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What effect does wine bottle closure type have on perceptions of wine attributes?

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of an extrinsic attribute of wine—closure type (natural, screw, synthetic, or glass)—on perceptions of intrinsic attributes (appearance, taste, bouquet, and overall quality) by comparing two separate samples of tasters to determine whether differences exist. A convenience sample of students, parents, faculty, staff, and community members in a college town in the northwestern United States participated in the study. The findings confirmed the positive halo effect of natural corks when compared with screw caps and synthetic corks. More specifically, wine thought to have been poured from a bottle with a natural cork closure registered significantly higher ratings on appearance, bouquet, taste, and overall quality compared with wines closed with screw caps or synthetic cork closures, but not those with glass closures. Our findings suggest that glass stoppers could replace natural corks without generating significantly negative effects on perceptions of intrinsic wine attributes.

1. Introduction

As wine becomes a lifestyle beverage, the wine industry's marketing initiatives have shifted dramatically from promoting wine as a simple product to transforming it into a multifarious commodity (Keown and Casey, 1995). Once wine is placed in a glass bottle, capped, and labeled, it takes on a set of attributes that provide it with importance and complexity, which suggests that there is more to wine than just its "simple tangible qualities" (Edwards and Mort, 1991). Consequently, wineries are now showcasing a larger section of brands and styles (Pinney, 2005), offering new types of packaging that highlights bottle shape, color, label, design, and style of closure (Barber et al., 2009).

Wine is also a significant product in the hospitality and tourism industry (Bruwer, 2003), often outselling other alcoholic beverages in restaurants, bars, and banquet settings (Hall et al., 2004). Consequently, wine tourism has become a significant tourism development strategy that has attracted scholarly interest across several disciplines (Bruwer, 2003) such as gastronomy (Alonso and Liu, 2011), wine destinations (Bruwer, 2003), consumer behavior (e.g., Lockshin et al., 2006; Rahman et al., 2014; Bruwer and Rawbone-Viljoen, 2013; Corsi et al., 2012; Bruwer and Nam, 2010; Rahman and Reynolds, 2015; Lu et al., 2017; Rahman and Reynolds, 2018), motivations for travel (Alant and Bruwer, 2004; Carmichael, 2005; Galloway et al., 2008; Getz and

Brown, 2006; Sparks, 2007), pricing (Thrane, 2004; Ali and Nauges, 2007), and culture (Hall and Mitchell, 2000).

As wine research continues to expand in breadth and depth, much work is needed to develop measures that make it possible to predict specific consumer behaviors (Barber et al., 2009). Many studies focus on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions as well as price expectations and perceptions of wine quality (Bleibaum et al., 2005; Marin and Durham, 2007). Even as alternatives to traditional cork enclosures spread across the industry, however, few studies have investigated the association between wine bottle closure type and consumer perceptions of intrinsic wine attributes (Lopes et al., 2012).

To address the need for such research, this study examines the effects of an extrinsic attribute of wine (closure type) on perceptions of intrinsic attributes of wine (appearance, taste, bouquet, and overall quality) by comparing responses in two separate samples of tasters to determine whether differences between and within the means of the two factors exist. With the wine industry changing very rapidly, the results of this study will provide hospitality marketing professionals, restaurateurs, and other food and beverage operators with findings that should assist in marketing their wine products and services more effectively.

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2. Literature review

Marketing research has shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes are major determinants of wine quality (Olson and Jacoby, 1972). Intrinsic attributes include a wine's appearance, bouquet (aroma, or "nose"), and taste, which cannot be altered without also altering the physical characteristics of the wine itself; the external attributes include its label or closure type, which are not among the physical product attributes (Orth and Krška, 2001). Although a wine bottle's closure style might seem to function solely as a means of preserving wine quality, in reality it serves as a marketing tool insofar as it conveys visual, audible, and tactile information to consumers (Lopes et al., 2012; Spence and Wang, 2017).

2.1. Wine closure type

Traditionally, three types of corks have been used to seal wine bottles: regular, agglomerated, and synthetic corks. Regular corks are made from bark that is stripped from cork oaks, agglomerated corks (which we did not include in our study) consist of ground-up cork bound together by natural resins or heated adhesive, and synthetic corks are made from plastic foam (Silva et al., 2011). Several studies have shown that closure type can enhance direct value by affecting the look of a product and is often perceived by consumers as a reflection of wine quality when making purchase decisions (Lopes et al., 2012). Although some studies have demonstrated the reliability of alternative closures, such as screw caps and synthetic corks, in preventing "cork taint" (Barrie, 2005), natural corks are preferred by consumers (Marin and Durham, 2007). Another related aspect of this is consumers' resistance to change (Garcia et al., 2007).

Problems associated with the use of cork closures include undesirable oxidation of wine, bottle leakage, and cork breakage during opening (Ferreira, 2013). For wineries, cork taint will likely result in lost revenue and brand-name erosion when consumers attribute poor wine quality to a bottle's winery rather than to the closure (Risch, 2009). Nevertheless, consumer perception seems to be the primary determining factor regarding the marketing of each closure type.

