Fantasy themes on wine labels: A good idea for practitioners?

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Abstract:

Purpose - This paper investigates the effects of fantasy wine labels on purchase intentions. While the use of fantasy themes (i.e., a fiction genre using imaginative elements and unreal creatures) is increasing in many product categories, yet it is unclear how consumers actually react to fantasy themes on wine labels.

Design/methodology/approach - Two on-line experiments were designed (using between-subjects design), and samples from New Zealand (Study 1: 237 participants) and USA (Study 2: 241 participants) were collected.

Findings - This research builds on the principle of hedonic dominance (Chitturi et al., 2007). The results of this research suggest that fantasy (vs. no-fantasy) labels enhance purchase intentions, but only when brand trust is well-established.

Practical implications - Wine companies could consider using fantasy themes on wine labels but only when trust in their wines is well-established. Our results suggest that (1) established brands (brand strength is a cue of brand trust) and (2) new brands that already hold quality recognitions for their wines (e.g., medals, awards, expert ratings) could use fantasy themes on wine labels to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

Keywords: Wine labels, fantasy themes, trust, principle of hedonic dominance

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1. INTRODUCTION

To what extent can our visual imagination determine what we taste? In an informative study, 54 wine experts tasted two glasses of identical white wine (one of which was red-colored with taste neutral food coloring). Surprisingly, none of the 54 experts were able to recognise that the 'red-colored wine' was, in fact, white wine (Brochet, 2001). Hence, people (even experts) struggle to differentiate accurately by taste; as other senses, in particular vision, interfere with their perception. Managers are well aware of that and invest heavily into product labels, providing visual and/or semantic information to influence taste perception. For example, in the US market alone, companies spend more than $120 billion annually for packaging and labelling (Kerin et al., 2009) with particular emphasis on unique visual designs that engage consumers imagination (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008).

Fantasy themes are a current, fast-growing trend that is spreading out among product categories beyond movie business. For example, a selection of 12 Australian wines called the Wines of Westeros (inspired by the fantasy series *Games of Thrones*) is forthcoming (Common Ventures, 2015). This anecdotic evidence emphasises the current popularity of using fantasy themes to market products. Although visual designs that stimulate imagination (e.g., fantasy themes) seem to be an increasingly popular choice for marketing managers (Nenkov and Scott, 2014), it is still unclear whether these designs enhance or hurt consumers' product perception and purchase responses.

The principle of hedonic dominance suggests that people tend to make more affective evaluations than cognitive ones, once the functional requirements of consumers are met (Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008). This suggests that unusual package designs (such as fantasy) are only affectively processed and enjoyed when consumers first established trust in the product/brand. In this study, we aim to assess the effect of fantasy wine labels on purchase intentions. This current research makes two important contributions. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the effects of visual designs that use fantasy themes. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature on visual designs that stimulate elaboration (Labroo et al., 2008; Landwehr et al., 2013; Nenkov and Scott, 2014). Second, we apply the principle of hedonic dominance and shed light on when visual designs stimulating elaboration such as fantasy wine labels are likely to have an effect on purchase intentions. On this basis, we derive important implications for marketing and brand managers involved in the wine industry.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this research, we define fantasy as a fiction genre that includes imaginative elements such as magical or mystical creatures: e.g., dragons and unicorns (Campbell, 2015; St. James et al., 2011). Because fantasy themes stimulate imagination (Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Martin, 2004), they also facilitate information processing by increasing the amount of visualisation and the generation of mental images (Zhao et al., 2009). Moreover, the literature suggests that fantasy themes allow the creation of a more pleasant world (Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Kozinets et al., 2004; Martin, 2004) because the "fantastic imaginary" (Martin, 2004) enables people to construct their own thoughts of a limitless world of possibilities (Kozinets, 2001; Schlosser, 2003; St. James et al., 2011), either visually or semantically (Wyer et al., 2008).

The principle of hedonic dominance suggests that people tend to make more affective evaluations once functional requirements are met (Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008). Specifically, consumers give greater weight to hedonic attributes when they take the functional attributes for granted (Chitturi et al., 2007). People tend to avoid losses (e.g., poor product quality), and trust in products/brands minimises these losses (Landwehr et al., 2012). Thus, an acceptable level of functionality is necessary to establish this trust relationship. Several strategies can help to establish trust in the product: e.g., brand strength and expertise cues (Dawar and Parker, 1994; Landwehr et al., 2012). We expect that fantasy labels increase purchase intentions when trust is well-established.

