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Perceived counterfeit risk and consumer's information-seeking behavior in Cameroon's wine market

Risque perçu de contrefaçon et comportement de recherche d'information du consommateur sur le marché du vin au Cameroun

KENNE BANTIO Adelaide*
Faculty of Economics and Management sciences
University of Garoua-Cameroon

HALIDOU Mamoudou
Full professor, Vice – Rector in Charge of Academic Affairs, professionalization, and the development of Information and Communication Technologies
Faculty of Economics and Management sciences
University of Garoua-Cameroon

Abstract
This research analyses perceptions of the risks associated with counterfeiting in the wine sector in Cameroon. Most of the research on product has looked at expensive items like luxury goods in wealthy countries. People have not paid much attention to counterfeit food product in countries that are still growing; characterized by weak institutional regulation and high information Asymmetry. In this context, the authenticity of products has become threatened and uncertain. This situation, further exacerbated by the advance of globalization, influences consumers' wine-purchasing behavior. The strategic challenge for brands and distributors lies in understanding the psychological mechanisms that influence consumer purchasing behavior in such a context. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse sample of 20 consumers, it emerges that perceived risk is multidimensional and is dominated by health and social dimensions. The study also highlights the central role of extrinsic cues such as price, place of purchase, packaging and the search for information in risk-reduction strategies. These findings enrich the literature **on** perceived risk in emerging contexts and offer managerial implications regarding traceability and communication.

Keywords: Perceived risk, counterfeit wine, traceability, consumer behavior; emerging market

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1. Introduction

Wine, one of the world's oldest consumer products, is no longer regarded as merely an alcoholic drink, but has established itself as a cultural and identity-defining product. The globalization of trade and changing consumer habits have fueled the growth of the wine market in many emerging countries, and more specifically in sub-Saharan Africa. In African societies today, particularly in Cameroon, wine consumption has become common place; Cameroon is recognized as the second-largest consumer of wine in Africa after Côte d'Ivoire and ahead of Togo. Several studies attribute the change in wine consumption habits to two major factors: the abundance of festive occasions and the ease of access to wine at retail outlets. At mourning ceremonies or funerals, wine has replaced traditional drinks such as alcoholic beverages made from maize, palm wine or raffia wine (Tsapi et al. 2009). Furthermore, wine, which was previously sold only by authorized distributors, is now found in restaurants, bars and eateries of all kinds offering wine lists at prices that are very affordable to everyone. In such environments, consumers are increasingly expected to authenticate products that they are not technically capable of verifying. However, this shift in consumption is now accompanied by a growing phenomenon of counterfeiting. This phenomenon poses a major threat that undermines consumer confidence and disrupts the functioning of the market.

Fueled by porous borders, a lack of sustained political will and ever-increasing consumer demand, counterfeiting accounted for USD 467 billion of global trade in 2021. According to the OECD, the sectors most affected are: clothing, footwear and leather goods (62% of customs seizures); cosmetics and perfumes (32% of dangerous items seized); toys and games (22%); car parts (7%); electronic goods and smartphones (6.5%); pharmaceuticals (5%); and alcoholic beverages, particularly wine. In Cameroon generally, no sector of activity is spared. The annual losses associated with this phenomenon amount to 250 billion CFA francs for the national economy (including lost turnover, tax revenue and jobs). Regardless of the sector in which it occurs, counterfeiting is considered a serious infringement of the intellectual property rights of an individual or a company.

Counterfeiting is a form of fraud that involves reproducing a product or its attributes in order to deceive the consumer and unduly capture the value associated with a brand. In the wine sector, this phenomenon is particularly worrying due to its health and economic implications. In Cameroon in particular, 95% of alcoholic beverages, wines, champagnes and whiskies are counterfeit. The most common methods of counterfeiting are the use of fake packaging, the use of fake CEMAC labels and the recycling of bottles. In such a context, characterized by significant information asymmetry, the act of purchasing is accompanied, on the one hand, by increased uncertainty regarding the quality and authenticity of the products (Akerlof, 1970) and, on the other hand, a moment of anxiety and stress, as these are generally low-quality drinks that are hazardous to health and safety. Furthermore, there is no guarantee, nor is there any after-sales service.

In this context, the concept of perceived risk appears central to understanding purchasing behavior. According to the theory of perceived risk introduced by Bauer (1960), perceived risk refers to the subjective perception of a potential loss associated with a purchasing decision. The work of Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) has shown that perceived risk is multidimensional, encompassing financial (loss of money), physical (health risks) and psychosocial (loss of prestige among peers) dimensions. However, we observe some limitations in the existing literature. Most existing studies on counterfeit consumption have concentrated on luxury products and deceptive counterfeiting within highly regulated western markets. Consequently, little is known about how consumers in emerging economies construct informal authenticity verification in environments characterized by institutional fragility weak traceability mechanisms, and widespread market uncertainty. It is therefore necessary to understand the various dimensions of risk as perceived by

Cameroonian consumers at the point of purchase, as well as the strategies they employ to reduce this uncertainty. Thus, this research aims to answer the following question: how do consumers perceive the risk of counterfeiting in the wine sector, and what mechanisms do they employ to reduce this uncertainty? To answer this question, an exploratory qualitative approach has been adopted. This study will be structured in three sections: the first section presents a literature review, the second section highlights the methodological approach, and the third section focuses on the presentation of the results and their discussion. It will contribute to the literature by enriching the understanding of perceived risk in emerging markets and by highlighting the central role of information seeking.

