

The Adoption of Masstige Positioning Strategy: A Case Study from the Food Industry's SMEs

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Abstract

This research explores the adoption of the masstige positioning strategy within the food industry, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Masstige, a term deriving from the union of mass and prestige, describes a strategy where quality and prestige are combined at prices accessible to a broader audience. The aim of this study is to assess whether the adoption of masstige positioning strategy allow SMEs to achieve a relevant competitive advantage and, consequently, a significant market position. By applying a qualitative research methodology, this study delves into a case study of SMEs in the food sector. In particular, the study analyses the company Urbani Tartufi and its "Filosofia Naturale" product line, offering an in-depth understanding of masstige strategy adoption and its impact on market positioning of the company. The findings of the study enriches the academic debate around the strategic positioning of companies and offers valuable guidance for SMEs in the food industry, encouraging the adoption of masstige as a successful strategy for differentiation and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Luxury, Masstige, Masstige Positioning Strategy, SMEs, Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary business environment, particularly within the food industry, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face the challenge of differentiating themselves in a competitive market. A strategic concept known as "masstige" (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003) blending "mass market" with "prestige," results as an emerging strategic choice. This strategy is appropriate to products that combine quality and prestige at prices accessible to a wider audience, thus challenging the traditional divide between luxury and mass-market offerings.

Combining various definition in literature, masstige can be defined as a positioning strategy that elevates a brand's prestige while remaining accessible to the mass market(Purohit and Radia, 2022), combining widespread distribution (Alagarsamy et al., 2024) with premium pricing (Paul, 2018)to maintain brand equity and appeal to middle-class consumers satisfying hedonic values (Park et al., 2022).

In the literature, it is possible to identify some examples of brands that have adopted a masstige positioning strategy. In the fashion industry, it is worth mentioning Victoria's Secrets(Mattia, 2013;

Silverstein et al., 2008) or Abercrombie & Fitch (Silverstein et al., 2008). While in the cosmetics sector, the case of Bath and Body Works is frequently recalled by authors (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Wang et al., 2022). Other examples come from the technology industry: Whirlpool with its Duet (Silverstein, and Fiske, 2003), General Electric with KitchenAid as the premium brand of dishwashers (Quelch, 1987) or Apple (Paul, 2018). In other cases, traditional luxury brands have adopted masstige positioning strategies for certain products or product lines: Stella McCartney fashion collection was occasionally included in popular retail chains as H&M (Pietrzak, 2019).

It is not uncommon to study masstige positioning strategies within the food industry; however, literature has primarily focused on major brands such as Illy or large food retailers like the case of Eataly (Mattia, 2013). Nevertheless, the application of masstige as a positioning strategy for SMEs within the food industry remains underexplored. This article aims to fill this gap by examining how SMEs can leverage masstige to enhance their market positioning.

The food industry presents unique challenges and opportunities for adopting a masstige strategy. While masstige positioning is prevalent in industries like fashion, cosmetics, and technology, its applicability to the food sector, particularly among SMEs, is less understood. Factors such as consumer behavior, market dynamics, and operational constraints play a significant role in this context. For example, consumer expectations regarding quality and price, distribution challenges, and the need for continuous innovation are critical considerations for food SMEs adopting a masstige strategy. This research seeks to provide insights into how food SMEs can successfully implement masstige positioning to stand out in the competitive market.

In particular, the present study aims to assess whether the intended balance between quality and affordability can serve as a competitive lever, enabling SMEs to obtain a relevant market position.

The study adopts a qualitative research method (Yin, 2018), drawing on a case study to explore the outcomes of the implementation of masstige strategy by SMEs in the food sector. This approach allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of the adoption of masstige and its impact on market positioning of companies.

The contributions of this paper are manifold. Firstly, it enriches the academic debate on strategic positioning by providing a detailed exploration of masstige, an area that, while increasingly recognized in practice, remains still underexplored in the current literature. Secondly, by focusing on SMEs in the food industry, the study offers practical insights into how businesses outside the traditional luxury sector can adopt and adapt masstige strategies to gain competitive advantage. Furthermore, the paper discusses the broader implications of masstige for market dynamics, consumer behavior (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003), and brand management (Mattia, 2013). It posits that the rise of masstige signifies a shift in consumer values and expectations, reflecting a growing demand for products and experiences that offer a balance of quality, exclusivity, and affordability (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

The following section of the paper presents a review of the literature, focusing on the concept of masstige, its relevance in the context of SMEs within the food industry, and its implications as a positioning strategy. The third section discusses the methodology employed in this study, detailing the qualitative approach, the selection of the case study, and the criteria for data analysis to explore the adoption and outcomes of masstige strategies (Yin, 2018). Following this, the fourth section presents the main findings of the analysis, discussing how masstige positioning strategies are employed by SMEs in the food industry and their effect on competitive advantages. Finally, the fifth section concludes the study.

