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Beverage Bloggers: A Developing Relationship Between Wine Blogger Expertise and Twitter Followers

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INTRODUCTION

Beverage bloggers appear to be an accepted community on social media. "The elite wine writers and critics are inundated with story pitches and invite to attend wine tours. Bloggers are becoming the new opinion leaders in wine" (Oregon Wine Board, 2014). Specifically, wine bloggers are committed to microblogs because they are passionate about wine, wine bloggers are not out to make money and do not measure their success based on the number of site visitors or social media followers they have (Lifestyle Blogging Report, 2015). Twitter is their social media communication medium of choice.

Wine bloggers who blog often have established themselves in becoming an increasingly influential voice through Twitter. Sharda and Ponnada (2007) reported that bloggers provide authentic information gained through personal experience and trust for one another which indicate an online community of practice. Therefore, a contributing participant or wine blogger on Twitter is more likely defined by a series of perceived legitimacy activities such as commenting and retweeting personally relevant opinions.

Twitter is a leading social media microblogging platform for wine bloggers, regarding engagement. Eighty-four percent of wine bloggers use Twitter to promote their blogs (Lifestyle Blogging Report, 2015). Twitter enables users to post status updates, or tweets, no longer than 140 characters to a network of followers using various communication services. While some users consider the 140-character constraint as a severe limitation, many argue that it is the feature that sets Twitter apart—little information is easier to consume and faster to spread. Therefore, Twitter streams contain a vast and diverse amount of information ranging from daily-life stories

to the latest local and worldwide news and events (Hurlock and Wilson, 2011). Twitter became popular in 2009, and the number of account holders has risen to 667 million members. Of those members who use the microblogging site at least once a month, the total grew to 302 million in the fourth quarter of 2014 (Global Web Index, 2015). The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between wine bloggers' wine credentials and their wine destination recommendations using the microblogging social media site Twitter.

Scott Rosenberg (2009) suggested that it had taken blogging roughly a decade to evolve from the pursuit of a handful of enthusiasts on the fringes of the technology industry into the media form presented today. Wine bloggers have established themselves as an increasingly influential voice through Twitter. Wine bloggers primarily consist of a community of citizens who have no wine industry professional affiliation. A smaller group of entrepreneurial wine bloggers promote their company, and the remainder remains connected to the wine industry or press.

More users are sharing real-time news and information sources in microblog communities. People post their thoughts and opinions on news and information in microblogs every day. Others' opinions have always been an important piece of information for most people during the decision-making process (Pang & Lee, 2008). Social influences play a vital role when people are making a purchase decision. Social networks are more recent forms of self-representation and communication and are subject to social behavior that is different from the real world (Bonhard & Sasse, 2006).

The latest developments in Web 2.0 have provided more opportunities to investigate web-based social networks. As the new social media, microblogs are becoming a popular communication platform. They allow users to post short messages to describe, update and share their status and opinion (Chang et al., 2011). Social Media is home to a growing audience and competition amongst wine destinations to attract this potential audience is growing as well. Thus, an argument is made that wine bloggers will continue to have a growing influence on wine destination recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One area of improvement for wine tourism networks is to exploit further social media (Christou and Nella, 2010). Social media platforms and user-generated content can contribute to creating or increasing the interest and engagement of wine consumers for a wine producing destination, a winery, a wine variety, or a wine brand (Sigala, et al., 2012). Social media can assist the members of wine tourism networks to gather valuable information on the profiles, motives, perceptions, and attitudes of wine consumers and tourists. Despite the value of social media, there are many wine and wine tourism organizations that restrict their activities to the use of a sole website and the traditional one-way communication model (Christou et al., 2009) and, as a result, this reflects a sub-optimal communication strategy and supports the need for research that explains the role of micro-blogging on wine tourism.

When barriers to entering the wine publishing community were high because of the limited access to the wine writing community, the wine blog was born. A leading wine critic, Robert Parker, was, arguably, America's, if not the world's, first wine blogger according to a

recent article in Forbes Magazine (Bell, 2014).Wine bloggers now have access to the wine community through smartphones, tablets, and computers and can self-publish content on the Internet through their wine blog. Drezner and Farrell (2008) defined a blog as having minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order with hyperlinks to other online sources.

