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The Role of Chocolate Web-Based Communication in a Regional Context: Its Implication for Open Innovation

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Abstract: Background: This research investigates the web-based communication and promotion strategies applied by a sample of selected chocolatiers in Piedmont, a region in the northwest of Italy known for its ancient chocolate-making tradition. Methods: the AGIL scheme was used (A-adaptation, which evaluates the persuasive approach; G-goal achievement, which evaluates the informative approach; I-integration, which evaluates the communicative approach; and L-latent model, which evaluates the identity approach). Each A-G-I-L category, subdivided into subcategories containing variables, was specifically evaluated during the analysis of the companies' websites carried out by a group of experts. The five experts assigned a score for each variable and subcategory to each site. The average subcategory and category scores for each website were analyzed using principal component analysis, which allowed three communicative orientations to be defined: classic, consumer-centered, international-oriented. Results: In general, the results show a strong link between the tradition of artisan chocolate producers and the desire to create a relationship of trust in the brand on the part of consumers. Conclusions: This research is the first to contribute to the field of chocolate web-communication and provides a picture of a local production reality; it is interesting in terms of chocolate promotion styles based on the combination of tradition and innovation.

Keywords: chocolate; web-based communication; claims; AGIL scheme; open innovation



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1. Introduction

Chocolate, from “food of the Gods” to “comfort food”, is a food known all over the world and consumed by individuals of all ages. In recent years, the cocoa industry has constantly increased, reaching considerable production. Europe is the world's largest chocolate market with 65% of the world's production (4 million tons in 2019) worth EUR 18.3 billion [1]. The geography of cocoa moves from the south of the world (76.3% of the world's cocoa bean production comes from Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Ghana) to the north and is concentrated in the hands of a few industrial processing players (four multinationals) that, alone, process 85% of the cocoa beans produced in the world [2,3].

Italy, with 700,000 tons of chocolate produced in 2018 (18% of the total European production), reached a production value of more than EUR 4.5 billion (with 50% of the sector represented by bars and pralines), with more than 300 thousand tons of product exported [4,5]. Specifically, cocoa products made in Italy increased in 2018 by 5.7% in quantity and 0.1% in value for more than 323,000 tons and EUR 1.7 billion [6].

Euromonitor International [7] highlights that after a steady decline in the past five years with an absolute consumption value of 11 kg per capita at European level and 4.9 kg per household in Italy in 2019, 2020 has seen an exponential growth in consumption in Italy as in other countries around the world. In particular, in Italy it seems that the restrictive

measures imposed by Government to limit the spread of COVID-19 have increased the consumption of chocolate, especially in the bar format, which recorded the highest growth of 4%, reaching EUR 540 million on the Italian market. According to the research institute, among the most sought-after categories were also the premium, organic and sugar-reduced qualities [8,9].

In Italy, chocolate consumption is characterized by a strong preference for the dark variety, which accounts for 42% of all chocolate consumed nationally, followed by hazelnut chocolate (23%), special chocolates (16%), milk chocolate (15%) and, lastly, white chocolate (5%) [10].

In recent years, the chocolate industry has rapidly evolved in terms of product differentiation and chocolate consumption habits: new product categories emerged, such as organic [11], gluten-free and vegan chocolate [12], as well as new ingredient mixes that give rise to new and distinctive flavors (i.e., matcha tea, coconut, blueberry and mint) [13]. In terms of consumption, over the past two years, the home environment (for consuming chocolate or for making cakes and sweets) has become the most suitable place to enjoy chocolate, but at the same time, consumption in the professional environment has collapsed due to the closure of bars, patisseries and restaurants. It is precisely due to this that large players and small companies are shifting their focus, experimenting with new distribution routes, and strengthening promotion and communication tools to promote new sales channels, such as online. In general, the communication strategies of chocolate companies in recent years have focused on communicating various product aspects, which are increasingly important for consumer choices. First of all, the chocolate health effects, mainly related to the type of dark chocolate, are often expressed and emphasized in product communication campaigns, given the growing interest of individuals in healthier chocolate alternatives. Following these indications and the growing preference of consumers for “light” products, many companies are producing sugar-free or reduced-calorie chocolate. In addition, recognition of the connection between cocoa and health—due to the presence of flavonoids in cocoa, which are associated with health benefits such as lowering blood pressure and improving blood cholesterol levels—has led to an increasing consumption of dark chocolate in recent years [14,15].

