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The serious side to funny cartoons: understanding public perception of wine through cartoon content analysis

Kristin Matheson[a], Kirk Plangger[b], Jan Kietzmann[c], Joseph Vella[d] and Philip Grant[e]

[a]Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada; [b]King's Business School, King's College London, London, UK; [c]Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada; [d]Department of Marketing Communication, University of Malta, Msida, Malta; [e]School of Management, Langara College, Vancouver, Canada

ABSTRACT

Understanding public perception of a wine festival, organic wine, or the impact of climate change on wine quality can be a complex task. Wine consumers' opinions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes seem to appear in traditional channels, such as newspapers and magazines, as well as in digital channels, such as blogs, tweets, text messages, social media comments, and consumer ratings. These come in all sorts of formats, but most commonly through text (e.g. posts, tweets) and images (e.g. pictures and videos). Content analysis can be an effective way to understand these widely shared means of expressing sentiment towards a wine and the wine industry. This article examines 300 wine cartoons using a content analysis method that classifies their content into four analytical dimensions: narrative, domestication, binary struggle, and normative transference. This cartoon content analysis reveals details of how different types of wine customers consume and evaluate wine across contexts (e.g. wine in restaurants or at home). This analysis also explores public perception trends regarding wine: social status associations, emotional consumer responses, and consumption-specific concerns. We conclude by discussing future research directions and managerial implications.

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The stories that cartoons tell

Wine is widely produced and consumed around the world – in at least 44 countries globally (Brinckmann, 2018); however, the public perception of wine as a product is sometimes a mystery to wine industry managers as there is little connection with average wine consumers. Average consumers of wine face a very difficult task when choosing which wine to purchase, as wine is a very complex product that ranges dramatically in price point, terroir, composition, aroma, body, flavor, intensity, acidity and 'fruitiness', among other variables. As a result, consumers often rely on experts' wine ratings, marketing messages and other consumers' experiences (Beninger, Parent, Pitt, & Chan, 2014). These sources are often inconsistent, as such it is difficult to understand the public opinion[1] of wine, its industry, or its products at any point in time. This article illustrates one way to gaining insight into public perceptions of wine using content analysis of cartoons.

CONTACT Kristin Matheson krismatheso@gmail.com

Despite the complexity associated with choosing a wine, wine accounts for 17% of the total market for alcoholic beverages, and the industry has grown significantly over the past 20 years (Brinckmann, 2018). Consumption in the United States alone has grown from approximately 400 million gallons in 1984 to 790 million gallons in 2016 (McMillan, 2018). However, as this growth is expected to plateau in the near future (Mullen, 2018), market-savvy wineries are looking for ways to understand the changing demographics and values of their consumers. We show that such information is available in cartoons, and that wine managers who can assess what cartoons, and other forms of content, tell us about society's views on wine consumption, and how public opinion towards this popular good changes over time, are likely to be able to realize a gain in their market share.

With this goal, this article aims to assess the general public opinion of wine using cartoon content analysis, demonstrate the versatility of the cartoon content analysis method and to provide examples of the possible insights that can be gained. In this pursuit, this article first discusses the cartoon medium, and then outlines a method of performing cartoon content analysis. It then illustrates the application of cartoon content analysis to the wine industry, its products and society, and discusses some of the insights found. Next, it discusses the findings derived from this method and summarizes research implications. The article concludes by acknowledging the study's limitations and identifying future avenues for scholarly investigation.

Content analysis and cartoons

Content analysis, a 'scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications' (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 10) can be used as a method for evaluating public perception. In a societal context, content analysis can examine widely accessible public texts and visual images to search for valuable insights into public sentiment towards a particular product, service, brand, current event, relevant issue, etc. (Kassarjian, 1977). Content analysis can be used to assess and sometimes predict public perception towards products and brands with the aim of enhancing the understanding of consumer behavior (e.g. attitudes, product / service usage, purchase influences), predicting future demand, and identifying risks to their corporate brand (Deshpande & Zaltman, 1982; Plangger & Watson, 2015). Advantages of content analysis include the public nature of the content (i.e. anyone can access it) and the fact that today, content from around the world is also commonly accessible online and can thus be collected relatively easily.