As stated by Leibold (2011) "this definition is broad enough to incorporate the different functionalities and uses of two distinct, yet related, types of user generated content in cyberspace: personal blogs or microblogs" (p.1024). In fact, there is increasing empirical evidence that Internet users around the world are seeking out information and people who share their narrow passions and convictions through microblogging. The sort of "selective exposure" that social psychologists have long argued underpins homophily in social spaces ranging from friendships, neighborhoods, and playgrounds (McPherson et al., 2001). Furthermore, the increased pace and interconnectedness of the "information age" has led to the proliferation of "identity-based movements," social movements that rebel against the dominant ideologies and institutions of global flows, and instead seek to construct alternative utopias (Leibold, 2011). For a majority of wine bloggers, their followers can determine whether the content is good or bad, and wine industry professionals do not control their ability to have peer influence because of their citizen blog or independent blogging status. Peer influence is commonly defined as the extent to which peers exert influence on the attitudes, thoughts, and actions of an individual (Briston and Mangelburg, 2005).

The concept of credibility has been and will continue to be of interest to scholars and practitioners in marketing and advertising (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Bloggers provide more authentic information, gained through personal experience (Sharda and Ponnada, 2007) and trust one another. Kozinets (2002) argues that people who interact in spaces like blogs over an extended period trust the opinions of the other users and take them into consideration when making a purchase decision. There are certain product categories on the web that require more information for people to make a purchase; therefore, recommendations on the internet are very helpful.

Wine appears to fit into this category suggesting wine blogs may be useful for some consumers to make a wine country destination selection. Tourism products also fit this category also as they are difficult, or even impossible, to evaluate before their consumption (Rabanser and Ricci, 2005) and depend on accurate and reliable information (Kaldis et al., 2003) thus elevating the importance of interpersonal influence (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). As such, it would seem reasonable to suggest that wine bloggers who are perceived to be the most trustworthy will also have the strongest influence on consumers. No person or organization monitors wine blogs, and there are no official guidelines or rules regarding what can be published (Thach, 2010); therefore, there are many diverse opinions about wines and wine brands. Because of these various views, some bloggers may write either positive or negative reviews about wine that can help or hinder wine sales.

As information is the lifeblood of tourism, the use and diffusion of the social media microblogging site like Twitter have a substantial impact on both tourism demand and supply.

The discussions, information exchange, and collaboration taking place in wine blogs provide value for wine tourists' trip planning (Sigala et al., 2012). This communication medium has many implications for the wine industry, as blog reviews of wine destinations can potentially influence travel patterns and may affect the sales of their wine products.

Personal influence theory

In particular, across all categories of opinion leaders, some important shared traits and behaviors can be divided into a few dimensions. Who one is—this includes certain personality characteristics or values held by the individual; What one knows—this includes the degree of knowledge and expertise that one has about a particular issue or product; and Whom one knows—this includes the number of contacts one has as part of their circle of friends and acquaintances (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1957).

As a combination of these traits and behaviors, opinion leaders, who are both knowledgeable and highly respected for their knowledge of a specific subject (Lazarsfeld et al.,1968), not only help draw the attention of others to a particular issue, product, or behavior but also, perhaps most importantly, signal how others should, in turn, respond or act. This influence may occur by giving advice and recommendations, by serving as a role model that others can imitate, by persuading or convincing others, or by way of contagion, a process where ideas or behaviors are spread with the initiator and the recipient unaware of any deliberate attempt at influence (Weimann, 1994).

According to the Boston University Wine Studies Program (2015) there several nationally and globally-respected certifying bodies for wine credentialing: The Court of Master

Sommeliers, Wine and Spirits Education Trust (WSET), Society of Wine Educators, Culinary Institute of America, International Sommelier Guild, Sommelier Society of America, and the International Wine Guild. Therefore, these certifications were selected for this pilot study on wine bloggers because of their credentialing tenure and professional reputation among wine professionals to test for personal influence of what one knows through years of food and beverage experience and whom one knows through Twitter followers.

The formal proposed relationship is formally stated as:

1)   Wine bloggers with at least one wine certification will have more years of food and beverage experience and

2)   Wine bloggers with at least one wine certification will have more Twitter followers.

