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Perception of wine labels by Hong Kong Chinese consumers

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Abstract

Purpose

The Hong Kong wine consumers are faced with a “demanding and arduous” task when choosing a bottle of wine from the thousands of brands available on the retail shelves. Apart from the wine intrinsic factors the extrinsic factors are also important in choosing a bottle of wine. This research aims to examine Hong Kong Chinese consumers in their perception of wine label and how wine labels affect consumers purchasing decision and the attributes they look for on a wine label.

Methodology

The first stage of the study was face to face interviews of 20 respondents in a major retail outlet of Hong Kong. Then an online survey was used with specific questions on their preferences on attributes about their buying experience, and the use of visual labels pictures to rate importance. Fifty nine valid questionnaires were collected from Hong Kong Chinese respondents.

Findings

The results suggest that Hong Kong Chinese wine consumers would look for top three mostly searched attributes the origin of the wine, grape variety and food and wine pairing information. A traditional label design with the image of a château is favored over modern and contemporary wine labels. The yellow color was found to be the most preferred and wines of French origin is mostly preferred for formal occasions while wines from Italy and Australia are chosen for less formal ones.

Practical implications

The findings will be useful for wineries wishing to enter the Hong Kong market, wine label designers for developing labels, to target easily the Hong Kong wine consumers, and better understand the consumers on how they assess alternatives among their choice process.

Key words: Hong Kong wine market, Chinese wine consumers, wine label, extrinsic wine attributes

1. INTRODUCTION

Wine consumption had been established over many centuries. It dated back to the ancient time where wine had been propagated from its origin to different parts of the world through merchants and wars. Coming to recent centuries, with the changes in the global business picture, leading to globalization of wine, the consumption of wine has been revolutionized. The global economic picture is also reshaping, with a shift in economic power from the matured markets to emerging markets, the move is by far an impact to the consuming flow. The growing magnitude of emerging markets such as China, has made every nation to turn their eyes onto it and to have a share. According to International Monetary Fund data presented in 2010, China's significance in the world economy has four times increased from 1995 to 2010 (Ahearn R.J., 2011). It is predicted by the World Bank in 2011, that the growth in emerging markets (China, India, Brazil, Russia and Indonesia) would be double of the projected growth rate of the advanced countries (such as United States, Europe) over 2011 to 2025.

Lifestyle changes coupled with the aid of the Hong Kong government on the duty tax exemption on wine in 2008 to target Hong Kong transformation as a wine hub, have led to the explosion of wine consumption per capita by 144 percent from 2006 to 2009 (Wine Institute, 2010a,b) and an average per capita consumption of 5 liters in 2011, ranking as first place in Asian's per capita consumption, before Japan (2.4 liters) and China (1.3 liters) (Accidental Travel Writer, 2012). With a provisional estimate of population, it is at 7.184 million by mid-2013 (Census and Statistics Department, 2013), Hong Kong is the third largest wine consuming market in Asia with China (first largest) and Japan (second largest).

With the abolishment of wine duty tax in Hong Kong in 2008, the import of wine has surged more than 80 percent in the following year (HKTDC, 2013). Just in the first quarter of 2013, from January to March, a total import of HK\$ 2,042 million (US\$ 263.48 million) in value term and 12.24 million of liters in volume terms are imported into Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a non-grape growing country where only two wineries are making wine in Hong Kong where they are not exporting but only for domestic consumption. The re-export is mainly to Mainland China and some neighboring Asia-Pacific countries.

Wine consumption in Hong Kong is very much related to dining, socializing and celebrating with friends, colleagues and family, at home or outside in public venues such as restaurants and bars. Wine is mainly consumed with food. Western food is a popular companion in pairing with wine. Chinese food is also pairing with wine of lesser popularity but with a growing trend.

Hong Kong being an ex-British colony has a mix of Chinese and Western cultural influences.

