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The Relevance of the Quality Construct to Wine Consumption
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ABSTRACT
This study focused on consumers’ difficulties with the concept of quality using the example of wine quality. The research was carried out because previous academic perspectives on quality have focused on the conceptual problems faced by researchers, rather than concentrating on the difficulties consumers may have with the idea of quality. Informants reported that dealing with quality in an aesthetic product like wine is complex, partly due to the abstract nature of the product, partly because of the focus required during engagement, and partly because of the difficulty of verbalising that engagement.

INTRODUCTION
This study focused on the difficulty drinkers can experience with the concept of quality using the example of wine quality. Quality is a term which is used almost daily by both marketers and consumers. The concept is an important issue within the field of consumer behaviour, with much discussion focused on trying to explain its nature and scope (Holbrook and Corfman 1985, Zeithaml 1988, Sweeney and Soutr 1995, Steenkamp 1990). Although consumer researchers acknowledge the problem of determining precisely what product quality is from an academic perspective, they appear to pay less attention to the dilemmas faced by consumers in defining the concept. This article is an attempt to redress this imbalance by exploring consumers’ understanding of the concept of quality in wine.

Using the Term Quality
Marketing academics have readily acknowledged that quality is difficult to define (Steenkamp 1990, Zeithaml 1988, Sweeney and Soutr 1995, Holbrook 1999). It seems that the confusion arising from varying interpretations of the term have led researchers to focus less on the nature of quality itself and more on its relationship to other variables. Where quality is addressed, the main emphasis of marketing researchers has been to try to categorise and define quality in an academic sense, rather than focus on the problems consumers face in understanding the concept.

The term quality is often utilised specifically by both consumers of wine and the professionals involved in the production and distribution of the product (Charters and Pettigrew 2002). In what is one of the most fragmented of all markets, any criterion which can frame or inform consumer purchase decisions is useful. Consequently the perception that one buys or experiences quality by one’s choice may have a significant influence on the decision-making process. For wine producers, understanding how consumers view quality may give them a critical edge in marketing their wines. Yet despite regular use of the term quality within the wine industry, there is little consideration of how consumers conceptualise quality and the resulting implications for developing quality-related communications.

To provide context to this investigation of consumers’ perceptions of wine quality and how they may differ from those of academics and wine marketers, relevant academic and practitioner viewpoints are presented below. The academic perspective on quality is that adopted by marketing academics, particularly consumer researchers, while the practitioner viewpoint is sourced from wine industry publications.

The Marketing Perspective
Steenkamp (1989) has offered a particularly precise analysis of the different means of categorising quality. He offers four different approaches to the concept, noting that one of these, adopted by the discipline of marketing, is ‘perceived quality’. Further, there are ten overall definitions of quality given by the Macquarie Dictionary (Delbridge and Bernard 1998), of which one is relevant to this discussion: ‘excellence or superiority’. It is excellence and superiority which are generally used in the marketing literature when referring to quality per se as a facet of consumer perception (Zeithaml 1988). The single definition ‘superiority or excellence’ in fact contains two different interpretations. Superiority is relative; there must be at least one other product of the same class in order for an item to be judged as superior. Excellence is discrete to the individual product. It is either excellent or it is not. Although ignored by consumer researchers, this distinction may, however, be relevant from the consumer’s point of view and it is almost certainly relevant from the perspective of the wine producer and critic. For instance both definitions operate separately in the Australian wine show system. In a class of (say) chardonnays there is no limit to the number of wines that can gain more than 18.5/20 and be awarded gold medals—their excellence is therefore assessed discreetly. However, only one of these wines can be selected as a trophy winner—the best in its class—which is a comparative judgment. It may well be that consumers view the two alternative definitions as separate processes and goals. Depending on the situation (for instance the purpose of consumption) they may seek merely something that is comparatively better than similar product types, or they may seek excellence as a discrete end in itself. This dichotomous understanding clouds the definition of wine quality.

