



Measuring quality conventions in the food industry: Applications to the wine sector in Spain



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 March 2013

Received in revised form 4 July 2014

Keywords:

Agri-food system

Wine

Quality

Convention theory

Quantitative methods

Spain

ABSTRACT

The “quality turn” that the agri-food system has recently taken considers quality to be a complex notion that is defined both by the physical characteristics of the product and by changing socio-cultural factors. Convention theory provides a framework for assessing quality by means of various criteria, which correspond to different convention categories. Research that is based on this theory employs qualitative methods and case studies. In this article, a quantitative research methodology that addresses the conventions of the agri-food industry was carried out. Specifically, 19 mathematical indicators were constructed from statistical sources to identify and measure existing quality conventions in the wine subsector. These indicators have been tested in a study of 16 Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs) inland Spain, with the following results: first, existing convention categories for each PDO were identified – industrial, commercial, domestic, public and civic – and a distinctive quality profile was developed for each one. Second, a ranking of PDOs was established according to their orientation to each convention type. The viability and utility of the quantitative methods in this quality convention study was demonstrated, thereby opening a research path that is complementary to qualitative methods.

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Introduction

In the last decade of the past century, the agri-food sector was subject to tension from two opposing trends, standardisation and differentiation: “we can assert that the contemporary food sector is bifurcating into two main ‘zones’ of production: standardised, industrialised global food networks on the one hand, localised, specialised production processes on the other” (Murdoch and Miele, 1999: 469). Standardisation involves manufacturing products that are tailored to specific types, models or universal standards. Standardisation affects production methods and consumption habits, and its main drivers are large multinational companies and global food value chains. However, there are also companies that produce distinctive products using specialised processes; these products are oriented towards specific consumers (Ilbery et al., 2005). The distinguishing features of products can

be flavours, textures and health claims, among others. Production processes can be distinguished in several ways; notably, there are traditional or artisanal methods. There are companies committed to environmental sustainability, and there are consumers who “identify[y] themselves as attempting to live and consume in ways that are more environmentally friendly” (Evans, 2011: 110) and demand food created with methods that are compatible with natural processes. There are also consumers committed to certain ethical values, for example, those who appreciate other production and distribution systems, such as fair trade networks.

Both “zones” of production have different regulatory mechanisms; given the homogeneity of standardised products, the production of this type of food is ruled by price, and that of differentiated food is assessed by complex judgments. With markets for artisanal and healthy products as well as products that are produced by methods that are respectful of the environment or that include criteria relating to equity and social justice, the main regulatory mechanism is a guarantee that the products do have the advertised qualities or have been prepared in accordance with these specific methods. In these cases, the price is of utmost importance once the requirement of a guarantee is met. Similarly, consumers first search for products that contain certain textures or

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flavours that they appreciate. Subsequently, when the consumers must choose amongst them, price is usually the determinant criterion. In advanced countries, the number of consumers who demand differentiated food, meaning that it is healthful or prepared according to artisanal methods, environmentally sustainable or grown with criteria relating to fairness and justice, has increased considerably in recent years. In concordance with this increase, large multinational companies in the food sector have diversified the range of their products. Moreover, these multinationals have often acquired distinctive product manufacturing companies and integrated them into the parent multinational while maintaining the name and identity of the original company (Sánchez-Hernández, 2009). Large retail companies have also increased the food variety offered by including specialty sections open to distinctive products. On the contrary, some special production companies have increased their scale and reached a certain standardisation grade. As a result, the bifurcation is gradually diluted through a hybridisation process anticipated by Murdoch and Miele (1999) in two illustrative case studies.

This hybridisation process has been discussed by food studies experts. Certain experts assuming the most critical position (Guthman, 2003) view this process negatively because such hybridisation implies an appropriation of the alternative values by the large multinational agri-food industries. Organic food, the main focus of this debate, would seem to lose its localised and traditional characteristics once it is produced in large quantities under the strict standards imposed by health authorities and once it is distributed through the same channels as all other products (Johnston et al., 2009; Campbell and Rosin, 2011): in some studies, these changes are called “conventionalisation” of organic food (Guthman, 2004; Lockie and Halpin, 2005; Goldberger, 2011). Organic food consumption, increasingly widespread in countries such as the USA, Germany or the United Kingdom, would seem to be less a commitment by people to view nutrition in a different, complex context than a form of fetishism (Carrier, 2010) or simply a fashion (Bhaskaran et al., 2006), which is promoted by the same corporations to exploit the existing dissatisfaction with the agri-food industry and generate new income in a niche market that is quite profitable because of its prices.