In light of the above reasoning, our research question is the following:

Q1: Can “masstige” be considered a positioning strategy for SMEs in the food retail sector, specifically in the competitive environment represented by large-scale retail distribution?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 From Traditional Luxury to Masstige

Even though in the business literature “[...] *there is actually no consensus about the definition of luxury products and brands*” (Heine, 2012, p. 9), traditionally, luxury represented an exclusive realm characterized by items that were expensive and available in a limited amount. This form of luxury, known as “traditional luxury”, is closely linked to conspicuous consumption (Kenneth & Veblen, 1899), a concept where owning unique and rare items was a signal of wealth and high social status. The essence of traditional luxury lays in its exclusivity, appealing to a niche market through the “snob effect” (Kenneth & Veblen, 1899). According to the snob effect, items are more highly valued when they are less accessible to the general public. Some examples of traditional luxury brands in the food sector are French brands such as “Ladurée,” “Angelina,” and “Rougié.”

Over time, the concept of luxury evolved, leading to the diffusion of “new luxury” or “masstige”. Masstige is a new form of luxury that merges the exclusivity of traditional luxury with the accessibility of mass-market product. It focuses on the offer of high-quality, prestigious products or experiences to a wider audience and emphasizes the personal satisfaction and connection with the brand over the mere demonstration of wealth and richness (Eckhardt et al., 2015). The term, brought into seminal study of Silverstein and Fiske (2003), implies a relevant shift in the way luxury is perceived and experienced. In particular, we refer to a concept of luxury intertwined with a private dimension of consumption, which serves as a reflection of the consumer’s identity (Pietrzak, 2019) and emphasizes the hedonic experience behind luxury (Campbell, 1983).

An example in the food industry of a company that has adopted a masstige strategy is Illy, which focuses on creating a premium coffee blend because “excellence can only be unique”(Paul, 2018). Other examples include San Pellegrino and Evian in the mineral water market. Evian has successfully associated its brand identity with other famous brands, distancing itself from its initial identity as ‘water suitable for infants’ due to its exceptional purity and safety. These companies offer premium products at prices higher than the average for their categories, yet they remain accessible to middle-income customers and are often distributed in mass retail. By doing so, they exemplify the concept of masstige, effectively balancing exclusivity and accessibility.

These examples illustrate how masstige strategies can make luxury products available to a broader audience without diminishing their prestigious appeal. This understanding is critical as we transition to discussing the broader positioning strategies within the food industry.

2.2 Positioning Strategies in the Food Industry

The positioning strategies commonly adopted in the food industry can be categorized into three primary kinds: utilitarian, hedonistic, and symbolic (Aqueveque, 2016).

The utilitarian strategy focuses on the functional aspect of food consumption, where the consumer benefits from the practical and instrumental attributes of the food, such as nutritional values, convenience, and affordability. This kind of strategy emphasizes the essential needs that food fulfills in daily life (Aqueveque, 2016).

The hedonistic strategy is adopted by companies that aim to deliver a hedonistic experience, i.e., a pleasure-seeking and indulgent experience to the consumer, highlighting the sensory, affective, and emotional gratification descending from food consumption. The hedonistic strategy relies on the desire of consumers for enjoyment and pleasure, making the taste, aroma, and overall gastronomic experience central to the appeal of the product.

The symbolic strategy underscores the social and status-signifying functions of food. It leverages the capacity of certain foods to convey prestige, luxury, or cultural identity, thus serving as a signal of social positioning. This strategy relies on the aspirations of consumers for status elevation and differentiation through the consumption of food products that signal a certain lifestyle or belonging to a given social group (Aqueveque, 2016).

Compared to the strategies here examined, *masstige* represents a novel positioning strategy in the food industry (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). It bridges the gap between mass market and prestige by offering high-quality, prestigious products at accessible price levels. Companies adopting *masstige* strategy address their product to a broad spectrum of consumers, aiming to democratize luxury and make premium experiences available to a wider audience. *Masstige* combines the allure of luxury with the pragmatism of mass-market accessibility, thereby catering to consumers who look for superior quality and exclusivity without the traditional luxury price tag. By doing so, *masstige* challenges the conventional dichotomies of the food industry's positioning strategies, offering a unique value proposition that appeals to the evolving preferences of contemporary consumers.