The population comprises of 93 percent of Chinese, about 1 percent of Europeans, 0.2 percent of Americans, 0.2 percent of Australians and 5.6 percent of other Asians (Census and Statistics Department, 2013). The wine consumers in Hong Kong would therefore be more local Chinese who are not new to western culinary and beverage consumptions, and some expatriates of other ethnicities.

1.2 Consumers' Assessment of Wine Information

Hong Kong Chinese consumers are very much opened to western and non-Chinese cultures. However, wine industry is a complex one with its many accreditations on the origin side (for example Appellation Contrôlée in France), it would be difficult for an average Chinese Hong Kong wine consumer to have full knowledge unless wine education is in force. Despite more and more wine appreciation classes are organized in Hong Kong, the percentage of consumers who really is educated with this knowledge would not be large. For an average consumer, the difficulty would be how to read the information given from a bottle of wine and to come to a final purchasing decision. According to Mueller and Szolnoki (2010), packaging and brand evaluation were the strongest drivers for informed liking of a wine. A lot of consumers are using implicit logical sequence to assess information available to them from a wide selection of wine (Mueller et al., 2009), within limited time frame to reduce any perceived purchasing risk. According to Mueller et al. (2009), the wine consumer would enter into a "search" of information to induce the hidden "experience" and "credence" aspect when purchasing a bottle of wine.

It is crucial to understand how the Hong Kong Chinese consumers perceive wine and what their considerations are before purchase. In the research conducted by Liu and Murphy (2007), French wines were considered of higher quality and better awareness than Australian wines. According to Somogyi et al. (2011), it is noticed that "reading labels" appeared only six times which represents less than half of wine in relation to health. Hong Kong has a Chinese cultural background. Its exposure to western culture influence impacts somehow the evaluation process of the consumers, the types of information they are looking for on the label and what they expect.

Many researches have been done on countries where wine consumption is part of the consumer's lifestyle, such as France (Celhay and Passebois, 2011), Italy (Rocchi and Stefani, 2005) and the United States (Sherman and Tuten, 2011; Boudreaux and Palmer, 2007). But there is no research done on the extent in which wine labels affect Hong Kong wine consumer's purchasing choice and decision on Old and New World labels, where the market is overloading with a multitude of wines from all origins. With the economic shift to Asian countries, more researches were carried out in big Chinese cities such as Beijing (Yu et al., 2009) and Shanghai (Balestrini and Gamble, 2006; Hu et al., 2008). Very few researches were

done on Hong Kong due to its insignificance and small market size. However, since the removal of all wine duties since February 2008, Hong Kong has a surge in wine import and consumption. A flood of wine from all origins into Hong Kong, has somehow alter the consumer's consumption behavior. Despite the growing wine consumption, limited studies have been digging into this piece of small land as Hong Kong.

Most of the labels are designed by non-Chinese people. We do not know if they have some understanding of the Chinese culture or whether the bottle of wine would be someday selling in a Chinese culture country. The design including the text and mention on the label, should be, by assumption, not with Chinese consumers in mind at the time of the design concept. Tootelian and Ross (2000) mentioned that consumers believed the information on the labels to reflect the true meaning such as the origin, grape variety, to base their selection of purchase pattern. In a research done by Liu et al. (2008), they introduced the effect of language (monolingual or bilingual) labeling on Chinese consumers and their awareness on the domestic and foreign wines. Bilingual labeling had positive effect on the country-of-origin on imported wines especially on French wines but not Australian wines.

The purpose of this study is to attempt to identify the elements that Hong Kong Chinese consumers consider in their wine purchase process. The next sections describe how the wine information search has linked to consumers would be further investigated using both qualitative and quantitative research methods in two phases to reveal the attributes, designs and colors that are most preferred and of importance to the Hong Kong Chinese consumers. The findings of this study would help wine label designers and wine marketer practitioners to draw their attentions and awareness onto the vital elements a consumer would look at.