Secondly, companies operating in the chocolate sector are increasingly highlighting aspects such as sustainability, innovation and origin of their products in their communication campaigns. Product origin is becoming particularly important during individual purchasing processes, linking this attribute to product sustainability, organic sources and the social aspect of inclusion of indigenous peoples in places of cultivation and along the entire value chain [16]. In particular, it emerged that premium products, such as chocolate with origin certification, are perceived by the consumer as being of higher quality and often attributable to local products [7].

Voluntary labeling is also gaining consumer-recognizable value for chocolate [17]. Labels with fair trade claims are able to attract consumer attention; however, they do not seem to justify a higher price alone [18]. In particular, it seems that young people are willing to pay more for products with reference to ethical attributes [17], although opinions differ on this aspect [19].

The degree of acceptance of chocolate products therefore depends on the information communicated and on expectations, which can be traced not only to the image and values that identify the manufacturer/brand, but also to a product’s intrinsic and sensorial characteristics [19]. Despite the evolution of consumer preferences towards elements such as organic, fair-trade, single origin and reduced sugar content, taste continues to be the predominant element for chocolate consumption [11]. For example, in Boivin et al. [20], it was found that consumers prefer the sensory characteristics of conventional chocolate to the healthy aspects of the low-calorie product, while in Siegrist et al. [21], consumers associated the product with health benefits (identifiable by label claims) with a worse taste than the product without this claim. Therefore, the communicated attractiveness of chocolate should not neglect taste, e.g., by combining attributes such as sustainability with

the sensory quality of the product in a promotional campaign, stimulating a higher degree of consumer curiosity and acceptability [22].

This market proves to be one characterized by many producers and, as a consequence, by a high number of brands. It is important, therefore, to consider the role of communication as a way to distinguish products and communicate to potential customers the reasons for choosing chocolate from one brand over another. With the wide range of products on the market today and the breadth of sales channels, the challenge for companies is to recognize consumer interests and chase the target audience [20]. In these terms, the chocolate market has undergone a strong evolution in recent years in terms of product communication and promotion strategies. However, new insights for improvement and development should be sought by the company in order to increase visibility, become appealing and differentiate it on the immense online market, even in the face of restrictions due to the pandemic. The internet and the potential offered by technology are rapidly changing the means of interaction and communication with consumers [23]. In addition to choosing the communication tools, it is important for companies to give to consumers the opportunity to visually find information to identify product features [17]. Therefore, design management is also an aspect of marketing-related activities that can communicate the values that the brand wants to convey through its products, packaging, advertising and environments. In this regard, in our research we started from the hypothesis that artisanal producers, in a very competitive production reality, have developed different sales channels, such as online sales, as well as different communication and web enhancement strategies in accordance with the needs of the modern consumer.

While consumer studies in the literature are many and highlight the relationship between the chocolate decision-making process and consumption with respect to intrinsic, extrinsic, psychological and sustainability-related attributes [19,22,24,25], to our knowledge, current studies related to the characterization of chocolate offerings and, in particular, market communication, are absent [24].

In this work, a sample of selected chocolate companies in the Piedmont region (north-western Italy) was considered in order to highlight the different web promotion choices of artisan chocolate producers in the identified geographical area, evaluating the persuasive, informative, communicative and identity approach of web marketing actions and defining different promotion and communication styles implemented by the selected sample. To achieve these purposes, the AGIL (adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latent pattern maintenance) scheme and principal component analysis (PCA) were used, respectively. The companies chosen were mostly small businesses with characteristics of artisan production, typical of the geographical area of reference. In fact, Piedmont is an area rich in artisan companies producing 100% Italian chocolate. Moreover, the province of Turin is the major Italian center for chocolate processing, not only in terms of the larger industrial realities, but especially for the artisan companies that carry on the Turin chocolate tradition [26]. The most recent data show that in 2018 the Piedmontese chocolate district was the largest Italian chocolate processing center with a production of 85,000 tons, equal to almost 40% of the national total. The metropolitan city of Turin alone has 72 chocolate processing companies, accounting for 66% of the Piedmontese total [27].