2.2. Closure type preferences by consumers

Natural corks are often infected by the 2, 4, 6-trichloroanisole (TCA) chemical produced by a mold, resulting in a musty, moldy aroma when doses are low (Goode, 2005), so the industry introduced wines with synthetic and screw cap closures to avoid this problem. Nevertheless, natural corks are generally preferred by consumers due to the romance and drama involved in opening a wine bottle (Atkin et al., 2006; Marin and Durham, 2007). It has been argued that traditions regarding how wine is presented for consumption strongly influence what consumers consider appropriate (Barber et al., 2009), reinforcing the perception that natural corks are associated with higher wine quality (Barber and Almanza, 2007). In Bleibaum et al.'s (2005) study, wine closure type was shown to affect consumer purchase decisions suggesting that consumers in the United States prefer natural corks over synthetic corks. On the other hand, consumers perceive screw-capped wines to be of lower quality and, in some situations, socially unacceptable (Bleibaum, 2011; Marin and Durham, 2007), thus slowing the shift to screwcaps and synthetic closures. Furthermore, increased awareness of sustainability and environmental issues also seems to influence closure choice, although it is unclear how wine consumers perceive or value the environmental friendliness of specific closure types (Lopes et al., 2012).

2.3. Socio-demographic factors and wine closure

Socio-demographic factors influence consumer perception of wine closures. In a qualitative study, Barber et al. (2008) found that experts in the wine industry believe that educating consumers will play a key

role in determining whether screw caps will become socially acceptable. This concept was empirically tested by Jeter (2012), who found that individuals with higher income and education levels had more positive perceptions than others of screw caps and other alternative closure types (Jeter, 2012). Such variations in perception are attributed to generational differences, insofar as distinct age groups are influenced by a range of unique factors yielding a range of opinions pertaining to the evaluation of wine quality (Nissen, 2012). Several studies find not only that today's wine consumers are younger than their predecessors, but also that they bring a unique set of tastes and lifestyle choices to the purchase decision process (Barber et al., 2006).

Some researchers have also called for more in-depth research on yet other forms of bottle closures (Barber et al., 2009). In response, we added the effects of glass stoppers to our study. Although we suspect glass will have significant effects on consumer perceptions of intrinsic wine attributes, natural corks will continue to have more significant effects due to the "new-ness" factor associated with glass as consumers need time to trust this closure type.

2.4. Intrinsic attributes of wine

Compared with other consumer products, wine can pose difficulties for consumers who want to know exactly what they are purchasing simply by viewing a package. A consumer must purchase a wine to discover its intrinsic qualities such as taste, bouquet, and color (Barber et al., 2006). While some consumers rely on imagery and color to infer wine quality (Boudreaux and Palmer, 2007), others make their purchase decisions based on other senses such as smell and taste (Bruwer, 2007). Findings in the literature overwhelmingly indicate that, from a sensory perspective, the taste of wine is the most important factor in determining repurchase decisions and perceptions of overall quality (Bilyk et al., 1975; Charters and Pettigrew, 2007; Keown and Casey, 1995; Thompson and Vourvachis, 1995) as well as preference of a particular varietal (Rahman et al., 2014). Depending on the buying and consumption setting, consumer preferences are also stimulated by a combination of tangible, sensory, and even atmospheric cues (Bruwer et al., 2011). Prior studies have also discussed behavioral differences related to wine, which depends on whether a consumption occasion is public or private, formal or informal, and similar factors (Demossier, 2004; Seymour, 2004). Therefore, a consumer who considers the taste of wine to be the most prominent attribute in one setting, may find appearance to be the most prominent in another.

2.5. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The literature confirms that consumers in general prefer natural corks to other closure types. We therefore suspect that these preferences will have a positive "halo effect," causing consumers to perceive intrinsic attributes such as appearance, bouquet, and taste more positively. The halo effect results from "extrapolation from a general impression to unknown attributes" (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977, p. 250) that unconsciously alters individual judgments. For instance, consumers significantly underestimate the caloric content of items from the sandwich chain Subway as opposed to those from McDonald's because of Subway's marketing campaign, which highlights low-calorie items (Chandon and Wansink, 2007). This effect is further explained by evaluative conditioning theory. A person's evaluation of a certain stimulus may depend on, and will often change with the pairing of, that stimulus with at least one other evaluated stimulus (De Houwer et al., 2001). According to Chan (1996), an individual's response to a stimulus depends on the attention and relevance the person attributes to the stimulus. In this context, an extrinsic wine attribute such as cork type can stimulate a consumer's ability to focus more attention on abstract cues, such as reputation, than specific intrinsic wine attributes such as taste and smell. This concept was evident in Lu et al.'s (2016) study, where it was demonstrated that wines primed as genetically modified

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