We advocate analyzing the content of cartoons to gain insights into the public's candid perception of a product, service, brand, or corporation (Bal, 2011; Bigi, Plangger, Bonera, & Campbell, 2011). By breaking cartoons into their basic elements, cartoon analysis can provide a useful tool to examine public perception. In other words, by analyzing and comparing the stories that cartoons tell using a systematic method, researchers and practitioners can develop actionable insights into, for example, the general attitudes and sentiment towards wine or the industry. Cartoon content analysis has been used to analyze a variety of topics. For instance, Wiid, Grant, Mills, and Pitt (2015) have used cartoon content analysis to assess the public's perception of salesmanship over time; while Zurbriggen and Sherman (2010) used this method to analyze the representation

of political candidates in the 2008 US election as a window into cultural constructs and conversations.

The concept of the cartoon originated in the Middle Ages, when artists would prepare cartoons as draft sketches of pieces of art they intended to create (e.g. a painting, fresco, tapestry, or stained-glass window). In the nineteenth century, cartoons became genuine forms of two-dimensional visual art, often printed as humorous illustrations in magazines and newspapers (Edwards & McDonald, 2010). Not to be confused with comic strips, which have a continuous storyline through a series of frames, cartoons are illustrations that are bound to one single bordered frame. Further, they seek only to provide one viewpoint of an external current event rather than comprising a self-contained narrative.

Cartoons mostly illustrate non-realistic or semi-realistic everyday situations for the purpose of satire, caricature, or humor (Alba, 1967). The intent of such artistic forms of expression is often to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society and to express viewpoints about topical issues (Caswell, 2004). Political editorial cartoons, for example, can be influential as they present an issue or a current event using common sense and lead readers to consider the point of view of the cartoonist, which could involve the kind of social structure and the historical epoch within which the cartoon has a place (Bal, Pitt, Berthon, & Des Autels, 2009; Baumgartner, 2008; Greenberg, 2002; Templin, 1999).

Various frameworks categorize the specific graphic devices cartoonists use to persuade their audiences (McCloud, 1993; Medhurst & Desousa, 1981). With regard to cartoons as a form of opinion discourse, there are 'strong' and 'weak' theories (Bal et al., 2009). The 'strong' theory of cartoons argues that they actually persuade and *shape public attitudes*, intentions, and behaviors (Brinkman, 1968; Caswell, 2004; Chatterjee, 2007; Medhurst & Desousa, 1981). The 'weak' theory, on the other hand, presumes that cartoons merely *reflect public attitudes* (Thibodeau, 1989; Wheeler & Reed, 1975). In either scenario, researchers study the content of cartoons in order to understand public attitudes that reflect or shape current events (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Ware, 2005). With our goal of understanding public attitudes toward wine, and how these perceptions change over multiple time periods (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Ware, 2005), this paper ascribes to the weak theory of cartoons.

There is also a normative component to cartoons when they frame a contemporary political or social issue by defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments and suggesting remedies (Greenberg, 2002). While reported news is supposed to be factual and objective, cartoons mix normative prescriptions with factual beliefs (Caswell, 2004; Wiid et al., 2015). With these goals, cartoonists consciously and deliberately choose how to illustrate an action through the use of specific visuals (e.g. people, animals, objects) and words (e.g. title, caption, date, numbers) that create symbolic meaning and provoke an emotional response (McCloud, 1993). Through cartoons, cartoonists send messages to their specific audiences. Through a rigorous process of cartoon analysis, we can understand what these messages mean. Following Greenberg (2002), this process of coding means that we have to understand four elements of a cartoon:

> *Narrative*: *What is the essential story line of the cartoon?* Cartoonists depict a coherent story comprising subjects and events within an encapsulated frame (in the case of a cartoon) or frames (in the case of a strip).

