Innovation Opportunities and Digital Storytelling:
An Exploratory Study of the Midlands and North Wine Region

Report of Findings – Executive Summary

This report discusses findings from an exploratory study of digital storytelling in the context of the Midlands and North wine region of the UK.

Section 1 introduces the context to the project: the importance of storytelling and storytellers for small-scale wineries, and the ways in which the Coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally disrupted small-scale wineries' typical marketing practices, routes to market, and approaches to engaging with their consumers. These conditions form the background to the project aims, which are to:
- scope the current state of play of Midlands and North regional wineries' digital marketing tools and content;
- identify innovation opportunities through digital storytelling.

To deliver on these aims, a mixed method, cross-sectional study was conducted via desk research, a qualitative content analysis 'audit' of regional wineries' digital marketing content, and an online survey and semi-structured interviews with winery representatives.

Section 2 reviews insights from existing research on three fronts:
- Storytelling across a range of market actors (wineries, hospitality staff, retailers, etc.) generates value for small-scale wines through generating positive associations, differentiation and trust in the minds of consumers, in turn leading to greater engagement with the wine, intention to buy/visit, and willingness to pay.
- Two scales of stories are important for small-scale wines: evidence-led, credible, tangible, authentic provenance stories add value at the level of the individual winery; 'umbrella' regional brand stories add value for the regional winery constituents. While there are different genres of regional wine stories, the properties of Midlands and North wineries offer potential for a 'local, regional destination' story, focused on offering an attractive, accessible regional tourism destination with local, authentic wines that offer a point of difference from 'supermarket wines.'
- The Midlands and North wine consumer *in the supermarket* does not differ markedly from the national average with regard to the frequency of wine consumption, importance of taste and price as key purchase drivers, and modal responses for price paid for wine for oneself (£6-6.99) and as a gift (£10-11.99). However, if the Midlands and North is positioned as a 'local, regional destination', then supermarket purchasing behaviour and price comparisons are unlikely to be relevant. Market research further underscores the potential for a 'local, regional destination' story: for example, an increased interest in domestic 'staycations,' and rural/countryside holidays, and a higher-than-national-average preference among Midlands/North consumers for domestic tourism in the Midlands and North.

Sections 3 and 4 report on the findings from the primary research. Section 3 focuses on the digital marketing audit, reviewing main digital platforms (e.g. 84% of the audit sample have a webpage; 70% have Facebook, 51% have Twitter, and 51% have Instagram, with 35% of wineries using all four platforms), as well as key digital innovations (e.g. online sales, now offered in some form by 75% of the regional wineries, having become

increasingly important–if not entirely new–since the start of 2020). Combining insights from the audit, survey and interviews, the section highlights several ways in which the pandemic presented opportunities for digital innovation and development, including:

- new or expanded use of digital tools for consumer engagement (e.g. web and social media; increased provision for, and reliance on, online sales);
- new consumer interests and demands (e.g. outdoor wine tastings, buying local, online purchases);
- availability of new resources to support business development, including time, Covid relief funds and WineGB webinars (which were well-received both for content and for the online delivery that was inclusive of members who found in-person sessions geographically challenging);
- ongoing interest in further digital development and support (e.g. in relation to websites, Facebook, and wine clubs).

Section 4 focuses on identifying common ground for an emergent, credible regional wine story that resonates with the region's winery stakeholders. On the one hand, the section identifies three themes that regional winery's individual external-facing stories have in common:

- family (70% of wineries emphasise the central role of kin, family, community, and volunteers);
- provenance (62% of wineries emphasise artisanal methods, authenticity, and local embeddedness, and this is further echoed in references to the region's challenging climate, the history of the land, and efforts at sustainable winemaking);
- diversity (across the entire sample, stories focus on grape varieties that are marginal or absent in the wider context of English and Welsh wine).

On the other hand, the section identifies points of commonality across internal perceptions of the Midlands and North region, including:

- confidence in the region's future (tempered by concerns about its external visibility and quality reputation; overcoming internal diversity and geographic distribution);
- cooperation (through sharing of knowledge, inter-winery collaborations, and benchmarking against regional peer role models, which potentially dovetails with the family theme in external facing stories);
- difference, both within the region (e.g., winemaker age/generation, winemaking styles) and between the region and the rest of English/Welsh wine, which is concentrated in the South and especially South East (in terms of winery number, scale, density of clusters, and style of winemaking, which potentially dovetails with the diversity theme in external facing stories).

Finally, section 5 reviews key takeaways from the research in light of the project's two overarching aims, posing the question: 'What sort of stories (provenance and regional) are meaningful and credible, for wineries and for consumers?' Looking across the findings, the section notes evidence (albeit based on a small set of respondents to the survey and interviews) that regional wineries are emerging from the pandemic with a strong sense of confidence and an enhanced digital marketing approach, with an awareness of areas for further digital development, and appetite for digital development resources, including the continuation of the well-received WineGB webinars. The section then highlights potential for a 'local, regional destination' type regional story for the Midlands and North, focused on:

- artisanal, authentic wines and wine experiences;
- family, community and connection *with and for* local/regional wine consumers;
- diversity and difference through small-scale producers who work with diverse grape varieties and styles to offer wines to be valued for their difference from what is available on the supermarket shelf, or elsewhere across English and Welsh wine.

Lastly, the report suggests potential next steps for future research in collaboration between regional wineries and CHEFS: the Culture, Health, Environment, Food and Society research cluster of Sheffield Hallam University.

A presentation of initial findings was delivered via a webinar, 14 June 2021. The recording (and feedback form) are available here: https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/chefscluster/midlands-north-wineries-research/

The full report of findings is available via the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive here: http://shura.shu.ac.uk/28861/

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