METHODOLOGY

Data

This pilot test used snowball sampling from the 2013 North American Wine Bloggers Conference attendance list. Snowball sampling is a common sampling method for locating blogs because it emphasizes the community characteristics of the bloggers by taking into account their actual inter-linkage properties (Sigala et al., 2012). The 2013 North American Wine Bloggers Conference attendees Twitter accounts served as starting points for sampling. After which, snowball sampling techniques provided each bloggers follower lists on Twitter for further sampling. Twitter followers may benefit from navigating other microbloggers and visit blogs that are familiar, important or relevant to other blogs. The snowball sampling of wine bloggers on

Twitter took place through telephone and email surveys. Sampling took place during January-February 2014.

All wine bloggers participating in the survey were active Twitter bloggers with a minimum of 500 followers and volunteered to be interviewed by phone or respond to the survey by email. Five questions were administered through the survey questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to understand more about the wine bloggers credibility through Twitter based on their wine credentials and other individual elements of their background including:

- Twitter Account Name

- What Wine Destination(s) they have traveled to in the last month if any

- Wine Certification(s) Attained if any

- Years of Professional Experience in Food and Beverage Industry, if any

- Home Geographic Location (City & State)

Dwelle and Molchany (2013) presentation at the 2013 Wine Tourism Conference in Portland, Oregon informed the author's survey questions. The main emphasis of the Wine Tourism Conference is about improving wine tourism traffic, making lasting connections with customers, educating consumers and creating a culture of wine. The target audience for the Wine Tourism Conference includes: wineries, wine and tourism promotion agencies and chambers of commerce, tour operators, travel agencies, transportation companies, event planners, hotels, and restaurants, public relations professionals and other consultants to the wine and tourism industries, academics and students from university wine tourism programs, and finally, media and bloggers who write about wine and tourism destinations (Pollard, 2012).

Thirty wine bloggers participated in the survey, twenty-five surveys were received by email, and five were completed by phone. All respondents were approached through a Tweet on Twitter to take part in the five question survey. Researchers stored and coded responses to the inquiry in the research team offices. The content analysis of the destination recommendations then commenced with wine bloggers microblogging patterns analyzed over a forty-five day period from January 1st, 2014 to February 14th, 2014. This observation period was determined, to begin with, the beginning of a calendar year and not to exceed forty-five days so that the research team could conduct the content analysis within the first quarter of 2014. All wine destination recommendations were noted if a geographic location was included in the characters of the participants' Tweets. All destination recommendations were recorded, and correlation analysis was used to the respective participants' wine certification level and recent travel. A cross tabulation of the survey responses was coded and shared with participants and aggregate results recorded for future study of this study. Finally, a two-tailed ANOVA test was conducted testing the researchers' hypotheses that the certifications would lead to an increase in both bloggers food and beverage experience and Twitter followers. When taking this into consideration, the Twitter followers test was significant.

RESULTS

Of the thirty respondents, 60% had zero internationally recognized wine certifications, 13.3% have one, 13.3% have two, 10% have three, and 3.3% have four internationally recognized wine certifications. This research shows a majority of the sampled wine bloggers

have no wine certifications. Fewer wine bloggers had two or three wine certifications, and one

had four internationally recognized wine certifications as seen below in Table 1.

Table 1.

Wine Bloggers with Internationally Recognized Wine Certifications

In Table 2 below results from the study show, wine bloggers with no wine certifications

recommended destinations a total of sixty-eight times on Twitter. Wine bloggers with one

certification tweeted about destinations a total of eight times. Wine bloggers with two wine

certifications tweeted about wine destinations twice. Wine bloggers with three wine

certifications tweeted about wine destinations eight times. Wine bloggers with four wine

certifications tweeted about wine destinations a total of nine times. In total, there were 100

tweets recommending wine destinations by the sampled wine bloggers during the observation

period. International wine destinations were tweeted about 37 times, and domestic wine destinations were tweeted 63 times. Domestic locations included California (32 times), Oregon (13 times), New York (4 times), Washington (4 times), Virginia (4 times), Texas (2 times), Missouri (1), North Carolina (1), Arizona (1), and Maryland (1).

