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"I Know I Like It, But How Do I Know if It's Any Good?": Quality and Preference in Wine Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between quality perceptions and preferences in the context of wine consumption. Interviews were conducted with Australian wine consumers, wine producers, and wine industry mediators to explore any differences in understandings of quality between members of these groups. The findings indicate that some people tend to consider wine quality to be objective, while others find it to be subjective. Another group appears to consider wine quality to be both objective and subjective, and they use the concept of their personal preference to link the two approaches. Focusing on preference allows for the idea that quality is 'out there' and verifiable independently of what drinkers like to consume.

ARTICLE

Introduction

The issue of quality is particularly important for the wine industry because of increasing competition. World wine production has been exceeding consumption by over three billion litres per annum for much of the last decade. Given this situation, wine quality is an important issue to those attempting to sell wines and those buying them. Defining quality can be problematic when different players in the market have different impressions of what constitutes a high quality product. In the wine industry, the different players include those producing the grapes, those making wine, those distributing wine, those who provide public comment on wine quality, and those who buy and consume wine. This article examines in detail the

concept of quality as it is perceived by the various players in the wine market.

There are different aspects of quality, including objective quality, subjective quality, and perceived quality. Objective quality is externally verifiable, such as the economic fuel consumption of a car. By comparison, subjective quality is only established personally. The response to the colour or styling of a vehicle, for instance, will be a matter of personal taste. Perceived quality is the consumer's assessment of quality, and therefore is usually considered to be most similar to subjective quality. A related concept is preference, which is the consumer's favour of one alternative over another. Preference is a precursor to making a choice between competing products. It cannot be assumed that preference always matches perceived quality, as wine judges, for example, can find a wine that they dislike to be high quality.

The Study

To explore the different perceptions of wine quality, informants were sourced from three major reference groups - wine producers, mediators and the consuming public. The mediator group was comprised of marketing managers, commercial wine buyers, retailers, wholesalers, sommeliers, wine writers, judges and critics. The consumers group included consumers exhibiting a range of gender, age, socioeconomic, and involvement characteristics. Consumer involvement was assessed based on a wide range of expressed consumption behaviours, including frequency of purchase, methods of evaluation, and information-seeking. Professionals were automatically classed as high-involvement.

Informants were drawn from a number of locations across Australia, primarily Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, but also including some regional areas such as McLaren Vale and Margaret River. The selection of informants was made with the aim of obtaining a spread of age and gender and also to ensure a wide variety of wine consumption practices. More informants were sourced from the consumer category as this group constitutes a much larger percentage of the overall population than either of the other two reference groups. In total 58 consumers, 22 producers and 23 mediators were interviewed. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with members of each group. The focus group interviews included a wine tasting session to enhance the participants' exploration of their ideas about wine quality.

Findings

Informants discussed both objective and subjective aspects of wine quality. Understanding how consumers come to adopt either a subjective or objective approach to wine quality is important because it is a precursor to understanding the perceived characteristics of wine quality itself.

Subjective quality

Many informants considered wine quality to be a subjective phenomenon, which equates primarily to their personal taste and is rooted in subjective experience:

Dan (low-involvement consumer): If you sum up quality for me, it's just whether I like it or not, it's just taste. I don't care how big a reputation it has but if I like it then I don't care.

Subjectivity was commonly offered as a perspective across the range of informants, although there was a tendency for the view to be expressed more by low-involvement drinkers than those with higher levels of involvement. Low-involvement drinkers regularly talked about personal taste and 'the eye of the beholder' when asked to discuss the nature of quality. Some high-involvement drinkers also took that stance, but less commonly - although one winemaker in the context of a discussion on subjective quality made the following comments:

Wendy (producer): We went to Italy for a few days and we were with a friend of mine - he was a Serbian. I was trying this wine and I said 'it smells like ... wild fennel'. And he said 'that's it, that's just too much'. I'd pushed him right over the limit. Anyway, it was not quite fennel it was just a little bit wild. He just wouldn't have a bar of it. The next day I pulled up some wild fennel from the path as we walked along and showed him. But he was 'wild fennel. Are you out of your mind?' But, yeah, I saw wild fennel in it. That's why I mean [quality] can only be subjective.

For some the subjectivist perspective (personal taste) shades into a relative perspective on quality. Thus:

Briony (medium-involvement consumer): I might say 'I'm going to buy this because I like it'. But the next time I might feel like 'oh - it's not so good, I'm not really in the mood for this'. But usually when I like a wine I like a wine.

For Briony taste is subjective, but it is also dependent on mood (and perhaps, by extension, on situation) and is therefore also a relative concept. A few others shared this perspective.

