DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, we have used an extended form of conjoint analysis in order to investigate the quality perception process taking place before or during the purchase of beef. The study was based on groups of respondents in four European countries. The results of the study have implications in three areas. There are methodological implications for the usefulness of extended forms of conjoint analysis for the study of quality perception processes. There are theoretical implications for the model employed, the Total Food Quality Model. And there are substantial implications for the marketing of bee£

As for the *methodological implications,* we have used a form of cojoint analysis which deviates from the more traditional forms applied in consumer research in two ways. Firstly, and most importantly, we have emploved not one, but an array of dependent measures on which product profiles were to be rated, resulting in covariance matrices, with the product profile as the unit of analysis, which allow estimating not only how quality cues affect the quality perception process, but also how the various elements of the quality perception process are related to each other. Secondly, we have overcome the limitations given by a comparatively large number of quality cues and a large number of dependent variables by employing the factorial survey approach, where each respondent receives an idiosyncratic sample of product profiles. It should also be noted that we have applied this in a cross-cultural setting.

Mostly the results have been encouraging in the sense that the resulting data led to results with meaningful interpretations and, with the exception of the French data, reasonable amounts of explained variance and good measures of fit. Also, the fact that the results achieved in three out of the four countries studied are quite comparable adds to their face validity. At the same time, however, the fact that the French data shoved very different patterns and that the French quality perception process as in general much more difficult to explain than the quality perception process in the other three countries emphasises the importance of cultural differences in studying the quality perception of food.

The results have a number of *theoretical implications* for the Total Food Quality Model.

Firstly, the constuct *perceived costs* needs further theoretical scrutiny. It is common in consumer behaviour models employing a hierarchical approach to explain purchases by a balancing of give and get components (Zeithaml, 1988).

The present study suggests that these components are not in fact independent, ie, that consumers do not form a perception of the give components independently of the get components. The perceived costs construct, as it tuned out in this study, is a subjective measure of relative value, which weights prices with some of the benefits expected from the product.

Secondly, the study shows many examples of cross-references among quality cues, eg, cut and colour cues being used to infer fat content. While this phenomenon vas recognised a long time ago (eg, Cox, 1967), it is ot usually explicitly integrated into models of food quality perception.

Thirdly, the results have shown that expected quality is not the only mediator between quality cues and expected fulfilment of purchase motives and intention to buy, as stipulated in the Total Food Quality Model. Of course, one might argue that this is due to the fact that important q.ality aspects may have been missing fom the operationalisation of expected quality used in the present study, and that the direct links found between quality cues and purchase fulfilment/intention to

buy would disappear had they been included. Still, it is conceivable that a quality cue is seen as contributing to a purchase motive without contributing to a quality aspect, like when minced meat was hypothesised to contribute to versatility in cooking without affecting one of the quality aspects.

Related to this, and fourthly, direct relationships between quality cues and intention to buy may also be explained by low involvement and/or high degrees of habitualisation. In a low inclement situation consumers may never form explicit quality expectations, but may have come to associate cetain product attributes with their daily purchases and use these to ensure a one-dimensional, non-specific satisfaction with the purchase after consumption, without engaging in the formation of expected quality. Even with higher degrees of involvement, high degrees of habitualisation may lead to similar phenomena: due to frequent repetitive behaviour direct associations have been formed in consumer memory between quality cues, and purchase intention, and the originally underlying knowledge structures mediating these by quality expectation and expected purchase motive fulfilment may become less accessible, leading to considerable measurement error and randomness when trying to ascertain them.

A number of *substantial implications* can be derived for the marketing of beef.

Two factors appeared to dominate the formation of expected quality: perceived fat and the place of purchase. Together, these show considerable uncertainty of consumers with regard to the formation of quality expectations. Fat content is actually not a good predictor of the quality aspects consumers are interested in, and to the extent it is, the prediction goes the other way round than consumers suppose. Especially a certain degee of marbling is actually a factor that contributes to tenderness, taste and juiciness, whereas consumers seem to think it detracts fom it. Thus, the formation of expectations about taste, tenderness and juiciness mainly based on fat attributes is actually dysfuntional. The high importance attached to buying fom a butcher's shows that consumers would like to entrust the purchase decision in the hands of an expert, who would be more capable than themselves in predicting the outcome of the meal. The use of colour as a cue in the quality perception process does not add to the accuracy of the prediction of quality aspects either.

Given this obvious uncertainty on the part of consumers, it is also interesting to note that the other extrinsic cues tested in the study, country of origin and information about breeding and feeding, had practically no effect on the formation of quality expectations at all. This poses a dilemma to the marketer of superior beef. If a producer is able to produce beef which actually is superior in terms of the quality aspects consumers are interested in - taste, tenderness, juiciness etc. - how can this message be conveyed to the consumer if the consumer is not able to recognise this superior quality, and at the same time tends to ignore auxiliary cues that were meant to suggest superior quality (as in the case of Irish beef)? One option is to cooperate with specialised retailing outlets, building on the consumer tendency to trust the retail expert. But with the declining market share of butchers' this may not be a feasible solution. Perhaps the other extrinsic cues currently used have not to a efficient extent made clear to the consumer what they stand for, and done this in a way trustworthy to the consumer. A combination of branding and quality grading, firmly related to actual superiority in terms of those quality aspects consumers are interested in, and promoted in a close co-operation between retailer and manufacturer in a way which establishes trustworthiness of the claims made, could possibly both help consumers in forming quality expectations with higher validity and manufacturers to communicate product superiority.