Zeithaml (1988) considered the definition of absolute quality within a marketing context to suggest that it refers to “the actual technical superiority or excellence of the products” (1988, 4). She added that “the term ‘objective quality’ refers to measurable and verifiable superiority on some predetermined ideal standard or standards” (1988, 4). This approach, using external data to attempt to establish the quality of specific products, has been adopted by other researchers (e.g., Hjorth-Andersen 1984). However, it is perceived quality as a paradigm, rather than absolute quality, that has dominated the perspective of marketing academics (e.g., Compeau, Grewal, and Monroe 1998, Holbrook and Corfman 1985). Perceived quality is considered an abstraction, resulting from the evaluation of a product (Zeithaml 1988). Perceived quality may be interpreted as “an overall subjective, evaluative judgment of a product’s perceived ability to deliver an expected bundle of benefits relative to benefits offered by other products” (Compeau et al. 1998, 296). Perceived quality is thus a subjective and personal evaluation made by the consumer.

The Outlook of the Wine Industry
Oenological academics, who train and consult to winemakers, focus on wine quality as a production management issue. Thus the standard text on producing wine examines quality control in some detail, without actually defining quality (Rankine 1989). This reflects the production management approach and may help winemakers to produce technically correct wines, yet does not necessarily assist consumers seeking to engage with the idea of...
wine quality. Some oenologists are more consumer-focused. Jackson (1994), for example, argues that quality is evaluated by the wine’s conformity to objective benchmarks, such as ‘regional standards’, or by the analysis of its discrete quality elements, such as the length of finish. This, however, tends to be the exception rather than the rule.

Wine producers and commentators also show an unwillingness to deal with quality as a concept. For example, The Oxford Companion to Wine, edited by the eminent British commentator Jancis Robinson (1999), is the major English language reference work on wine. Nevertheless, Robinson only considers quality in terms of the European Union’s legal construct ‘quality wine produced from a specified region’ (QWPSR). QWPSR implies that quality only exists because the wine comes from a specific geographic area, rather than because it tastes better than other wines. This difficulty of engaging with quality has even led one wine marketing practitioner to conclude that quality is an irrelevant term for wine (Gardner 1998). Gardner proposes that overuse of the term by wine producers means that it is almost ‘meaningless’ (p 145) so that “the term quality remains contemptible” (p 151).

The reluctance among wine critics to deal with the concept of wine quality probably results from two factors. The first is the lack of a commonly accepted definition of wine quality. Secondly, there is uncertainty about the benchmarks against which a wine can be judged. For certain commentators the evaluation of wine is an aesthetic practice (Amerine and Roessler 1976), while for others it can be a subjective process (Peynaud 1987). Alternatively, it may be considered scientifically verifiable and thus objective (Somers 1998).

Determining wine quality presents specific problems to wine professionals because of the complexities surrounding the process of tasting, which is not a precise science. It is clear that there is uneven sensory awareness, both in a single person and between individuals, and that this unevenness relates both to olfactory perception (Woods 1998) and the sense of taste (Peynaud 1987). Crucially, enjoyment lies not in the aroma itself but in our interaction with it; thus pleasure is partly about our personal perspective (Engen 1988). Consequently tasting skill, personal preference, and external notions of quality may interact erratically as one tastes a specific wine.

Understanding Quality

Based on the above discussion, the problems surrounding the concept of quality can be analysed in at least two ways. The first is definitional. Is quality excellence (and thus discrete to the product) or superiority (and therefore comparative)? Secondly, emphasis can be placed on determining if quality is perceived (subjective and thus rooted in the individual consumer) or absolute (determined by external criteria which can be accepted by all consumers). Perceived quality is the paradigm adopted by most marketing academics. This can be seen as a means for placing the responsibility for determining quality firmly on the consumer. This illustrates how the focus of consumer researchers is on their own difficulties in defining and categorising quality, rather than the problems encountered by consumers.

The wine industry shares the uncertainty about the concept of quality displayed by marketing researchers, an uncertainty which is accentuated by factors which relate specifically to wine as a product. There is, for instance, an apparent indecision about how the assessment of wine quality is carried out. Is it a matter of chemical analysis, an organoleptic procedure which requires tasting, or does it require external means of benchmarking quality? Furthermore it is clear that the very process of tasting accentuates the problems of understanding quality, fraught as it is with uncertainties over personal taste and uneven sensory perception. However, the industry also focuses on its own difficulties in analysing quality rather than the problems faced by the consumer.

