

STRATEGIC FAMILY WINERY BRAND LAUNCH IN THE VUCA (VOLATILITY, UNCERTAINTY, COMPLEXITY, AMBIGUITY) MARKET: THREE CASE STUDIES FROM SERBIAN MARKET

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to extend previous research on brand innovation by uncovering the process of family winery branding in relation to the new product launch in the VUCA market on the case of three Serbian wineries. The study deploys qualitative oriented and empirical approach in presenting a multi-case study. Three semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with owners and/or managers in these three wineries. The results demonstrate that all three family wineries are offering high-end product for the domestic market with smaller one still experimenting with strategic direction of innovating for high-end market while the two larger ones putting focus either on autochthonous grape varieties with eye-catching labels or authentic brand identity with strong storytelling. Another important aspect identified is the frugal nature of product launch in the family wineries due to limited resources. The paper presents is among only few studies on new product development in wine business literature.

Keywords: wine business, new product, wine marketing, branding, family business, multi-case study

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1. Introduction

Previous research in the global wine business calls for research in both family owned as well as large corporate wineries in managing both wineries as a whole well as wine as one of the most complex products to sell, in order to identify best management practices across cultural contexts (Orth et al., 2007). In this sense, previous research on portfolio labelling in SME wineries, has found that for smaller wineries using a coherent logo on all wines has it's advantages in terms of expert ratings and brand equity, while running unrelated labels both for

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wines in the portfolio as well as for other non-alcoholic beverages diminishes expert rating and brand equity (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021c).

Family-oriented business models in certain wine regions around the global are thought to be a constraint for wine production quantity and successful export and suited for niche high-end wines and tourist offers (Mora, 2016). Family-oriented wineries in certain countries and wine regions, such as Balaton lake in Hungary are also prone to deploying extensively social media as a primary and often only means of branding and communication (Paunovic et al., 2022). Family businesses in general need to deploy relationships and networks in order to be successful in the VUCA world (Bernhard et al., 2020; Mamula Nikolić, 2021).

Strategic wine business management, technology and innovation are relatively young and still under researched fields compared to wine marketing, wine market research and wine consumer behavior (Orth et al., 2007; Weatherbee et al., 2019). Previous research has found that innovativeness does not contribute at all to the market performance of wineries, while proactiveness as a part of entrepreneurial orientation contributes does (Li & O'Connor, 2017). Therefore, it is only recently that an area of strategic packaging and brand launch and innovation in family and non-family wineries has started to gain attention in the literature (Dreßler & Paunovic, 2022; Stanujkic et al., 2015). The existing winery strategic innovation management literature has mainly focused on creating typologies of strategic innovation and branding, as well as sustainability and regional perspectives of small winery innovation (Aldecua et al., 2017; Dressler & Paunovic, 2021a, 2021a; Gilinsky et al., 2008). Previous research has uncovered that the simultaneous focus on dichotomy of product quality and brand strength puts wineries on the strategic path of export and integration into the global value chain (Cherubini Alves et al., 2011; Menghini, 2015; Montaigne & Coelho, 2012). The key to economic growth here appears to be the ability to connect agriculture within the cluster with other industries, encourage investment, protect intellectual property and open the local market (Porter et al., 2004).

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic branding, positioning and product development

Brand is considered to be a strategic competitive asset that needs to be managed strategically, that it is in a long term and overarching way (Kapferer, 2008). However, there is a certain level of managerial paradoxes in the form of dichotomies, built into family winery brand management: family-business goals, FMCG-luxury products, uniformity-diversity of product portfolio labelling, innovation-tradition. In this sense, wineries deploy and discard, extend, combine and optimize various brand management practices to create market value (Högström et al., 2015). Strategic brand building begins and is being reiterated by understanding brand image and associations, and consequently defining and redefining brand identity and brand positioning aspirations (Kapferer, 2008; Till et al., 2011). Brand positioning needs to clearly delineate the value proposition not only from the competitors on the market but more importantly between brand identity, brand image and pricing strategy, taking into account both point-of-difference as well as point-of-parity (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021b; Keller et al., 2011).