Domestication: How does the image bring distant events closer to home? Cartoonists typically use familiar locations and signs to bring distant events closer to our everyday lives. For example, they locate remote events in homes, streets, and settings familiar to their target audience. They also use recognizable symbols such as dress and equipment to indicate someone's role or profession.

Binary Struggle: Who are portrayed in a binary struggle? Cartoons often treat a political or social issue as a binary struggle between two social protagonists (one right, the other wrong). Blame is usually assigned to one of the protagonists, and the other faction is portrayed as the victim.

Normative Transference: Who is portrayed in the cartoon as the "loser"? One of the main functions of a cartoon is to make a normative judgment by allocating fault and portraying victims.

In the following section, we illustrate how these four elements of cartoon content can be analyzed to understand public perception of wine. Cartoons are a particularly good choice since wine, as a product, has not only enjoyed a long and rich history but has also been frequently portrayed in cartoons over time. This allows us to draw from many years of cartoons in order to look at public perception at different moments.

Wine in cartoons

Wine has played an important role in many cultures for thousands of years, indeed according to Judeo-Christian tradition, since 'Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard' (Genesis 9:20). It has been used as a religious symbol and consumed to celebrate joyous occasions and commiserate mournful events. Wine has been a major element of agriculture and commerce, sold on some occasions for a lower price than water, and on others for sums only the very wealthiest can afford (Ashenfelter, 1989). It is drunk as an accompaniment to the simplest of peasant food, and also as a complement to meals in the greatest restaurants. The joy of wine consumption has been praised: 'Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do' (Ecclesiastes 9:7), and also excoriated: 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise' (Proverbs 20:1). Wine also features prominently in literature (e.g. William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: it is said that were a wine to be drunk in paradise, it would be Chateau Margaux) and in film (e.g. Sideways, Bottle Shock, Mondovino). Many great artists have portrayed wine in its production and consumption, and even painted wine labels (e.g. Picasso, Miro and Warhol for Chateau Mouton Rothschild). Moreover, especially based on the different price points of, and the social status associated with wine, many cartoons focus on wine as a product and on those who serve and consume it.

To date, little academic research has focused on the public perceptions of wine. Research over the last decade has focused largely on specific aspects of wine, such as marketing strategies (Iaia, Scorrano, Fait, & Cavallo, 2017; Paschen, Paschen, & Kietzmann, 2017; Thach, 2009), branding, brand image and personality (Brochado, Vinhas da Silva, & LaPlaca, 2015; Johnson & Bruwer, 2007; Wilcox, Laverie, Kolyesnikova, Duhan, & Dodd, 2008), regional or operational differences between wine and / or wineries, such as family business and tourism (Cassar, Caruana, & Konietzny, 2018; Iaia et al., 2017; Johnson & Bruwer, 2007), customer segmentation and motivations for consumption (Olsen, Thach, & Nowak, 2007; Paschen, Paschen, & Kietzmann, 2016; Taylor, Bing, Reynolds, Davison, & Ruetzler, 2018; Thach, 2012; Wolf, Higgins, Wolf, & Qenani, 2018), as

well as new information sources, including social media platforms (Beninger et al., 2014; Cuomo, Tortora, Festa, Giordano, & Metallo, 2016; Reyneke, Pitt, & Berthon, 2011; Thach, 2009). As far as we are aware, this is the first study that presumes that cartoons do in fact reflect public perceptions toward wine-relevant issues, and that investigates public perceptions of wine over a relatively long period. It tackles the main question of whether a content analysis of a large sample of cartoons about wine and its consumption can be sensitive enough to pick up how people feel and think about wine. And if so, what are these sentiments?

Data collection

We collected cartoons from the following online cartoon repositories: cartoonistgroup.-com, politicalcartoons.com, nytsyn.com, chron.com, creators.com and cartoonstock.com, and also the cartoons available under subscription at erobertparker.com ('the independent consumer's guide to fine wines'). We used the search terms 'wine', 'wines', 'serving wine', 'drinking wine', 'sommelier', 'wine maker' and 'waiter'. Only cartoons in English, or in English-language publications, were included. Our final sample includes a total of 300 cartoons. Some cartoons were linked to their publication dates – the earliest of these was published in 1801; 30 cartoons were published prior to 2000, 108 were published after 2000, and 162 were undated, although almost certainly published since the 1980s. Two coders independently coded each cartoon according to Greenberg's (2002) categories, and then conferred to resolve cartoons where there were differences in interpretation or categorization. The coders also attempted to condense interpretations under each of the four categories in order to minimize the number of cells under a category where there would only be one or two counts. Below we describe the findings and results of the content analysis and then we generalize some observations from these results.