2. Materials and Methods

AGIL Scheme: Adaptation, Goal-Attainment, Integration and Latent Pattern Maintenance

In this study, a multidimensional research methodology called the AGIL scheme was applied. The AGIL schema is commonly used to study communication as an expressive phenomenon of social relations [28]: in fact, its multidimensionality is due to the set of techniques simultaneously used to study the social phenomena that allows measuring the different ways in which communication is conveyed [29–31]. In our research, this approach was adopted to evaluate the communication effectiveness of chocolate manufacturers through the analysis of their websites [28,32]. The scheme is divided into the four components represented by A (adaptation, which evaluates the persuasive approach),

G (goal attainment, which evaluates the informational approach), I (integration, which evaluates the communicative approach) and L (latent patterns, which evaluates the identity approach) [28]. For the data collection and website evaluation, a sample of chocolate food companies ($n = 28$) with active websites were chosen, selected according to a geographical criterion of location in the provinces of Turin and Cuneo (Piedmont, Northwest Italy). The research was carried out between October 2019 and February 2020.

A group of researchers from the University of Turin consisting of five experts was selected to conduct the analysis of the websites in accordance with the AGIL scheme. They possessed different professional skills: agrifood product marketing, consumer behavior analysis, business economics, communications and web marketing. The selected panel analyzed each website and, from their observations, 20 indicators were identified to describe the websites' communication style. These indicators were collected in 5 subdimensions for each dimension of the AGIL scheme. The 5 subdimensions were then used to assess and measure the intensity of communication on behalf of chocolate companies through their websites (Table 1).

Table 1. AGIL scheme: indicators and subdimensions referring to each dimension of the AGIL scheme.

Dimensions	Subdimensions	Indicators	References
Adaptation (A)	Brand recognition	Degree of ease in brand recognition	[33,34]
	Site design	Degree of customization and uniqueness	[35]
	Free-from products	Presence of products free from certain ingredients (sugar-free, gluten-free, lactose-free, etc.)	[36–39]
	Fat-reduced products	Presence of fat-reduced products	[13,40]
	Vegan products	Presence of vegan products	[13,40]
Goal-attainment (G)	Taste and texture	Quantity of indication about the product taste and texture	[41,42]
	Availability of information	Quantity of intrinsic information about chocolate and its label	[19,43]
	Certifications	Presence of certified product lines (i.e., organic, vegan, etc.)	[44,45]
	Health benefits links	Presence of product lines with health benefits (polyphenols-flavones)	[46–48]
	Product use	Information about the possible product uses (e.g., for preparations, cooking)	[49]
Integration (I)	Price	Expression of the importance of the price of products	[50–52]
	International profile	Number of foreign languages available	[53]
	Interactive website	Presence of chat rooms, forums, social networks	[54]
	User-friendly	Degree of intuitiveness, ease of navigation and easy access to information	[55]
	E-commerce	Presence of an online shop	[56]
Latent pattern maintenance (L)	Communication of innovation	Originality and innovation of the process and the product	[57]
	Origin	Presence of references to the place of origin of the raw material and the place of processing	[58,59]
	History-tradition	Presence of references to the history-tradition of chocolate and territorial identity	[60]
	Environmental sustainability	Presence of references to environmental sustainability	[22,61]
	Social sustainability	Presence of references to the relationship with farmers/producers (social aspects, fair trade)	[59]

The assessment of the four criteria of the AGIL was made by the five experts according to their knowledge. Independent evaluations were chosen because this approach allows obtaining data relatively quickly and provides instant feedback and information regarding perceptions, opinions and ideas [62]. In addition, it is a low-cost method for analyzing product promotion choices on behalf of competitors and for identifying market trends. The work of the experts was divided into three phases: in the first phase, the expert group selected the different subdimensions referring to the four dimensions of the AGIL scheme. In the second phase, the selected websites were independently observed; in the third and final phase, a questionnaire was filled out individually to evaluate each sub-dimension. In this phase, participants had the task of giving a score (1 to 5) to each indicator [63]. Following the AGIL methodology used, a score was then assigned to each indicator through the use of a Likert scale. This consisted of 5 points in which 1 indicated absence of the attribute and 5 indicated strong presence of the attribute. After assigning the different scores individually in order to obtain a single final result, the average scores given by the participants for each indicator were calculated. The scores obtained for the different indicators were calculated for each, using a $c \times v$ matrix, where c means cases (in our specific case, the number of chocolate manufacturer websites, i.e., 28) and v means variables (in this hypothesis, the subdimensions). In accordance with the literature [28] and in accordance with the four dimensions of Lazarsfeld's (1967) theoretical framework, it was then possible to obtain the total scores for the four dimensions through the application of the AGIL scheme [31]. Finally, all assessments were grouped together and the mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation were calculated for each subdimension. The four dimensions of each producer were then calculated based on the scores obtained from the individual indicators following the multidimensional theory of communication [28].