Involvement

Crucial to this study, and to the problems drinkers may encounter with the idea of wine quality, is the concept of product involvement. A recent definition of involvement suggests that it is “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based in inherent needs, values and interests” (Brennan and Mavondo 2000, 132).

Relevance is a key word in the definition and it is also important to note the focus on the consumer; it is not the product which creates involvement. It has been shown that involvement is a major factor in the development of a drinker’s outlook on wine generally (Lockshin, Quester, and Spawton 2001, d’Hauteville 2003, Quester and Smart 1996). It has also been suggested that high-involvement drinkers form about one third of the market for wine (Lockshin and Spawton 2001), and that these drinkers constitute a group which has a very different perspective on wine consumption from other consumers (Lockshin 2002).

It is commonly the case that involvement is described dichotomously as high or low (e.g., Quester and Smart 1996). Some others claim that it is more likely to operate on a continuum, even though this is harder to assess practically (Brennan and Mavondo 2000). For wine, at least, involvement appears to operate on a continuum (d’Hauteville 2003). Accordingly in this study consumers were split into high- (HI), medium- (MI), and low-involvement (LI) drinkers. This allowed a clearer analysis of consumption practices to explore how the relevance of wine to individuals may shape or reflect their perspectives on quality. Consumer involvement was gauged following a close analysis of expressed consumption behaviours. It used a wide range of activities such as information seeking, frequency of purchase and methods of evaluation. Thus if an informant invariably tried to purchase wine at a low price or showed inaccurate knowledge they were more likely to be low-involvement. In line with the exploratory nature of this study, this qualitative means of deriving involvement level was considered to be more appropriate than the administration of the Personal Involvement Inventory.

PROCESS

An exploratory approach involving interviews and focus groups was used to obtain insight into the ways Australians conceptualise wine quality, which may or may not have similarities to their understandings of quality relating to other classes of goods. In order to access those who were most likely to have thoughts relating to wine quality, sampling was limited to those who classified themselves as wine drinkers. The limitations of this approach include the inability to assume the findings have relevance in wine markets outside of Australia and the possibility that non-wine drinkers have different characteristics to wine drinkers.

Sixty informants took part in the study, 35 participated in focus groups and 25 were interviewed individually. Informants for the research process were selected to mirror the range of general consumers of wine, and as such they reflected an array of levels of involvement with wine and wine consumption. A more detailed description of the informants, their recruitment, and their involvement classification has been provided elsewhere (Charters & Pettigrew, 2003). Informants were informed that the interviews (individual and focus groups) would discuss wine, but they were not aware that the focus would be specifically on wine quality. During the interviews informants were invited to comment on their motivations to drink wine and their perceptions on the nature of wine quality. Other topics included the factors consumers use to interpret
quality, their views on the relationship of quality to value, price, and purchase, and how they assess wine organoleptically. Wine was used as a stimulus in the focus groups to facilitate exploration of consumers’ sensory engagement with the product. Tasting wines and discussing the process of quality evaluation in situ was found to be a very useful approach.

From commencement of data collection a practice of analysis and cross-referencing of data was adopted that involved comparing and contrasting what informants were saying and doing. This process was adopted in part to start the process of analysis by developing data categories (Janescik 1994), and also to improve further data collection by allowing it to be more precisely focused (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The focus group and interview transcriptions were analysed using NUD•IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Information Searching Indexing and Theorising).

The trustworthiness of research is based on two factors (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The first is the nature of the data collected. In an attempt to attain data trustworthiness in qualitative research the standard process is to submit the data and the data-collection process to triangulation—the use of multiple practices to validate the research (Denzin, 1989; Janescik, 1994). Two forms of triangulation were employed in this study, data triangulation, using different involvement levels and varying locations in Australia, and methodological triangulation employing focus groups and interviews. The second factor necessary to attain trustworthiness is the role of the researchers themselves (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Thus, the cross-checking between the researchers of (1) data analysis, (2) interpretation and (3) tentative conclusions offered a further means of adding rigour to the study.