Findings

The narrative element results (see Figure 1) describe the essential storyline of the wine cartoons, the majority of which were about wine snobs (32%) or altercations between waiters and customers (20%). There are also a number of cartoons about drunkenness (16%), squabbles over wine between husband and wife (11%), and government corruption (11%).

The domestication element (see Figures 2 and 3), which simplifies complex concepts and issues, was broken into two parts: the location and the dominant symbol of the wine cartoon. The most common setting in the cartoons was restaurants (34%) with a fair number in the home (25%), the outdoors including vineyards (24%), or in a wine store (10%). The most common dominant symbol in the wine cartoons was red wine (58%). Furthermore, some famous wine brands were featured in some wine cartoons, such as Dom Perignon (1.5%), Chateau Margaux (<1%), Chateau Haut Brion (<1%), Chateau Mouton Rothschild (<1%), and Opus One (<1%).

A trend was evident in the binary struggle element (see Figure 4) in the wine cartoons studied, which explicitly highlights a hero / victim and a villain, where average people or customers are seen as the heroes in cartoons, while wine snobs or waiter are seen as villains (35% and 20% respectively). In some cartoons wine is seen as the villain, and health the hero (16%). In those cartoons that show a binary struggle within couples the husband

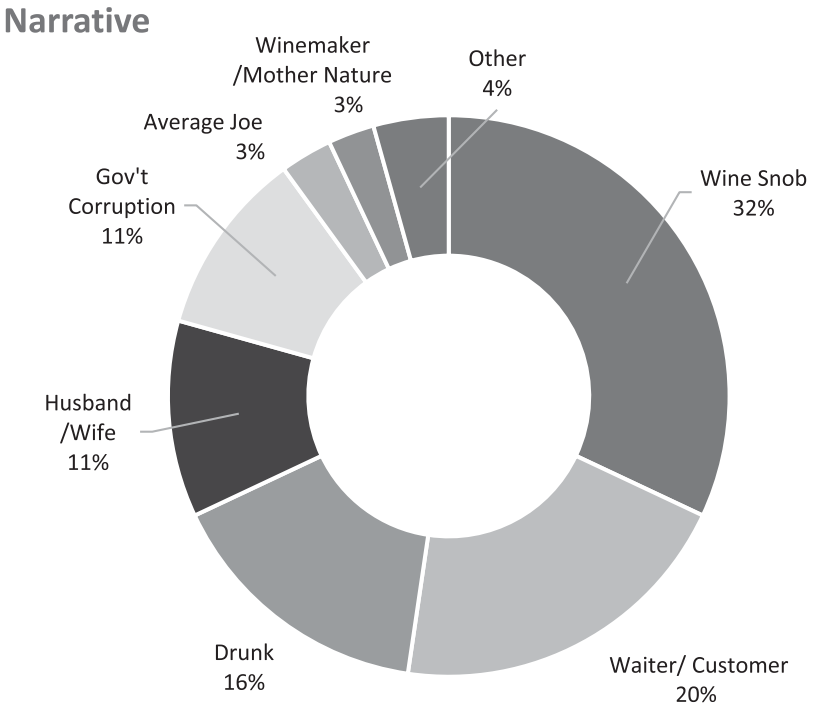

Figure 1. Narrative element.