2. Theoretical framework and conceptual development

2.1. Counterfeiting in the consumer goods sector

Counterfeiting should not be viewed as a static phenomenon, but as a constantly evolving illicit ecosystem. In the field of management sciences, it is defined as the fraudulent reproduction of a product, its brand or its packaging, with the aim of unduly appropriating the added value and reputation of a legitimate operator.

2.1.1. Types of counterfeiting: from deceptive to non-deceptive

Academic research generally distinguishes between two main patterns of counterfeit product purchases: non-deceptive counterfeiting and deceptive counterfeiting. In the first case, the consumer is complicit; they knowingly purchase a fake (often in the luxury or textile sectors) to gain social status at a lower cost. The second scenario is the critical case of the wine market in Cameroon. Here, the consumer is an unwitting victim who believes they are purchasing an authentic product at market price, but ends up with a counterfeit product.

2.1.2. The specific characteristics of wine counterfeiting

Several counterfeiting strategies are observed in the wine sector, making detection increasingly complex for the layperson; among these strategies, we can cite, amongst others:

- ‘Refilling’, which is the most widespread strategy, involves collecting empty bottles of prestigious wines from restaurants, hotels or even rubbish dumps, and refilling them with table wines or homemade blends. Here, the container is genuine, but the contents are fake.
- Packaging imitation (look-alikes): this involves counterfeiters reproducing labels and capsules that closely resemble those of leading brands. The aim is to create confusion among hurried buyers.
- Origin fraud: this involves affixing prestigious geographical indications to products that have no connection with those regions.

2.1.3. The harms of counterfeiting

Unlike the counterfeiting of luxury or fashion goods, the counterfeiting of food products, particularly consumables such as wine, poses a major public safety issue. The use of methanol, industrial dyes or unfermented sugars can cause serious poisoning. Furthermore, once doubt sets in, wine loses its status as a ‘status symbol’. For if authenticity is no longer guaranteed, the consumer’s social investment is rendered worthless. Widespread mistrust will then drive consumers to abandon certain outlets (supermarkets, bars) in favor of insider networks or specialist wine merchants.

As wine is an experiential product, the customer may not be certain of the wine's authenticity even after consumption, attributing a bad taste to poor storage rather than fraud. This constant uncertainty fuels the need for reassurance strategies, which we will explore through information theory.

2.1.4. Information asymmetry and counterfeiting

The wine market is characterized by significant information asymmetry, where sellers (distributors, bar staff, retailers) possess crucial information about the authenticity of the wine that consumers cannot immediately verify. According to Akerlof (1970), this asymmetry can lead to a deterioration in the overall quality of the market. Indeed, as consumers cannot distinguish genuine wine from counterfeit wine, they will refuse to pay a high price. This may result in genuine products being driven out of the market, leaving room for lower-cost counterfeit products. According to Nelson (1970), wine is an experience good: authenticity remains a matter of belief and can only be assessed after consumption. This characteristic increases uncertainty and makes consumers reliant on indirect signals.

2.2. The theory of perceived risk in marketing

The concept of perceived risk, first introduced by Bauer (1960), is based on the idea that consumer purchasing behavior inherently involves risk-taking. According to this approach, every purchasing decision generates consequences that the consumer cannot predict with certainty, and some of these consequences may prove unpleasant. It is important to note that risk here is subjective, as it is largely a matter of perception. This perception then dictates information-seeking and purchasing behavior.

2.2.1. The multidimensional aspects of risk

As wine is an experience-based good, this further exacerbates the consumer's perception of risk. Indeed, its unverifiable nature at the time of purchase (much like other products such as clothing, for example) makes the act of purchasing inherently uncertain. However, the work of Jacob and Kaplan (1972) agrees on the existence of a multidimensional structure of perceived risk that can be applied to the specific context of adulterated wine: we can cite

- Physical risk (to health): this refers to the fear that the product may harm the consumer's health. In the case of wine, this aspect is heightened by the fear of consuming unknown or toxic substances resulting from fraudulent production methods.
- Performance risk (use or function): the consumer fears that the product will not meet their expectations or possess the advertised properties. In the case of wine, this means that the product is of poor quality, adulterated, or that its taste does not correspond to the advertised grape variety or designation of origin.
- Cognitive and social risk (self-image): this relates to the fear that a poorly chosen purchase may harm others' opinion of the buyer or their self-image. Wine consumption has been associated with social distinction and symbolic self-presentation (Bourdieu, 1979). Recent consumer behavior research further confirms that luxury and experiential consumption practices increasingly reflect identity related and status signaling concerns (Dhaliwal et al., 2025). That's explain why serving the wrong wine during a meal may be perceived either as a professional error or as a sign of ignorance.

- Financial risk: this refers to the fear of losing the money spent on the purchase or having to spend more to replace a defective product. Wine is often viewed with suspicion if it is sold at a very low price.
- Several subsequent studies have demonstrated the influence of perceived risk on consumers' purchase intention and information-seeking behavior (Dowling and Staelin, 1994; Mitchell, 1999).

2.2.2. Risk reduction: a cognitive necessity

Consumers do not remain passive in the face of the threats encountered when making a purchase. They employ risk reduction strategies (RRS). According to Roselius (1971), these strategies aim either to reduce the probability of failure by, for example, seeking information, or by brand or point-of-sale loyalty; or to mitigate the consequences in the event of failure. In the context of counterfeiting, these mechanisms take on particular importance: as they become genuine defense tools, transforming the buyer into a 'strategist' of authenticity.