For understanding the strategic brand launch, one first needs to differentiate between a product and a brand. A brand is a name that influences buyers (Kapferer, 2008). However, with complex product portfolios, branding is a bit more complex, as product brand launch the product itself is new to customers and still needs to establish itself as a brand, but it build upon the brand and reputation of the winery who launches the product brand. Winery brand portfolio needs to be managed strategically as a whole, for example by trying to avoid cannibalization of old products with new products.

Product innovation management is considered by wineries to be the most important area of winery innovation management, with activities like NPD, new bottle design, new packaging, fungus-resistant wines, new pricing and new product-service bundles (Dressler, 2013). Similar to the research on innovation management, product innovation management research concentrates significantly on collaboration with stakeholders (Annunziata et al., 2018), either through open innovation (Dries, Pascucci, Torok, & Toth, 2014) or from the perspective of global industry shifts (Morrison & Rabellotti, 2017). This approach of co-innovation seems to be particularly important for SMEs wineries engaging through an innovation ecosystem in a development of a breakthrough product (Olarde-Pascual, Oruezabala, & Sierra-Murillo, 2017). Social media have also received considerable attention in the new wine-related product development literature, extending the possibilities for wine entrepreneurs through crowdfunding, pre-launch testing, market research, word-of-mouth promotion at virtually no cost (Szolnoki, Thach, & Kolb, 2016; Wecker, 2019; Wilson & Quinton, 2012). There are important differences of NPD in wine SMEs compared to some other industries: presence of mono-product company strategies, the importance of the region of origin, as well as the incremental nature of innovation because of the constraints of tradition; other aspects are shared across industries, such are the interplay of product function and brand meaning in NPD, the importance of innovation in export markets, the increasing importance of sustainability, as well as the importance of integrating both the knowledge on new technologies and the knowledge on explicit customer needs (Chaudhury et al., 2014; Dell'Era & Bellini, 2009; Maurel, 2009; Menghini, 2015; Rossi et al., 2012).

2.2. Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the business environment

VUCA can be defined as volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, a term that denotes a business environment which escapes any confident analysis and planning and challenges decision-makers on a constant basis (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). VUCA processes change the nature of the markets and thereby competition in the modern business and society towards agility as a new imperative (Doheny et al., 2012). Besides agility (as a response to volatility), other authors propose embracing and developing experimentation (as a response to ambiguity) and focusing on restructuring processes (as a response to complexity) and information and knowledge (as a response to uncertainty) for success in the VUCA markets (Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018). In addition, previous literature proposes managing by strategic paradox in the VUCA environment, in terms of following explorative innovation and exploitative innovation in parallel (Du & Chen, 2018). One of the major challenges of decision-making in the VUCA world is choosing the most relevant of the VUCA aspects and focusing on developing the appropriate response to this major challenge (Aimar & Smith, 2021).

3. Methodology

The research is an explorative, qualitative and empirical multi-case study. It presents 3 action-oriented research case studies on the family winery strategic brand launch in Serbia. The family winery brand in this case is considered as a whole, umbrella brand, while separate wines/product brands inside each winery are a part of this overall family winery brand. The three interviews and the accompanying research of the available online materials on the three family wineries were conducted in September and October 2019 with wineries located in Serbia. The questionnaire used in the study was based on the previous research by Dressler and Paunovic (2022) on brand innovation. This primary data collection method relied on semi-structured telephone interviews of wineries belonging to a convenience sample of available small family wineries in Serbia.

4. Results

4.1. Executive summary of the three case studies and basic info of each one of the three cases

First, text analysis of the overall transcribed interviews is presented in the Figure 1 and Table 1, where 30 major terms from the interviews are extracted and presented as a word cloud, and a table. The top 15 used words are: wine, market, product, winery, change, quality, plan, brand, high, consumer, production, much, sale, price and restaurant.