2.3 Masstige as Positioning Strategy in the Food Industry

The *masstige* strategy differs significantly from the approaches used in traditional luxury. Literature has highlighted that traditional luxury faces a wide range of challenges. In particular, for what is of our interest, the food retail sector is facing some challenges that stem from the democratization of consumption and the rise of mass consumer goods, linked to the birth of the large-scale retail distribution and the digital revolution (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Silverstein et al., 2008; Silverstein & Fiske, Neil, 2003). This shift arose from the proliferation of distribution channels, reduced labor and transport costs, alongside an increase consumers' income (Silverstein et al., 2008; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

Companies are now facing with a new kind of middle-class consumers who are sophisticated and cultured, with a higher awareness of their emotional states (Silverstein, Michael J. & Fiske, Neil, 2003). They exhibit complex identities, often described as "multi-phrenic selves" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), leading to "liquid" consumption trend (Eckhardt et al., 2015), i.e., more volatile consumption habits and brand relationships (Moorlock et al., 2023). The result is a contradictory consumer behavior, as they tend to economize in categories of goods perceived as less relevant, while trading up in those of high emotional importance (Silverstein et al., 2008). The result is a large-scale retail market polarization, where consumers gravitate toward either premium or low-cost goods, bypassing mid-range options. Such a trend poses a strategic challenge for companies, which faces a market simultaneously asking for both mass-market affordability and luxury quality. Consequently, a paradox emerged where mass consumption's accessibility intertwined with the exclusivity and prestige of luxury goods (Kumar et al., 2018).

The target of *masstige* strategies are consumers who are looking for an authentic brand experience and prioritize sensorial, emotional, relational, and cognitive values associated with the product (Batat, 2019). This new consumer characterization poses challenges for companies and their positioning choices, requiring them to develop business strategies in a highly competitive environment populated by discerning customers willing to switch brands due to an inadequate representation of their identity by those same companies.

The intricate relationship existing among these factors defines the competitive dynamics within large-scale retail market. Goods typical of traditional luxury has historically been distributed through exclusive channels such as flagship stores and concept stores (Mattia, 2013). The selective distribution enhanced the perception of luxury goods as rare resources, serving the purpose of social differentiation (Bourdieu, Pierre & Vestheim, Geir, 2010). In contrast, companies adopting *masstige* strategies can leverage more wider distribution channels while still maintaining a high level of prestige (Kumar et al., 2018). This is in slightly contrast with the "rarity principle", according to which the heightened awareness of a brand's exclusivity or rarity enhances its aspirational value (Dubois & Paternault, 1995). The transformation of luxury away from rarity and exclusivity, notably observed in Eastern markets, challenges established market norms. Traditional luxury strategies, centered on absolute market positioning (Mattia, 2013), are giving way to newer companies adopting a "relational" positioning strategies, such as *masstige* (Mattia, 2013). These changes in how luxury goods are distributed could lead to a deep rethinking of what represent luxury in the modern markets.

Companies operating with traditional luxury goods, thus using exclusive distribution channels to enhance the perception of luxury goods as rare resources and source of social differentiation (Bourdieu & Vestheim, 2010), have traditionally centered their strategies on absolute market positioning (Mattia, Giovanni, 2013). This aligns with the "rarity principle," according to which the exclusivity of a brand significantly strengthens its aspirational value (Dubois & Paternault, 1995). Conversely, companies operating in the masstige market face a different set of strategic challenges and opportunities. These companies serve customers who look for an authentic brand experience, valuing sensorial, emotional, relational, and cognitive aspects of the product (Batat, 2019). The masstige market compels these companies to develop robust business strategies in a highly competitive environment where brand loyalty is fragile. Differently from companies offering traditional luxury goods, companies which apply masstige strategies – and thus offer masstige products – can use a wider set of distribution channels while still preserving a sense of prestige (Heine, 2012; Kumar et al., 2018).

For instance, in the Italian market, "Eataly," founded by Oscar Farinetti in 2004, embodies a new distribution format for luxury food (Mattia, 2013). It exemplifies a blend of prestigious products and experientiality, serving as a model for SMEs applying a masstige strategy and, consequently, looking for new distribution channels (Mattia, 2013).

Another relevant challenge for the food industry sector is the digital revolution: by the end of 2020 direct-to-consumer e-commerce in Italy soared by 31%, totaling an impressive 5 billion euros (Italian Trade Agency, 2021). In this ranking, the food industry sector was in third position with 2.7 billion euros (Italian Trade Agency, 2021). In the Italian market for products priced at 150 euros or more, online sales represent 33.6%, whereas quality products in offline markets only make up 23.3% (NielsenIQ, 2021). Traditional luxury often fails to embrace the digital revolution (Creevey et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2019; Vinearan, 2019), given its mentioned preference for very restricted and selective distribution channels (Vinearan, 2019; Creevey et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2019) as well as the exclusive nature of the traditional luxury and the democratic and egalitarian nature of digitalization (Balasyan & Casais, 2018). On the contrary, SMEs adopting a masstige strategy, can properly benefit from the potential of e-commerce channels as they do not operate through elitist distribution channels such as boutiques or flagship stores, thus do not fear being unable to replicate the in-store experience online (Creevey et al., 2022).