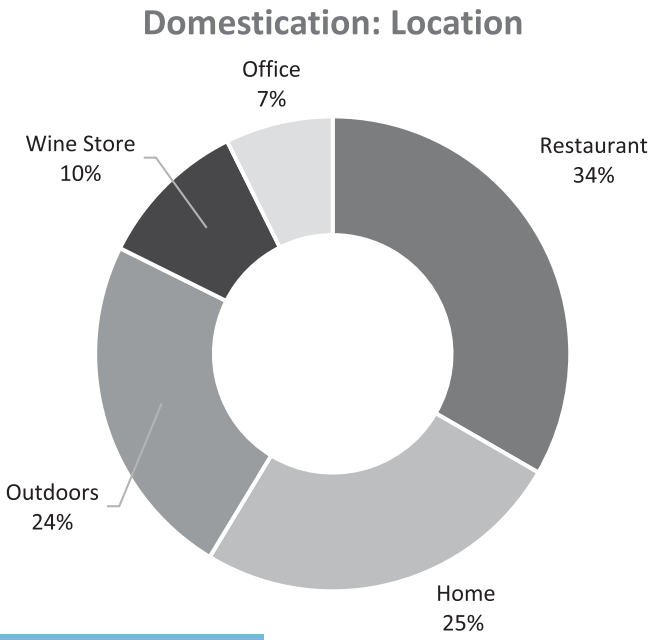

Figure 2. Domestication element (location).

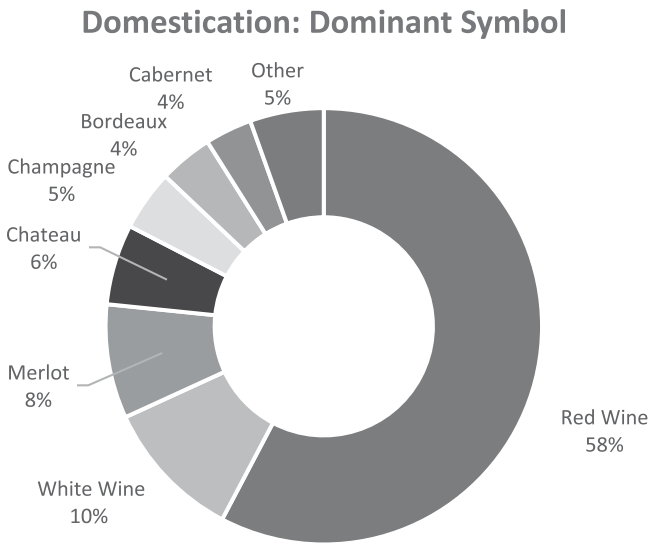

Figure 3. Domestication element (dominant symbol).

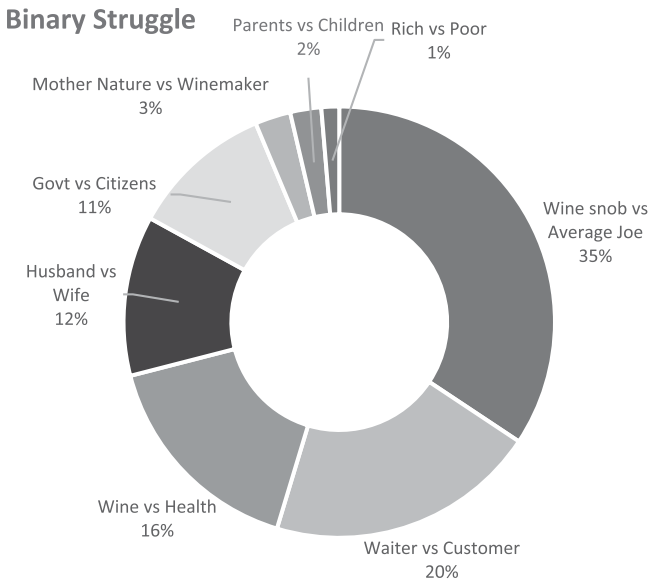

Figure 4. Binary struggle element.

is usually the villain (12%). Normative transfer element (see Figure 5) in the wine cartoons seems to point to the average Joe (25%), health (18%), or customers in many wine consumption situations (12%) as the losers of the struggle.