2. METHODOLOGY

First a qualitative research was conducted. The aim was to gather attributes that influence wine consumers in purchasing wine. This stage was a face to face interview and to help to identify patterns, themes or features in a wider prospect.

In the first phase of this research, a permission was obtained from a leading supermarket chain store having many outlets in all parts of Hong Kong, to interview its customers in their wine section. It was conducted in the form of a face to face interview of about 5 minutes each where respondents who bought wine on that day would be asked to answer 5 short questions. The subjects were asked about the reasons why they chose the particular wine (price, drank earlier, recommended by family or friends, quality, brand name, vintage, region, gift, promotion). The second question was about the information they were looking for on the label (brand name, vintage year, varietal, producing region, château image). Regarding the label image and information respondents consider the information on the label as useful

(varietal, producing region) and mentioned that traditional label or brand name to be useful for them. Subjects were also asked about the occasions they buying wine; most of them purchased wine on a regular basis, some of them seem to buy wine only for special occasions or during promotions. The interviews were conducted on two consecutive days in the weekend, a Saturday afternoon and a Sunday morning where a high rate of purchase occurrence would take place. The choice of outlets was in two large local residential districts' malls, Kowloon Tong and Tseung Kwan O. The chosen outlets are located in Festival Walk, an upmarket major landmark in Kowloon Tong, and East Point City, a large private housing estate and shopping mall in Tseung Kwan O.

The second stage was a structured questionnaire through online survey. The target population of this study consisted of all Hong Kong population of Chinese origin only of legal drinking age of 18 years old or above, of male and female and having purchased at least a bottle of wine in the past 3 months. The questionnaire was distributed by email to a convenience sample of initial list of thirty five friends' email which was then be requested to cascade to their friends.

Prior to the launch on the second phase, the questionnaire was translated from English to Chinese and vice versa to ensure accuracy in the meaning. Then it was pre-tested using a convenience sample of ten respondents so as to ensure the smoothness and consistency in the questionnaire setting before it was finally online.

Based on literature reviews and from the interviews in the first phase, seven attributes mentioned on the label were selected for the use in the online survey. They are: brand, grape varietal, vintage year, origin of the wine, alcohol content, label color and label design. They represent the most direct attributes that influence on the decision of purchase and as well as part of the information search that often appear.

- Brand name plays a great influence in the decision process as it is the first element that the consumer will see on the label (Harper, 2010).
- Grape Variety: Most New World countries simplified the labeling with simply the mention of the grape varietal and it appeared that such simple labels are preferred by a lot of consumers (Harper, 2010).
- Vintage year: consumers would be willing to memorize the years of good harvest. It is ranked second most important attribute when purchasing wine in a research done by Barber et al. (2006).
- Origin of the wine is regarded as one of the most important attributes when purchasing wine (Barber et al., 2006). The country of origin or the producing region of the wine, is often used as an indicator of quality (Sutanonpaiboon and Atkin, 2012).

- Alcohol content is a health concern by many drinkers with nowadays healthy eating and drinking habits campaigns. It is a mandatory mention on the wine labels as per the wine labeling laws.
- Label color is perceived differently in each culture. Hong Kong being a Chinese base culture has a strong influence of Chinese culture, with somehow diluted by Western cultures. It is interesting to look into the effect of colors on the consumer's choice, whether any impact would be perceived (Kommonen, 2011). The choices of color for this research would have significant meaning in the Chinese culture and they are red, yellow, black and white.
- Label design plays a certain role on Hong Kong Chinese consumers. As pointed out by Sherman and Tuten (2011), the label design served as extrinsic cue in the perception of wine. Would a French wine label with a château has more influence on Hong Kong Chinese consumers than a label showing a daisy flower but still from France? It would be interesting to see what type of image or design characteristics do Hong Kong Chinese consumers relate each country's wine.

One hundred questionnaires were collected. The sampling frame was a convenience sample from a private distribution list of initial thirty five friends' email, to be requested to further cascade to more friends. The response rate was therefore 68%. Of the valid questionnaires, 59 (87%) were from Hong Kong Chinese and 9 (13%) were from other origins respondents.

