

A healthy indulgence? Wine consumers and the health benefits of wine

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Abstract

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the US. Moderate red wine consumption has been linked to a reduction in the risk of death by heart disease and heart attack by 30–50%. With about 600,000 people dying from heart disease in the US each year, red wine has become increasingly popular among health conscious consumers. Wine is often touted for its potential health benefits, but to what extent is “health” a factor when consumers make their consumption decisions for alcoholic beverages? This study aims to further understand how consumers make their beverage choices and to understand the role wine health benefit knowledge plays in the willingness of consumers to purchase wine. The results suggest that consumers value the relationship between food/beverage intake and their health status. Consumers with few health issues were the ones more likely to indicate that they consume wine for health reasons, suggesting a potential market among consumers with known health issues. In addition, consumers who attributed the most health benefits to wine were the ones most likely to drink more wine and pay more for wine if it were health enhanced.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Wine and health

Amid the increasing health concerns among consumers, preferences are changing toward healthier foods and beverages. Consumers are eating out less and have shifted their diets to include less saturated fat and cholesterol while increasing consumption of fiber (Todd, 2014). Sales of organic foods in the US increased from \$11 billion in 2004 to \$25 billion in 2013, accounting for 3.5% of US food sales (Osteen et al., 2012). In addition, there has been a marked growth in the demand for functional foods. Functional foods, defined as foods fortified for additional health benefits, reached \$37.3 billion in US sales in 2009, which was up from \$28.2 billion in 2005 (Singer, 2011). Popular health-oriented food marketing

package claims range from the heart-healthy red hearts found on the box of Quaker Oats cereal, to the happy-colon yellow arrow on a carton of Activia Yogurt.

The French paradox suggests that consuming red wine daily not only helps the cardiovascular system, but it also increases lifespan due to the resveratrol (found in the skins and tannins of red grapes) content in red wine (Catalgol et al., 2012). Resveratrol has been linked to preventing decline in cardiovascular function caused by age (Das et al., 2011). France surpasses many countries in average life expectancy partly due to the common practice of drinking red wine with meals (Brownlee, 2006). The French consume red wine moderately, at 2–3 glasses daily, reducing the unhealthy effects of high cholesterol foods common in the French diet, including breads, cheeses, and rich desserts (Brownlee, 2006).

Red wine contains antioxidants, called flavonoids, which reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by decreasing the bad cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein-LDL), and boosting the good cholesterol (high-density lipoprotein-HDL). Research has shown that a daily dose of red wine is linked to, on average, a 12% increase in HDL (Catanese, 2013). The resveratrol

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content found in red wine is believed to aid in a wide range of medical problems. Studies have shown that red wine can potentially decrease the risk of colon and prostate cancer when consumed in moderation (Catanese, 2013). However, not all wine is “created equal,” with red wine containing eight times as many flavonoids as white wine (Catanese, 2013). In addition, region, winemaking practices, variety, harvest timing, and growing methods can all impact resveratrol levels of wine, which leaves the door open to purposefully modifying those factors to increase resveratrol levels in wine (Siemann and Creasy, 1992). Additionally, producers in Australia have explored adding additional resveratrol during the winemaking process and researchers in Rioja have explored the use of nanotechnology to increase resveratrol levels in wine (Patterson, 2009). Representatives of Willamette Valley Vineyards were successful in lobbying the Alcohol Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) to allow the listing of resveratrol content on US wine labels.

Although most doctors advocate limited consumption of alcoholic beverages because of triglycerides and bad blood lipids, red wine seems to be different (Guilford and Pezzuto, 2011). The resveratrol found in red wine fights against these harmful effects that other alcoholic substances cannot (e.g. high cholesterol, rising blood pressure, and unhealthy triglycerides) (Lippi et al., 2010). Moderate consumption of red wine has been suggested as a possible therapeutic supplement for the prevention and/or treatment of coronary heart disease, as a result of the wine's alcohol, resveratrol, and polyphenolic compound content (Guilford and Pezzuto, 2011; Lippi et al., 2010).

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Heart disease can be preventable and controllable through healthy diet and lifestyle choices. With moderate red wine consumption, the risk of death by heart disease and heart attack can be reduced by 30–50% (Catanese, 2013). With about 600,000 people dying from heart disease in the US each year, red wine has become increasingly popular among health conscious consumers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Despite studies suggesting otherwise, to some extent the health benefits of red wine are not entirely clear, and the jury may still be out on finding a definitive answer. It has been hypothesized that some of the studies touting the benefits of red wine achieved positive results due to confounding socio-economic factors while other research suggests that the resveratrol content in red wine only provides negligible benefits (Xiang et al., 2014; Lindberg and Amsterdam, 2008). Because of conflicting red wine studies, it is likely that there is a certain level of confusion among consumers regarding the health benefits of wine. From infomercials to nutritional supplements, consumers are exposed to a vast array of marketing claims for health and wellness as a result of resveratrol. Research suggests that health claims on food products in the US has led to increased consumer confusion (Hasler, 2008). Consumers struggle to process nutritional information, resulting in confusion regarding health and nutrition claims (Darian and Tucci,

2011). Consumers also have difficulty distinguishing between the levels of scientific evidence on food claims (Hasler, 2008). Perhaps as a result of this, consumers are often skeptical of health claims made on food products (Petrovici et al., 2012; Szykman et al., 1997).

Little is known about the role that health concerns, perceptions, and knowledge play in the decision to purchase and consume red wine. Although consumer confusion regarding wine products is evident, are they also confused about the health benefits of wine (Drummond and Rule, 2005)? How much do consumers know about the potential health benefits of red wine and does that knowledge influence their consumption choices? As trends continue for improved health, diets, and wellness among consumers in the US, what role will red wine play in this trend? Will consumers change their wine purchase decisions because of health concerns? The objectives of this research relate to determining the existing knowledge of wine consumers as related to the health benefits of wine and to isolate the role of health concerns in a consumer's decision to purchase wine.

1.2. Literature review

Changing lifestyle and dietary habits may present more benefits than medical care, yet adjusting individual dietary habits is a challenge involving trade-offs between nutrition, taste, price, convenience, and cost (Wansink, 2006; Blaylock et al., 1999). When consumers evaluate products that they consider to be healthy, nutrition and health are two aspects that they use to assess a product's potential benefit (Lähteenmäki, 2013). Nutritional value appears to be the health benefit that has the most impact on a consumer's purchase (Darian and Tucci, 2011).

1.2.1. Health claims and consumer choices

Evidence suggests that health is beginning to play a more prevalent role in consumer's purchasing decisions and, as a result, health claims are becoming more commonly seen on food and beverage products (Martinez, 2013). An increasing amount of research is being done to examine the link between nutrition label use and consumers' food choices. Availability of knowledge, education and information is key to informing consumer purchase decisions. Product labeling can be an essential instrument for changing and influencing dietary habits and behavior (Grunert and Wills, 2007). Drichoutis et al. (2005) found a positive link between nutrition label use and purchase decisions because of the impact nutritional labels have on consumers' perceptions. Education, gender, income level, and health status all influence nutritional knowledge and nutritional knowledge influences the use of nutrient labels when shopping for food (Guthrie et al., 1995; Szykman et al., 1997; Nayga, 2000; Drichoutis et al., 2005, 2006; Gracia et al., 2007).

Debate has also occurred over the role of socio-demographic differences in the preferences for and the impact of health claims. Health claims can only provide added value if consumers both recognize the benefit and find it important

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