The Status Elevation of South African Chenin Blanc: Old Vines as a Category Reinterpretation Schema

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Abstract

◦Purpose – South African Chenin Blanc accounts for 18% of South Africa's vineyard area, 53% of global Chenin Blanc production and 53% of South African old vine (OV) plantings (Budd, 2019; SAWIS, 2017). However, the category is stigmatised as a "workhorse" variety globally. In contrast, the OV category is perceived as having high status and recent OV certification1 has been widely embraced by South African (SA) Chenin Blanc producers. We ask: Why and how wine categories become stigmatised, and whether and to what extent the spanning of wine categories, specifically SA Chenin Blanc and OV, positively influences consumer choice?

Market categories are socially legitimated baskets of products sharing similar attributes (Durand and Khaire, 2016). Objectively evaluable, categories compete for market position, and members of stigmatised categories, with core offerings vilified and subsequently negatively evaluated face reputational challenges (Barlow, Verhaal and Hoskins, 2018; Delmestri and Greenwood, 2016). Category reinterpretation and status-change literature informed the extant understanding of category spanning, or multi-category membership, and its role in category reputation and value change (Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011). Two divergent views illustrate the research problem. Delmestri and Greenwood (2016) argue that category status can be radically elevated by allusion, involving decoupling from the stigmatised category and associating with higher status categories. In contrast, Negro et al. (2011) argue that category reinterpretation, whereby existing categories are associated with new schema, leads to loss of consumer appeal.

◦Design/methodology/approach – Wine media netnographic analysis, the ethnographic study of online communities (Kozinets, 2002), framed the problem. Qualitative coding of a broad sample of relevant articles raised concepts to constructs (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012). The resulting data structure was abductively transitioned into a theoretical model explaining stigmatisation of the global Chenin Blanc category and status-elevation of the OV category. A discrete choice model (DCM), or choice-based conjoint analysis will analyse consumer

preference trade-offs (Lockshin, Jarvis, d'Hauteville, and Perrouty, 2004). A set of optimal profiles with different combinations of vine age, origin, grape variety and price attributes were converted to digitized wine bottle images and are being presented to wine drinkers. A DCM analysis model will compute comparative utilities, importances and market simulation models.

◦Findings – Qualitative data analysis revealed three stigmatising constructs for Chenin Blanc (Figure 1). Commodifying refers to rendering of Chenin Blanc identity as a "workhorse" variety with neutral taste. Commodifying influences doubting or nagging perceptions of Chenin Blanc as mediocre, influencing market obscurity. These two constructs influence low category reputation and price (Figure 2). In contrast, three status-elevating constructs framed perceptions of OV wines (Figure 3). Premium refers to perceptions of rarity, influencing high quality and critical acclaim. Legacy involves the proud veneration of OV's. These two constructs influence inspiration, preservation and category growth, thereby unlocking value (Figure 4). Incomplete netnographic and DMC findings preclude fully answering the question.

◦Practical implications – Theoretically, the study will provide insight into the effect of spanning wine categories with different reputations and value, specifically SA Chenin Blanc and OV. Practically, the study will provide insight into the relative demand-side utility, importance and potential market value of SA OV Chenin Blancs.

Key words: -

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Figure 1. Chenin Blanc data structure

SAMPLE QUOTES

A. "Chenin has been a workhorse grape in California, with most of it disappearing anonymously into jug or box wine."

B. "Chenin Blanc has long been considered the workhorse of the South African wine industry, and large-scale plantings of this grape variety provide grapes used in distilling and wine making."

C. "Its reputation suffers from the sad fact that many Chenins made around the world really are boringly bland or downright offensive."

D. "South African Chenin has only been made in serious styles since the mid to late 1990s and has yet to prove its longevity."

E. "For less than R30 you can find decently made, fresh and fruity chenin blancs from the co-ops and former co-ops."

F. "Cheap Chenin Blanc, Pinotage, struggle. If Chile has been a reliable source of bargain-basement reds, South Africa has provided the whites."