Table 1 provides a socio-demographics profile of the Hong Kong Chinese respondents who participated in the survey. The respondents' profiles matches somehow with the latest Hong Kong population statistics in terms of gender, age groups, marital status, education level and occupation.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Importance of Attributes

Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of seven attributes, on a scale of four from "extremely important" (4) to "not at all important" (1), by indicating one choice for each attribute. The results depicted in Figure 1 show the mean scores of the top three attributes of importance to Hong Kong Chinese respondents were "origin of wine" (mean=3.085), "grape variety" (mean=2.746) and "food and wine pairing" (mean=2.542). The "origin of wine" was significantly different from "grape variety" ($p < 0.05$), and "food and wine pairing". However, "grape variety" and "food and wine pairing" are not significantly different. This shows that most of the respondents consider "origin of wine" as more important than the other attributes which are less important in their considerations, while "alcohol content" is the least important for the respondents. On the origin selection, France was chosen by most respondents with highest percentage of 27% ($n=110$) on the overall,

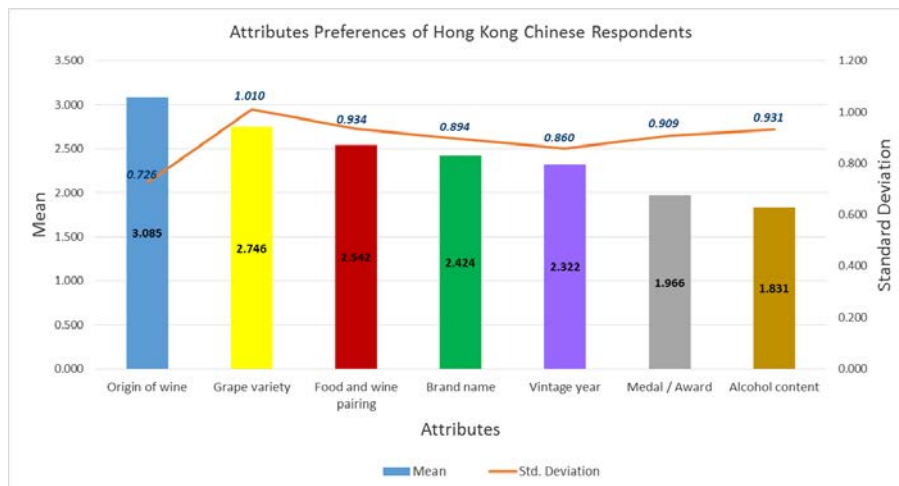
mainly for the purpose of business dinner (highest at 37%, n=46) and special occasion or gift (highest at 39%, n=37). Australian origin was highest and most preferred for family gathering (17%, n=32).

Table 1: Demographic of Hong Kong Chinese Respondents (*n*=59)

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	27	46
Female	32	54
<u>Age</u>		
18-34	26	44
35-44	18	31
Over 44	15	25
<u>Marital status</u>		
Married	27	46
Single	32	54
<u>Education</u>		
Secondary school	9	15
Academic	50	85
<u>Employment</u>		
Financial service industry	7	12
Tourism industry	1	2
Trading and logistic industry	9	15
Professional services or producing industry	20	34
Others	16	27
Unemployed	6	10

The results are in accordance with the study done by Thomas and Pickering (2003) where respondents showed preferences of “grape variety”, “region” and “cellaring information” (type of knowledge to acquire) to be of importance to be put on the front label. Also in a study done by Cohen (2009) on Australian wine drinkers to rate thirteen wine attributes on wine selection, the attributes “grape variety” and “origin of wine”, were rated third and fourth of importance, but “matching with food” (same as “food and wine pairing”) was rated on eighth position which is not the case in these findings.