2.3. Information theory

In a perfect market, the buyer and seller have the same level of knowledge about the product. However, the wine market in Cameroon is characterized by significant information asymmetry. Information theory, as developed in Akerlof's (1970) work on the "market for lemons", helps explain how uncertainty about quality can lead to widespread mistrust.

2.3.1. Signaling theory and quality assessment

Faced with this information asymmetry, consumers rely on signals to assess product quality. According to Spence (1973), a signal is information provided by the product or the seller to attest to its quality. It helps to reduce uncertainty by providing indirect clues about quality. Indeed, in the absence of prior tasting, the buyer focuses on external signals such as price, the reputation of the point of sale, the design of the label or the quality of the capsule to assess the authenticity of the wine before purchase. Price appears to be a signal of the quality of the products used. A high price is often interpreted as a 'guarantee' against counterfeiting, whilst an abnormally low price becomes a warning sign. In marketing, Erdem and Swait (1971) demonstrated that credible signals reduce perceived risk. However, their effectiveness remains limited when these signals are manipulated (Kirmani and Rao, 2000). In this case, as Treiblmaier (2021) points out, the digital economy, through blockchain, will enable consumers to enter a new phase where transparency is a key signal. This is because it offers tamper-proof proof of authenticity, which significantly reduces consumer uncertainty.

2.3.2. Information seeking as a risk-reduction strategy

In a high-risk environment, consumers adopt strategies aimed at reducing uncertainty (Roselius, 1971). These strategies include seeking information; brand loyalty; or relying on trusted sources. Thus, the consumer becomes a "clue seeker" to reduce their cognitive anxiety. They are constantly seeking traceability, that is, looking for tangible evidence (medals, labels, QR codes) to guarantee the product's authenticity. In addition to the quest for traceability, interpersonal information (a friend's recommendation, loyalty to a wine merchant) becomes the most valued source of information for guaranteeing authenticity in the face of the fallibility of visual cues. Information seeking plays a key role in this process, particularly when uncertainty is high (Brucks, 1985).

2.4. Development of research proposals

2.4.1. Perceived risk as a driver of information-seeking strategies

The literature on consumer behavior establishes that perceived risk is a major determinant of information-seeking behavior. According to Bauer (1960), any purchasing decision involves uncertainty that the consumer seeks to reduce. This logic was further explored by Roselius (1971), who demonstrate that consumers employ various strategies to reduce perceived risk and proceed with the purchase. Among these strategies, information-seeking proves necessary and occupies a central role. Furthermore, according to Brucks (1985), the intensity of information-seeking increases with the level of perceived uncertainty. In a context marked by significant information asymmetry, such as that of counterfeit wine, this dynamic is amplified and leads consumers to adopt more intensive information-seeking behavior. This observation leads us to propose the following:

P1: *Perceived counterfeit risk intensifies consumer's information- seeking behavior.*

2.4.2. The mediating role of information-seeking in the relationship between perceived risk and risk avoidance strategies

The relationship between perceived risk and consumer behavior is not linear. Consumers develop intermediate cognitive mechanisms that enable them to translate their perception of risk into a purchase decision. Information-seeking is the mechanism through which consumers transform their latent anxiety into concrete action. Indeed, the perception of the danger of counterfeiting does not directly lead to the adoption of a risk-reduction strategy. It first triggers a need to verify or certify the signals perceived through information-seeking in order to reduce information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1970) and make authenticity signals more intelligible. Hence the following research proposition:

P2: *Information -seeking behavior shapes consumer's risk-reduction strategies*

2.4.3. The influence of the nature of information on the choice of risk-reduction strategies

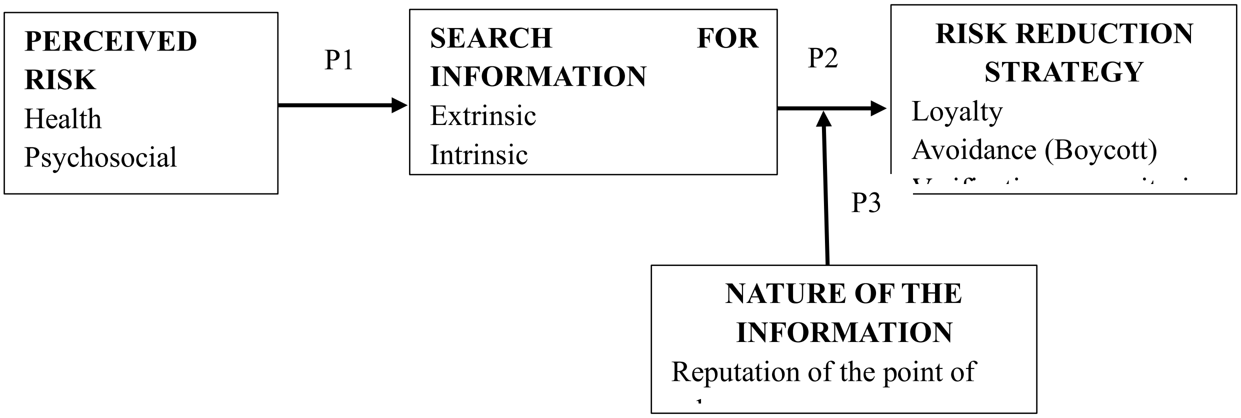
Beyond its mediating role, information derived from the processing of perceived signals about the wine or the environment has the capacity to dictate the consumer's behavioral response. According to, Erdem and Swait (1998), the credibility of the information determines its impact on behavior. Thus, in a context of uncertainty, consumers will adapt their strategies according to the type of information available. Depending on the evidence of counterfeiting decoded, the consumer will then choose an appropriate risk-reduction strategy. If the information concerns the reputation of the point of sale or the air conditioning, the consumer will tend to favor an avoidance strategy. Furthermore, if the information relates to the physical attributes of the bottle, the consumer will choose a strategy of exclusive brand loyalty, rendering any other unknown product suspect. It is in light of the above that we propose the following research proposition:

P3: *The nature and type of the information obtained influences consumer's risk-reduction strategies.*

2.5. Conceptual model

Based on the theoretical developments outlined above, a conceptual model is proposed to synthesize the relationships between the variables under study. This model highlights the central role of perceived risk in the implementation of information-seeking mechanisms, as well as its indirect influence on risk-reduction strategies. Information seeking is conceptualized as a mediating variable, whilst the nature of the information determines the strategies adopted by the consumer.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of information seeking



Source 1: Author's design

3. Research methodology

As explained by Gavard-Perret et al. (2012), all research, whether descriptive or explanatory, is based on a theoretical framework initially employed to familiarize oneself with existing concepts and findings in the literature, and subsequently to test these concepts and the links between them, correcting them or creating new ones. In the case of this descriptive research, the aim is to construct a plausible and detailed understanding of the purchasing process under examination, which may consequently enrich or reinforce all or part of the theoretical foundations initially employed.

3.1. Reasons for choosing a qualitative study

Consumers' perception of risk cannot be treated as an objective and independent reality. Rather, it is a reality constructed on the basis of perceptions, doubts and strategies for avoiding counterfeits adopted by individuals. Consequently, this research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, particularly suited to the analysis of complex and understudied phenomena (Miles and Huberman, 2003). As defined by Aspers and Corte (2021), qualitative research is an iterative process aimed at creating new theoretical distinctions through close engagement with the phenomenon under study. This approach will therefore allow us to gain access to the consumer's inner world in order to understand how they navigate a market fraught with uncertainty and how they interpret the various signals of perceived quality in their environment. Furthermore, the concept of counterfeiting in the wine sector is by nature polysemic and contextual. The existing literature struggles to shed light on the consumer's purchasing decision where counterfeiting has become a structural variable in a market such as that of Cameroon. Thus, co-producing knowledge that does not merely describe the facts but also reveals the deeper meaning for the interviewees, through an interpretivist approach, is the most appropriate way for us to grasp the complexity of these behaviors in depth.

3.2. Sample and data collection procedure

According to Miles and Huberman (2003), qualitative research generally relies on small samples of individuals, situated within their context and studied in depth. The appropriate number of cases depends on existing knowledge of the topic under study (Eisenhardt, 1991). It also depends on the research topic and the possibility of obtaining additional information from new cases. Data were therefore collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with wine consumers. The sample was selected on the basis of diversity to reflect the variety of socio-cultural profiles in Cameroon. These respondents had varied profiles in terms of age, gender and occupation, and resided in the cities of Douala, Yaoundé, Ngaoundéré, Garoua and Maroua. Their ages ranged from 31 to 63. After 20 interviews, we stopped conducting further interviews as theoretical saturation had been reached. To enhance analytical rigor, coding procedure followed an iterative thematic analysis approach inspired by content analysis (Bardin, 2013). Initial open coding was conducted manually before categories were refined and grouped using NVivo 12. Constant comparison techniques were employed throughout the analysis process until no substantially new conceptual insights emerged from additional interviews.

Using a tape recorder, we were able to record the interviewees' responses at their homes, workplaces or whilst travelling. The initial prompt was fairly broad, and during the interview the interviewees were free to respond without any influence from us. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour 20 minutes, with an average of 53 minutes and 31 seconds.

4. Presentation of the data analysis process

In order to present the results in a coherent and comprehensible manner, we will outline the analysis process, starting with the interview guide, moving on to data transcription, and then to lexical and thematic analysis. We will then present the conceptual model of our study.

4.1. Presentation of the results of the exploratory research

4.1.1. The themes of the interview guide

The interview guide consisted of three main themes, as presented below.

- Topic 1: Understanding the concept of counterfeiting
- Topic 2: Perceived risk of wine counterfeiting
- Theme 3: Information-seeking strategies in response to the risk

4.1.2. Exploratory data analysis

Computerized content analysis, following the procedures outlined by Bardin (1977), is the exploratory data analysis technique used. It forms part of qualitative analysis, which involves the manual or computerized processing of textual corpora and refers to a process of seeking meaning in a text or an interview (Mucchieli, 2015).