Table 2.

Wine Bloggers Wine Destination Recommendations on Twitter
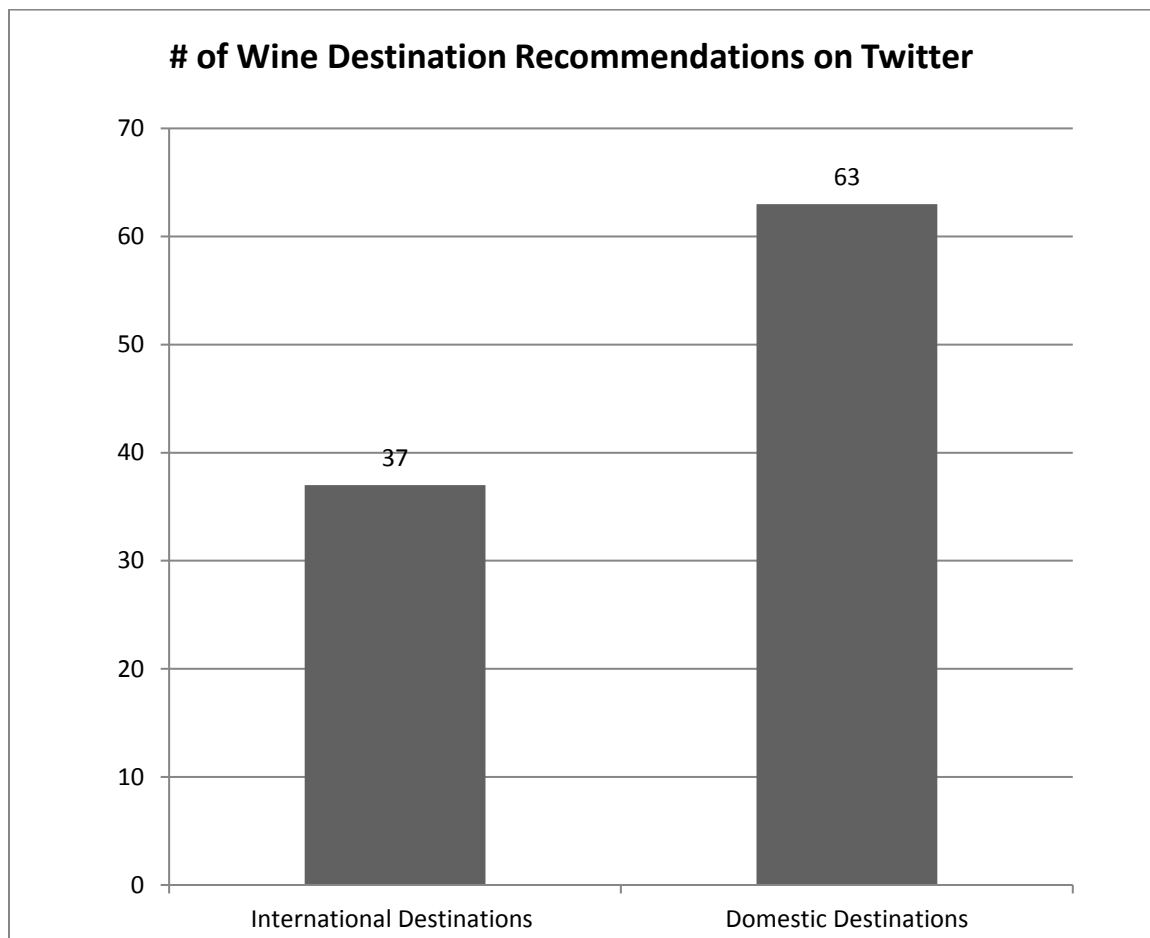
The most popular wine destinations for bloggers over the last month were located in California; its wine regions were visited during nine separate trips by wine bloggers. Followed

by Oregon, which was visited on four separate occasions, Virginia twice, while Missouri and Arizona were each visited once. None of the wine bloggers from the study visited North Carolina, New York, or Texas within the last month. International wine destinations were visited on seven separate trips by wine bloggers during the same period as seen in Table 3 below

Table 3.