G. "Overlooked, often untasted, certainly uncelebrated, Chenin Blanc gets no respect."

H. "Of all the world's great white grapes, Chenin is the least appreciated."

I. "Chenin was then regarded as something of a 'workhorse grape' from which most winemakers produced rather unexceptional, cheap plonk."

J. "Oceans of very ordinary Chenin Blanc from California or South Africa."

K. "International markets were unknowing or unenthusiastic about Chenin or Steen."

L. "Once widely planted in California, it had largely disappeared from fine wine regions by 2000."

1ST ORDER CONCEPTS

A. Produced as cheap table wine or bulk wine.
B. Made as base wine for the distillation of brandy.

C. Described as having a neutral or bland taste.
D. Produced for immediate consumption.

E. A wine produced en masse by cooperative producers.
F. Categorised as a "cheap and cheerful" wine.

G. A grape variety overlooked by consumers.
H. Openly disliked by the wine community.

I. Viewed as an unexceptional wine.
J. Considered a mediocre wine not warranting special occasions.

K. An unknown varietal to many consumers.
L. Plantings and hectarage are decreasing internationally.

2ND ORDER ATTRIBUTES

Workhorse Grape

Neutral Taste

Low Prices

Low Reputation

Mediocrity

Obscurity

3RD ORDER CONSTRUCTS

Commodifying

Discounting

Doubting

310

Figure 2: Stigmatisation drivers for Chenin Blanc

COMMODIFYNG   **DOUBTING**   **DISCOUNTING**

Workhorse Grape

Neutral Taste

Mediocrity → Obscurity

Low Reputation

Low Prices

Figure 3: OV data structure

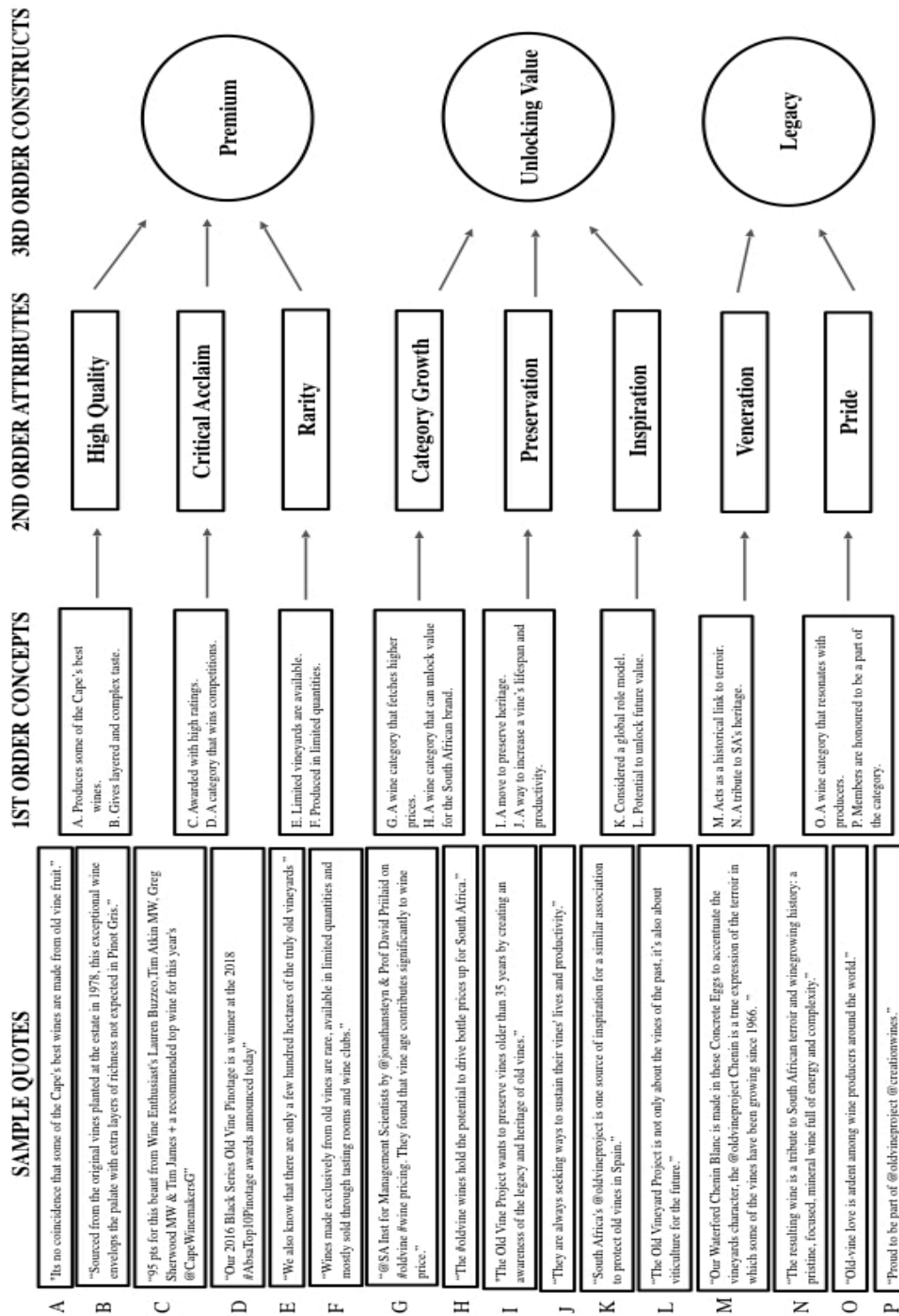| SAMPLE QUOTES	1ST ORDER CONCEPTS	2ND ORDER ATTRIBUTES	3RD ORDER CONSTRUCTS
A. "Its no coincidence that some of the Cape's best wines are made from old vine fruit."	A. Produces some of the Cape's best wines.	High Quality	Premium
B. "Sourced from the original vines planted at the estate in 1978, this exceptional wine envelops the palate with extra layers of richness not expected in Pinot Gris."	B. Gives layered and complex taste.		
C. "95 pts for this beaut from Wine Enthusiast's Lauren Buzzeo,Tim Atkin MW, Greg Sherwood MW & Tim James + a recommended top wine for this year's @CapeWinemakersG"	C. Awarded with high ratings.	Critical Acclaim	