**FINDINGS**

Informants discussed several aspects of wine quality. It quickly became apparent that many informants considered the concept of wine quality to be complex and elusive, probably as a result of its abstract nature:

Ian (LI): I think quality’s an interesting one. It’s a tough one to actually put your finger on.

This perspective was shared by high-involvement consumers also, as the following extract suggests:

Kate: (HI) [Grape quality is] a form of lusciousness—but that’s not necessarily based on body. You can have a fairly light bodied wine that has texture and has structure. And you can have those wines that actually can have some texture and structure but not necessarily be terribly expensive. But they are… [pause]. Difficult questions—god... [long pause]. Quality? On each different level there’s different things you can say.

Kate offered a link between the quality of grapes and the weight and texture of wine—but, whilst she could comment on possible dimensions of quality, she found it hard to be precise about its overall, global nature.

Informants particularly noted the difficulties of quality assessment relating to the physical and cognitive skills involved in evaluation and the need for focused concentration. They also commented on the relevance or otherwise of wine quality to their decision making. Each of these aspects is outlined below.

**Assessing Wine Quality**

*Process difficulties.* Lower involvement informants often referred to the difficulties they face determining whether a wine is of good quality. For some this was the result of a feeling that they lacked appropriate experience:

Nettie (LI): I understand that I don’t understand much about wine quality, I’ve heard all the terminology, ‘something on the nose, and a bit on the back of the palate and the front of the palate—and it’s finished with this and decorated with that.’ I don’t understand.

Nettie believes that some form of external (objective) quality exists and she is aware that a specialist jargon exists for framing it, but she cannot understand the language so she considers that she is unable to perceive the nature of quality in wine.

For some, the difficulty in conceptualising or defining wine quality meant that it is easier to focus on poor quality rather than good quality. Avoiding poor quality, as the converse of seeking out good quality, was often referred to by informants and seemed to be an important issue for them:

Norman (LI): I’m not particularly fastidious about wines and to my mind the quality is such that it is drinkable, pleasant. But I did actually buy a cask of Kaisersohl Moselle the other week—and I took it home and that had got a very boxy taste to it. It had gone off. It had been in the sun or something ... and it was a really unpleasant taste. In fact I couldn’t even manage a glassful and I took it back and swapped it for another one.

Norman offered the fairly uncomplicated and broad ‘drinkable, pleasant’ as his definition of quality, yet was apparently much more at ease in apprehending the absence of quality in a wine. Elsewhere in the interview Norman showed little interest in expensive wines and little complexity in his conceptualisation of quality, yet he can express distaste vigorously when a wine is unpleasant. Even the opportunity to finish the first glass before returning the cask was eschewed, so awful was the wine.

Medium involvement informants also often communicated uncertainty in their discussions of wine quality. Diana, for example, had just started attending a wine education course to improve her ability to assess wine quality. When asked what processes she uses to evaluate wine she commented:

Diana (MI): I have to say that trying to define the tastes and aromas—I find it very difficult to isolate a flavour and say ‘that’s grapefruit’, or ‘that’s kerosene’, or ‘butter’. I find that very difficult. So I suppose I don’t know.

Diana sensed that she should be showing some coherent, analytical approach to the evaluation of wine, but found as many others did that it is hard to place precisely the flavours that she is tasting. This difficulty with the process of assessment and the related issue of articulating the criteria for evaluation was common amongst low- and medium-involvement drinkers.

*The Need for Focus.* As a corollary to the difficulty of assessing wine, some informants were explicit that the process of engaging with wine requires focus. Typical of those who discussed the need for focus was Norman, who talked about the time when he would travel away from home to work and often buy a cask wine to consume on his own:

Norman (LI): I think it’s a matter of distraction or concentration. Sitting in the motel room, I’m very much aware of my friend Bacchus and the quality of what I’ve got there—because you know there’s just silence, perhaps, and the laptop and me. In a barbecue you’re chatting, you’re laughing, I might even...
end up singing. So you are distracted, I suppose, to some extent. Unless somebody specifically brings your attention to it and says ‘this is a such and such, what do you think?’ the chances are you don’t prejudge it that much. You just say “oh that’s a chardonnay, very nice, thank you,” glug, glug and down it goes. I think it makes a difference what concentration you’re putting on the actual drink that you’re having.

