

## Article

# The Value of Semantics in Food and Wine Labeling: Research on Italian Wine Consumers

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**Abstract:** Semantics studies have been experiencing an ever-growing utilization and application in packaging, product labeling and, more broadly, in marketing strategies. Considering the food and wine sector, existing research on semantics application in labeling confirms its worth in influencing consumers' perception of products. In this sense, it is a fundamental tool for managers to communicate the value of their brands. Nevertheless, further studies are still needed to understand how the visual aspects of the packaging generate the desired meanings among consumers, especially in Italy. The paper intends to fill this gap by applying a semiotic approach to study Italian wine consumers. Specifically, a close-ended questionnaire, with a free word association segment focused on the values perceived by consumers when looking at four digitally crafted wine bottle front labels, was utilized. Although the results show some discrepancies from current studies, this paper points out that the existing literature on the topic seems comprehensively applicable to Italian consumers. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, it would be necessary to extend the number of respondents to further validate the results obtained.

**Keywords:** wine; semantics; Italian consumers; labeling; marketing



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## 1. Introduction

Several scholars have determined that a product's packaging and, more specifically, visual aspect can influence consumers' perceptions of that product [1–4]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated how this assumption is even more relevant for food products [5,6]. According to the Dang and Nicholas study [7], the inclusion of a positive nutrient to a food package label improved the perception of unhealthy foods, which were felt to be healthier than they were.

While packaging arises from the need to contain, preserve, and protect a product, its fundamental capacities in aiding the recognition of said product in the crowded shelves of stores, and thus its commercialization, have been demonstrated by various studies [8]. Several others were conducted to gauge and understand specifically how the visual aspects that compose a product's package help this recognition process and communicate meanings and feelings to consumers, thus aiding marketers to convey specific values when advertising their products [5,6,9].

Considering this context, it becomes apparent how finding a way to adjust and adapt packaging to convey predetermined values could be of great use for product marketing and commercialization [10,11].

Many authors have identified semiotics as an excellent instrument to achieve this goal [12–15]. Semiotics, understood as the science that describes the mechanism by means of which a sign becomes a meaning [16], has been the focus of many studies concerning its direct application to product packaging and labeling [4,15], and of even more specific work regarding wine bottle front labels [17,18]. The latter are particularly focused on how the visual aspects of a wine package communicate precise meanings and influence consumer

perception of the product, looking at specific nations [9,17–21]. However, none of them appear to analyze the specific case of Italian consumers.

The relevance of the Italian domestic wine market (EUR 1.8 billion in 2021 [22]) and purchasing habits of Italian consumers, who favor supermarkets over wine specialized shops or direct purchase from vineyards [23], make the study of wine labels particularly important to support individuals in their decision making to buy. Considering this in-store context, where the consumer does not have the possibility to taste directly the actual product (as when purchasing directly from the producer) or is not supported in his choice by specialized staff (such as when purchasing from specialized wine shops), the label becomes both the main element influencing his purchase decision and a fundamental aspect in aiding the bottle to stand out in the crowded aisles of a supermarket [20]. This rise of this impersonal and quick-choice purchasing habit and the subsequent rise in the importance of product packaging and labeling have been confirmed by various existing studies [20,24]. As stressed by Galati et al. [25], wine is an experiential product that cannot be evaluated before consumption, and consequently, packaging elements significantly affect consumers' evaluation of product quality. Given the complexity of wine marketing, which requires the consideration of specific peculiarities closely related to the local characteristics of each wine region and each consumer [26], it is therefore clear that the label assumes a fundamental role in the definition of strategies capable of catalyzing consumers' attention and positively influencing their purchasing decisions.

Starting from the work of Ares et al. [27], who compared the interpretation of visual codes used in product packaging between two countries that share the same language (Spain and Uruguay), the present work extends this idea by using the visual codes identified by Celhay and Remaud [18] and their interpretation in reference to French consumers and applies them in a survey of Italian consumers. In this way, it is intended to determine whether two countries that share a strong cultural connection, but not the same language, can still share the same interpretation of visual codes.

Three main branches of existing literature were then considered. The first one concerned the importance of labels as a first point of contact with the consumer. To this end, the main work examined was the research of Van Tonder and Mulder [17], which reported how “the wine bottle front label is the forceful first point of contact with the consumer” [17] (p. 2), confirming the works of Ritz [28] that described the labels as the main and first element noted by consumers while observing a bottle of wine, and thus the main source of advertising. This take on wine bottle labels is further confirmed by the research of Morse [29] regarding the design of the labels and their importance in conveying the brand values to the consumers. A significant notion that emerged during the examination of this literature was the concept of “expert” wine consumers, who would be more influenced in their decision by specific information such as the region and country of origin, the cultivar, and the variety [17], compared to less experienced and more naive wine consumers, who would base their decision more on the pictorial aspects of the label and the values they convey [30,31].