The Number of Times a Wine Destination Was Visited by Wine Bloggers
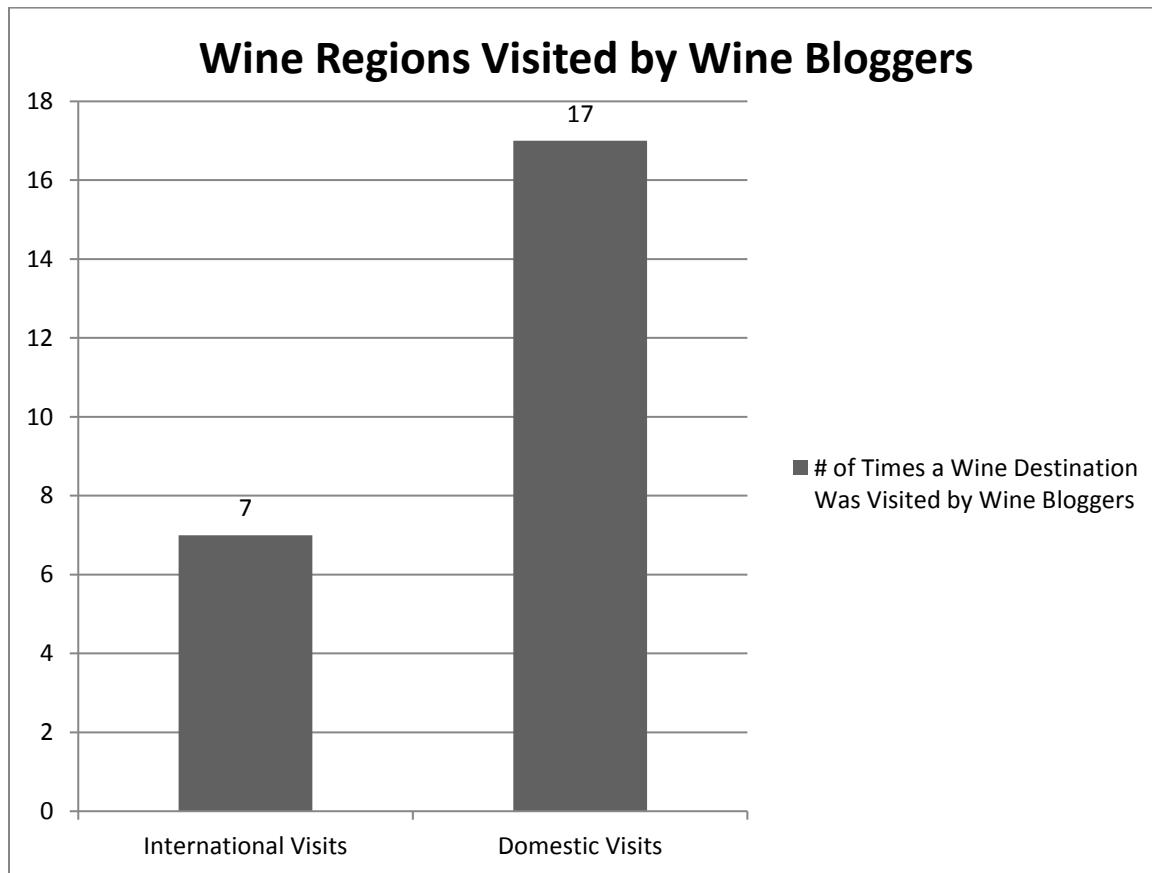

Table 4 below shares that more wine bloggers call California home than any other state, thirteen wine bloggers reside in California. Other domestic bloggers lived in Oregon (4), Texas

(3), Maryland (2), Washington (1), Pennsylvania (1), New York (1), Virginia (1), Connecticut

(1), North Carolina (1), Missouri (1), and Arizona (1). No wine bloggers live internationally.

Table 4.

