

Quality Attributes of Wine Products: an Explorative Study of Consumers' Buying Motivation through a *Means-End Chains* Approach

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Research objectives

In the last few years, the interaction between more conscious consumers and wine supply chain actors, has influenced the complex, and somewhere trendy, phenomenon of wine consumption. In Europe, the growing number of wine clubs and associations, the attention devoted to wine on every media channel, and the plethora of wine fairs born everywhere show the cultural importance of wine consumption behaviour.

From the researcher point of view the complexity of this issue is well known: there is considerable empirical evidence that consumers, in purchasing a specific food or wine product, express a preference for certain attributes (colour, size, region of origin...) that are considered quality cues (signals) of the whole product. For this reason Steenkamp in 1989 clarified the concept of perceived quality in food markets as the mediation between product's characteristics and consumer's preferences. This means that quality perception depends on an individual evaluation that is strictly related to the environment and the specific consumption situation and that can be based on incomplete information (Holm, Kildevang, 1996). The discovery of subjective and objective dimension and how they interrelate each other can be an important issue to determine the profitability of firms in the long period. As stated by Lockshin (2003) wine quality can be based on perceptions, such as price, recommendations of friends or experts, or the label. But the levels of involvement and knowledge can be determinants of searched information and consequently of quality perception and buying behaviour. Thus, the understanding of different consumers' quality perception is a mainstream for both researchers and managers who deal with the wine market.

As a consequence, it is becoming increasingly important to give correct answers to some questions, such as:

- Which attributes reveal the quality of wine?
- Which values are implicitly searched by consumers when they drink wine?

In order to shed some light on consumer behaviour with respect to the research questions mentioned above, the objectives of this explorative work have been twofold:

- Analyzing the perception of quality of two different consumers' groups: members of the SlowFood association and young costumers of wine in grocery multiple chains in Tuscany (Italy).
- Highlighting the existing linkages between the specific attributes of products, functional consequences and desired values.

Literature review: wine quality perception

In the past years marketing research has investigated quality perception in wine buying and consumption behaviour through reviews, qualitative and quantitative analysis (Combris et al., 1997; Angulo et al., 2000; Rocchi, 2000; Orth, Kruska, 2002; Lockshin, 2003, Verdú Jover et al, 2004; Charters, Pettigrew, 2007). Quality has been often recognized has an important factor in order to understand buying determinants. Perceived quality is based on both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes and a plethora of cues influencing consumers have been analyzed. For instance, according to Zeithaml (1988) price becomes a signal specifically when a) few information are available, b) the product cannot be evaluated and c) the risk to make a wrong choice is high. Even if intuitively a decision to buying wines could be weighted on several data, empirical research shows that consumers use only a limited number of information and, *prices* together with *brands* seem to be surrogates of other attributes making the choice less risky (Lockshin et al., 2000).