Moreover, the adoption of a masstige strategy allows SMEs to face the requests of stakeholders in terms of sustainability, particularly within the realm of luxury food. Persistent skepticism has surrounded the supposed compatibility between the luxury sector and sustainability principles (Kapferer, 2010; Keinan et al., 2020; Torelli et al., 2012). In this sense, a masstige strategy can assist SMEs in aligning with the democratic and personal values that have emerged among consumers of the masstige, especially in the post-pandemic era (Wang et al., 2022), navigating the inherent challenge for traditional luxury enterprises in harmonizing the core tenets of luxury – self-enhancement, dreams, and social differentiation– with the pillars of sustainability –rationality, frugality, equality, reality, and self–transcendence–(Keinan et al., 2020).

In conclusion, SMEs have the opportunity for adoption of masstige positioning strategy. This kind of positioning strategy combines accessibility, prestige, large-scale retail, and premiumness, addressing the needs of masstige consumers and is characterized by the following attributes:

It conveys luxury-like qualities and mass market prices, offering a balance between exclusivity and accessibility, premium price and widespread distribution that allows consumers to enjoy premium experiences (Kumar et al., 2018);

A market-centered strategy (Mattia, 2013);

Similarly to traditional luxury, the adopting company is surrounded by an aura of prestige and it is associated to high-quality products (Kumar et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2018);

A high capacity of the brand to innovate and differentiate itself through unique product offering, marketing strategies or distribution channels (Kumar et al., 2020);

The attention toward a new kind of customer, a hedonist consumer, who is also interested in the functional benefits of the products (Mattia, 2013).

3. METHOD

To investigate the intricate dynamics of masstige as a positioning strategy within the food industry, the present study employed a qualitative methodology. In particular, we adopted the single case study method to investigate the complex relationship between masstige strategies and the operational environment of the company. This kind of investigation is well-suited to the case study method in consideration of its capacity to give insight into the features of complex business phenomena within their natural settings (Yin, 2018).

The case study selected for the present study is represented by an Italian food company, named "Urbani Tartufi", which is a SME operating in the food industry and a pioneer in the adoption of masstige positioning strategy. The company excels in blending the widespread appeal of the mass market with the charm of prestige, serving as a perfect example to the observation of the managerial choices and practical implications of the implementation of a masstige strategy.

Data were collected through a triangulated approach in order to guarantee a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under analysis (Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews with the company's key stakeholders—including senior management and marketing executives—offered deep insights into the strategic rationale, challenges encountered during the implementation process, and the outcomes of masstige positioning strategy on the perception of the company among stakeholder and its market performance. The interviews were conducted from November 2022 to September 2023, with the aim of closely following the process that led to the creation of the "Filosofia Naturale" brand line, the design of positioning and strategic marketing strategies for the brand line, and the design of communication strategies for the line until the very first product launch.

Throughout the entire research project, there was constant contact with both the company's ownership and the company's marketing strategists, as well as the sales and commercial team, who were knowledgeable about the strategies followed by the brand for its strategic placement in mass-market retail.

The interviews were complemented by an exhaustive review of both internal and publicly available corporate documents, ranging from marketing strategies and product development records to annual reports. The documentary analysis provided us with a solid base of knowledge, allowing us to clearly identify and evaluate the effect of the adoption of masstige as the core strategic approach of the company.

A useful tool for reconstructing the company's history and philosophy was reading the book commemorating the company's 170th anniversary, as well as visiting the "Museum of Truffle," founded by Urbani Tartufi in Scheggino, Umbria, Italy, where documents that testify to the company's communication and positioning strategies since its founding are collected.

Additionally, directly experiencing what the brand offers to consumers added a layer of observation to our study and gave us the chance to evaluate how masstige strategies work in everyday life. In particular, we analyzed the in-store placement of Urbani Tartufi's product lines. This activity allowed us to better understand the products' competitive landscape within the retail environment.

To analyze the collected data, we adopted the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), which involves a systematic approach to coding qualitative data and building a data structure that supports the development of new concepts. This method was instrumental in drawing findings and ensuring the credibility of our results.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Urbani Tartufi and its Positioning Strategy

The case study in this research focuses on the new brand line, "Filosofia Naturale," of the Italian company named Urbani Tartufi, a SME operating in the food industry and having truffle as flagship product. The company has long history, detailed in the volume released on the 170th anniversary of its foundation. The company is owned by the Urbani family and its headquarters are in Scheggino, a small town in Umbria region, considered the green heart of Italy, and it operates in 70 countries with 5 brands, 300 employees, and a turnover of 75 million euros. The company is managed by Olga Urbani, a member of the second-last family generation.