Among the various possible neuromarketing instruments used to study the areas of interests of consumers, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography, and functional near-Infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) [32,33], the second branch is focused on the results obtained by eye-tracking and pupillometry experiments, and the main work examined was the research of Laeng, Suegami, and Aminihaibashi [34] and their two experiments conducted on Norwegian consumers using Italian wine bottles. The eye-tracking and pupillometry techniques, described by the authors as “the monitoring of eye fixations combined with measure of changes of the eyes' pupil diameters while observers examine wine labels on a computer screen” [34] (p. 3), were used individually in the two experiments. Given a series of four labeled wine bottles, the first experiment, based on the eye-tracking technique, investigated both the areas of interest of the consumer and the connection between the time an individual spent gazing at each of them and the chances that he/she would later choose the most focused bottle. The second one focused on

the pupillometry and showed how the dilation of the eye pupil of the interviewee varied based on the perceived attractiveness of the label. Particularly interesting are the results of the first experiment, which showed how very little time was spent on the written parts: the wine name, winery, and cultivar only took 2% of the total fixation time, while the bulk of time was actually spent gazing at the pictorial elements [34] (p. 7). Considering the label written in Italian and the sample consisting of Norwegian students, the language barrier was considered as a possible trigger for these results. Nevertheless, other similar works by Townsend and Kahn [35] and Pieters and Wedel [36] confirmed that consumers were generally more inclined to spend more time on pictorial elements than on written information. Finally, the results of the second experiment showed both a direct correlation between the time spent gazing at a label and the possibility that that bottle would later be chosen, and how a label considered by the interviewee more attractive than the average caused a bigger dilation of the pupil.

The third branch considered the importance of semiotics in product and wine labeling, analyzing the work of Celhay and Remaud [18], which started by investigating the basics of semantics, the signifier (a linguistic form, e.g., a word) and the signified (the meaning of that linguistic form), and proceeded to consider them in the marketing context: the signifiers became the various visual codes that compose a product label, such as the images or the color used, while the signifieds were the concepts or ideas conveyed by them. In their study, they specify how the association between signifier and signified in the minds of the consumers can be predicted thanks to semiotics studies, and thus used by marketers.

Considering wine bottle front labels, Celhay and Remaud [18] identified the following visual codes: the layout, the graphical composition, the text composition, the font, the colors, the letters, the main graphical element, and lastly the technique used to craft the label. In their research, they interpreted the meaning of these visual codes by using the method proposed by Cavassilas [37], and then used them to craft the four wine bottle labels that were the focus of their study. The results emerged from their work demonstrated the efficiency of semiotics in conveying predetermined values to the consumers, thus confirming its worth as a tool for marketers.

It is therefore evident that the wine bottle front label becomes crucial in the definition of marketing strategies, as it represents the first point of contact with consumers. As a result, semiotic studies assume a central role in the construction of labels that can convey specific messages to consumers, influencing their perceptions and purchasing decision-making processes. Despite the growing interest from several scholars in how the visual aspects of wine packaging communicate specific meanings and influence product perception [17,18,20], few studies appear to analyze the case of Italian wine consumers.

In this perspective, the study aims to fill this gap by understanding whether the results of current research on the accuracy of semiotic elements used in wine bottle front labels also apply to Italian consumers. To this end, a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions and a final section dedicated to a free word association segment was used and submitted to 197 willing individuals chosen randomly from the Italian population. The results obtained were analyzed on their own and then compared with the results obtained by the existing research.

This study contributes to enriching the existing literature on the topic by investigating the communicative function explicated through semiotics in wine labels, with particular focus on the Italian case. Furthermore, practical implications are provided through the identification of which visual elements of a wine label are most effective in conveying specific values and messages to consumers, thus supporting managers in building their communication strategies.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the materials and research methods used, Section 3 presents the empirical results, Section 4 illustrates a discussion and, finally, Section 5 sets out the main conclusions and limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study seeks to understand whether the results of current research on the accuracy of semiotic elements in wine bottle front labels also apply to Italian consumers. For this purpose, a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions and a final section dedicated to a free word association task was used and completed by 197 people from the Italian population. The focus of the research lies in the free word association part, in which respondents were asked to describe their perceived feelings and values after looking at four different digital wine bottle labels created specifically for this study. The formulation of this last section is based on the approach used by Celhay and Remaud [18] in their work on Bordeaux wine visual codes, and the methodology implemented by Ares et al. [27] and Piqueras-Fiszman et al. [15] in their studies of food labels. Given this premise, four main steps were taken:

1. Identification of wine visual codes.
2. Design of wine label models for the free word association test.
3. Semiotic analysis of wine label models designed.
4. Testing of wine label models.