When Norman can concentrate on wine he can reach some conclusions about its quality. When he cannot focus he just accepts the offer of a drink and ‘down it goes’. The implication is that he does not think about it carefully in a social context. This view was held by a range of other informants, including some classified as high-involvement.

As suggested by the example above, the need for focus can be confounded by distractions in the drinking environment. Situational factors were described by a number of informants as being problematic in the assessment of wine quality. In the following extract Fred, an occasional musician, is talking about the drinks he sometimes gets served when performing in a hotel:

Fred (LI): They’ve got a particular house white, or something with their own label on it ... And I taste it--and I don’t know whether it’s ... $40 a bottle or $10. And sometimes I think ... it’s the effervescence of the occasion--but I don’t know whether it’s $40 or $10.

The occasion, Fred suggests, may overwhelm his powers of analysis. When he does not know which wine he is drinking he is unable to place its quality, at least as it is judged according to price.

**Decision Making**

Many informants considered wine quality to be a determining factor in their wine selection, and this was particularly evident among higher involvement drinkers. For some informants, however, the concept of quality in wine was reported to be irrelevant. This was particularly apparent among those who took a subjective view of the nature of quality (‘good wine is just what I enjoy’), or for those who--like Nettie above--viewed wine quality as a foreign language which they cannot speak. Thus in a focus group:

Cleo (MI): I don’t really buy a wine for quality. I buy it just for me liking it.

Alec (MI): I think quality’s completely personal.

Cleo: Quality is just a word that doesn’t come into it for me.

For some informants the concept of wine quality actually had negative connotations. The following exchange occurred in a focus group:

Question: What does everyone else think quality is about?

Florence (LI): I think a lot of the time it’s snob value.

Damian (MI): I agree.

Ben: To me it’s not much more than the money that you pay for it and I don’t pay too much attention. I’m quite happy with the better cask wines myself.

The ‘anti-snob’ theme recurred regularly in this focus group. Ben and Florence both showed very low-involvement levels; Damian was a medium-involvement consumer, but seemed to restrain some of his enthusiasm for wine in order to ensure that he ‘belonged’ to the group. Ben and Florence were adamant that high quality, as reflected by high price, is at best irrelevant and at worst an unpleasant expression of status-seeking behaviour.

**DISCUSSION**

It was noted in the literature review that researchers find the concept of quality difficult to define and engage with. This difficulty is in part a result of the multiple definitions of the concept and in part to do with its abstract nature. Consequently, researchers themselves use varying ways of categorising and analysing quality, including a tendency to resort to perceived quality as a definition. This has two outcomes. First, it places the onus on the consumer to determine what quality is. Second, it simplifies the tasks of marketing researchers by absolving them from the responsibility of defining quality. It becomes a process limited to recording, analysing, and quantifying the consumer’s perceptions of the quality dimensions of a product. This may be comparatively simple with consumer durables (for instance electrical goods (Sweeney and Soutar 1995)). However, it becomes more difficult with quasi-aesthetic products like wine where the old saw de gustibus non est disputandum (‘there can be no debate about matters of taste’) is regularly used to pre-empt effective comparison or evaluation. With electrical goods it is relatively simple to evaluate performance. The safety, efficiency, speed, and whitening ability of a washing machine can be measured. By comparison, the concepts employed to evaluate wine are imprecise and there is no common agreement about what they are (Charters and Pettigrew 2002). Even more the consumer’s assessment of, and response to, music, paintings or craftworks may falter because of a lack of commonly agreed or widely understood evaluative criteria.