Since we adopted the perspective of the 'weak' theory of cartoons (Thibodeau, 1989; Wheeler & Reed, 1975), which considers cartoons as indicators or reflections of public perspectives, sentiment, and opinions, some clear patterns emerged from the content analysis data:

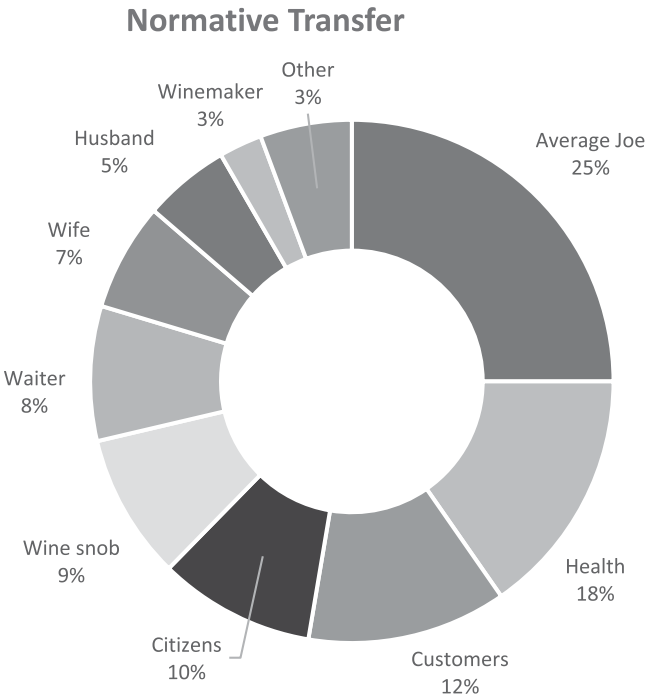

Figure 5. Normative transference.

- Wine, often drawn as 'red', and its consumption are viewed as elitist in many cases.
- When it is consumed in restaurants, wine is portrayed as the object of a binary struggle between wine snobs and ordinary people, and between waiters and customers. Ordinary people and customers are most often the losers in the struggle.
- When wine is consumed at home, the struggle is between husbands and wives, with the husband most often representing the villain.

The insights under each of the four categories (narrative, domestication, binary struggle, and normative transference) generated from this analysis relate to current research related to wine consumption and behavior. For example, our wine cartoon research confirms what many might already perceive as true – wine is often viewed as a 'snobbish' product, which can frequently make ordinary consumers feel foolish or simple. Taylor et al. (2018) support the fact that feelings such as self-confidence, and other intrinsic motivations and personal characteristics impact individual buying intentions. The authors also note that knowledge of wine is thought to be a social indicator of status and sophistication. Moreover, consuming wine with meals, either in the home or at a restaurant is most common (Olsen et al., 2007). Elements of domestication in terms of location, and binary struggle are also echoed in Thach's (2012) work on the connection between gender and occasion related to wine consumption, finding that while there are similarities, there are also differences between genders. As consumers we are socialized to wine. As adults, this process is greatly influenced by our partners, as well as friends, family members, and colleagues. Men and women are socialized to prefer or

avoid wine consumption in particular contexts and environments, both public and private (Olsen et al., 2007).

Within society, general concerns about wine's impact on health (e.g.: alcohol abuse) exist. This impacts not only individual consumption patterns and preferences, but also how society views and values others consumption patterns and preferences. Current research sites a disconnect with regards to the health implications of consuming wine. While certain demographics and societies perceive some health benefits (Olsen et al., 2007), the overarching stereotype from this analysis appears to be of the contrary belief. This disconnect may be the byproduct of cultural norms surrounding alcohol consumption, media publicity, scientific research and public health policy in a particular society (Stockley, 2011).

Wine's tenure as mankind's favorite beverage is as old as history itself. It is a true testament to societal changes in economics, culture, and social discourse, which are captured by cartoons over time. The story of wine is a story of people – wine snobs, waiters, customers, drunks, husbands, wives, and the average Joe – savoring this beverage at restaurants and homes. While the struggle between wine snobs and the average Joe figures prominently in cartoons, it more or less reflects the social discourse and stereotypes that exist.