Subsequently, two non-parametric rank-based tests were used to test the significant differences between the four AGIL groups and to assess the existence of significant differences between the subdimensions of each dimension [64]. The Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to test the four AGIL components. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare the differences between the five subdimensions within each group with pairwise comparisons [65].

Finally, the PCA methodology was adopted to identify the communication styles implemented by the companies selected in the study. PCA allows the exploration of a set of interrelated variables, without imposing any fixed structure of the result, allowing the reduction of the number of initial variables that it summarizes into a limited number of components. An initial correlation matrix was used for this study considering the minimum correlation value of 0.3. Sample adequacy was analyzed using the KMO index, and Bartlett's sphericity test was performed to test the hypothesis that the correlation matrix coincided with the identity matrix. Factor extraction was based on Varimax rotation. Analysis was performed using the SPSS 27.0 software package for Windows.

3. Results

3.1. AGIL Evaluation

Table 2 shows that the predominant dimension of communication used by the analyzed websites was integration (I) with an average score of 2.9. It is evident that the predominant communication objective is based on interaction with the user, through the use of social networks, with the aim of establishing a relationship or link with the customer or potential customer. Among the defined subdimensions, the one on which companies seem to focus the most in website development is "easy access to information" (score of 3.9). As a matter of fact, this subdimension achieved the highest average score among all the subdimensions used in the AGIL scheme. The selected chocolate manufacturers therefore paid more attention to the ease of navigation and the degree of intuitiveness of their website. The second most important dimension was latent pattern maintenance (L) with an average of 2.8. The companies surveyed express their willingness to identify their products with the company image and values. Within this dimension, the highest score (3.3) was

linked to tradition together to the indication of origin. These two parameters, considered simultaneously, are probably communicated to emphasize the link between the company, the history of chocolate production and the territorial identity. This last indicator refers not only to the terroir where the processing and transformation of cocoa takes place and therefore where the companies surveyed are located, but also to the indication of the place of origin of the raw material.

Table 2. AGIL results.

		Mean Sub-Dimension	St. Dev	Coeff. of Variation	Range	Mean Dimension	Kruskal–Wallis Test between Dimensions	Mann–Whitney within Dimension
Adaptation (A)	Brand recognition	3.10	1.54	0.50	1–5	2.3062	***	Site design, Brand recognition > Free-from products > Vegan products, Fat-reduced products
	Site design	3.43	1.13	0.33	1–5			
	Free-from products	2.40	1.32	0.55	1–5			
	Fat-reduced products	1.23	0.68	0.55	1–5			
	Vegan products	1.37	0.95	0.69	1–5			
Integration (I)	Price	2.84	1.59	0.56	1–5	2.9462	***	User-friendly > E-commerce, Price, Interactive website > International website
	International profile	2.13	1.23	0.58	1–5			
	Interactive website	2.71	1.28	0.47	1–5			
	User-friendly	3.92	0.92	0.23	1–5			
	E-commerce	3.13	1.56	0.50	1–5			
Latent pattern maintenance (L)	Communication of innovation	2.95	1.20	0.41	1–5	2.784	***	History-Tradition, Origin > Communication of innovation > Environmental sustainability, Social sustainability
	Origin	3.24	1.41	0.44	1–5			
	History-tradition	3.31	1.22	0.37	1–5			
	Environmental sustainability	2.25	1.35	0.60	1–5			
	Social sustainability	2.17	1.29	0.59	1–5			
						<i>p</i> -value	I, L, G > A	

The *p*-value refers to the statistical significance level: *** <0.001.

The third dimension by average score was goal-achievement (G), which assesses the type of information communicated. In general, the selected companies did not consider certified lines or references to the cocoa health benefits as main factors in communication. In this dimension, they mainly focused on the chocolate information and on the label. In addition, the indication of the taste of the product also scored above the average of the others within dimension G. The adaptation dimension scored lower than the others, also presenting subdimensions with very low scores such as the quantity of vegan or reduced-fat products. This result shows that the companies analyzed gave importance to the degree of customization and uniqueness of their site, but limited the offer of “premium” products such as gluten-free, reduced-fat and vegan. In particular, the presence of reduced-fat products was the subdimension with the lowest score (1.2) of all those analyzed. Tables with the results of the Kruskal–Wallis H test and the Mann–Whitney U test can be found in Supplementary Material.

3.2. Web-Based Communication Styles of Piedmontese Chocolatiers

From the analysis of the main components, it was possible to identify three communication styles highlighted by the companies analyzed (Table 3).