Figure 1. Most frequently used words in the interviews regarding winery brand and new wine product launch

Table 1. Most frequently used words in the interviews regarding winery brand and new wine product launch

No.	Word	Frequen.	Perc.	No.	Word	Frequen.	Perc.
1	wine	30	3,61	16	taste	6	0,72
2	market	27	3,25	17	year	6	0,72
3	product	17	2,04	18	activity	5	0,60
4	winery	16	1,92	19	begin	5	0,60
5	change	11	1,32	20	belgrade	5	0,60
6	quality	11	1,32	21	boss	5	0,60
7	plan	10	1,20	22	communication	5	0,60
8	brand	9	1,08	23	label	5	0,60
9	high	9	1,08	24	range	5	0,60
10	consumer	8	0,96	25	variety	5	0,60
11	production	8	0,96	26	work	5	0,60
12	much	7	0,84	27	choose	4	0,48
13	sale	7	0,84	28	competition	4	0,48
14	price	6	0,72	29	decision	4	0,48
15	restaurant	6	0,72	30	enter	4	0,48

The three cases begin by presenting basic info the three wineries: name, wine region, year of establishment, vineyard size, portfolio of wine brands/products and business model description. After that strategic family winery brand positioning is presented, innovations in the winery and the process of new product brand development inside the product portfolio.

After that, major decision are presented regarding new product brand launch on the market: target markets (in terms of lifestyle and demography), geographical priorities, impact on the current product portfolio, price and communication. The Table 2 presents the three case studies of small family wineries, each in a different stage of development reflected both by vineyard size as well as business model, which is more either more focused on sales (B Pusula) or has several business model innovations and revenue streams from wine hospitality and tourism besides sales (A Despotika).

Table 2. Basic info about the three interviewed wineries

Winery	Wine region	Year of establish.	Vineyard size	Winery business model
A Despotika	Šumadija	2006.	11ha	Besides wine production, there is also offer of wine tasting, wine growing museum, wine tasting in a restaurant and on a terrace, wine cellar tour as well as event hall
B Pusula	Pocerje-Valjevo	2006.	16 ha, with partner grape growers over 20 ha	Focus on wine production and sales
C Petra	Subotica	2014.	3 ha	Winery inside family estate

Average winery in Serbia is around 15h big (Jankulović et al., 2013), which means that the three wineries in our sample somewhat smaller wineries than the average in Serbia. With one winery around 3h, another with 11h and the third one with over 16h and 20h overall, they do represent well the average size of the small family wineries compared to larger cooperatives (Grdelički vinogradi), publicly traded companies (Rubin), or those owned by larger food corporations (Vinarija Drasković), which often have the sizes of several hundred hectares.

4.2. Strategic family winery brand positioning and innovations in the three cases

Among the three wineries, only the two larger ones (A Despotika and B Pusula) have reported strategically directed innovation management, while the start-up winery (C Petra) has still no strategic direction for innovation. This start-up winery knows very well their positioning but are still experimenting regarding which innovations will best lead them to success and how. The winery A Despotika has an accent on autochthonous domestic varieties as a brand positioning, winery B Pusula on brand storytelling about authentic identity, while winery C Petra has only the focus of high-quality wines.

Regarding innovation, for winery A Despotika, cuve wines are the ones adapting to the changing customer needs. For all wines, the labels and label awards play an important role in attracting public attention. For winery B Pusula, the focus is on competent human resources and technology, while for winery C Petra innovations range from cleanliness, human and technological resources to organic production. The Petra winery also has special selling and labelling techniques typical for high-end wines.

New product development in winery A Despotika, is something that is constantly being adjusted according to the market reactions and expert opinions. For winery B Pusula the aspect of frugal innovation is very relevant as an enormous amount of financial and human resources needed to be invested in organizing tastings for brand introduction to the market: both for distributors, restaurants as well as end consumers. In addition, no resources were deployed for marketing in the mainstream and printed media, but social media are the main channel of communication. For winery C Petra, direct contacts of the boss and the sales department with restaurants and hotels are crucial as well as future plans to go to competitions.