The following paragraphs focus on steps 1, 2, and 4. The semiotic analysis of the wine label models (step 3) is developed from the results obtained by Celhay and Remaud [18] and is illustrated within step 4, where the meanings that the visual codes and attributes of the four digital wine label models should convey to the consumer are also described.

### 2.1. Identification of Wine Visual Codes

Celhay and Remaud [18] identify multiple visual codes, such as layout, graphical and text composition, brand typography, background color, main illustration theme, and style. For each of these, the authors pinpoint specific visual attributes. The layout, for instance, may have the following characteristics: centered, left-aligned, right-aligned, or justified. Based on the type of visual attribute used, each visual codes conveys a precise message to the consumer's mind.

Starting from such considerations, this study utilizes the visual codes defined by Celhay and Remaud [18], while narrowing down the range of visual attributes examined. Table 1 summarizes the selected visual codes and attributes, also indicating the different values they should communicate to the consumer.

**Table 1.** Visual codes and attributes selected, and message conveyed.

Visual Codes	Visual Attributes	Message Conveyed
Layout	Centered	Classicism and tradition
	Left/Right-aligned	Modernity and innovation
Graphical composition	Vertical and horizontal axis	Calmness, reliability, and seriousness
	Diagonal axis	Feeling of motion and energy
Text composition—Position (Brand name)	Center top	Authority and prestige
	Bottom of the front	Deficit in legitimacy of the product
Text composition—Dimension (Brand name)	Thin font	Lightness and delicacy
	Bold font	Strong flavor and firmness
Brand Typography (Letters)	Roman	Tradition and seniority
	Italic/oblique	Sense of gravity and precision
	Uppercase	Prestige and importance
	Lowercase	Modesty and simplicity

Table 1. Cont.

Visual Codes	Visual Attributes	Message Conveyed
Brand Typography (Colors)	Black and gray	Sobriety, elegance, and grace
	White	High quality
	Gold	Luxury
Background color	Yellow	Values of tradition and antiquity
	Ocher and brown	Rustic and rural feelings
	White	Modernity and quality
Main illustration theme	Castle or farmstead	History and tradition
	Crowns and monograms	Nobility
	Vineyards or landscapes	Nature and rusticity
Main illustration style	No illustration	Sense of void and detachment from the land and the country of origin
	Engraving	Craftsmanship and seniority
	Photography	Modernity and innovation

## 2.2. Design of Wine Label Models for the Free Word Association Test

The previously illustrated visual codes and attributes were differentially combined to develop four digital wine label models (Figure 1). Considering that the aim of the study is to confirm the validity of the results obtained by Celhay and Remaud [18] among Italian consumers, the first two labels faithfully follow the labels made and used by those authors in their research. On the other hand, the third and fourth labels present some different elements to further corroborate the ability of visual elements to convey very specific values and feelings to consumers.



**Figure 1.** The four labels used for the free word association segment—from left to right: Historical and Traditional, Innovative and Modern, Modest and Organic, Rustic and Territorial.

As shown in Figure 1, the labels have some common characteristics. However, in each of them it is possible to find a precise peculiarity, consistent with the intended message, which can be identified through semiotic analysis of visual codes and attributes. These



peculiarities and the messages they convey were defined using the notions illustrated in Table 1, which were identified in the study of Celhay and Remaud [18]. A description of the four digital wine label models is provided as follows.

1. **Historic and Traditional.** This label uses a horizontal and vertical composition, upper-case letters, and bold font. To convey a sense of tradition and recall values related to viticulture, the background features an ochre color, and the main illustration depicts a church.
2. **Innovative and Modern.** This label features an abstract image in an almost diagonal position to convey values of modernity and innovation, breaking away from the generally traditional illustrations of wine bottles. The brand name positioned at the top center has been colored gold to invoke a sense of luxury and quality. To reinforce the values of modernity of the illustration and quality and luxury of the brand, the background color is white.
3. **Modest and Organic.** This label shows a tree as the main illustration. The aim is to recall the values of organic farming and nature. Lowercase letters are used to indicate the region of origin and type of wine to convey a sense of simplicity and modesty. In addition, the text is thin to evoke the values of lightheartedness and delicacy, as well as to create a parallel with organic farming. The techniques employed by the latter, in fact, involve simpler and less aggressive use of chemical components than traditional farming.
4. **Rustic and territorial.** With the objective of emphasizing the territory of origin, this label uses a thin font and a brownish background color. The main illustration depicts a farmhouse next to a vineyard, conveying a sense of rusticity and simplicity.