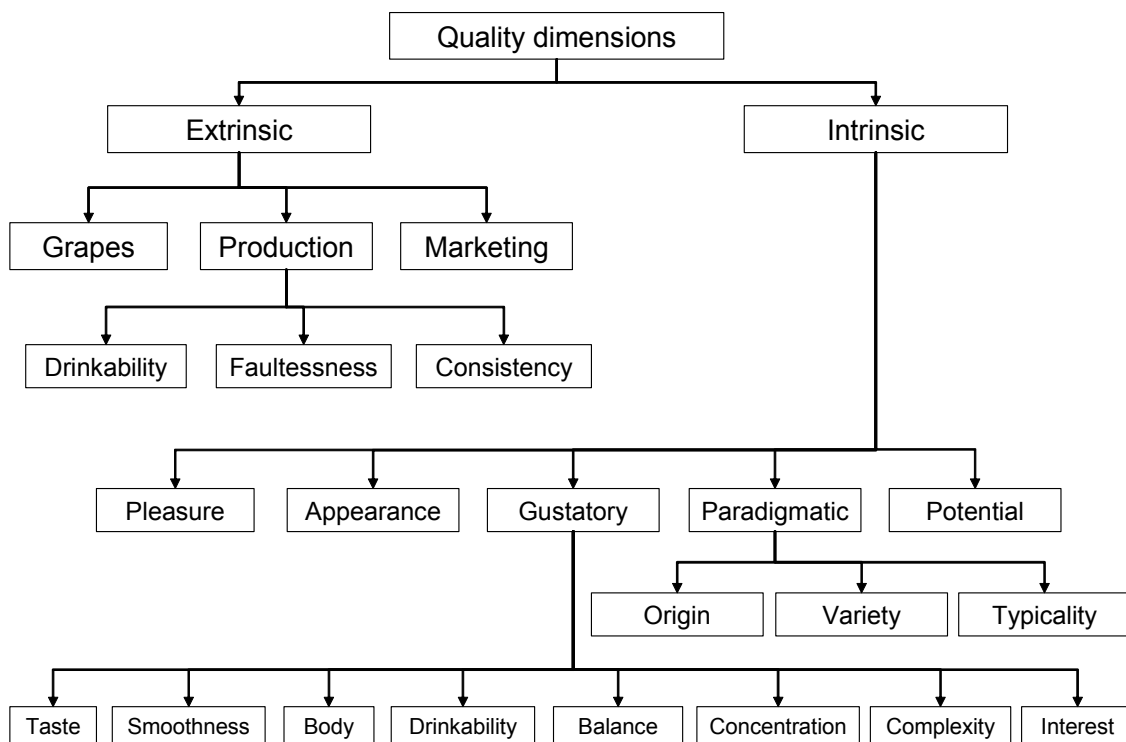
As underlined by Stefani (1997) and Rocchi (2000) in wine market, qualitative differentiation is accompanied by an information asymmetry between producer and consumer. As evidenced by Landon and Smith (1997) to close the information gap, the consumer use signals as the firm reputation, based on previous experienced quality.

Lockshin suggests three dimensions of “involvement” related to products, brands and purchases; consumer more or less involved react in different ways with respect to attributes like prices, denominations of origin, varietals, etc... Generally the more involved consumers will be those with higher willingness to analyse and to use information for their purchases, instead the less involved will be those who use signals like prices or brands as strategies to reduce risk.

Charters e Pettigrew (2007) studied through *focus groups* method with tasting sessions, the experienced quality of 60 Australian consumers with different level of involvement. They found a hierarchy of quality dimensions where the multidimensional nature of quality is well expressed. They introduce the distinction of catalytic and terminal dimensions. The pleasure belongs to the latter type and it is the result of a sensory experience (catalytic dimension) of tasting. The value of pleasure have been discovered as a terminal value by many other studies (Fotopoulos et al., 2003 and Alexaki et al., 1999)

Quality dimensions have different importance depending on level of involvements: more involved consumers favour cognitive/terminal dimensions while less involved ones identify sensory characteristics even if they are not always able to perfectly define them.

Figure 1 – Wine quality dimensions



Source: Charters, Pettigrew (2007)

Materials and Methods

The methodology employed in this work is based on the *Means-End chains* approach. It is a good tool to identify how a product or service selection facilitates the achievement of a desired end-state through the meanings that consumers give to the product. Moreover, this approach is useful in order to analyse the motivations on which consumers base their purchasing behaviour (Gutman, 1982). The analysis of the *Means-End chains* is based on interviews to consumers through which the researcher tries to understand the meanings they devote to attributes and consequences. Two techniques have been used in two different stages of the research: *focus groups* (FGs) and the *laddering* technique.

FGs have been applied in order to detect the quality attributes perceived by consumers. Data gathering has been done through a discussion “conducted by a trained moderator among a small group of respondents, stimulated to discuss on the subjects of the discussion in an unstructured and natural manner (Malhotra and Birks, 2006).