From the analysis of Urbani Tartufi some elements of success emerge with regard to the positioning strategy of the company. They are: (a) the broadening of the product offering and the high capacity of the company for line extension; (b) the construction of a solid brand with a rich history, that allows the company to apply a strategy as the one described in point (a); (c) attention to changes in the truffle sector and market trends to drive business diversification and line extension processes; (d) the distribution of products through different kinds of channels, targeting diverse market segments; (e) skillful integration of functional and emotional benefits in the value proposition for consumers.

The positioning strategy adopted by Urbani Tartufi is anchored in its solid brand history, rooted in centuries-old tradition. Such a brand embodies traditional luxury values such as history, refinement, and exclusivity. The strong brand identity has enabled the Urbani Tartufi to expand its product range while maintaining its luxury perception among consumers. As Olga Urbani explain: "attempts to sell under different brand names have been unsuccessful, reinforcing the necessity of the Urbani Tartufi brand name". This is particularly significant in a sector like that of truffles, since as the marketing director Paola Terenziano underlines: "we are in a sector where the product –truffle– is perceived unbranded". With over 600 items in its portfolio, including products derived from truffles and related items like mushrooms, the brand's strength allows for broad product inclusion, facilitated by the Urbani family's involvement in other ventures such as "Urbani Funghi", a company having mushroom as flagship product.

The strong brand name is combined with the attention of the company to market changes, as demonstrated by the Truffleland project, initiated in 2017 from an idea by Francesco Loreti Urbani. As recalled by her mother and president of the company, Olga Urbani: "he decided to diversify one of the company's activities into truffle production through the sale of mycorrhizal plants into a visionary idea".

The products of Urbani Tartufi are distributed through a selection of channels that include large-scale retail distribution, as well as flagship stores in some of the largest cities in the world. This exemplifies how the company is capable of apply differentiation in its product lines to establish a presence across multiple distribution channels that target different market segments. Indeed, as recalled by the marketing director Paola Terenziano: "the challenge is in this sense is placing the product in the most appropriate way since we are talking about a gourmet and fine dining product, which must be made understandable to the consumer in the simplest and most intuitive manner possible".

Finally, the perception of the company among consumer is achieved through skillfully integrating know-how and symbolic values. The know-how stems from its leadership position in the truffle industry, requiring adherence to minimum quality standards offered to consumers by the brand, reminiscent of the principles of *masstige* (Mattia, 2013).

Urbani Tartufi defines itself as the "ambassador of Italian taste in the world" -as stated on the corporate website- implying the commitment of the company to conveying a certain productive knowledge (Mattia, 2013). The term "symbolic values" refers instead to the values associated with traditional luxury such as quality and tradition.

4.2 The Masstige Strategy behind Urbani Tartufi Line Extension “Filosofia Naturale”

Filosofia Naturale is a product line launched by the parent brand Urbani Tartufi at the end of the summer of 2023. It consists of 8 product variants—including whole truffles, as well as sauces and products derived from truffles. Most of them are vegetarian, non-GMO, gluten-free, and sold in a sustainable packaging. None of the products contain artificial flavors, aiming to offer consumers truffles in their natural state without the presence of artificial aromas.

The product line represents an extension of the parent brand Urbani Tartufi, employing the endorsed identity technique (Pastore & Vernuccio, 2008). Our analysis indicates that it is specifically Filosofia Naturale that facilitates Urbani Tartufi's adoption of masstige as a positioning strategy. The product line comprises eight variants designed to establish Urbani Tartufi's presence in the healthy food market. These products, based on truffles, are distinguished by their natural, vegetarian, gluten-free characteristics, along with sustainable packaging, and in certain instances, vegan attributes.

Several elements make Filosofia Naturale a product line adopting a masstige positioning strategy.

Firstly, the Filosofia Naturale seems to embrace the exclusivity-accessibility paradox (Kumar et al., 2018). On the one hand the element of exclusivity stems from the product itself, namely truffles, which have long been regarded as an elite product in the food sector, as well as from the support provided by the equity of the parent brand. Moreover, there is a certain sophistication in terms of design and aesthetic packaging that distinguishes Filosofia Naturale from the classic Urbani line among consumers. On the other hand, accessibility is provided by the distribution channels – mass-market retail – and price. In fact, as noted by sales director of Urbani Tartufi: “the line is perceived as premium both by the trade and by the final consumer, with a trade margin on the premium product category never lower than 40%”, yet its price in mass-market retail continues to make it accessible to the average consumer.

Secondly, the product line Filosofia Naturale, like other masstige products, adopts a relational market positioning perspective, which is a typical element of a masstige positioning strategy. This kind of positioning is more market-oriented than product-oriented, also considering the competitive challenges of a scenario such as mass-market retail.