To avoid influencing the interviewees, the name of the wine was not shown and was instead replaced in all labels with a generic “Cantina”, positioned differently based on the different values the labels wanted to convey.

### 2.3. Testing of Wine Label Models

#### 2.3.1. Description of Participants

The study was addressed to Italian wine consumers over the age of 18, recruited using the Italian Sommelier Association’s database of introductory courses organized in central Italian regions in 2021. To increase the number of respondents, each person was invited to forward the online survey to others. The sample size was defined by applying the Brasini et al.’s [38] formula:

$$n = [Z^2 a / 2 \times N] / [4(N - 1)\theta^2 + Z^2 a / 2] = [1.96^2 \times 396] / [4(396 - 1) \times 0.05^2 + 1.96^2] = 195.24 = 195$$

where  $n$  is the sample size;  $Z^2 a / 2$  the confidence level, with  $Z^2 a / 2 = 1.96^2$ ;  $N$  the population size;  $\theta$  the margin of error allowed (it has been set at 5 per cent). (\* The value 1.96 is calculated using the tables of the standard normal distribution. They refer to the areas of underlying probability to a normal curve with a mean equal to 0 and a standard deviation equal to 1.) According to the Italian Sommelier Association’s database, 396 people attended the sommelier introductory courses in the central Italian regions during the period of the survey. Hence, the above formula suggests that the number of questionnaires that had to be administered to have statistically significant results was 195. In total, 197 people participated in the survey.

The average age of survey participants was 33 years old; following Dimock’s classification [39], 51% of respondents belonged to the Millennial Generation (1981–1996), 23% to Generation Z (1997–2012), 17.5% to Generation X (1965–1980), and 8% to the Boomer Generation (1946–1964). Women represented 56% of the total population studied, while men were 44%. In addition, 56% of respondents had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Finally, 50.4% of respondents worked, 37.5% studied, 11.5% both worked and studied, and 4.5% were unemployed.

Out of 197 interviewees, 37% of them consumed wine two or three times a week, 23% once a week, 18% every day, 9% a few times during the year, 3% only once a month, and

2% never drank wine. As for the type of wine consumed, the most popular was red wine (58%), followed by white (31%), and lastly by rosé (11%).

Only 29% of the total respondents showed an extensive knowledge in the wine field by answering correctly all the 3 technical questions asked in the second section of the questionnaire to assess their knowledge and expertise of wine.

### 2.3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected by sharing an online questionnaire to participants during the period of October 2021–November 2021.

The questionnaire was structured with close-ended questions, and a final section designed with a free word association task. According to Ares et al. [27], free word association represents a qualitative methodology particularly used in the fields of psychology and sociology and assumes that asking a respondent to freely associate ideas evoked by a given stimulus could provide relatively free access to the respondent's mental representations of that stimulus. In this study, the four digital wine label models were the stimuli.

Specifically, the questionnaire was divided into three different sections. The first concerned the respondent's personal data, asking for information on age, gender, education level, employment status, and area of residence. The second section investigated the respondent's wine purchasing and consumption habits and degree of wine expertise. To assess the latter, respondents were asked to specify what each of the following terms "Sangiovese", "Chardonnay", and "Rosso Piceno" indicate, choosing from the options "black grape wine", "white grape wine", or "region of origin". The third section was devoted to free word association. Therefore, the following question was included for each label displayed individually by the respondent: "Please, focus on the label of this wine bottle. After a thorough examination, could you tell me what does it make you think about? Please write down the first word, idea, emotion, or image that comes to mind while observing it" [18].

### 2.3.3. Data Analysis

Participants' responses were analyzed using LibreOffice Calc, a spreadsheet program from the open-source office productivity software suite LibreOffice.

In order to compare the results with those obtained by Celhay and Remaud [18], four different categories were identified and used during the analysis of the results of the free word association section: the overall sample, consisting of all the respondents (=197), female (=111), male (=86), and expert consumers (=58), who are the respondents that answered correctly all the three technical questions asked in the second section of the survey. The distinction between the female and male categories was utilized to determine whether gender would influence the perceived meaning of the different visual codes. Similarly, the category of expert consumers was introduced to determine whether "inexperienced" and "experienced" wine consumers were affected differently by the same visual codes.

All the words used by the respondents in the free word association section were written down and analyzed. The frequency with which each word was mentioned was determined by counting the number of respondents who used that specific association. Following the study of Ares et al. [27], only the words mentioned by more than 5% of the respondents in each category were used for the data analysis.