Recent research suggests that unique and atypical product design lead to positive affective responses when consumers engage in effortful cognitive processing (Bloch, 1995; Landwehr et al., 2013). Visual designs that use fantasy themes enable people to enjoy constructing imagery (Zhao et al., 2009). The creation of such an unreal world is a way of escaping from reality (Belk and Costa, 1998; Hirschman, 1983; Kozinets et al. 2004) and generating positive emotions from processing fantasy related-information (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). That is because the imagery is a sensory process (MacInnis and Price, 1987) which triggers positive affective reactions (Petrova and Cialdini, 2005; Schlosser, 2003). As a result, such elaboration enables consumers to enjoy processing the products' benefits (Nenkov and Scott, 2014). Thus, pleasing aesthetics increases affective reactions, yet consumers are likely to also consider indicators of functionality (e.g., brand information) that influence quality judgments of the product (Page and Herr, 2002). Hence, once the cut-offs for utilitarian benefits are met, and people establish trust in the product/brand, positive affective reactions are likely to be enhanced (Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008), resulting in the increased purchase intentions (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

3. STUDY 1

Design. The experiment is a 2 (wine label design: fantasy vs. no-fantasy) x 3 (mode of information: picture-brand name congruence vs. picture-brand name incongruence vs. text only) between-subjects design. Two fictitious wine labels were designed. *Fantasy* was manipulated by a picture of a fantasy animal (dragon or pegasus) and/or a fantasy animal-evoked brand name (Dragon Estate) while no-fantasy labels had a real animal (falcon or heron) and/or evoked brand name (Falcon Estate). To cover the whole spectrum of how fantasy themes could realistically appear on the label, we also manipulated the mode of information and used it as a control variable. That is because the picture-brand name congruence (vs. incongruence) is easier to process by being meaningful (McCracken and Macklin, 1998). However, some individuals find it easier to comprehend semantic information than visual information (Wyer et al., 2008), that is why text only conditions were also used in this study.

Sample and Procedure. 237 adults over 18 years old (69% female) were contacted on-line via snowball sampling in New Zealand. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. After respondents saw the wine label, they indicated their trust in taste of the assigned wine in an open-ended question "What would you expect this wine to taste like?"

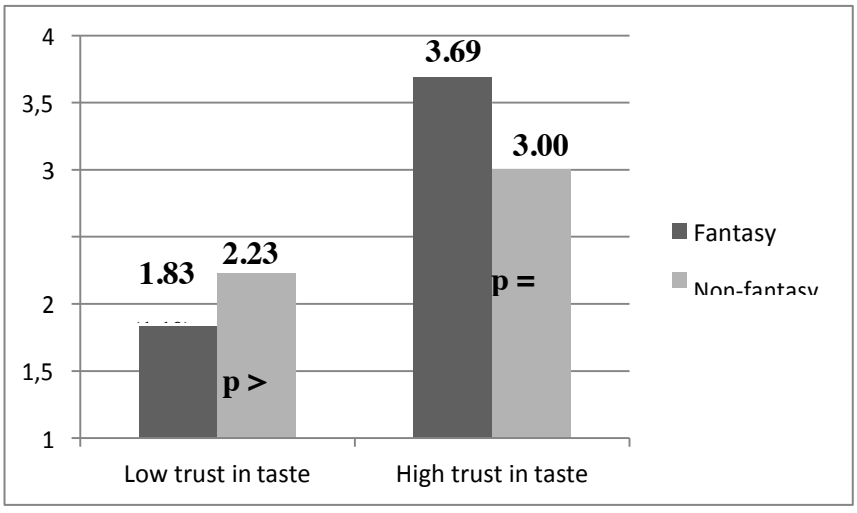
Purchase intentions were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = very unlikely to buy; 7 = very likely to buy, adapted from Landwehr et al. 2012). Next, to be able to include *trust in taste* as a moderator, we had to code the open-ended question "What would you expect this

wine to taste like?" The open-ended question was coded by two independent judges to reflect the participants' *trust in taste*. Participants' responses were coded into "0" when they used negative words and into "1" when they used neutral or positive words to describe their taste perception of the assigned wine label.

Fantasy manipulation check: Results confirmed that participants perceived the amount of fantasy (measured by "How much fantasy does this label contain?") to be higher in the fantasy conditions (M = 4.02, SD = 1.97) than in the no-fantasy conditions (M = 2.88, SD = 1.78, $t(235) = -4.62$, $p < .001$).