Three selected components, which explain a total of 57.3% of the variance, were selected. The first, “classical claims”, showed the most traditional style of communication where the reputation of the producer is placed at the center, combining the communication of the product’s hedonic value, tradition and innovation with the origin, as well as the production and product sustainability. The second component, called “consumer centered”, identifies companies that pay attention to consumers attentive to chocolate health benefits (allergen-free, with reduced fats and sugars, etc.) and to certified products (e.g., fair trade

or vegan). The latest component is aimed especially at the international consumer with the possibility to select the language from several options, with the aim of taking the user to the online e-commerce shop in a few clicks. In order to achieve these results, this form of communication is based on the attractive design of the website combined with easy access to information, including the price of the products, which is always clearly visible.

Table 3. PCA results: web-based communication styles of Piedmontese chocolatiers.

Variables	Component		
	Classical Claims	Consumer Centred	International Oriented
Origin	0.776		
Social sustainability	0.773		
History-tradition	0.77		
Interactive website	0.708		
Product use	0.695		
Brand recognition	0.671		
Taste and texture	0.632		
Environmental sustainability	0.617		
Communication of innovation	0.582		
Information available	0.561		
Health benefits links		0.749	
Certifications		0.717	
Free-from products		0.717	
Vegan products		0.705	
Fat-reduced products		0.557	
International profile			0.558
E-commerce			0.828
Price			0.826
User-friendly			0.708
Site design			0.548
Explained variance	34.768	12.853	9.663
Test KMO	0.855		
Barlett’s test of sphericity (Approx. chi-square)	1604.427	df = 190	Sig. = 0.000

4. Discussion

4.1. Evaluation of Chocolatiers’ Websites: The AGIL Results Discussion

The analyses of chocolatiers’ websites conducted following the AGIL scheme proved useful in identifying the communicative approaches chosen by the chocolate companies in northwest Italy.

As expressed by other authors [28], the web-based communicative approach of companies aimed at engaging consumers through both dialogic interaction and in terms of availability and clarity of information was predominant. Moreover, the fact that the predominant dimension was integration establishes direct relationships with both Italian and foreign consumers [66]. In general, the companies involved in this research were able to develop this sharing, communication and sales tool (website) by embracing the growing need of consumers who demand more information transparency, product awareness and accessibility, and a loyal relationship to the producers [67–69]. Therefore, these results confirmed our research hypothesis highlighting the importance to differentiate the communication style but always in accordance with consumers’ needs.

4.1.1. Identity Approach and Tradition

The development of user-friendly websites and interaction tools is one of the most important aspects in creating visibility, recognition and, therefore, trust between business

and consumer. In fact, several studies in the literature suggest that ease of navigation has an important impact on the usability of a website and, consequently, on how much a user feels they can trust the seller [70]. This aspect related to the identity approach is also identified in other studies [66], where companies present themselves through their websites and with the image with which they identify themselves. Within this dimension, the reference to tradition and origin are elements that identify the company's history in chocolate production and its link to the territory. In fact, Turin is the Italian city of chocolate, linked to its traditional production, which began in 1560 and evolved from the 19th century. Even today, the province of Turin represents the largest Italian center for chocolate processing, where artisan companies are committed to carrying on Turin's chocolate tradition [63]. Regarding the emphasis on the place of origin, this result is in line with what has been reported in the literature, according to which European chocolate companies often associate their brand with the country of origin [71].

4.1.2. Communication Strategies and Regional Open Innovation

On the other hand, this study shows that chocolate companies do not base their communication strategy on certified or healthy product lines. In the case of chocolate, it therefore seems that the companies involved in the study are targeting a consumer who bases his or her choices on a conscious approach, linked more to a traditional product and a known producer than to the hedonic aspect. This result is in line with a study conducted on the analysis of websites of Passito wine producers: also in this case, the information dimension was the least efficient [63]. In the achievement dimension, the information provided about the chocolate, its label and the products' flavor qualities was the main consideration. Therefore, knowledge of the intrinsic attributes of a food could characterize the consumer's choice during the purchasing process, a result in line with an industry study related to pasta communication strategies [72].

In general, it is noted that, in line with other studies [28], companies were oriented towards a traditional communication approach; indeed, brand recognition and site personalization scored higher on average than site interactivity. In contrast to these results, an analysis conducted on the new communication methods available to wine producers showed that the persuasive function was the most important communication method. This was used by producers to communicate their brand through content characterizing the quality of their wines such as the origin of raw materials and the winemaking process [63].