Objective quality

In contrast to the subjective view of wine quality there was a number of informants who held an explicitly objective perspective. In this instance quality may be described as inhering in the product itself, rather than in the personal response to it. This perspective

was expressed almost as commonly as the subjective viewpoint, although more notably amongst higher-involvement consumers:

Simon (high-involvement consumer): I think the quality's inherent, [I] really do. There may be styles you don't like - but you can tell the difference between good quality and poor quality in something you don't like. And I think that's fairly easy to do. You know I'm not a great fan of rosés but had quite a few in France. One chap was very proud of this rosé he made ... It was nice ... very good fruit in it. Good quality wine.

For many respondents the objective position was adopted distinct from a more relativist position in which situation was perceived to vary the quality of wine. Thus Martha distinguished what was actually in the glass from her situational ability to assess and enjoy it. This view was shared by a number of informants and is in overt contrast to the more relativistic viewpoint expressed earlier by Briony.

Objective approaches to quality were also evident in the view that quality is determined by production processes:

Leo (high-involvement consumer): It gets back to whether it's a well-made wine. If it's a well-made wine...you enjoy it.
Leo is talking at this point within the context of exploring what he considers wine. Some professionals insisted that objective quality is critically important, in some cases for professional reasons:
Umberto (Mediator): I do then start getting a bit picky if somebody says 'this is the best because I think it's the best wine'. I say 'well actually it isn't. You absolutely have the right to say "yes it's my preferred drink" but it may not be the best of its type. And you won't know that unless you do the type of stuff that I do on a regular basis, and you want to learn about that type of thing.'

Umberto tastes widely and regularly for his work, and that, he concluded, puts him in a position to judge wines objectively. Others are entitled to their preferences but they could not, he argued, by extension claim that their preferred wine is the highest quality. It is important to Umberto to maintain this perspective. Were the alternative perspective, that quality is purely individual, to gain widespread acceptance, his career of tasting, evaluating and recommending wines would cease to exist.

As noted above the objective view of quality tended to be held by higher-involvement drinkers rather than low-involvement drinkers (although this was not an absolute rule). Producers in particular were more likely to express a belief in objective quality, although as

one winemaker noted this may be because they want to believe their wine is 'objectively' better than that of their rivals.

Nevertheless, some medium- and low-involvement drinkers also tended towards an objectivist viewpoint. Where this happened they often separated their preference from any ability to discern quality. Some even disclaimed any capacity to assess quality, though they did not doubt its existence. In what follows Cleo is referring to wines tasted during a focus group:

Cleo (medium-involvement consumer): If you were to ask me which is the best quality I really can't say, because I don't think I'm qualified to know what is the best quality wine.

Cleo accepts that some external, objective quality exists and that others are trained and qualified to judge it. However, she feels that she cannot assess it. This point of view illustrates how objective concept of quality can have an existence alongside personal preference and it is this relationship which can act as a nexus between the objective and subjective approaches to wine quality. This relationship is expanded upon below.

The role of personal preference

A majority of informants - including a number who initially conceived quality as a subjective process - distinguished their own personal taste in wine from what may or may not be high quality. The following comes from a focus group:

Ellie (medium-involvement consumer): I think taste and quality are related but I think they're different concepts. I've had very well made, very expensive, lovely bottles of wine but they just weren't to my taste. But they were balanced, they were great quality, they were fantastic wines - but I personally didn't like them. And I've gone for a cheaper bottle on the table that I happened to enjoy and everyone else drank the really expensive one.

This viewpoint - distinguishing quality from preference - was widely held across all reference groups and all levels of involvement. As would be expected, it was particularly common amongst those drinkers who adopted an objective view of quality. Ellie, for example, will drink a cheaper bottle that others prefer not to drink (and which is therefore perceived to be 'lower quality') if she enjoys it more than a bottle which is both more expensive and preferred by her companions (and is thus perceived to be 'higher quality').

The view that preference is separate from quality was most clearly expressed by the producers and mediators:

Question: Do you think there's a difference then between people saying 'the wine's good' and people enjoying it? Richard (producer): At a technical level, yeah. This is the notion of wine show judging - where I think 'this wine's fantastic, and I'll give it a gold medal, but for God's sake don't give me lots of it to drink.' We're supposed to be able to do that...There are wine styles that you've been asked to judge [where that happens]. In my case - sparkling reds - I'm a non believer...So I'd like to think I could judge a class of them and give an appropriate gold medal to a wine that I would not choose to drink in a fit.

Richard accepts that there is an element of objectivity in the evaluation of wine, and that he could exercise his critical faculties to engage with this objectivity. He dislikes sparkling red wine and finds it hard to judge it as a class; nevertheless he does feel he can do it at times if required. His view that show judging - in particular - requires professionals to suspend their personal likes and dislikes, to achieve an 'objective' judgment about the quality of a wine, was regularly repeated by winemakers.