We estimated a 2 (wine label design: fantasy vs. no-fantasy) × 2 (trust in taste: low vs. high) ANOVA with *purchase intentions* as the dependent variable and mode of information as a covariate. The main effect of fantasy on *purchase intentions* is insignificant ($p > .10$), while the effect of *trust in taste* is significant ($p < .001$). The main effect of the mode of information was significant ($F(2, 231) = 6.73$, $p < .002$). As expected (see Fig. 1), there was a significant interaction between fantasy and *trust in taste* on *purchase intentions* ($F(1, 231) = 8.85$, $p <$ .01). To interpret this significant interaction effect, the follow-up results revealed that within the group of high *trust in taste*, participants were less willing to buy a bottle of wine with a no-fantasy label (M = 3.00, SD = 1.57) than with a fantasy label (M = 3.69, SD = 1.67; $t(147) = -2.60$, $p = .01$). In contrast, within the group of low trust in taste, although the means suggest that participants were less willing to buy a bottle of wine with a fantasy label (M = 1.83, SD = 1.10) than with a no-fantasy label, the difference is insignificant (M = 2.23, SD = 1.23; $t(86) = 1.58$, $p > .10$).

Fig. 1: Purchase intentions of fantasy labels in the presence of trust in taste (Study 1; standard deviation in brackets)



Discussion. The findings of Study 1 suggest that people are less likely to buy a bottle of wine with a no-fantasy label rather than with a fantasy label when their taste expectations are met or exceeded. Thus, trust in taste seems to be an important determinant of purchase intentions. In Study 2, we directly manipulated trust with using objective criteria (i.e., Parker rating points) to reflect the level of expertise of the wine producer and wine quality.

4. STUDY 2

Stimulus development. The experiment is a 2 (wine label design: fantasy vs. no-fantasy) x 3 (perceived expertise: low expert rating vs. high expert rating vs. control: no expert rating) between-subjects design. Two fictitious wine labels were designed. *Fantasy* was manipulated by showing a picture of a fantasy animal (unicorn) and a fantasy-evoked brand name (Mystery Estate) while no-fantasy labels had a real animal (horse) and a no-fantasy evoked brand name (Mastery Estate). *Perceived expertise* was manipulated by using a 100-point scale from the wine specialist magazine Wine Advocate (established by the worldwide wine expert Robert Parker and commonly used in US wine market) and showing either no rating as no indication of perceived expertise or 71 points as low expertise or 94 points as high expertise. Below the wine rating indications, the Wine Advocate Rating System was provided (including the range of relevant values). This rating point scale, as an indicator of wine quality, is one of the practical examples of how wine companies that use fantasy labels could establish consumers' trust in their wines.

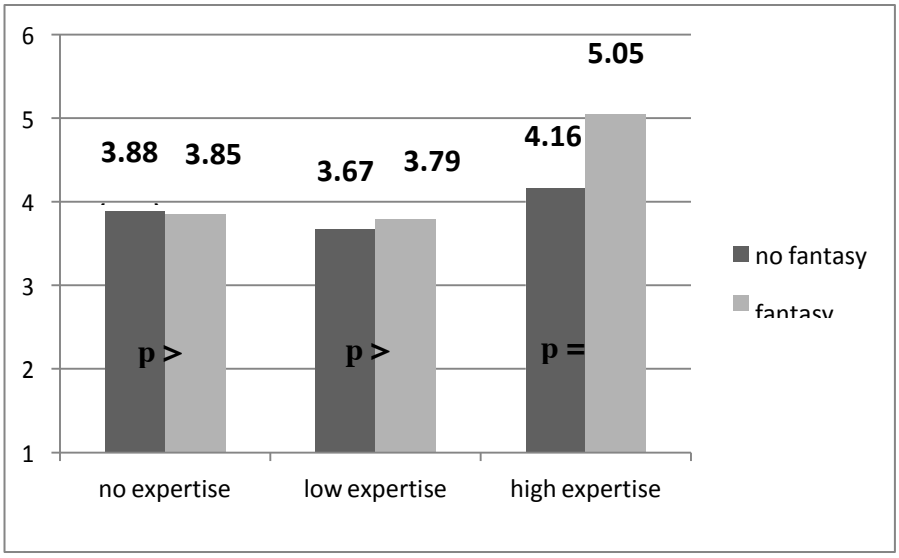
Sample and procedure. A sample of 241 adults (39% female) from across the United States was recruited through Mechanical Turk to participate in this online experiment in exchange for 40 cents. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. *Purchase intentions* were measured in the same way as in Study 1.