It is clear from the findings of this study that the difficulty in grappling with the concept of quality is not just experienced by academics and wine industry professionals but also shared by wine consumers. In considering the nature of wine quality, the assessment of wine quality and its relevance to them, many drinkers revealed the complexities they face in coming to terms with the concept. These complexities appear to stem from a number of sources. In part they result from the problems consumers can experience when conceptualising wine quality. Thus they seem to share a common predicament with academics in trying to define an abstract concept. This is compounded with a product like wine because of the fuzziness of its aesthetic nature (Amerine and Roessler 1976), which is harder to engage with than, say, the speed and fuel consumption of a car. The suggestion has therefore been made that wine quality ‘is much easier to recognize than define’ (Amerine and Roessler 1976, 2). Further, the difficulty for consumers appears to be accentuated when they ‘don’t have the language’. Just as tasting is a process categorised for most people by aroma rather than words (Engen 1987), so quality can be more easily categorised and therefore comprehended when one has the ‘right’ words. For the less involved (thus, generally, the less ‘wine literate’), this powerlessness to express the evaluation of quality may distance them from the concept itself. The fact that there may be multiple definitions of wine quality adds to this inability. One consequence is that some consumers may find it easier to focus on the absence of quality—on what they dislike—rather than determine or explain its presence.

The problems of comprehending wine quality appear to be accentuated by the difficulties associated with its evaluation. The physiological and psychological problems with assessing wine detailed in the literature review were noted by some informants. Additionally, situational problems and the need to focus intently on the process of evaluation were also reported by informants to be issues affecting the evaluation of wine. For some consumers these difficulties may create ambiguity about the nature of wine quality. Some informants, even those who accepted the existence of some form of objective quality, suggested that quality is still irrelevant to their preference. A few appeared to view the concept of quality in
a negative light, including the perception that it is merely a market-

ing device.

It is also apparent from the responses given in the study that
there may be different approaches depending on the involvement
level of the individual. High involvement consumers seemed as
likely as others to consider the nature of wine quality difficult to
grasp as an abstract idea, and agreed that evaluating wine quality
required focus. However, they were less likely to dismiss it as
irrelevant or negative. Lower involvement consumers commented
more often on the linguistic, situational, and processing problems
related to the comprehension of quality. Given that the number of
high-involvement drinkers has been estimated at around one-third
of all wine consumers (Lockshin and Spawton 2001), the relatively
large proportion of low- to medium-involvement consumers has
related to the comprehension of quality. Given that the number of

consumers may experience difficulties with the nature of wine quality and by extension
quality in aesthetic products generally. For some this may be
because evaluating quality requires considerable focus or that
clearly describing the elements of quality may be challenging. For
many, however, the problem becomes more specific, focusing on
how quality is actually assessed and the intricacy involved in
pinning it down precisely. This is an unsurprising conclusion and
reflects the trouble expressed by academics in dealing with the
However, this difficulty faced by consumers appears to have been
largely overlooked in studies on the subject. Consequently, the fact
that it is difficult for consumers to get to grips with and explain
quality, at least in relation to a quasi-aesthetic product like wine,
may make any conclusions about the nature of wine quality doubly
tentative. By extension it is possible, and perhaps likely, that the
idea of quality in any aesthetic product complicates consumers’
evaluations. This has important implications for marketing theory
where the emphasis is on ‘perceived quality’. If consumers them-

selves feel they are not in a position to ‘perceive quality’, then the

quality construct in the discipline is undermined.

This struggle to comprehend wine quality has two practical
outworkings. The first is that elements of wine quality may produce
ambivalence, even negativity, amongst some drinkers, especially
those with lower product involvement. This applies to the nature
of quality itself and to various issues surrounding its evaluation
and relevance. Consumers may conclude that evaluating quality has
no relevance to them, nor little applicability to their purchase deci-
sions. Crucially, product involvement appears to have a relation-
ship with the difficulty experienced in coming to terms with wine
quality. Whether this is an issue of cause or effect remains to be
examined. It may be that finding the idea of wine quality easy to deal
with allows consumers the luxury of becoming more involved.
Alternatively, it could be that as a result of their higher involvement,
and the associated increase in knowledge (Goldsmith and d’Hautville
1998, Dodd, Pinkelton, and Gustafson 1996), they have learnt more
about the abstraction which is wine quality.

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