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Does How Fluent a Winery Name sounds affect Taste Perception?

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Abstract

Purpose

Some winery names are easy to say (e.g., Peller Estates), whereas others are relatively difficult to pronounce (e.g., Hernder Estates). Does the relative ease or difficulty of pronouncing a name unconsciously influence the perceived taste of the wine?

Methodology

We invited participants from the local community into a wine-tasting lab to sample a wine. We used a between-subjects experimental design whereby one group of participants was told that the wine came from a winery called “Titakis” (easy-to-pronounce) whereas another group was told that the wine came from a winery called “Tselepou” (difficult-to-pronounce). A third (control) group also sampled the wine, but was given no winery information. Note that all 3 groups sampled the same wine. Random assignment placed participants into the 3 experimental groups. The dependent measures included taste perception (i.e., liking), willingness to buy, and willingness to pay in dollars.

Findings

Relative to the control group, participants tended to prefer the wine associated with the difficult-to-pronounce name. This finding was especially evident for more knowledgeable wine consumers. Specifically, participants in the difficult-to-pronounce winery name group showed higher liking ratings, greater buying intentions, and higher willingness to pay for the wine than participants in the control group. There were no differences in ratings between the easy-to-pronounce winery name group and the control group.

Practical Implications

These findings have implications for wineries wishing to explore branding opportunities. The results of this experiment suggest that difficult-to-pronounce winery names are associated with superior taste perceptions of the wine.

Key Words: Consumer, perception, branding, labeling, fluency

1. INTRODUCTION

Every aspect of a wine's label deserves special attention, because seemingly unimportant details may influence consumers' perceptions towards the wine, which can have a considerable financial impact on the bottom line. When a winery is introducing a new product to the market, the marketing team must make many decisions. Some of these decisions are related to the linguistic elements of the label. For example, managers need to decide which brand name will be used. Extant literature demonstrates that the relative ease or difficulty of pronouncing a name affects consumer evaluations towards that name (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009). But does the relative ease or difficulty of pronouncing a name influence actual taste perceptions? This experiment examines this question.

Numerous studies have provided evidence that the perception of taste is not clear but suggestible and ambiguous (Elder and Krishna, 2010). In addition to the intrinsic cues from the wine itself, extrinsic cues such as the labeling (Levin and Gaeth, 1988); brand name (Alison and Uhl, 1964, McClure et al., 2004), price (Plassman et al., 2008, Almenberg and Dreber, 2009), region of origin (Hoegg and Alba, 2007) and advertisement content (Elder and Krishna, 2010) can also affect taste perception. Extrinsic cues influence the cognitions related to the taste experience therefore creating expectations about the product (Elder and Krishna, 2010). For example, in one study consumers who ordered a prix-fixe restaurant meal were given a complimentary glass of wine that had been relabeled as either "new from California" or "new from North Dakota". Those who believed they had been drinking California wine ate 12% more of their meal than those who believed they drank North Dakota wine. This is likely because California's Napa Valley is famous for its wines, whereas North Dakota is the last American State to produce commercial wine (Wansink, et al, 2007). The results of this study suggest that the region of origin, which produced more positive sensory thoughts about the wine, not only increases the taste ratings of the wine but also increases the enjoyment and the consumption of the accompanying food.

The fact that thoughts related to sensory experiences affect sensory evaluations leads to one question; does the relative ease or difficulty of the linguistic elements of a label, which represent a metacognitive cue to judgment, play a role in taste-related judgments? "Linguistic fluency", or the perceived relative ease or difficulty of reading a name, prompts inferences about many different aspects of the environment, including an item's value or familiarity (Oppenheimer, 2008). For example, stock names that are relatively easy to pronounce are associated with a higher value than more difficult to pronounce stock names (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2006). Given that cognitions related to sensory experience affect sensory evaluations (Shiv and Nowlis, 2004) the metacognitive cue of fluency may also affect sensory evaluations.