Table 3. Strategic brand positioning of the winery A Despotika, innovation and new product development process

Company	Strategic brand positioning	Winery innovation	New product development process
A Despotika	The brand is positioned in high-quality wines of a higher price category with an emphasis on autochthonous domestic varieties. The product portfolio innovation influenced the brand and vice versa the building of the brand on varieties planted and the potential of planting new varieties.	Indigenous domestic varieties as a priority. Changing the share of certain varieties in Cuve wines, as an adaptation to customer requirements. Introducing eye-catching wine names and labels that have won awards for best labels was very important.	As the varieties were planted in the vineyards according to the recommendations of the winemaking experts, so were the varietal wines and thus the brands that were placed on the market. Over time, it turned out that some wines sell better, some less, depending on the taste and satisfaction of customers.

Table 4. Strategic brand positioning of the winery B Pusula, innovation and new product development process

Company	Strategic brand positioning	Winery innovation	New product development process
B Pusula	The connection existed and consists precisely in the recognition of one's own and authentic identity, in parallel with the innovation management e.g. regarding label redesign. Instead of following trends, we turned to what we already had and didn't recognize before... the very name of Pusula winery, on the basis of which we built a complete story about the brand.	The most important decisions were the acquisition of new equipment and the hiring of a new technologist in terms of production. Also, the use of single streams for the highest quality wine was important.	After the planting of the vineyard, the ripening of the crop and "children's diseases" - the production of wine from grapes from young vines in order to see the potential, i.e. the influence of the climate and the soil on the final product, as well as defining the style of wine that corresponds to the potential (a total of 7 years after planting), the process of introducing the product to market (which continues today) began by organizing tastings for distributors, the HoReCa sector and end consumers. Entering the market was not simple and easy since it was necessary to win the trust of the relevant stakeholders in the most direct way, by investing in the product itself (tasting) and a huge amount of employees' time with non-existent means for marketing in terms of advertisements in print and electronic media. The only channel used for mass promotion is social networks.

Table 5. Strategic brand positioning of the winery C Petra, innovation and new product development process

Company	Strategic brand positioning	Winery innovation	Product development process
C Petra	We strive for the highest possible quality. There was no direct connection between innovation and strategy.	We have started to change people, change the strategy of work in the winery, so that we achieve maximum commitment. This means that cleanliness of the work processes and everything needs to be high in order to avoid something that can have a bad effect on the wine and quality. We have a technologist constantly and we strive to make our wine as high quality as possible. There was the introduction of the latest machines and barrels and all that. We are moving to organic production. We are still in the conversion period. There was a Pinot Noir Reserve a few years ago, it was limited, only 600 or so bottles and it was numbered on the ticket, we have that too.	We haven't fully entered the market. We are just now developing and entering the market. Our boss and the sales department have conversations with hotels and restaurants and that's it. We don't go to competitions for now, I don't know why there aren't any. I want to introduce it now.. We haven't gone to any competitions yet. We are a small winery, not so big that we could go to hypermarkets, stores, and we don't want to do that.

It is important to notice that only in the smallest of the three wineries, the question of strategic innovation compared to just innovating was not considered important. It can be hypothesized therefore that these strategic aspects of innovation for product launch only comes with certain winery and sales size, while in the early stages innovation comes down to experimenting and finding the focus.

4.3. Strategic wine product brand launch in the three cases

Regarding target markets, all three wineries target the affluent part of the market, A Despotika with domestic and autochthonous grape varieties, winery B Pusula with offering quality hedonistic experience and winery C Petra with an offer for high end market in restaurants, hotels and wine shops. All of the wineries are concentrated on Serbian urban market, primarily Belgrade, Novi Sad and Subotica, while winery A Despotika has also tried exporting to China. New products have no impact on other product in the winery portfolio of wineries B Pusula and C Petra, while in winery A Despotika they have reported a stagnation of wine sales for wines with no dedicated marketing activities. Communication about newly launched products in winery A Despotika is mainly conducted through Internet marketing and wine fairs. For winery B Pusula, a combination of direct communication with Horeca and wine fairs and tasting for end consumers is important, while winery C Petra conducts direct communication with hotels and restaurants as an exclusive way of communication new product launch.