Wine Bloggers Geographic Home
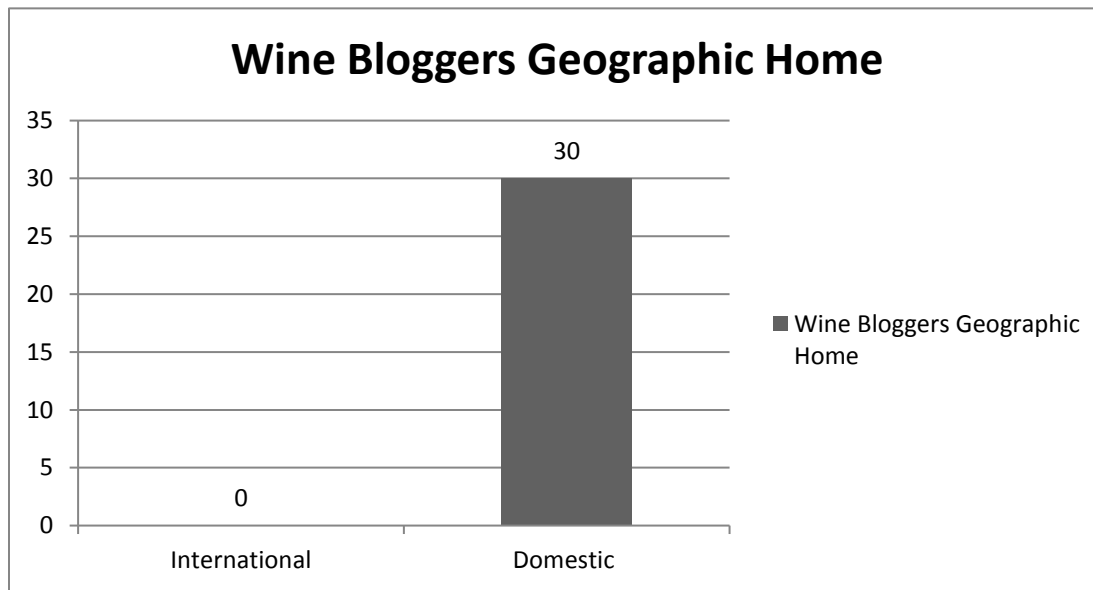
Five wine bloggers have no food and beverage industry experience as seen in Table 5

below. Although, five wine bloggers also have over ten years of food and beverage industry

experience. A total of twenty wine bloggers has one to ten years of professional food and

beverage industry experience.

Table 5.

Professional Years of Food and Beverage Industry

Professional Years of Food and Beverage Experience
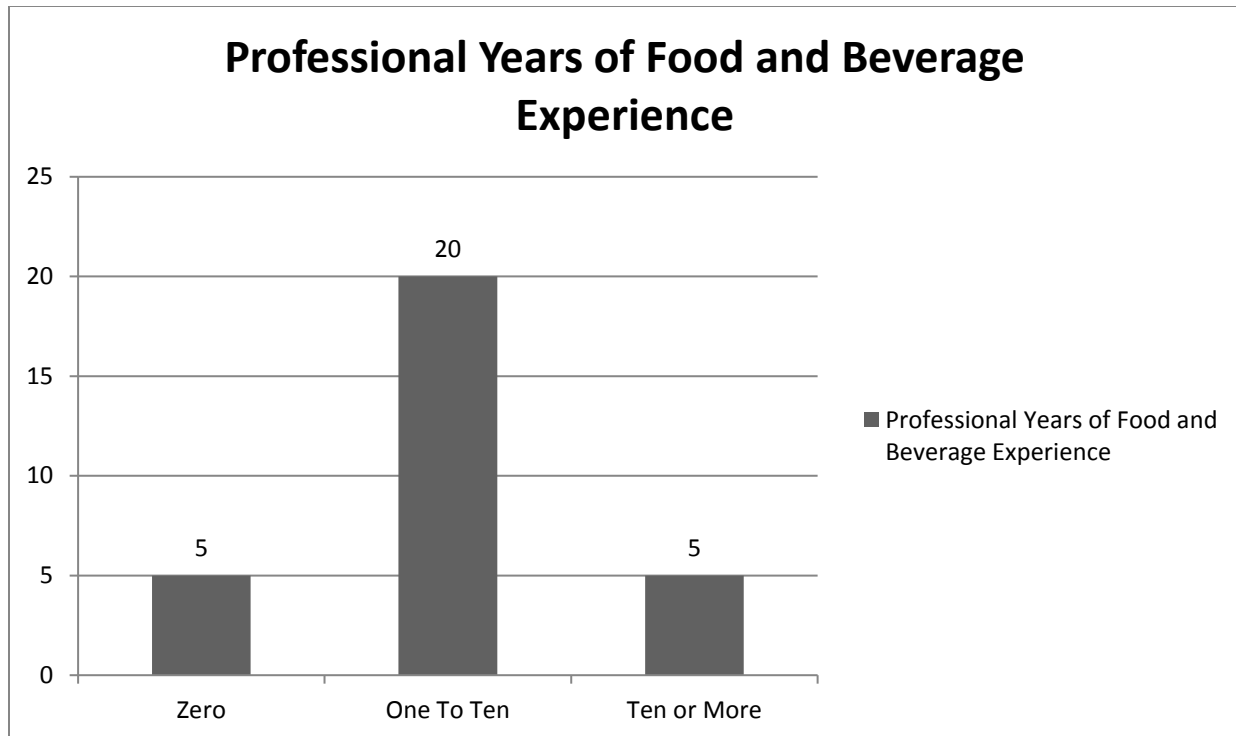
Data Analysis