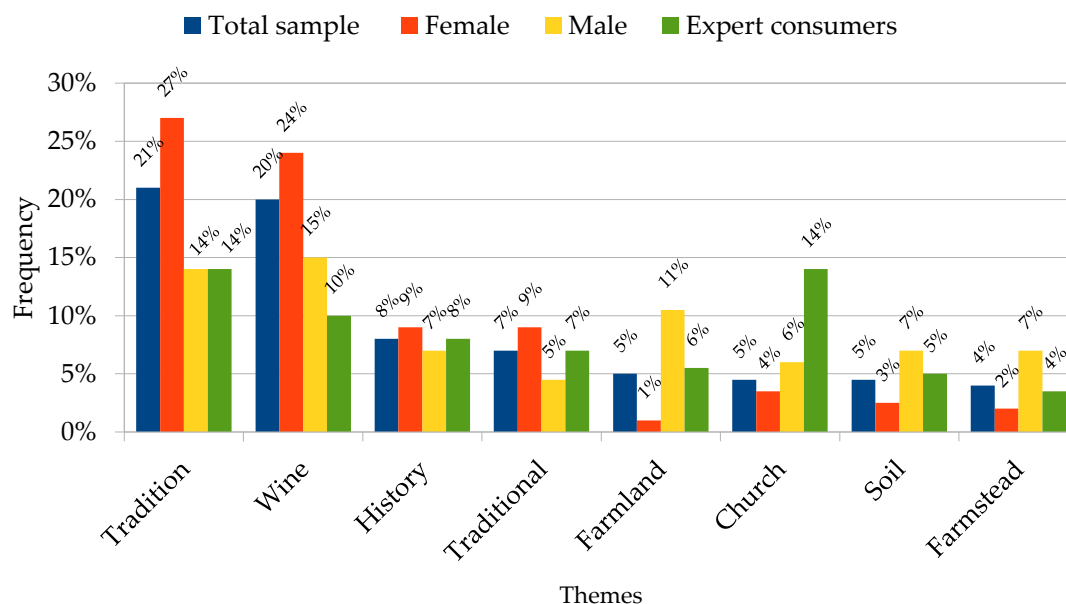
A histogram was created for each label through LibreOffice Calc software to analyze the data collected from the survey.

## 3. Results

The following paragraphs present the results obtained from the analysis of the third section of the questionnaire, concerning free word association. To this end, for each digital wine label model, the outcomes are described with reference to the different categories of respondents considered.

### 3.1. “Historic and Traditional” Digital Wine Label Model

In general, the words mentioned by more than 5% of the respondents in reference to the first “Historic and Traditional” label are “Tradition”, “Wine”, “History”, “Traditional”, “Farmland”, “Church”, “Soil”, and “Farmstead” (Figure 2), being completely in line with the expected values during label model creation.



**Figure 2.** Histogram of the “Historic and Traditional” label results.

Specifically, “Tradition” (21%), “Wine” (20%), and “History” (8%) are those most mentioned by the total sample.

As for women, the label “Historic and Traditional” is mainly associated with the meanings of “Tradition” and “Wine”, which have a frequency of 27% and 24%, respectively. In addition, they are particularly sensitive to the values “History” and “Traditional”, both of which were indicated with a frequency of 9%.

Similarly, male consumers mention the words “Wine” (14%) and “Tradition” (14%) more frequently. Unlike female respondents, men appear more focused on the connection to farmland and land, naming the concept of “Farmland” with a frequency of 11%.

Finally, the expert category deviates from both the total sample and the male and female categories, showing a greater focus on the messages conveyed by the main label illustration. In fact, church was mentioned with the highest frequency (14%), while “Tradition” (14%) and “Wine” (10%) ranked second and third in the minds of expert consumers.

### 3.2. “Innovative and Modern” Digital Wine Label Model

Figure 3 shows that the meanings conceived during the label design process—modern, innovative, and quality—are reflected positively by all respondents. On the other hand, the message of “luxury”, which should have been conveyed by the label’s gold color, did not exceed 5% in any of the categories considered. In addition, no words were used that recall the values of tradition, history, or agricultural land, consistent with the absence of a main graphic illustration on the label or a background color that evokes these values.