On the contrary, other authors argue that hybridisation is a manifestation of modernisation or an ecological transition of capitalism (Marsden, 2004; Marsden and Smith, 2005; Morgan et al., 2006; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Kitchen and Marsden, 2009). These authors consider the progressive incorporation of differentiated food, including that from fair trade, organic production and traditional and localised elaboration, into the major agri-food network in a favourable light. They believe that such incorporation offers the consumer a healthier product with affordable prices and a wide range of distribution points. Moreover, the pressure within supermarkets and hypermarkets to stock such products appears to increase the area of organic cultivation and the production of these differentiated foods, favouring the consequent environmental and social benefits for the producing areas.

This hybridisation has also been studied from the consumer perspective. Certain studies (Rimal et al., 2005; Eden et al., 2008; Lang, 2010) show that consumer patterns are rarely monolithic, with households only buying standard or differentiated food; in reality, households most frequently combine both options for purchasing food.

The growth of the hybrid model meets with the existing resistance from both agri-food system extremes and has been discussed in the literature. Some studies analyse the opinion supporting biotechnology and the contribution of genetically modified organisms (GMO) to food security and health. Special emphasis is placed on the potential of these GMO to feed a continuously growing global population (Pechlaner and Otero, 2008; Dibden et al., 2013),

additionally highlighting the failure of the alternative food networks to meet such a global challenge (Seufert et al., 2012). At the opposite extreme, food sovereignty and agro-ecology supporters accuse the capitalist model, including the hybrid sector, of being unsustainable for the society, the economy and the environment (Warner, 2007; Desmarais, 2008; Tomlinson, 2013). The alternative to this model consists of the integral relocation of food networks based on independent small exploitations, small-scale productions and distribution in neighbourhood markets.

In all these discussions the term “quality” is a catch-all that is generically used to refer to all of the qualities that differentiate a product: “Quality is a complex notion, the meaning of which may vary for specific products and between individuals, regions and countries. It is socially constructed through the interplay of different actors” (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000: 217). Consumers who appreciate certain flavours or characteristics consider foods that have these attributes to be of a higher quality than those that do not; but it is difficult to establish objective quality criteria on the basis of organoleptic properties: “Although food is corporeal, its characteristics are readily translatable into bearers of visual, aural, textural and taste sensations, their detection and appreciation are culturally mediated” (Watts et al., 2005: 29). In the opinion of some consumers, products made with methods that respect the environment or in accordance with ethical criteria have higher quality than others, as “quality seems to be at once defined by the physical characteristics of the product and also by changing socio-spatial relations” (Mansfield, 2003: 10). Given the identification of quality and the qualities of differentiated foods, “the distinction between the agro-industrial paradigm and ‘alternative food’... is called the quality ‘turn’ within the food sector” (Stræte, 2004: 228). However, “the quality ‘turn’ is not singular or monolithic, with a unique set of constitutive elements, meanings and politics” (Goodman, 2003: 3).

In summary, quality cannot be defined by a single evaluation system. Therefore, quality research requires a multidimensional approach. Convention theory offers a suitable approach to research the different criteria that are used in quality assessment and constitutes the theoretical framework of this article.

Most studies that apply convention theory consist of case studies and make use of qualitative methodologies. The use of statistical indicators and quantitative techniques is absent; but such an approximation would be more general in the sense that it can facilitate the analysis of a broader suite of cases and provide means for generalisation. The aim of this work is to design and implement a set of statistical indicators to study the existing quality conventions of the food industry. Such a set, when applied to an increased number of companies or groups of companies, will allow a more general vision than case studies regarding existing food industry quality conventions. Moreover, these indicators will allow the development of more precise comparative studies between groups of companies.

In the following section, the essential aspects of convention theory are outlined, and a literature review of the application of this theory to the food sector is presented. In the third section, the selection criteria for statistical indicators to evaluate food sector quality conventions are specified, and a set of indicators that were designed specifically for the wine subsector are presented. In the fourth section, the operability of these indicators is tested and applied to 16 wine production areas in the inland Spain, all of which are recognised with PDOs. In the fifth section, the adequacy, limits and potential of these indicators are discussed.

Convention theory as an interpretative framework of quality in the agri-food sector

Conventions can be defined as “practices, routines, agreements and their associated informal or institutional forms which bind

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