This research seeks to determine the influence of the linguistic fluency of a name on taste perceptions; and in doing so, makes several key contributions to both the fluency and sensory evaluation literatures. First, past research shows the effects of fluency of product descriptions on product evaluations for products, such as cheese (Pocheptsova et al, 2010). However, given that none of the previous studies involved actual consumption of the product, they do not provide valuable information to practitioners about whether fluency of a name influences taste perceptions and evaluations of the taste experience, and how, exactly, that occurs. Specifically, there is no solid evidence that the subjective feelings that fluency creates can be transferred to and can shape perceptions related to an

actual consumption experience, thereby altering product evaluations. Second, we demonstrate actionable methods for marketing practitioners to enhance the image of their products. Specifically, we show that by choosing relatively disfluent wine brand names, consumers will have greater taste perceptions associated with those names.

2. HYPOTHESIS

Products that are categorized as more "special occasion" (such as wine) are often expected to be rare. Objects or products that are rare, and are correspondingly perceived to be unfamiliar, tend to be relatively difficult to process. Given the association of rarity and lack of familiarity with disfluency, consumers tend to also make the inverse inference: that which is disfluent, is perceived to be more special (Pocheptsova et al., 2010). In other words, things in the environment that are rare are difficult to comprehend; the inverse of that is the inference that difficult-processing is associated with rarity. As such, we predicted that wine associated with a difficult-to-pronounce winery name would be associated with greater taste perceptions, and a higher willingness to pay.

3. METHOD

3.1. Pretest

In order to isolate ease or difficulty of pronunciation as the key independent variable, we chose a pair of winery names that were mismatched on fluency, but were matched on other variables such as perceived prototypically, value, and familiarity. That is, we wanted to test two names that were equally unfamiliar, but that differed on how easy (or difficult) they were to say. Ten respondents (six women, and four men) from a mid-sized North American university participated in a pilot test. Participants were given four pairs of wineries names, one corresponding to an easy-to-pronounce name and the other a difficult-to-pronounce name (e.g., Harald Kraft vs. Hauerhof Tanzer) and were asked to evaluate each name on perceived prototypicality, value, familiarity, as well as perceived easy of pronunciation, and perceived similarity to English (all on a 7-point likert-scale). The *Titakis Winery* vs. *Tselepou Winery* pairing displayed a significant difference for ease of pronunciation (5.33 vs. 2.78), (t (9) = 3.26, $p < .012$) as well as similarity to the English language (4.33 vs. 2.22), (t (9) = 3.92, $p < .004$); however, showed a non-significant difference in perceived value (2.33 vs. 2.34), (t (9) = -.244, $p > .81$), familiarity (1.67 vs. 1.11), (t (9) = 1.17, $p > .28$), and prototypicality (4.11 vs. 3.00), (t (9) = 1.350, $p > .21$). As a result, this pairing was selected for the main experiment.

3.2. Participants

One hundred and thirty-four members of the local community (including students) participated for either course credit or $5. The average age was 24.

3.3. Design and Procedure

Participants were invited to lab to partake in a wine tasting experiment, where they would be required to sample wine. This experiment employed a between-subjects design

whereby participants were randomly assigned into one of three experimental conditions: the "easy-to-pronounce winery name" group (n = 48), the "difficult-to-pronounce winery name" group (n = 45), or the control group (n = 41).

Media Lab Research Software was used to administer the experiment. All testing was performed within a laboratory, whereby the participants were seated at a cubicle, which was equipped with a computer tablet. Participants had in front of them a glass of 90mL of locally-produced chardonnay. Participants were informed of the (artificial) winery name through the text presented in the Media Lab program, "This wine sample has been supplied by Titakis (Tselepou) Winery". Participants in the control group did not see any winery-related information. Participants were instructed to swirl the wine for several seconds and then sample the wine. Participants then answered questions assessing how much they liked the wine (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much), how willing they would be to buy the wine (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very likely), and how much they would be willing to pay for a bottle of the wine (Winkielman et al., 2005). Subsequent questions concerned demographics (i.e. gender and age), smoking and eating habits, as well as liking and purchase patterns of white wine. (These variables did not have any effect on the data so they will not be discussed further.) Next, participants completed a wine knowledge test (Hughson and Boakes, 2001), which served as a tool to cluster participants as either "low knowledge" or "high knowledge".