Table 1 :1 Profile of interviewees

Interviewee identifier	sex	Age	Professional occupation	City	Interview Duration
case\\I 1	Male	50	merchant	Yaounde	1h
case\\ I 10	Male	47	Economic Operator	Douala	1h20
case\\I 11	Male	52	Administrative Executive	Ngaoundere	43 min
case\\I 18	Male	33	Entrepreneur	Garoua	57 min
case\\ I 19	Male	51	Lawyer	Yaounde	1h10
case\\I 2	Male	54	merchant	Yaounde	45 min
case\\ I 20	Male	34	Teacher	Yaounde	58 min
case\\I 5	Female	43	Dressmaker	Yaounde	1h10
case\\ I12	Female	31	Entrepreneur	Garoua	40 min
case\\ I13	Male	63	Retired person	Garoua	35 min
case\\I 14	Male	51	NGO Director	Maroua	55 min
case\\ I 15	Male	55	Entrepreneur	Bertoua	43 min
case\\ I16	Female	33	Teaching Assistant	Ngaoundere	49 min
case\\I17	Female	38	Nurse	Garoua	1 h05
case\\I3	Male	49	Businessman	Yaounde	50 min
case\\I4	Male	42	Administrative Executive	Yaounde	1h15
case\\I6	Male	46	Journalist	Yaounde	1h15
case\\I7	Male	41	Banker	Douala	1h10
case\\I 8	Male	24	Student	Douala	45 min
case\\ I 9	Female	50	Administrative Executive	Yaounde	50 min

Source 2 : Author's elaboration based on exploratory study

4.1.3. Analysis framework

The framework for analyzing the wine market in Cameroon requires a multidimensional approach centered on the definition of the concept of counterfeiting, consumers' perception of risk, and the resulting information-seeking strategies.

Table 2 :2 Perception of counterfeiting

Code	Categories	Illustrative quotes
Definition of counterfeiting	Infringement of intellectual property	"Counterfeiting is an infringement of intellectual property rights and tax fraud"
	Violation of consumer rights	"To me, counterfeiting is a violation of the consumer's right to information and safety."
	Zero quality	"A counterfeit product, in terms of quality, is quite simply a product of zero quality"
	Poor storage	"The risk of counterfeiting through negligence, that is to say, poor storage that spoils the wine"
	A barrier to consumption	"Counterfeiting is a barrier to the consumption of quality products in Cameroon."
Extent of counterfeiting	No one is spared	"No one is spared; even supermarkets are infiltrated by dodgy suppliers"
	A widespread phenomenon	"The phenomenon is so widespread that it is hard to believe that good wine even exists. No brand is safe ".
	Massive fraud	"Wine counterfeiting in Cameroon is a massive fraud"
	National	"The scale is national because the network for collecting bottles is highly organized"

Source 3: Author's elaboration based on the finding of the exploratory interviews.

Interpretation of the table: several particularly strong words and expressions are used to highlight the seriousness of the counterfeiting problem. *"Wine counterfeiting in Cameroon is a massive* fraud" I6*, the "scale of which is nationwide" I7. "No one is spared; even supermarkets are infiltrated by dodgy suppliers" I1. As for I9:* "*The phenomenon is so widespread that it is hard to believe that any good wine exists. No brand is safe."*

Those interviewed define counterfeiting as "an obstacle to the consumption of quality products in Cameroon" I11. It constitutes a "violation of the consumer's right to information and safety" and "an infringement of intellectual property rights and tax fraud" I16. Although some consumers distinguish between two types of counterfeiting: counterfeiting through fraud and counterfeiting through negligence, they nevertheless draw a distinction between the two. For I15, "the risk of counterfeiting through negligence", that is to say "poor storage that spoils the wine", is just as significant as intentional fraud. However, whether intentional or due to negligence, a counterfeit wine is a wine of "zero quality" (I11), meaning that the contents are "often undrinkable", resembling "vinegar" or even "colored water".

The counterfeiting practices observed in Cameroon are summarized in the following table:

Table 3:3 Counterfeiting techniques observed in Cameroon

Code	**Categories**	**Illustrative quotes**
Indicators of counterfeiting	Wine level	"An abnormally low or high wine level, with no clear explanation"
	Poor condition of the capsule	"If the cap on the neck is crumpled or loose. If it is obvious that it has been tampered with or there are traces of glue"
	Poor label quality	"If, upon, the label appears blurred, misaligned, if the colors are running or if the paper appears to be of poor quality"
	Low price	"Price is a very strong indicator of counterfeiting."
Counterfeiting practices	Refilling/repackaging	"What I know is that people take empty bottles of fine wines and fill them with low-end table wine or, worse still, dubious products"
	Label forgery	"Wine counterfeiting manifests itself in the form of forged labels or recycled bottles." "They copy the labels of the best-selling brands and put a poor-quality blend inside."
	Illegal importation	"It is often linked to illegal importation (smuggling)."