Fantasy Manipulation Checks were conducted following the same procedure as in study 1. As intended, participants perceived the amount of fantasy to be higher in the fantasy conditions (M = 5.51, SD =1.39) than in the no-fantasy conditions (M = 3.92, SD = 1.81, $t(228.52) = -7.66$, $p < .001$). *Perceived Expertise Manipulation Checks*. Participants answered a 2-item index of competence ($\alpha = .94$) "To what extent do you believe this wine producer is", using two items "credible" and "competent" (1 = not at all; 7 = very much, adapted from Aaker et al., 2010). As intended, results revealed that participants perceived the level of the wine producer's expertise to be higher in the high expert rating conditions (M = 5.47, SD = .94) than in the low expert rating conditions (M = 4.65, SD = 1.07, $t(157) = -5.09$, $p < .001$).

We estimated a 2 (wine label design: fantasy vs. no-fantasy) × 3 (perceived expertise: no vs. low vs. high expert ratings) ANOVA with *purchase intentions* as the dependent variable.

Results revealed a marginally significant effect of fantasy labels ($F(1, 235) = 2.81$, $p < .10$) and a significant effect of perceived expertise ($F(2, 235) = 7.60$, $p = .001$). The interaction between fantasy and perceived expertise was not significant ($p = .12$). However, planned contrasts (see Fig. 2) showed that participants were more willing to buy a bottle of wine with a fantasy label (Mystery Estate) than with a no-fantasy label (Mastery Estate), but only in the high expertise conditions (M = 5.05, SD = 1.15 vs. M = 4.16, SD = 1.50; $F(1, 235) = 6.75$, $p = .01$). Within the no and low expertise conditions, the difference between fantasy and no fantasy labels was not significant (Ps > .10)

Fig. 2: Purchase intentions of fantasy labels in the presence of perceived expertise (Study 2; standard deviation in brackets)



*Discussion***.** The results of Study 2 are consistent with findings of Study 1 and further reveal that even a subtle manipulation of the brand name (Mystery vs. Mastery) and using a unicorn versus horse can significantly increase purchase intentions for the wine labels, but only if consumers trust the producer's expertise. For wine companies that consider using fantasy labels, this study suggests that high rating points on the Parker scale are one of the ways of establishing trust in wines (by reflecting a high producer's expertise and wine quality) and increasing consumers' purchase intentions.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Across two studies using different country samples and different ways of manipulating fantasy labels, we find a consistent pattern in the results. Namely, fantasy labels increase purchase intentions, but only when trust in the product is established. The findings demonstrate that unusual designs such as fantasy labels should be used with care and only when trust is well-established. Our findings have clear managerial implications for brand managers and practitioners dealing with wine labels. Strong brands could consider unusual wine labels because brand strength is a cue of brand trust (Dawar and Parker, 1994). Wine marketers should also ensure that consumers trust their existing products. For example, wine companies could use fantasy labels to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, but only when these companies already hold quality recognitions for their products such as medals, awards, and stickers with high expert ratings (e.g., from Robert Parker or James Halliday).

In line with previous studies (Chitturi et al., 2007; Melnyk et al., 2012), we focused on purchase intentions. That is because consumers' intentions are important to predict the direction of future purchases. In general, purchase intentions are positively linked to purchasing behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). However, they cannot always convert into purchasing behaviour (Chandon et al., 2005; Morwitz et al., 1993). Thus, further

research should address this point by investigating purchasing behaviour. For example, further research should look at actual sales of existing wine brands using fantasy labels in order to find how fantasy labels drive sales in the marketplace. This current research investigated how consumers react to fantasy wine labels in artificial settings. Other research should further explore how fantasy labels affect consumers' responses by conducting field studies (e.g., in a liquor store, supermarket or winery). Furthermore, this paper focused on the effect of fantasy wine labels on consumers using samples from "New World wine countries". This effect may differently affect consumers from "Old World wine countries" because they are perceived to be more traditional and attached to heritage/ "terroir" values. For example, would including an 'unreal' animal on a French heritage-based label increase purchase responses for a bottle of wine? Finally, we used only one country of origin: Australia, future research should employ other countries of origin (e.g., "Old world wine countries"). That is because countries and regions of origin play an important role, as indicators of wine quality and reputation, in the consumer preference and consideration to purchase a bottle of wine (Ling and Lockshin, 2003; Orth et al., 2005). Therefore, these geographical cues may also affect consumers' reactions to wine fantasy labels.

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