Thirdly, as it is the case for Filosofia Naturale, the masstige positioning strategy emphasizes the quality and functional characteristics of the product and its emotional dimension, when compared to the ordinary communication of the parent brand “Urbani Tartufi” (Mattia, 2013). Therefore, the masstige strategy tends to align more closely with positioning strategies in the food sector that can be described as hedonistic or functional (Aqueveque, 2016). Furthermore, in a masstige positioning strategy symbolic positioning becomes less important, since ostentatious consumption appears to be less relevant (Aqueveque, 2016). In this regard, Filosofia Naturale communicates tangible functional benefits to the consumer, which strengthens the position of the company in the market. This is particularly significant considering, as noted by the sales manager, that “the line is a first mover in the truffle market in mass-market retail”. For masstige products, a strong qualitative foundation is essential to communicate the experiential and symbolic benefits of the product (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

Lastly, the product line meets the needs of a new type of consumer, which our analysis defines as midway between a “foodie” (Mattia, 2013) and a health-conscious individual. The target customer of “Filosofia Naturale” is one who perceives the naturalness of the product and its high quality as inseparable from the hedonistic experience it guarantees. Pleasure for these target customers is understood in strictly personal terms, closely linked to the concept of well-being (including physical) and self-care, to the extent that some literature employs the concept of autotelic consumption, i.e., an end in itself (Holt, 1995). The brand seeks a connection with target customers based on values such as naturalness, quality, and affiliation with the vegan/vegetarian world, which should ensure the brand's security against the constant turnover of brands that customers undergo (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003).

4.3 The Strategic Learning Resulting from the Masstige Positioning Strategy of Filosofia Naturale

The core value proposition to the target customer of the brand line Filosofia Naturale is the use of natural flavors. Indeed, the use of synthetic flavors in the truffle sector is certainly one of the most deceptive elements towards customers. As the company's marketing manager points out: "The objective of the brand line is to try to combine naturalness and flavor, offering to the target customer some of Urbani's best sellers without artificial aromas." As a brand line adopting a masstige positioning, a central element for Filosofia Naturale is quality, achieved by offering truffle products that exclusively contain natural flavors.

The brand line integrates the parent brand into the "healthy food" trend. It is a growing trend, as evidenced by the report released by Osservatorio Immagino of GS1 Italy (2022), which cross-references over a hundred claims found on the digitized labels of food products with NielsenIQ sales and consumption data. The report indeed highlights an increase in sell-out of products labeled 'vegan' by 0.6% and an increase in sell-out of products with 'vegetarian' claim by 1.8% (Correale et al., 2022). If we instead consider labels falling under the 'sustainability' category, the most significant claim is undoubtedly 'recyclable', with a 6.8% increase in sell-out; however, claims such as 'sustainable' and 'recycled material' labeled products also show a positive increase in sell-out (Correale et al., 2022).

As stated on the corporate website, the line is designed for a customer segment attentive to both the health dimension of the product and its high quality, taking into consideration elements such as eco-sustainability, high-quality standards, reliability, and safety. This is achieved through a brand extension – Filosofia Naturale– thereby reducing costs compared to creating a new brand from scratch. The line distinguishes itself from the brand's conventional product range, enabling the incorporation of new associations related to naturalness and sustainability. Indeed, "Filosofia Naturale" has some of the elements of success which typically characterize a successful brand line as:

- Quality of brand positioning (Boisvert & Ashill, 2018): the parent brand Urbani Tartufi has a well-established position in the market, which is particularly indicative for a sector where, as the marketing manager of Urbani Tartufi points out "the product is perceived as unbranded";
- Width of promotional investment (Boisvert & Ashill, 2018): through a multi-channel communication strategy –social media, television, press, influencer marketing– in a five weeks' time span, as underlined by Paola Terenziano;
- Authenticity of brand extension (Napoli et al., 2013): the brand line appears coherent to the target customer. As remarked by the president Olga Urbani: "Filosofia Naturale is connected to other projects of the company as "Truffleland", since the objective is to better the quality of the product and the traceability of the production chain;
- Overall extension fit (Albrecht et al., 2013): Urbani Tartufi opted for including in its new brand line its best sellers, in order to offer to its target customers the traditional portfolio of its products. Therefore, this constitutes a trading up strategy (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003) for Urbani's best sellers.

The brand line also allows the parent brand to reach a wider target audience by opening up to two new kinds of customers: the "foodie" consumer (Mattia, 2013) and the "healthy/green" consumer. The former can be described as a customer attentive to gastronomic novelties, focused on food quality, and the refinement of products. In particular, some authors have identified foodies as frequenters of "specialty stores", which are retail outlets characterized by a distinctive format offering quality, high levels of service, a wide assortment of products, and unique goods (Calvo-Porrall & Lévy-Mangin, 2018). The latter includes all the customers attentive to the sustainable dimension of consumption and to the healthy and "fit" nature of the ingredients used. At the demographic level, the "green/health" consumption primarily concerns women

(Lone et al., 2009), who are typically more informed about their purchases, partly due to being the primary decision-makers in purchases (Padel & Foster, 2005).