The main variables emerged from focus groups have been chosen as the starting point for the laddering technique process, in order to detect the purchasing motivation and the cognitive and affective linkages between product and consumer.

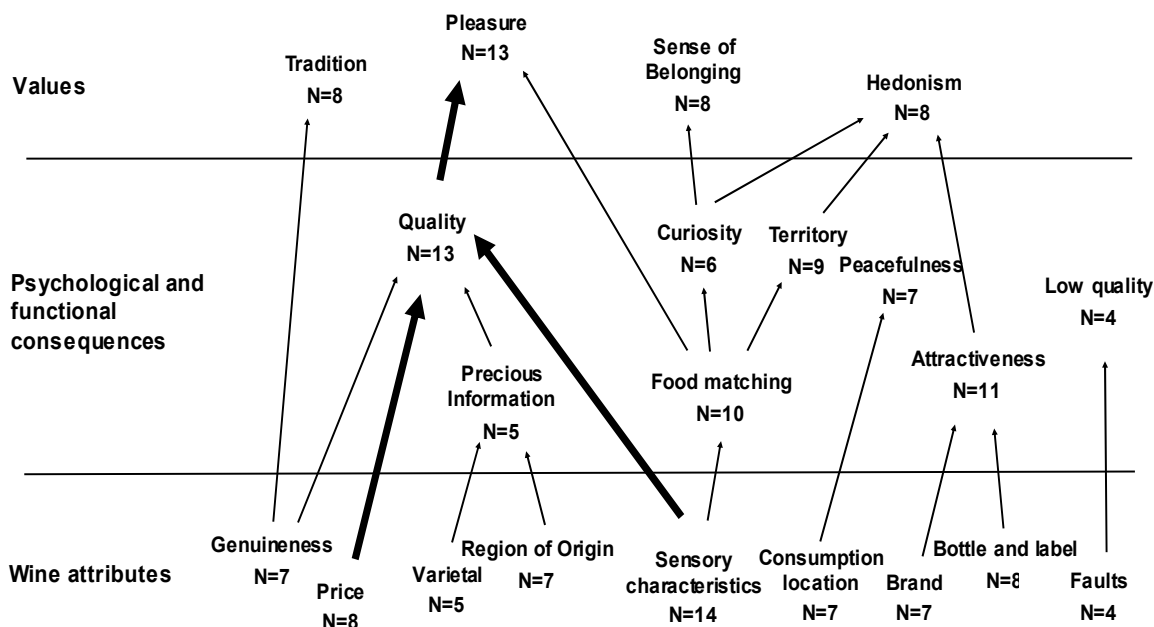
Two types of laddering technique exist: a “soft” and a “hard” one (Grunert, 2005). In order to give a higher degree of freedom to the interviewer and in light of the explorative nature of this research the “soft” version have been chosen.

Two focus groups of eight participants each, have been organised respectively with expert and involved consumers (members and non-members of Slow Food Association in Italy). Then, it has been applied the soft laddering technique on 15 expert and 15 “non-expert” consumers.

Main Results

The coding process of laddering interviews lead to many “chains” analyzed trough the use of Laddermap¹ software realized in 1989 by Gengler and Reynolds (2001). The meaning of words has been in-depth analysed by research team because with same words, experts and non experts could imply different connotations. The cut-off, that means the minimum of links in Implication Matrix correspond to 4. The choice of this level has been decided in order to graphically reduce the complexity of map. In the maps (figure 2 and 3), the relations cited more than 5 times are highlighted with a wider arrow. The results of this study highlight some differences between the two groups of consumers.