Figure 1: Importance of Attributes rated by Hong Kong Chinese respondents (n=59)



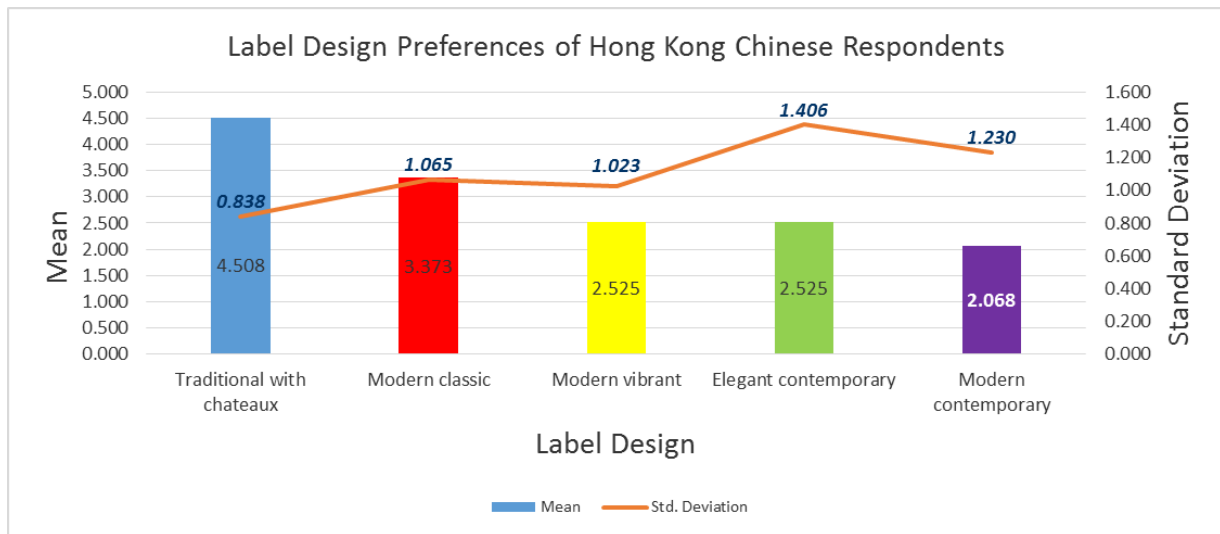
Brand name is found to be the fourth on the importance which is different from the a previous study done by Mueller and Szolnoki (2010) where brand was found to be one of the strongest drivers for informed liking.

No significant differences were found between male and female. Significant difference ($p < 0.01$) was found between the 35-44 years old and 45 years and older for “food and wine pairing”, as the older people give more importance to this attribute, maybe because that they are more experienced with wine.

3.2 Preference on Label Design

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of five, from 5 being “most preferred” to 1 being “least preferred”, their preferences on 5 label designs shown in the format of pictures on the survey. Results are summarized in the Figure 2 which shows the label design with a “traditional with château” has the most significance with highest mean of 4.508 where the standard deviation is 0.838 which is only 18.59% of the mean, the lowest standard deviation in the list among all. Then comes the “modern classic” with mean of 3.373 in a second position and follows at third position by “modern vibrant” and “elegant contemporary”, which are both with same mean of 2.525. The findings are in accordance with previous researches done by Celhay and Passebois (2011) and Sherman and Tuten (2011), where wines from France with visual codes were recorded and ranked according to the degree of perceived typicality representing a given category in our mind and grouping views in the overall perception of the wine quality. As per tradition, a château is a representation of France thus a higher degree of importance is seen from the findings.

Figure 2: Label Design rated by Hong Kong Chinese respondents (n=59)



Significant differences were observed among the labels. Traditional with château label was significantly preferred ($p < 0.001$) followed by the modern classic label.

Comparing the preference of label design for gender and for age groups show that all gender and age groups seem to have a tendency on preference for a label “traditional with château”. It is also observed that older respondents of 45 years old and more, give much attention and preference on traditional and classical label designs. This might be due to the long standing knowledge in wine. It is noticed from the findings that younger generation from 18 years old to 44 years old, is more inclined to traditional label with a château but also to modern and contemporary ones.