General discussion

Cartoons are visual media whose content reflects the public's sentiment, perceptions, opinions, or concerns regarding all sorts of matters. As we can see from the cartoon samples chosen, cartoons are a rich source of information about wine and society. The narrative of these cartoons show that wine is often thought of as red, and perceived to be snobbish. From a consumption and purchasing standpoint, the domestication element demonstrates that wine is often consumed in restaurants or at home. The binary struggle is evident not only between waiters and patrons, but between genders, and in various personal relationships that exist in society for many reasons as well. These complexities help us understand consumer behavior when it comes to wine. When we understand who is perceived to be the loser and why, we can delve into the underlying thoughts and feelings people hold about this product, and the unconscious judgments that are made inside and outside of the industry, such as the perceived impacts on individual and societal health.

Like wine, one of the most well-known product categories and industries, political parties, celebrities, brands, etc. will find that they might also be depicted and discussed in cartoons. More importantly, these are not rare occurrences; on the contrary, many newspapers and other visual media include cartoons, thereby making cartoons a medium ripe for content analysis. Readers of cartoons already need to decipher the symbols, personifications, and other stylistic devices in order to understand their deeper meaning.

Limitations and future research

This study has a few limitations that are important to consider in future cartoon content analysis research. First, it considered a limited sample of three hundred wine cartoons from English-language cartoon repositories, and thus does not capture public perceptions towards wine in non-English contexts. The research context must be carefully constructed around the research question or problem before any content analysis takes place. Second,

the analysis of the wine sector, its products, and culture are merely descriptive with no sophisticated data analysis as there is no real benchmark or anchor by which to judge the results. This paper merely provides an illustration of the potential of cartoons as a source of insight. Cartoon content analyses are best used as a tracking device (e.g. examining issues over time [Mills, Robson, & Pitt, 2013; Wiid et al., 2015]), or as a means of comparison (e.g. contrasting countries or brands [Lacity & Rudramuniyaiah, 2009; Wiid, Pitt, & Engstrom, 2011]). More advanced analyses could include for example comparing: (1) public sentiment toward a product, service or a brand and its consumption across cultures by analyzing cartoons in different languages and from different countries, (2) the four cartoon elements over time to detect changes in public attitudes, or (3) publication media (e.g. newspapers, blogs, websites, social media, etc.) to see if different reader segments might have different attitudes. In addition to longer-term trends and shifts in public perceptions, cartoon content analysis can be an efficient source for time sensitive information. Cartoons are a highly responsive source and are able to demonstrate changes in public opinion in a timely manner, as well as provide insights into current events and issues.

The cartoon repositories investigated above hold published and unpublished cartoons, although for the purposes of our analysis, only published cartoons were included. For example, the cartoon repository Cartoonstock contains many cartoons that have not been published in print media but are listed as an online marketplace to connect cartoon creators and buyers. Thus, these online cartoon databases contain not only cartoons that have been selected by a publication's editor, but also content that might reflect a broader view of public sentiment, especially when you consider user rating systems or number of downloads as an indicator of quality and popularity.

Conclusion

Wine managers and researchers seek data about how the public perceives wine and the wine industry. We show a glimpse into this public perceptions using a unique method, cartoon content analysis, of evaluating consumer sentiments, attitudes and opinions toward wine. Our analysis illustrates the perceptions of wine as an overall product; however, there is potential to analyze and compare public sentiment at different points in time, as well as across specific wine regions, wine brands, or wine consumer segments using a similar method.

Cartoons and cartoon content analyses can be useful for understanding what people are saying, thinking and feeling with regards to a topic that interests you, such as wine in general, the wine industry, a specific wine event, or even something as specific as genders' influence on wine perceptions. Moreover, it can demonstrate changes in the public's perception over time or across cultural and national boundaries. By using these publicly available cartoon data, consumer insights may be gained while still earning a chuckle from the researcher.

Note

1. The terms public *perception, opinion* and *sentiment* all refer to how people feel and think about a brand and are thus used interchangeably in this article.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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