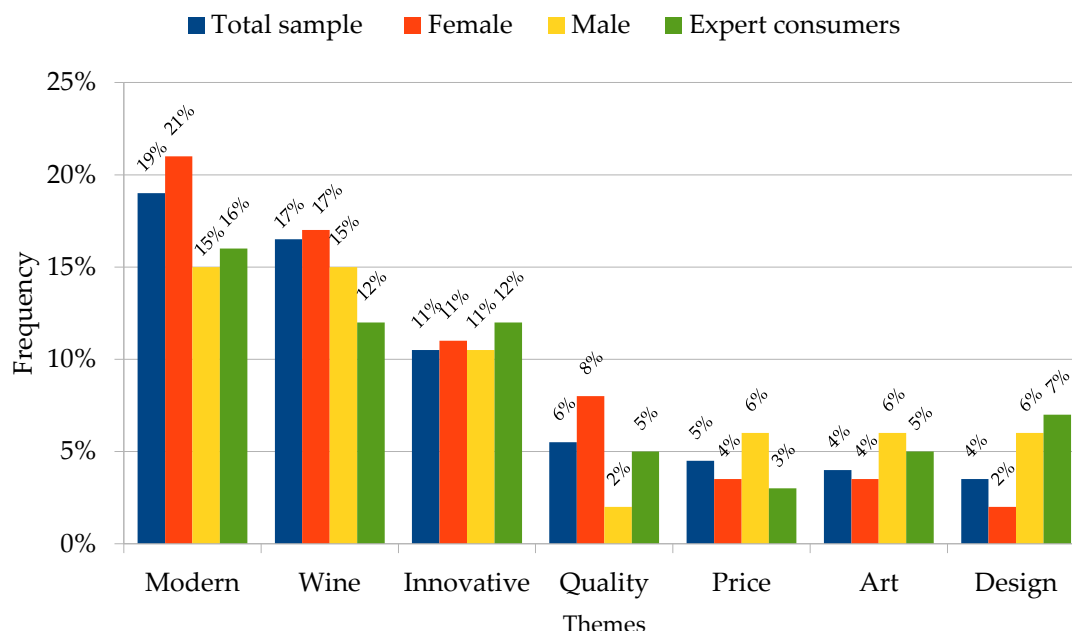
Specifically, the total sample indicates a prevalence for the words “Modern”, “Wine”, and “Innovation”, which are each named at 19%, 17%, and 11%.

Female participants are in line with the results found in the total sample, with “Modern” (21%), “Wine” (17%), and “Innovative” (11%) as the words most associated with the label model analyzed.

Similarly, male consumers in the sample show a prevalence for the concepts “Modern” (15%) and “Wine” (15%). In contrast to what has been observed for the other categories of



respondents, the message “Quality” (2%) does not appear among the four most frequently mentioned, while the concepts of “Price”, “Art”, and “Design” appear to be more widely received, with a frequency of 6% each.



**Figure 3.** Histogram of the “Innovative and Modern” label results.

Consistent with findings for most of the respondent categories studied, expert consumers indicate “Modern” (16%) as the main perceived message, followed by “Wine” (12%) and “Innovative” (12%).

### 3.3. “Modest and Organic” Wine Digital Label Model

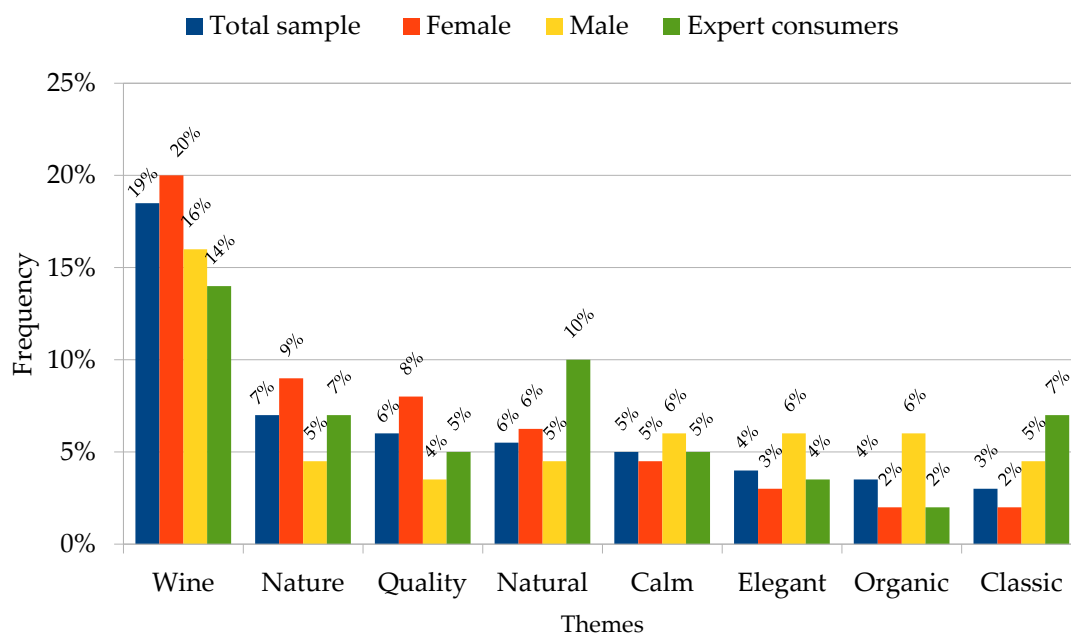
In reference to the third label model developed, it is particularly interesting to note that the messages intended at the stage of its creation—modest and organic—are not the most frequent (Figure 4), both in the total sample and in the individual categories. “Modest”, which should have been conveyed by the thin font and lowercase letters, does not exceed 5% in any of the respondent categories, and the theme “Biological”, which should have been conveyed by the tree used as the main illustration, appears with an overall low frequency. Although the value “Organic” is not successfully conveyed to respondents, the main illustration of the label template confirms its effectiveness, given the overall high frequency with which the concepts of “Nature” and “Natural” were recalled by the consumers analyzed.