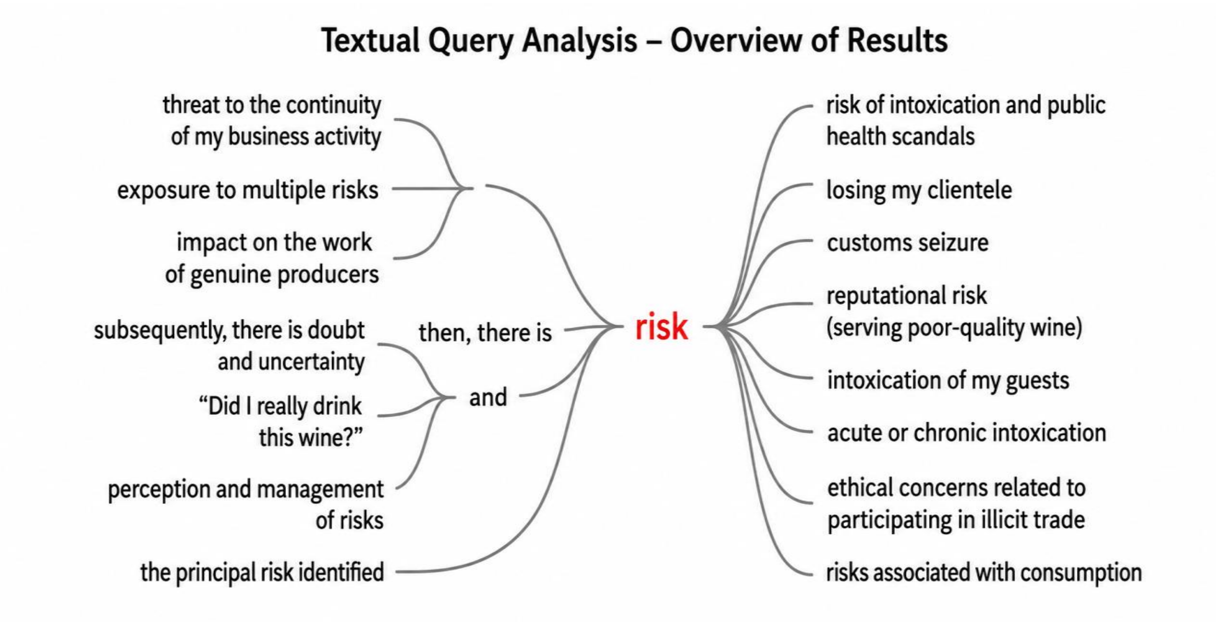
Source 4: Author's elaboration based on the finding of the exploratory interviews.

Interpretation: The quote accounts reveal a variety of counterfeiting practices, ranging from the illegal importation of bulk wine to the falsification of labels and the refilling of bottles with low-grade table wine or dubious products made by mixing various harmful substances. Consumers rely on multiple authenticity cues to distinguish genuine wine from counterfeit products. Namely:

- An abnormally low or high level of wine in the bottle with no clear explanation;
- The poor condition of the capsule, which appears crumpled, fragile or tampered with by counterfeiters, with traces of glue;
- Poor-quality labelling, characterized by poor print quality, blurred or misaligned text, and the use of poor-quality paper or colors;
- An abnormally low price is a strong indication of counterfeiting.

With the concept of counterfeiting clarified, the buyer's ability to identify counterfeiting techniques highlights sources of insecurity and enables a multidimensional assessment of risk.

Figure 2: Analysis of risks associated with counterfeiting



Source 5: Author's elaboration based on data from exploratory study, analyzed using NVivo 12

This figure illustrates the associations linked to the concept of risk and the direct consequences of consuming or selling counterfeit wines. Wine consumer face four main risks:

- The health risk, which is the most significant, highlights the seriousness of consuming counterfeit products. These products can cause acute or chronic poisoning, health scandals or even endanger the lives of guests.
- The risk is not only physical; it can also affect economic and legal aspects through customs seizures and the loss of customers for a business. This risk leads to unfair competition, loss of goods and the closure of businesses.

- The risk to image or reputation. Serving adulterated wine to guests or offering it to a third party at a festive occasion can seriously damage one's reputation.
- The ethical risk associated with the feeling of being part of a criminal counterfeiting network following the purchase or consumption of counterfeit wine.

Box 1: Seeking information in the face of risk

Q1: I listen to discussions and rumors among my friends and colleagues about which brands to avoid.

Q2: I read expert reports on recent frauds involving specific vintages. I also seek information from my networks of wine enthusiasts and my regular suppliers

Q3: I ask my trusted wine merchant (my only supplier now!) for advice, or I ask friends at the market who are aware of the latest issues with brands

Q4: I don't visit specialist forums, but I pay close attention to discussions among colleagues or informal warnings circulating within my professional or social network

Q5: But before buying for a large reception, I ask my friends in the association

Q6: I compare the price on my phone with a well-known website to see if it makes sense. If the difference is too big, I get suspicious. I ask my friends: "Hey, have you ever bought that wine? Was it any good?" I rely heavily on other people's experiences.

Q7: I search online to check the vintage and the base price to make sure the offer is reasonable.

Q8: I quickly check the vintage and the estate on Google to make sure the asking price is in line with the international market

Q9: I look for technical details: "What type of glass did they use for the 2015 vintage? Who was the supplier of the capsule for that year?" I check whether the bottle I'm holding matches the estate's technical specifications. It's the most precise information that matters to me.

Table 4:4 Sources of information for wine buyers in a counterfeiting context: Codes, Categories Illustratives quotes

Codes	Categories	Quotes
Interpersonal information (word of mouth)	Rumors	Q1
	Community networks	Q5
	Sharing experiences	Q6
Information from experts	Loyalty to the wine merchant	Q3
	Reports of fraud	Q2
Digital information	Price comparison	Q6
	Digital authentication search	Q2
	Domain verification	Q8
Technical information	Physical compliance check	Q9
Professional information	Professional alerts	Q4

Source 6: Author's elaboration based on data collected from the exploratory interviews

Analysis of the verbatim transcripts reveals a predominance of the use of interpersonal information (Q1, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6), thus favoring informal sources of information. The use of market acquaintances, colleagues, friends from the association and a trusted wine merchant shows that information circulates by word of mouth and that the consumer reduces their anxiety by delegating the task of verifying authenticity to an expert. The verbatim quotes Q2 and Q9 show that the consumer also aims to break down information asymmetry by seeking information ranging from the product's technical details to the consultation of expert reports. This behavior transforms the act of purchasing into a genuine compliance check, thus demonstrating that for some consumers, only the forgery-proof physical mark is considered authentic. The use of the mobile phone as a tool for digitally verifying price consistency, vintage and year makes the phone an instrument of market regulation. Any significant discrepancy would be immediately perceived as an indication of counterfeiting.