4. RESULTS

Planned comparisons were performed for each dependent variable, comparing ratings for the easy-to-pronounce relative to the control group, and the difficult-to-pronounce versus ;the control group. Whereas there were no statistically significant differences for the easy-to-pronounce versus the control group, there were differences observed in the dependent measures for the difficult-to-pronounce versus the control group, especially for the more knowledgeable consumers. When examining the difficult-to-pronounce versus the control group, the low-knowledge participants showed no significant differences between groups, whereas the high knowledge participants did show differences in all 3 dependent measures (liking, willingness to buy, and WTP). Please refer to Table 1 (Low Knowledge group) and Table 2 (High Knowledge group) for a comparison of means across the three conditions. Specifically, the difficult-to-process group (M = 4.83) reported higher liking than the control group (M = 4.13), $t(58) = -1.723$, $p<.09$. Also, the difficult-to-process group (M = 4.43) reported a higher willingness to buy than the control group (M = 3.70), $t(58) = -1.780$, $p<.08$. Finally, the difficult-to-process group (M = \$16.13) reported a higher WTP than the control group (M = \$11.73), $t(55) = -2.131$, $p<.04$.

Table 1: MEANS AND STANDARD ERRORS OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES FOR LOW KNOWLEDGE GROUP

	Control		Easy-to-pronounce name		Difficult-to-pronounce name	
	N=14		N=16		N=15	
	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM

overall liking	4.29	0.42	4.00	0.40	4.67	0.36
willingness to buy	3.93	0.51	3.25	0.41	3.67	0.49
willingness to pay ($)	12.00	1.37	13.66	1.54	15.92	1.95

Table 2: MEANS AND STANDARD ERRORS OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES FOR HIGH KNOWLEDGE GROUP

	Control		Easy-to-pronounce name		Difficult-to-pronounce name	
	N=27		N=32		N=30	
	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM
overall liking	4.48	0.31	4.66	0.32	4.83	0.22
willingness to buy	4.00	0.31	3.94	0.36	4.43	0.25
willingness to pay ($)	13.03	0.71	14.40	1.21	16.13	1.17

5. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

We investigated the influence of the relative ease or difficulty of pronouncing a winery name on taste perception and other evaluations. We found that especially for higher knowledge consumers, there is higher preference towards a wine associated with more difficult to pronounce winery names. This was evidenced by ratings of liking and buying intentions, as well as reported willingness to pay. These findings closely resemble those observed by Pocheptsova et al. (2010), whereby participants preferred images of special occasion products (e.g., gourmet cheeses) presented in a difficult-to-process manner than in a more fluent manner. However, these findings contribute to this literature in that they show that difficult to pronounce names are associated with enhanced taste perceptions, with downstream consequences to buying intentions and willingness to pay.

Various studies in the literature have shown that marketing activities may affect product evaluations, taste ratings, and even the actual performance of the products. The results of the current research demonstrate that elements of a wine's label, such as the winery name or other branding information can be associated with higher liking ratings for consumers if those elements are made to be more difficult-to-process. One limitation however is that there may have been a cultural bias inherent in the design of the study (i.e., there would be different results if a Greek sample were tested because the winery names would be perceived to be fluent for that sample). Nonetheless, looking at cultural biases may be an interesting avenue of future direction.

Marketers are consistently searching for new innovative ways to maintain relationships with consumers, develop new relationships, and ultimately stimulate purchases. The current research findings suggest that the metacognitive cue of fluency can be leveraged to attain such a goal. In the context of special occasion products or

hedonic goods, it is generally a difficult processing experience that results in more favourable evaluations. Similarly, the use of a difficult-to-pronounce brand name will create more of an appeal for the corresponding products. This disfluency emanates an impression of uniqueness, derived from perceived unfamiliarity; an attribute that is in alignment with the schema of hedonic products. It may also be the case that the use of visually abstract fonts or images results in the same outcome. This idea can be explored in future research.

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