The innovation introduced by "Filosofia Naturale" is the possibility of combining the hedonic and healthy aspects of food consumption, overcoming the common perception that consuming healthy food must involve a 'depriving' experience. Typically, healthy food is seen as synonymous with restrictive diets, bland flavors, and a lifestyle full of sacrifices. On the contrary, in our analysis, the target customer emerges from the intersection between the "foodie" consumer model and the "healthy/green" consumer model. The result is a target customer characterized by a high attention level to product information and quality, hedonism, self-care, and experience.

The new brand line positioning is more centered on benefits and attributes if compared to that of the parent company, which is more focused on emotional and symbolic benefits. As often happens with masstige brands, the emotional positioning is built upon a consolidated asset of know-how and expertise attributed to the brand (Mattia, 2013). "Filosofia Naturale" operates within the "functional-reified" space with a strong connection between brand and product because the latter is primarily purchased for its functional benefits (Berthon et al., 2003). Functional benefits in a product subjected to a masstige positioning strategy should be prominently highlighted. In the case of "Filosofia Naturale", this is achieved through the information provided on the packaging and the landing page of the corporate website.

The primary advantage of a masstige positioning strategy for a brand line such as 'Filosofia Naturale' lies primarily in occupying the ideal space of 'naturalness-democratisation' positioning in the matrix depicted in the Figure 1.

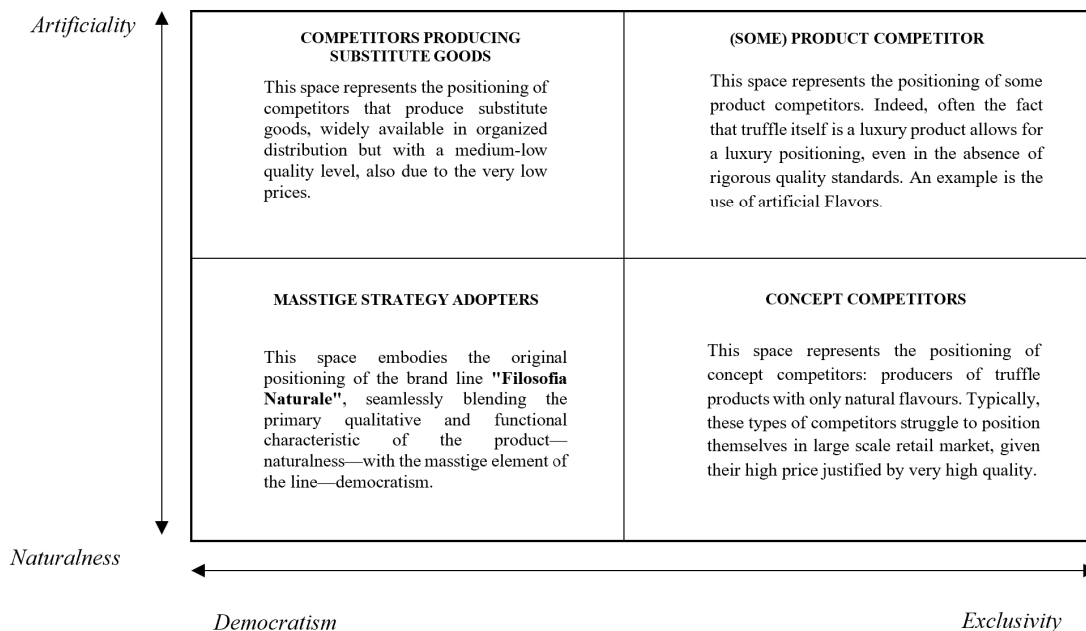


FIGURE 1: Originality of the positioning of Filosofia Naturale explained through the two dimensions of naturalness-industrialization and exclusivity-democratism.

The matrix in Figure 1, elaborated by the authors, represents the two dimensions we deem relevant for analyzing positioning in the competitive landscape: naturalness-industrialization and luxury-democratism. The first dimension refers to the greater or lesser attention to the naturalness of the product.