Box 2: Strategies for avoiding counterfeits

Q1: I check the label (print quality, alignment, cleanliness), the cap seal (smooth cap, no tears or signs of repackaging) and the liquid level in the bottle.

Q2: I insist on an invoice even for a single bottle, to have proof of legal origin

Q3: I never buy from markets or small street stalls

Q4: Before buying a bottle of wine, I carefully inspect the cap, particularly the crimp, to see if it is perfectly sealed

Q5: I also check that I am in a recognized specialist shop.

Q6: I never buy a bottle that has been left out of the chilled section. Here, in this heat, if the wine has been left in the sun or near a window, I leave it. I sometimes ask the shop assistant if they can guarantee that the wine has been kept cool

Q7: I compare photos of the bottle on offer with images of genuine bottles from the same vintage on auction platforms or specialist websites.

Q8: To avoid counterfeits, I buy wines I know inside out. Because with a familiar wine profile, it becomes easier for me to spot any anomalies (flavor, appearance).

Table 5:5 Risk avoidance strategy: codes and categories

Codes	Categories	Quotes
Choice of place of purchase	Avoiding street markets	Q3
	Exclusive choice of specialist shops	Q5
Sensory and physical inspection	Quality of sealing	Q4
	Quality of the backing	Q1
Conservation	Conservation technique	Q6
Traceability	Documentary traceability	Q2
Comparative benchmarking	Comparison of bottles and prices	Q7
Product and brand reputation	Product and brand loyalty	Q8

Source 7: Author's elaboration based on data collected from the exploratory interviews.

An analysis of these verbatim comments reveals that Cameroonian consumers do not tolerate counterfeiting and employ strategies based on four pillars:

- Checking or technical inspection of the capsule and packaging (Q1, Q4), where even the slightest imperfection leads to the product being rejected;

- Taking into account the product's storage and preservation conditions. Consumers view poor preservation as a form of fraud or counterfeiting. Consequently, air-conditioning at the point of sale and proper preservation are no longer a matter of convenience (Q5) but now constitute an essential sign of quality;
- The search for proof of authenticity and product traceability through legal means (invoice, Q2) or technology (comparison of digital photos, Q7);
- Loyalty to a familiar product or brand (Q8). Consumers buy wine with which they have a certain familiarity; exploring new alternatives becomes too risky, as they lack any internal criteria for assessing its authenticity;
- Careful choice of place of purchase: consumers favor formal channels (Q5) over informal channels (Q3).

5. Results

Counterfeiting in Cameroon is a widespread phenomenon of national scale affecting all sectors of activity, and no brand is spared. It is defined as a violation of consumer rights and intellectual property rights, and constitutes tax fraud. It is also defined as a deterioration in the quality of wine due to poor storage. The most common counterfeiting practices are: repackaging, label tampering and direct importation. Faced with these practices, consumers are not standing idly by. They look out for several tell-tale signs to spot counterfeit wine. These include: an abnormally low or high level of wine in the bottle with no clear explanation; a damaged capsule; a poor-quality label; and an abnormally low price.

It appears that the perceived risk associated with counterfeiting is multifaceted, comprising three main dimensions: health risk (physical), psychosocial risk (symbolic) and ethical risk. It ranges from the serious consequences of poisoning and commercial ruin to involvement in illegal networks, all of which act as barriers to spontaneous consumption. The presence of risk places the buyer in a state of anxiety and psychological discomfort, which they will naturally seek to reduce before proceeding with a purchase. To restore a sense of security, the individual will activate information-seeking mechanisms and resort to trust-building mechanisms such as avoiding informal channels, verifying the product, demanding traceability and brand loyalty. All these mechanisms aim to transform a purchasing situation fraught with uncertainty into a deliberate and secure choice.

Regarding information-seeking, when faced with risk, consumers adopt an active approach to seeking information, the main sources of which are:

- Word of mouth;
- Consulting experts or wine merchants;
- Digital tools;
- And social media.

These practices suggest the emergence of informal authenticity verification systems through which consumers collectively compensate for institutional uncertainty.

6. Discussion

Our finding suggests that, in highly uncertain market environments, consumers progressively relocate trust from product itself toward its surrounding environment. Authenticity is no longer inferred solely from intrinsics product characteristics but from environmental authenticity signals such as point-of-sale reputation, cold chain preservation, packaging integrity, invoices, and interpersonal trust networks.

Consistent with perceived risk theory (Bauer, 1960; Mitchell, 1999), Our results confirm that counterfeit-related uncertainty strongly shapes consumer behavior. However, unlike prior studies emphasizing financial and functional dimensions of risk, this study shows the central role of perceived risk in purchasing decisions. by highlighting the predominance of health and psychosocial dimensions in the Cameroonian wine market This hierarchy is consistent with Garas's (2023) conclusions regarding the preponderance of social influence and concerns related to personal integrity (both physical and symbolic) over purely transactional considerations, within a modern consumer context. This finding suggests that, in emerging markets characterized by weak regulatory enforcement and widespread counterfeit circulation, perceived risk extends beyond transactional concerns and becomes closely associated with personal safety and social identity preservation.