The researchers proposed two hypotheses related to wine certifications:

1) Wine bloggers with at least one wine certification will have more years of food and beverage experience and

2) Wine bloggers with at least one wine certification will have more Twitter followers.

To test these hypotheses, the researchers ran two separate independent t-tests. Due to the directional nature of these hypotheses, the researchers used one-tailed t-tests. Even though Figure X indicates a difference in the two groups, the t-test was insignificant for years of experience in food and beverage ($t = 1.49$, $p = .073$). This lack of significance could be due to the small

samples size (N = 30) or the number of years in the food and beverage industry may not relate to wine certifications. In the food and beverage industry, years of experience is very meaningful, and so wine bloggers may have a stronger motivation to strengthen their resume with certifications if they have fewer years' experience that could counteract the hypothesized reason of individuals getting more certifications through the natural progression of their career.

The test for difference in the number of Twitter followers had a significant Levene's test for equality of variance (F = 16.27, p < .001) and, therefore, the researchers used a t-test that did not assume equal variances. The t-test was significant (t = 1.89, p = 0.041), indicating wine bloggers with certifications had more Twitter followers. This result may be beneficial to wine bloggers who are starting out or are looking to expand their reach. The wine bloggers who went through the certification process received knowledge and expertise that make their recommendations inherently more meaningful even if their followers do not know of their certifications. Also, wine bloggers could publicize their certifications in their Twitter profile that may result in more followers.

CONCLUSIONS

The study is intended to add to the common body of knowledge as it relates to characteristics that influence the number of followers on a social media microblog like Twitter. Although the hypothesized relationships are relatively simple, the results provide preliminary insights that can be useful in further conceptual developments.

Due to the large standard deviation and small sample size, the current results should be treated as tentative evidence of a relationship that could be used to justify further research.

Further research is also needed to determine the extent to which multiple certifications increase the number of followers. Our analysis shows that wine bloggers with a certification had an average of 75% more followers than those without certifications (4,583 followers and 2,612 followers respectively). Because of the low sample size and high variability in number of followers, there was a large standard deviation for both groups (3,301 with a certification and 1,360 without a certification). Due to the relatively small sample used in the current study, we were unable to effectively conduct this analysis.

As with all research; it is important to place the results in appropriate context. Parameters of the study included a relatively small population of wine bloggers (all self-reported). As a result, this may have led to some unintended bias. Further research should seek to ensure a larger sample and additional verification of both experience and certifications. Suggestions for further studies in this area include extending the sample to wine bloggers living outside of the United States. While there is no reason to believe that the relationships will differ significantly, such analysis will provide greater external validity to the results.

Industry Implications

Wine bloggers with certifications were found to have more followers than those who do not. Our analysis shows that wine bloggers with a certification had an average of 75% more followers than those without certifications (4,583 followers and 2,612 followers respectively). This supports prior research showing that credentials have a major influence on behaviors of others. As such, one recommendation for wine-bloggers wanting to increase follower participation is to consider becoming certified.

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