In particular, the total sample shows a prevalence for the words “Wine” (19%), “Nature” (7%), and “Quality” (7%), which are the most frequently mentioned.

Similarly, the results observed in the female sample show “Wine” (27%), “Nature” (9%), and “Quality” (8%) as messages most associated with the visual codes of the label model considered.

As for male respondents, the word “Wine” (16%) is the most mentioned, followed by “Calm”, “Elegant”, and “Organic”, which all show a frequency of 6%.

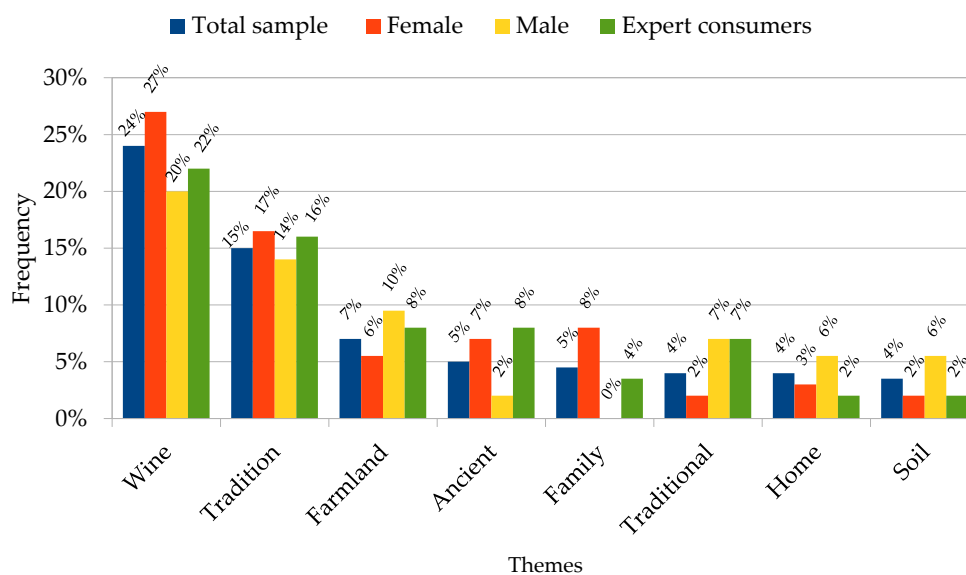
Finally, the category of experienced consumers names the meanings “Wine” (14%), “Natural” (10%), and “Nature” (7%) the most, aligning with the main results found in the total and female sample.



**Figure 4.** Histogram of the “Modest and Organic” label results.

### 3.4. Rustic and Territorial” Label

As in the previous label, the most common themes used by respondents are not the ones intended during the creation process. Neither “Rustic” nor “Territorial”—which should have been conveyed by the brownish color of the background and the farmhouse with vineyard used as the main illustration—are among the most frequent concepts, both in the overall sample and in the specific categories (Figure 5). In contrast, the most frequently used words involve the concepts of “Wine”, “Tradition”, “Farmland”, and “Ancient”, which have a frequency of 24%, 15%, 7%, and 5% in the total sample. This result is very close to the that of the first label investigated.



**Figure 5.** Histogram of the Rustic and Territorial label.

The female category shares similar results overall with the other study categories, except for the word “Family”, which is the third most mentioned word with a frequency of 8%.

The male respondent category indicates “Wine” (20%), “Tradition” (14%), and “Farmland” (10%) as the main messages, thus showing similar results to those of the first label model.

Finally, experienced consumers are generally consistent with the results of the total sample, showing higher frequency for the words “Wine” (22%), “Tradition” (16%), and “Farmland” (8%).

#### 4. Discussion

The main objective of the study was to understand whether the results of current research on the accuracy of semiotic elements used in the front labels of wine bottles also have application to Italian consumers. This paper extended the studies conducted by Celhay and Remaud [18] on the semiotics of packaging in referring to French wine and applied them to the specific case of Italian consumers.