Consistent with signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Erdem and Swait, 1998), consumers rely heavily on extrinsic cues to evaluate product authenticity under conditions of severe information asymmetry. Our findings extend prior research by demonstrating that, in counterfeit-prone environments, trust progressive shifts from intrinsic product characteristics toward environmental authenticity signals such as point-of-sale reputation, cold-chain preservation and interpersonal trust networks. This suggests that authenticity assessment in emerging markets is socially and environmentally constructed rather than exclusively product-centered.

However, in an environment where signals can be imitated, their ability to reduce uncertainty is undermined. This observation confirms the work of Mugge and Schoormans (2012) showing that the effectiveness of signals depends on their credibility. For Wilcox et al. (2019), in markets plagued by counterfeiting and fraud, widespread mistrust of products is fueled by the fact that certain signals become imperfect, or even misleading, heuristics, which can reduce or perpetuate uncertainty. This situation often leads consumers to act as investigators seeking digital evidence of consistency (vintage, estate). This quest for technological validation confirms Treiblmaier's (2021) argument regarding the need to shift towards traceability systems. The findings further indicate that digital technologies increasingly function as informal market-regulation mechanisms. Consumers frequently use smartphones, online searches, and price comparisons to verify product consistency and detect potential fraud. This behavior transforms consumers from passive buyers into active authenticity investigators seeking technological reassurance in environments characterized by weak traceability systems. In such systems, the product carries its own proof of origin, thereby compensating for the fallibility of the traditional distribution networks described in our study.

In line with prior research on information seeking behavior (Bruck, 1985, Dowling and Staelin (1994), our findings show that consumers actively search for information to reduce counterfeit related uncertainty. Nevertheless, this study reveals that interpersonal networks, informal discussions, and trusted social relationships play a significantly greater role than formal institutional sources. In contexts where institutional trust remains fragile consumers appear to construct informal verification systems based on collective experience and interpersonal reassurance. The findings of this study are fully consistent with several recent studies confirming that, when faced with high uncertainty, consumers will intensify their search for information by drawing on various sources (Hoyer et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017). Our research enriches this perspective by highlighting the predominance of informal sources, primarily word-of-mouth and social media. This aligns not only with the research of Filieri (2016) on the role of social capital and trust in an uncertain environment, but also with that of Appel et al. (2020), which demonstrates how, in a context of widespread fraud, digital interpersonal networks become the most credible source of reassurance.

Finally, according with consumer coping and risk reduction theories (Roselius,1971), consumers adopt many defensive strategies to minimize counterfeit related exposure These strategies include avoiding informal channels, intensifying product verification or inspection; remaining loyal to familiar brands, and demanding traceability evidence. Our findings suggest that consumers develop informal private control systems aimed at compensating for institutional deficiencies within the marketplace.

7. Research contributions

This research has enabled us to make a threefold contribution: the first is at the theoretical level, through the enrichment of signaling theory (Spence, 1973). Indeed, in a market characterized by information asymmetry such as a market saturated with counterfeits; price loses it signaling function in favor of the product's extrinsic characteristics and the reputation of the point of sale. From a managerial perspective, the communication strategy of authorized wine distributors must now focus on evidence-based marketing centered on wine traceability and educating consumers about visual indicators of authenticity. Empirically, this research shows that organoleptic deterioration of wine due to poor storage or exposure to heat is perceived by consumers as counterfeiting. This finding extends the conventional understanding of counterfeiting by showing that consumers may interpret poor storage conditions and cold chain failures as forms of authenticity violation comparable to intentional fraud. For Cameroonian consumers, the integrity of a wine's intrinsic quality depends on the integrity of the cold chain, which consumers regard as a quality signal in its own right.

8. Limitations of the research

One of the main limitations of this research remains the study context. By focusing our study exclusively on Cameroon, the external validity of our research has been restricted. Indeed, purchasing mechanisms and sensitivity to products such as wine vary according to the socio-economic contexts of each locality. This does not allow for the generalization of the results across Africa. Furthermore, modelling the behavior of wine consumers is a difficult task and varies from one individual to another. Indeed, not only is the quality of wine perceived through complex cues such as the label, the cork and the price, but the concept of counterfeiting in this sector also touches on subjective dimensions such as food safety.

9. Conclusion

This research has explored the mechanisms of risk perception in a context of widespread counterfeiting. It shows that risk is not limited to financial loss, but extends to health and social dimensions and, more originally, to an ethical dimension.

From a theoretical perspective, this work contributes to enriching the field by proposing an 'extension of the concept of counterfeiting' for the local consumer. Indeed, product deterioration due to poor temperature control is also equated with a breach of authenticity. Faced with this uncertainty, does the consumer employ information-seeking strategies in which the point of sale and the price serve as substitute signals for a traceability system that is often unreliable?

From a management perspective, the fight against counterfeiting must not be solely a legal one, but must also involve communication for all stakeholders in Cameroon's wine sector. It is imperative to adopt 'evidence-based marketing' (certification of points of sale, tamper-proof measures, transparency regarding the cold chain) in order to restore confidence

However, although this study ultimately demonstrates that authenticity in emerging markets is socially constructed through informal network of trust and verification practices rather than guaranteed exclusively through formal institutional mechanisms, it would benefit from being supplemented by a larger-scale quantitative study. Statistically testing the proposed mediation model would allow these results to be generalized to the entire CEMAC region.

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