Only one professional expressed a dissenting view. Wendy (a thoughtful and highly respected winemaker, and also a show judge) was quoted earlier as tending to hold a subjectivist concept of quality. She refused to separate her preference from her decisions as a show judge:

Wendy: I've never given a gold medal to a wine that...I don't like, that I wouldn't want to drink.

For professionals, however, that perspective was exceptional rather than the rule.

For many drinkers who distinguished quality from preference this differentiation seemed to be a means of resolving the apparent paradox of personal taste and belief in the objective nature of quality. Preference thus seems to be a means of linking a personal, subjective approach to the concept of wine enjoyment with a more objective viewpoint. It allows for the idea that quality is 'out there' and is verifiable independently of what drinkers like to consume, and it allows both perspectives (subjective and objective) to be maintained contemporaneously despite their initial apparent contradiction. In the case of high-involvement drinkers that stance was predicated on an ability to evaluate quality, but then to separate that evaluation from their own preference. For some low-involvement consumers a split appears to occur between the certainty of what they like and an acceptance that 'objective' quality exists, despite their inability to recognise, evaluate or articulate it.

Cleo has already been quoted claiming that she does not think she is qualified to judge the quality in wine. She continued:

Cleo (medium-involvement consumer): I only know what I like...my taste doesn't seem to coincide with any of the judges. Consequently I'm no judge of quality wine. I only know what I like and when you asked us earlier how we judge quality, I don't really buy a wine for quality - I buy it just for me liking it.

Cleo articulates a kind of bafflement by the idea of quality. She accepts that it exists and that it can be evaluated, but she has no comprehension of it - merely of her personal preference. This is very different from Richard's assertion, above, that he can identify good wine even though he may choose not to drink it. Cleo's declaration of inability was often articulated by other low- and medium-involvement consumers.

Discussion

These findings suggest that wine drinkers may also adopt either a perceived quality approach ('the quality of wine is merely what accords with my taste') or a more objective position (an expectation that there are accepted general norms by which the quality of wine may be judged). The approach of the drinkers sampled seemed to be fairly evenly split between the two conceptual positions, although there was a tendency for higher-involvement drinkers to adopt a more objectivist approach and for lower-involvement consumers to focus more on personal taste (i.e., perceived quality). Additionally, some drinkers may adopt both a subjectivist and objectivist position, even though they are apparently inherently contradictory.

Higher-involvement drinkers typically felt that they could still evaluate the quality of a wine although it may not fit with their own personal preference and may not be a wine that they would ever choose to drink. By comparison, low-involvement drinkers tended to believe that they cannot recognise objective quality although they accept its existence. One way to view this paradox, therefore, would be to see quality engagement as a tension between a subjective element and an objective element. Objective quality seems to stem primarily from production-related issues. Subjective quality is the core of the individual's relationship with the product, and relates closely to pleasure. It is rooted in the individual's inability to have absolute certainty in the external validity of their evaluation of the product.

There are two ways in which the consumer can reconcile this paradox of the subjective and the objective. One, generally for low-

involvement consumers, is to accept the existence of objective quality but to claim no ability to discern it, merely to 'know what I like'. These drinkers start from a subjectivist position but accept that objective quality exists paradoxically alongside that viewpoint. However, objective quality as a means of determining preference has no relevance for them, for they cannot engage with it - they do not understand how to analyse a wine objectively. To that extent they are divorced from objective quality.

The second way of reconciling this paradox was adopted by a few high-involvement consumers and many of the professionals. They approach a wine systematically with a checklist of points to be considered and/or a benchmark against which it can be evaluated, as is often done in professional wine tasting. Such processes give these drinkers an objective way into engagement with the product. At the same time, while checklists and benchmarks offer a framework for evaluating the quality of the wine they do not necessarily guarantee enjoyment. Thus an individual who drinks wine with this perspective starts from an objective standpoint, evaluates the wine using objective standards, but may reach the subjective position when they gain little pleasure despite the wine apparently displaying the indicators of quality.

Conclusion

These findings have implications for wine consumers. In a market characterised by massive product choice, a large number of suppliers, the extensive use of industry jargon, and a product possessing considerable status symbolism, consumers can find it difficult to make informed and satisfying purchase decisions. Some consumers may find the selection process more comfortable by appreciating the extent to which other consumers can share this difficulty. Similarly, an awareness of the lack of consensus of the subjective/objective nature of wine quality among consumers and industry members alike may allow some drinkers to focus more on their own preferences and to be less concerned with getting the wine selection process 'right'.