The survey focused on the free association of words, which was tested by defining four digital wine labels made through the interaction of visual codes and attributes and their semiotic analysis. The data obtained showed that the main desired messages were understood in a very similar way by consumers in both Italy and France, as certain pictorial elements of the label models were interpreted in the same way. Comparison of these results with those obtained from previous studies by Celhay and Remaud [18] confirms that especially the main illustration and background color play a decisive role in conveying certain meanings, strongly recalling the values for which they were designed. The use of a traditional building tied to wine production and a yellow/brown color of the background always recalled (as in the first and fourth labels) historical and traditional values, while their absence remarked a stark absence of those values (as in the second and third labels).

Despite the overall applicability of the studies by Celhay and Remaud [18] to Italian consumers, the results of this paper suggest some discrepancies. Precisely, these inconsistencies were manifested in relation to the brand typography, both in terms of letters and colors, which failed to always evoke the values it was intended to. Indeed, the gold-colored branding of the second label did not convey the expected value of “luxury”, and the lower-case letters and thin font of the third label did not communicate the value of “modesty”. This contrasts with the results of Celhay and Remaud [18], where the presence of the gold color always recalled the value “luxury”, while the thin font and lowercase letters conveyed the value “modesty”, as predicted by semiotic analysis.

In line with the findings of Celhay and Remaud [18], these observations are basically valid for all different categories of respondents, regardless of gender and degree of experience. The differences that emerged between the female and male categories are not significant, as they concern the frequency of the lesser-used words and not the main values recalled by the visual codes. Similarly, the results of expert consumers are overall consistent with those of the total sample, although they appear to be more influenced by the main illustration of label models compared to the other categories.

Semiotic analysis is therefore an effective tool in understanding and interpreting consumer associations and expectations originated by the visual elements of the product [18,27]. Consequently, it assumes a central role in the communication process, as it can convey specific messages and stimulate a positive response from the potential purchaser. As stated by Opprud [40], when consumers first perceive a product, their attention is drawn to signs that can help them to identify and classify the product. In the case of food and wine products, such signs are incorporated into the packaging and its visual components (shape, size, label, etc.), which strongly influence consumers’ expectations and perceptions [41,42]. Therefore, being able to define the visual aspects of packaging according to the intended message through their semiotic study becomes crucial to significantly influencing purchase decisions [43,44].

## 5. Conclusions

Wine label design is a complex yet extremely important task, considering the wine bottle front label importance during the purchasing process, as it represents the main point of contact with the consumer. In this perspective, semiotic studies are very useful tools in this designing process, being very efficient in conveying predetermined values, as demonstrated in this survey concerning Italian consumers.

The study presents interesting academic and practical implications.

It contributes to enriching and expanding the current literature on the topic of semiotics applied to the labeling of food and wine products, further extending the work conducted by Celhay and Remaud [18] and reinforcing the concept introduced by Ares et al. [27] that similar cultures might share a common interpretation of visual codes. Considering that Ares et al. [27] compared the understanding of the same visual codes between two countries (Spain and Uruguay) that have both cultural affinities and the same language, the present study extends this hypothesis by showing how two countries with strong cultural proximity may share the same interpretation of visual codes, despite linguistic differences.

The paper also presents managerial contributions, showing how using a semiotic approach strongly based on the main graphic illustration, background color, and layout could enhance the communication strategies of Italian wine companies, supporting different producers to convey specific values and feelings to their consumers. This becomes even more relevant when considering that wine in Italy constitutes not only one of the best-known and most relevant products for both the domestic (EUR 1.8 billion of Italian wine consumed in Italy in 2021, [22]) and international markets (EUR 7 billion of wine exported in 2021, [22]), but it is also one of the products that is recovering most rapidly after the export slowdown caused by the COVID-19 crisis (+12.4 percent year-on-year increase in 2021, [22]). In addition, the consideration that similar cultures appear to exhibit the same understanding of the visual codes of the label models analyzed could facilitate Italian wine companies' intent on expanding their business to culturally similar countries, such as France.

The main limitation of the research derives from the smallness of the sample analyzed, which consisted of 197 respondents. In addition, the free association form used in the survey asks consumers for only one word to describe what the label conveys to them, potentially reducing the degree of detail of the response.

Future research should expand the number of respondents to further validate the results obtained. Furthermore, it could be useful to increase the level of statistical analysis by including the study of relations and impacts with respect to the different categories of respondents considered. Finally, it might also be interesting to study the perception of visual aspects used in wine labeling in other countries belonging to the Mediterranean area, to see if sharing a similar cultural background results in a quite similar interpretation of such visual elements.

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