Figure 2 – Means-End Chain for Slow Food members



Source: our elaboration

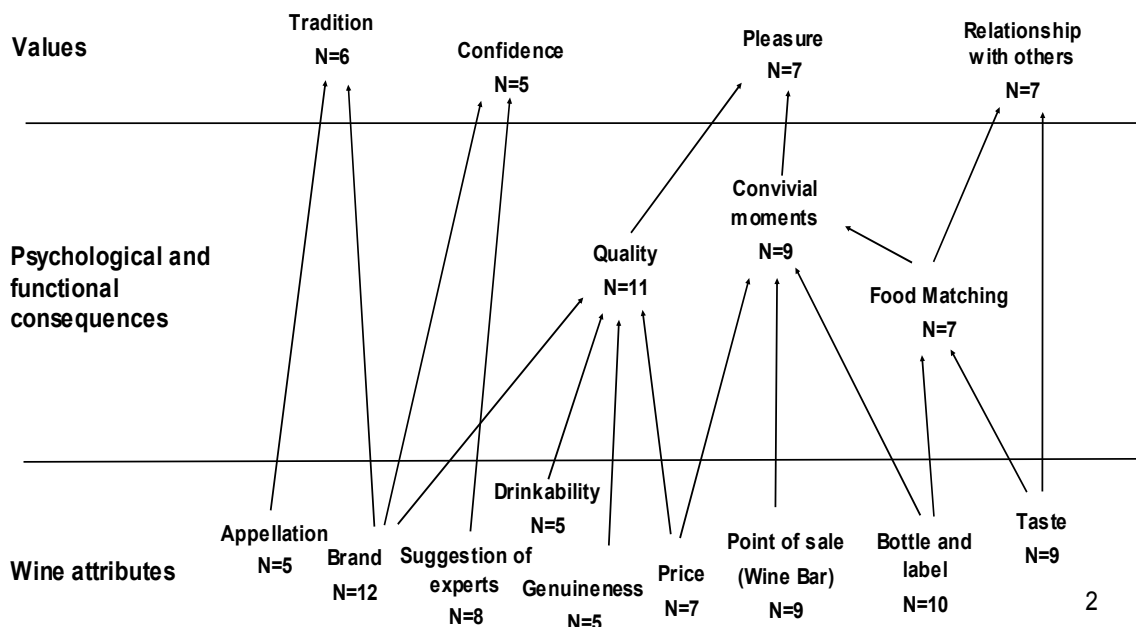
¹ LADDERMAP software (DOS system) can be requested to Charles Gengler, Baruch College, City University of New York, or it can be downloaded at <http://www.peffers.com>. Recently Naspetti e Zanoli (2005) developed, in collaboration with Thelen e Botschen, a more innovative software in Windows called MecAnalyst. For further information: <http://www.skymax-dg.com/mecanalyst/index.html>

First of all, as it is possible to observe from the maps, the interviews with Slow Food members have been more informative than with non-members. This is due to their higher level of involvement and knowledge about wine.

For both groups wine is always associated with a convivial moment. But whilst for “non-experts” wine is just an extra, an accessory for the atmosphere and the place of consumption, for Slow Food members wine is the main link with the others and the starting point of discussion.

Genuineness and price have been indicated by the majority of interviewed consumers as signals of quality together with sensory characteristics, the varietal and the region of origin/appellation (mainly cited by “members”) and drinkability and brand (by “non-members”). The brand, and in particular those famous brands like Frescobaldi or Antinori have been considered in a totally different manner by the two groups: while for “members”, it is only a signal on the bottle that means in many cases globalisation of production, for non-members it is a quality attribute and, as stated by Lockshin (2000) acts as a surrogate for a number of attributes in dealing with risk and providing product cues.

Figure 3 - Means-End Chain for “non-members”



Source: our elaboration

Generally, the final values of Means-End chains reveal two main issues elicited with different vigour among the two groups: Pleasure (of drinking and discovering) and Tradition. Hedonism, Sense of Belonging (for Slow Food members) and Confidence and Relationship with other (for non-members) are the other end-states mentioned by consumers.

The results of this research confirm the complexity in defining quality attributes of wine. In fact, in the light of multidimensional nature of quality, many factors play a crucial role to predict attitudes and behaviour of consumers' segments.

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