3.3 Preference on Label Color

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of four, from 1 “worst” to 4 “best”, their preferences on 4 labels based on their color dominance shown in the format of pictures. Findings as shown on the Table 2, exhibit the preferences of the respondents on the yellow color dominant label (mean=2.847, SD=1.031). It has the highest mean and the lowest standard deviation. This denotes that the yellow color dominant is of significant difference from the other label colors ($p < 0.05$). It might be due to the fact that the color yellow is very close to the color gold which is considered as wealth in the Chinese culture (Kommonen, 2011). Surprisingly, white color dominant label (mean=2.492, SD=1.150) comes second in the list of preference, while red color dominant label (mean=2.271, SD=1.201) is in the last position in the preferred list. These findings are somehow contrary to the standard Chinese culture belief and preferences in color (Kommonen, 2011; Liu and Murphy, 2007).

Table 2: Label color preference by Hong Kong Chinese respondents ($n=59$)

Label color	Mean	Standard Deviation
Yellow	2.847	1.031
White	2.492	1.150
Black	2.390	1.034
Red	2.271	1.201

Exploring within the gender and the age groups, similar pattern of preference was seen and in accordance with the direction of preferences in label color as seen previously.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper presents the study on Hong Kong Chinese consumers, having bought at least one bottle of wine in the last three months, by examining their attitudes towards information search on a wine label such as attributes, label design and color preferences, price, consumption occasion and type of wine purchased.

From the findings of this research, wineries or brand owner or wine label designer or wine marketer, who are to enter the Hong Kong wine market with the Hong Kong Chinese wine drinkers in mind, should provide clearly and concisely, what the wine drinkers consider as most influential attributes such as origin of the wine, grape variety and food and wine pairing suggestion. This would help to facilitate and to minimize the time in information search, which could in the end increase in sales.

If looking at the importance of origin of the wine from this research, wine label designers have to bear in mind to directly convey the message of the origin of the wine which could comprise of the country of origin, or the region or the terroir of the wine. Such specific details would help tremendously the wine consumers to pick precisely according to their preferences whether it is a matter of taste, emotional, geographical, and so on. Furthermore it would help to promote that country or region of origin of the wine in a better way as an easier entry point into a market.

Another upcoming trend in the Hong Kong Chinese wine consumer's preference is the information about food and wine pairing on the wine label. It was not of importance in the past few years as it was barely mentioned in the past literatures, but with the popularity of wine appreciation courses and wine tasting events, where Hong Kong carries the reputable

label of “gourmet paradise”, wine cannot go without food. And such piece of information of food and wine pairing does not exist if there is lack of space on the wine label or in the case of one front label only. However, from this research, it is revealed that there is such a request which should not be ignored by the wine label designer or wine marketer or winery owner. For adventurous wine consumers looking for new taste or wine enthusiasts with none to basic wine knowledge, such piece of information would be of great help in guiding their selection which could be a way to lead to repeat purchase or referrals to friends and families through word-of-mouth effect.

Furthermore, attractive and easy to understand wine label color and designs would help the information search. Combination of elements from the most influential wine label designs and colors should be used according to the product targeted positioning such as purchasing timing, consumption occasion and targeted consumer’s groups. If a traditional label with a château would attract more customers, then a wise use of such element to incorporate into the label design would help into the sales. Color has somehow a meaning in the Hong Kong Chinese context. It would be good to use wisely where appropriate as per the target occasion or festive season or types of consumers to promote sales. For example a pink color dominant wine label would be best suited for a launch in the Valentine period rather than in the Mid-Autumn Festival.

French wine has already established its special place in the preference of the Hong Kong Chinese wine drinkers for many years. Other promising origins seeing on the rise such as Italy, Australia, Chile, South Africa and the United States, should be promoted as well to offer variety to the consumers with more tasting events and marketing supports. Companies should promote wisely these rising origins according to the consumption occasions so as to better target the right consumers.