D. "Our 2016 Black Series Old Vine Pinotage is a winner at the 2018 #AbsaTop10Pinotage awards announced today"	D. A category that wins competitions.		
E. "We also know that there are only a few hundred hectares of the truly old vineyards."	E. Limited vineyards are available.	Rarity	
F. "Wines made exclusively from old vines are rare, available in limited quantities and mostly sold through tasting rooms and wine clubs."	F. Produced in limited quantities.		
G. "@SA Inst for Management Scientists by @jonathansteyn & Prof David Priilaid on #oldvine #wine pricing. They found that vine age contributes significantly to wine price."	G. A wine category that fetches higher prices.	Category Growth	Unlocking Value
H. "The #oldvine wines hold the potential to drive bottle prices up for South Africa."	H. A wine category that can unlock value for the South African brand.		
I. "The Old Vine Project wants to preserve vines older than 35 years by creating an awareness of the legacy and heritage of old vines."	I. A move to preserve heritage.	Preservation	
J. "They are always seeking ways to sustain their vines' lives and productivity."	J. A way to increase a vine's lifespan and productivity.		
K. "South Africa's @oldvineproject is one source of inspiration for a similar association to protect old vines in Spain."	K. Considered a global role model.	Inspiration	
L. "The Old Vineyard Project is not only about the vines of the past, it's also about viniculture for the future."	L. Potential to unlock future value.		
M. "Our Waterford Chenin Blanc is made in these Concrete Eggs to accentuate the vineyards character, the @oldvineproject Chenin is a true expression of the terroir in which some of the vines have been growing since 1966. "	M. Acts as a historical link to terroir.	Veneration	Legacy
N. "The resulting wine is a tribute to South African terroir and winegrowing history: a pristine, focused, mineral wine full of energy and complexity."	N. A tribute to SA's heritage.		
O. "Old-vine love is ardent among wine producers around the world."	O. A wine category that resonates with producers.	Pride	
P. "Proud to be part of @oldvineproject @creationwines."	P. Members are honoured to be a part of the category.		

Figure 4: Status-elevating drivers for OV