As it is evident from the matrix, "Filosofia Naturale" has an original positioning strategy. This original positioning combines the main qualitative and functional characteristic of the product –

naturalness – with the typically masstige element of the line – democratism. Moreover, this positioning distinguishes the brand line from: (a) competitors producing substitute goods (competitors which produce goods which satisfy the same needs of our products); (b) “concept competitors” (producing truffle-derived products with only natural flavors), and (c) “product competitors” (other truffle producers). Compared to the “concept competitors,” the brand line benefits from the endorsement of a solid parent brand such as Urbani Tartufi. Compared to “product competitors” the brand line overcomes the “accessibility-exclusivity” paradox, combining at the same time high quality and large-scale retail trade. Lastly, compared to competitors producing substitute goods (e.g., sauces, condiments, pâtés) the brand line benefits from symbolic associations linked to truffle products as the idea of luxury.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to analyze masstige as an original positioning strategy for SMEs in the food industry, constituting a competitive advantage in a saturated market as that of large-scale retail.

This academic contribution tries to show how masstige positioning strategy can overcome the primary challenges associated with positioning issues in the luxury sector, which is particularly relevant for SMEs operating in the food industry and selling luxury-associated products such as truffles and truffle-derived products. Specifically, masstige positioning strategy resolves the “exclusivity-accessibility” paradox by enabling a company to maintain a premium and distinctive market position within the large-scale retail market. Furthermore, the masstige positioning strategy enables companies, particularly SMEs, to construct their market position based on the attributes and functional qualities of the products, in contrast to the luxury sector, where positioning is typically built on symbolic benefits.

The masstige positioning strategy, as observed, may also involve the extension of corporate activities, through the creation of new brand line which absorbs the benefits of the parent company. More specifically, in the food sector, this kind of positioning strategy allows the parent company to align with the growing trend of “healthy food”, incorporating new associations related to naturalness and sustainability with limited effort, as everything occurs through a corporate extension strategy.

Masstige positioning strategy enables SMEs to attain a unique space within a highly competitive context such as the large retail market. In the case of Filosofia Naturale, this original market position lies at the intersection of “democratism-naturalness”. In this way, the brand line allows the parent company, Urbani Tartufi, to appeal to a new type of target customer, situated between what we have defined as the “foodie” and the “health-conscious individual”.

This positioning generate a competitive advantage for the company over other competitors present in large-scale retail market and beyond, as it uniquely enhances qualitative product characteristics, a higher yet still accessible price, and product accessibility due to its placement in large scale retail.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the literature on strategic positioning by highlighting the adaptability and effectiveness of the masstige strategy in non-traditional luxury sectors like the food industry. This research demonstrates that the masstige strategy, traditionally associated with the fashion and cosmetics industries, can be successfully applied to the food sector, offering new insights into how luxury perception can be crafted through product attributes and marketing strategies. The findings challenge existing theoretical frameworks by providing empirical evidence that supports the flexibility of the masstige model beyond its conventional boundaries, thereby opening new avenues for academic inquiry into luxury branding and market positioning strategies in diverse industry contexts. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how SMEs can leverage the masstige strategy to balance exclusivity and accessibility, maintaining a premium brand image while reaching a broader consumer base.

For practitioners, the findings provide actionable insights into leveraging product attributes and line extensions to penetrate competitive markets effectively. This study offers practical guidance on how SMEs can develop and implement a masstige strategy to differentiate themselves in saturated markets. By focusing on functional and qualitative aspects of their products, such as natural ingredients and sustainability, companies can enhance their brand appeal and meet the evolving preferences of health-conscious and environmentally-aware customer. Moreover, the research underscores the importance of corporate line extensions, suggesting that SMEs can capitalize on the established reputation of parent companies to introduce new product lines that resonate with a wider audience. This strategic approach fosters brand loyalty and facilitates market expansion, enabling SMEs to achieve competitive advantages and sustainable growth in the large-scale retail market.

The present study presents some limitations that can serve as a starting point for future research. Firstly, it is a qualitative study conducted on a single case study which, although representative of the food sector, is nonetheless just one example of the application of the masstige positioning strategy in SMEs. Future studies could analyze case studies in other geographical areas, both as single case studies and in a comparative perspective. Secondly, another limitation is the fact that our study focuses on the food industry. Future research could consider case studies from other industries to investigate whether the masstige strategy exhibits similar characteristics, regardless of the industry in which it is applied. Thirdly, this work does not consider the possible different application of masstige strategies within the contexts of family-owned and non-family-owned SMEs. Therefore, we propose this perspective for analysis as a future research direction.

Additionally, the geographical context analyzed in this case study offers an innovative perspective on Italian SMEs, contrasting with the predominant focus on Asian contexts in existing literature. This case study provides valuable insights into SMEs' positioning strategies within the Italian and broader European context. Such diverse geographical insights can enhance the journal's international scope and relevance, promoting its role as a global platform for innovative research (Cristofaro et al., 2021).

In conclusion, this academic research serves as an exploratory qualitative study that starts a discussion on the topic of masstige positioning strategies, especially within the food industry. It sets the stage for more structured and quantitative research on the topic, inviting further investigation into how these strategies can be effectively implemented.

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