4.2. Discussion PCA

Although the analysis of the sites provided us with a general strategy on which the Piedmontese chocolatiers base their web-based communication, PCA allowed us to distinguish three different orientations through which the companies developed their website communication strategies.

4.2.1. The "Classical Claims" Communicative Style

The first communicative style, "classical claims", is based on a clear and user-friendly communication that easily leads the consumer back to his or her trusted chocolatier. The advantages of this strategy, now recognized by many food companies, are related to web-enhanced brand communities as a lever for relationship marketing communication, especially in order to establish links with devoted users [73]. Involving consumers by focusing on aspects that are important to them (such as taste, authenticity, territory and sustainability) is a prerequisite for obtaining the involvement and loyalty of the brand that leads to the creation of positive relationships with the brand. Ease of interaction and ability to share with customers on the website facilitate user reach, positively influencing the experience and evaluating producers. This has more emphasis with emotional products like chocolate [74–76].

4.2.2. The “Consumer Centered” Communicative Style

The second component, called “consumer centered”, focused on communication. In fact, the dissemination of health information on the internet becomes increasingly important for food producers, especially in relation to the growing concern about health among consumers [47,77,78]. The beneficial effects of chocolate are found above all in products with high cocoa content: the consumer now perceives the connection between health and dark chocolate to be a fact [42]. However, this style is dedicated to niches, as when it comes to a product like chocolate—emotional and linked to the enjoyment of the senses—on the whole, consumers tend to be tempted by the hedonic aspect [20,21]. This style probably moves away from the classic communication schemes to approach market niches represented by sports people or consumers attentive to social issues.

4.2.3. The “International-Oriented” Communicative Style

The last approach was the one that mostly underlined the company’s international character. Given the strength of the traditional brand, correlated to a positive and transparent communication of the product and the brand value, even on the foreign market, this communication style represents a good tool for companies to face competitive forces and expand their markets through the internationalization of sales, as also stated by other authors [79].

5. Conclusions

This research is the first to contribute in the area of web-based chocolate communication, providing a picture on the promotion of an area’s production and pointing to the combination of tradition and innovation.

This work is intended as a reflection tool for small- and medium-sized artisan chocolate businesses to evaluate their communication and promotion performance and to provide suggestions for improving their approach to the web, also by identifying less explored market segments. Advertising agencies could also benefit from the results of this work to propose new digital marketing strategies to companies in the chocolate industry. The results clearly show the bonds that the producer wants to create and maintain with the customers, emphasizing the relationship of the brand with the origin of the product, both of the raw material and of the place of transformation based on the sales area. On the other hand, new consumption drivers are considered of secondary importance, though now vital for other products in the food sector; these are sustainability, fat- and sugar-free, vegan, health. This result expresses the strong link with the tradition of artisan chocolate producers who try to create a bond with consumers based on trust in their brand; therefore, this does not push the producer to look for new marketing campaigns. Furthermore, it highlights the uniqueness of the chocolate product in which hedonic characteristics remain at the forefront as a driver in forms of promotion. However, from the analysis of the communication and promotion styles, what emerges alongside the classic style, based on the emphasis on the manufacturer’s reputation, combined with tradition and origin, is that there is a clear opening for interactivity, with social networks used as tools for customer relations. Considering that the companies examined were small and medium-sized enterprises, often family-run, and that they followed management patterns that cannot be traced back to those typical of the large food industry, it is interesting to note this propensity for continuous interaction with the consumer, which denotes a strong commitment to communication.

Innovation is gaining ground and some companies in particular are targeting the most demanding customers who choose chocolate for its health benefits, or who are also looking for certified products (e.g., fair trade, vegan) and which do not contain allergens, fats and sugars. It can be said that the world of chocolate is undergoing a rapid evolution not only in the styles of consumption but also in the styles of production and communication where innovation is combined with tradition. Furthermore, in relation to the past two years, which have seen an increase in domestic chocolate consumption linked to the lockdowns caused

by the COVID-19 pandemic, differentiating promotional campaigns and communication styles has been a key focus for companies to expand their market.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the major limitations of the work presented, especially linked to the narrow geographical area studied which, although emblematic and dynamic, cannot represent the sector at either national or international level. Another limitation lies in the choice of the qualitative content analysis methodology which, although well suited to the context studied, presents the intrinsic limits of qualitative studies. Possible future studies will focus on overcoming these limitations by investigating with quantitative content analysis tools the web and social communication forms of producers on a larger scale.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/joitmc8020084/s1>. Figure S1: Results of the Kruskal–Wallis H and the Mann–Whitney U tests.

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