Table 6. The most important strategic decisions regarding new wine product brand launch

	Target markets	Geographic priorities	Impact on the existing product portfolio/winery brand	Price	Communication
A Despotika	A higher payment category of buyers oriented towards domestic wines and autochthonous varieties	Serbia and an attempt was made to export to China	Stagnation of wines to which no appropriate attention has been paid to in terms of sales increase.	The prices are based on similar products of competitors of a high quality category on the Serbian market. Various rebates and volume discounts are given.	Internet marketing and appearances at wine fairs.
B Pusula	Customers who are aware of the importance of what they put into themselves as part of hedonistic behavior	Belgrade as the only city in Serbia with many high-paying customers, generally all connoisseurs of wine	No impact on the entire portfolio, just a change in the organization of the portfolio	The goal was a good price-quality ratio, especially in market niches that are outside the focus of the competition	Communication takes place with distributors, the HoReCa sector and with end consumers through fairs and tastings
C Petra	Wine connoisseurs with medium and higher paying capacity as end customers, but specifically restaurants, hotels and wine shops.	Belgrade, Novi Sad and to a lesser extent Subotica	No direct impact.	Top quality wines priced around €10	Direct communication with hotels and restaurants.

5. Discussion and conclusions

It is worth noting that wine business research outside the predominant discipline of marketing has traditionally been a less prominent field of research, including research fields like entrepreneurship, innovation and strategy, among other fields of research (Orth, Lockshin, & d'Hauteville, 2007; Weatherbee, Sears, & MacNeil, 2019). In this sense, the literature on strategic innovation management in the wine industry was expected to be limited. The present study therefore contributes to the field of global wine business research by presenting three cases of branding small family-owned wineries in Serbia. The cases cover both winery branding, as well as wine product and portfolio branding in all of its complexity. The managerial paradox of launching novel wines into existing established portfolios is presented with accompanying innovations for each of the three wineries, as well as their tactics in making the transition from tradition to novelty as smooth as possible. The results of the study confirm previous findings in the wine branding literature that SME family wineries are especially well suited for producing niche high-end wines and some tourism offers, as suggested by (Mora, 2016) and often deploy social media as both market research and branding tool (Paunovic et al., 2022). In the case of Serbian wineries the wines are niche and high-quality but not high-end in terms of the global market- however they do target high-end consumers in the largest Serbian urban centers. Our findings regarding new and existing products in the winery product portfolio confirm the potential cannibalization of too many products especially if they are not uniformly labeled, as well as the importance of appealing labelling approach, as previously noted by Dressler and Paunovic (2021c).

Major conclusions pertaining to the presented results are connected to the different types of innovations being deployed depending on the winery brand size, life-cycle phase, winery brand/portfolio architecture. The results show that small start-up winery has no strategic innovation management in terms of targeted innovations in relation to their strategic brand positioning but finds itself still in an experimenting phase, where target group is known but the innovation management is still on a trial-and-error basis in order to see what works and what doesn't. In the two larger wineries, innovations are focused on autochthonous grape varieties with eye-catching labeling as well as authentic brand identity with strong story telling component. Regarding the input for new product development, both feedback from (end) customers (B2B and B2C) is relevant as well as expert opinion. This confirms the importance of the relationships and networks for successful brand launch of family businesses in the VUCA market, previously identified in the literature by Bernhard et al. (2020) and Mamula Nikolić (2021). A very important aspect here that was pointed out is the aspect of frugality in the early stages of new product launch, where tastings and communication with (end) customers in person and through social media require a lot of financial and human resources which are usually not available, but the owner-manager needs to be flexible in making the necessary arrangements. Regarding target markets, the affluent part of the domestic market is in the focus of all three wineries, mainly major urban centers with smaller attempts to export to China. Major communication channels for new product launch are social media, wine fairs, and direct contact paired with tastings with hotels, restaurants, and end consumers.

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