The *relationship is*, thus, *between wineries and online wine businesses.*

Focusing on SC, the vision of online wine businesses is quite clear: SC plays a role in the brand-building process but cannot become a commercial channel in its own right. This means that, for the wine sector, social media are to be considered tools for generating traffic to an e-shop, which can only work if the content shared is exclusive, original, and adds high value, and if social media in the wine world never took off. The development potential of specialized vertical social networks for wine is low: buyers are searching for information on products and prices, but there is no conversation or sharing of user-generated content. In fact, in some cases, reviews are avoided, as is the "voice of the expert." The most plausible model, according to respondents, even in a social context, is that of digital wine clubs. Even in terms of the development of typical social media activities (advice and recommendations, ratings and reviews, shopping experiences through forums and communities, etc.), no significant developments are foreseen within e-commerce sites. Therefore, a profile of *the web companies "alongside" the online wine buyer* emerges.

The online wine business operators are definitely focused on creating proprietary databases with a growing profiling of online wine buyers and a one-to-one dialogue. Horizontal interactions between users are not considered a strategic element; in fact, according to some, they represent a potential for critical issues that are difficult to manage. Not surprisingly, from an operational point of view, businesses have allocated attention and financial resources to the following digital activities: lead generation campaigns, the production of content (texts, images, and videos) to stimulate customer engagement and attract organic traffic (SEO), and one-to-one e-mail marketing campaigns. The online wine businesses provide wine producers (especially small ones) with paid viral marketing campaigns for businesses, digital visibility services, and marketing services. From the analysis, *the distinctive skills of web companies in online sales compared to traditional businesses* emerges.

5.3. Final Considerations: The Subcategories of Analysis

Interesting elements emerged from the discussion and conclusion (in italics): the key ideas that came out from the interviews made it possible to identify subcategories of analysis that, in our opinion, present interesting food for thought on the SC phenomenon in the wine sector, summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. Subcategories of analysis.

Wine Producers	Online Wine Business
■ The adaptation of companies to the digital transformation as a response to the needs of online wine buyers ■ Digital transformation as an opportunity for the expansion of sales channels ■ The difficulty of wine producers conversing with online wine buyers ■ The possibility offered by social media to communicate directly with the online wine buyer ■ Digital marketing as an opportunity in B2C commerce ■ The need to identify a specific "language" to use with online wine buyers	■ Focus on experiential attributes of the product ■ Relationship between wineries and online wine businesses ■ The web companies "alongside" the online wine buyer ■ The distinctive skills of web companies in online sales compared to traditional businesses

5.4. Practical Implication

Our analysis revealed a significant delay in wine producers getting to know the consumers and buyers of their wines. One area in which these companies aim to invest the most in the future to improve their competitiveness is B2C marketing initiatives aimed

primarily at profiling their shoppers, with implications for the sustainability of the traditional business model. An area to further develop is governance logic in potential areas of inter-channel conflict, especially regarding the price lever. The possibility for a restaurant customer to instantly Google a specific label on the wine list to find the online price indeed represents a possible critical issue; on the other hand, it may also lead to synergy between traditional channels and emerging channels. Finally, the wineries will identify their own direct way of interacting with their wine lovers while trying to overcome the critical issues related to the sustainability of the mere e-commerce formula and enriching their online value proposition with services and elements of exclusivity.

From the perspective of online wine business operators, a series of further reflections emerged concerning the sustainability of their sources of competitive advantage within the different business models identified. In the Italian market, historically, these companies have shown that they are still unable to generate satisfactory profitability precisely because of the explosive growth of investments on the one hand, and the reduced operating margins on the other. In B2C commerce, therefore, it will be necessary to increase the contribution margins through new, high-quality services (e.g., speed of delivery and, in specific metropolitan areas, super express delivery, guides to buying wine and pairing it with food, technical training on wine, or the organization of events and entertainment) to support gradual up-pricing, up-selling, and cross-selling, which are aimed at increasing the value of the average receipt. Further initiatives may consist of building direct relationships with producers, implementing offline sales strategies (a sort of 2.0 wine bar), and, of course, the internationalization of the catchment area. Finally, the launch of a B2B offer aimed precisely at catering, which, financially weakened by the long lockdown phases, could appreciate the possibility of small, mixed (multi-brand), and frequent reordering, thus reducing the investment in "cellar wines ". There are numerous fronts through which competitive threats from different players in the sector may arise: direct formulas undertaken by wineries, new business models implemented by operators of the online wine business, and investment in online selling by large chains of modern distribution.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study might seem related to the survey sample, which was limited to three wine producers and three online wine businesses. However, one should keep in mind that we conducted exploratory research and that the sample, which is valid and reliable, made it possible to identify subcategories of analysis to better understand the behavior of online wine buyers and the impact of SC on wine sales online.

The findings of this pilot survey are, therefore, evaluated in terms of useful indications for orienting the subsequent research phases.

The first consideration concerns the nature of the sample from a qualitative point of view: it is valid and reliable as the companies composing the sample strongly correspond to the ideal type that will be subject to subsequent analyzes on a larger scale.

The second consideration concerns the choice of the "units of analysis": the subcategories that emerged from this work presented in Table 9 will be used as "units of analysis" in future research phases.

Furthermore, thanks to the results of the pilot survey, we can identify at least three guidelines for future research activity:

1. The direct communication with the online wine buyer and the identification of a specific mood, language, and tone of voice to use with them;
2. The opportunity of using digital transformation for the expansion of sales channels from an omnichannel marketing perspective;
3. The deepening of supply chain relationships—between online wine buyers and wine producers—and the communication between these two actors—among them and online wine buyers.

The integration of the first two points would allow wine producers, who—as repeatedly reiterated in the course of this analysis—are not very familiar with SC, to overcome this gap and start using SC in their business practices.

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