One major element to successfully market a bottle of wine, is to thoroughly understand the targeted market and its consumer’s segment. Each market and each segment differ somehow in their perceptions of things. The key elements in which they are looking at would help tremendously the winery or brand owner or marketer, to achieve successful sales results and to sustain in the long run.

4.1 Conclusion and Managerial Implication

This paper was aimed at exploring Hong Kong Chinese consumer’s predilection in their search of information on a wine label perception, on how wine labels affect Hong Kong Chinese consumers purchasing decision and the attributes they look for on a wine label. The results of this study confirm that Hong Kong Chinese consumers in the sample of the study are affected by the wine label by looking for extrinsic factors such as but not limited to, the

origin of the wine, the grape variety, and the food and wine pairing information as most important, as well as label design and color in assisting them in their purchasing decision, where a possible lack of knowledge about the wine is still present (Hu et al., 2008). Surprisingly brand name was not the top three attributes that was of importance in this survey and contrary to the first phase ground work data collection and other previous literatures. Empirical evidence from this exploratory survey on Hong Kong Chinese consumers has exposed some changes in consumer's preferences shift which should not be ignored. It should not be underestimated the power of information presented on the wine label which could ensure the overall interactions with the buyer in the process.

This study is of particular importance about the Hong Kong Chinese population due to its niche nature, to wineries, wine companies, wine label designers or wine marketers practitioners. Having said that Hong Kong being a formal British colony, it has both the influences of the Chinese culture as well as the Western's where the freedom of information is unquestionable. However the findings echo with Hu et al. (2008), to reveal some salient features of Hong Kong Chinese consumers' buying behavior that are associated with the Chinese culture, particularly the "face value" which is reflected in the selection of wine origin. This piece of information is valuable to French wineries or wine companies or wine label designer may be to include a French element in the wine label to attract consumer's attention.

4.2 Limitations and Future Researches

The present study has several limitations and requires further researches. First, the respondents comprise of a convenience sample of 100 respondents where 59 are Hong Kong Chinese. The sample size is therefore small and limited which prevented any segmentation. Future research with a larger sample size and longer time frame would be preferred to prevent a limited representation of the sample population, to make the results more generalized. Secondly, the selections of labels for the questions related to label design and label color dominance, are of limitations and might not be the most precise interpretation. These selections should have restricted to the types shown and not a generalization which could have limited and influenced the respondents' perception with bias. A wider selections and combinations from different countries and style, would be preferred to be more homogenous and generalized in representation. Thirdly, some of the questions are of different scale (four and five point Likert scale) which showed somehow difficulties in the final analysis to derive very accurate analysis.

One last point to mention but not the least, the selection of attributes is of limitation which could have restricted the respondents in their ranking. Attributes such as vineyard, percentage of blend, cellaring information to name a few, could be considered in future researches.

Future researches should include how other possible factors such as the education levels, the level of wine knowledge and wine involvement, would influence their perception of attributes importance. Possibly more emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of the bottle of wine in relation to the purchase intent and choice, to enable marketing practitioners and wine label designers to manage and to depict the perceived value of the product such as quality, loyalty, satisfaction and so on. Perhaps more discovery of additional upcoming variables of importance in the course of the purchase decision process such as the influence of other external extrinsic cues and information sources (example internet) should be investigated.

A comparative study comprising of the three major territories of Hong Kong (Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories) was not possible due to the small sample size, but it would be of significant interest in order to collect consumers' behavior for better placement of products to improve sales and marketability within Hong Kong. Finally, a comparative study of larger budget, of bigger picture involving more major cities of China such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Chengdu and Beijing, would be of significant interest so as to compare with other big cities located in the different part of China, which comprise of different Chinese wine consumer's behaviors with a good geographical spread from the North to the South of China in a larger scale.

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