Lausanne 2024 Abstract Submission

Title
Gender in the glass or gendered palate? The role and influence of gender on wine tasting and rating

I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Keywords
wine tasting; ratings; gender; gender-descriptors

Research Question
We are interested in the role of gender in wine tasting (see details in the abstract)

Methods
Regression analyses; text analysis; AI

Results
Tasters use gendered-descriptors in their comments; there are differences between wines and between tasters.

Abstract
In recent years, wine has attracted the interest of researchers from various disciplines. It indeed offers an ideal “playground” for investigating a wide range of issues. Firstly, tasting a wine and grasping its nuances of aroma and taste represents a unique sensory experience. Secondly, to express oneself about a tasted wine, it is necessary to place it in a territorial, historical and, more generally, cultural context. Cognitive mechanisms are at the heart of these processes, and multiple biases can have an impact on the taster and his or her evaluation of a wine. These
considerations have led to the emergence of what Spence (2020) calls “wine psychology” (see also Parr (2019)). The way in which tasting is approached, and the very appreciation of a wine’s quality, depend on the taster. His or her cultural background plays an important role (Rodrigues & Parr, 2019). The taster’s expectations of the wine, whether correct or incorrect, contribute to the way he or she feels about it (Masset & Raub, 2023). The human brain is such that it tends to make more or less constructed and automatic associations between the stimuli perceived by its various senses. So, for example, the color of a wine creates expectations and thereby influences the aromas and flavors experienced at the moment of tasting (Parr, White, & Heatherbell, 2003). Coloring a white wine into a rosé, even using a colorant that is perfectly neutral in terms of taste, leads the majority of tasters to find red fruit aromas in it – which, however, they do not find in the uncolored white wine (Wang & Spence, 2019). These crossmodal correspondences can be explained by the use of a common semantic lexicon to describe sensations specific to different senses (Spence, 2018). In other words, a taster’s assessment of a wine and its quality is never perfectly objective.

The complexity of the stimuli experienced during tasting makes it difficult to translate them into words. Consequently, tasters tend to use semantic references with which they are comfortable. Comparisons and, above all, metaphors are frequently used. Metaphors respond to the same logic as the crossmodal correspondences experienced during tasting (Caballero, 2019), and they have this strength of being able to convey a complex message in an intuitive way (Wang, Thomadsen, & Amidi, 2024). Anthropomorphism (Suárez-Toste, 2007) and in particular the use of gendered descriptors (Masset, Terrier, & Livat, 2023) are among the most common metaphors. Indeed, some types of grapes and methods of wine production result in wines that are often characterized as fine, delicate, and elegant, traits commonly described as feminine. On the other hand, words like powerful, tannic, bold, and strong, typically associated with masculinity, are used to describe other wines. Émile Peynaud, now widely regarded as the “father of modern winemaking”, considered the distinction between feminine and masculine wines to be one of the key dimensions in wine evaluation (Peynaud, 1980). Product-associated gender is not neutral to the consumer. Schnurr (2018) finds that consumers tend to prefer products matching their goals, with hedonic goals leading to a preference for feminine-perceived products and utilitarian goals for masculine-perceived ones. The taster’s gender is also likely to affect his or her perception of a wine. Gender identity, as defined by Lorber and Farrell (1991), is a social construct influencing attitudes and behaviors, a concept further explored by Zayer and Pounders (2022). Notable gender differences in the wine industry have been documented in various areas: Barber et al. (2009) focus on information-seeking behavior, Mitchell and Hall (2001) on winery visitor perceptions, and Forbes (2012) on drinking patterns. Recent studies, including Bryant and Garnham (2014), Galbreath and Tisch (2020), and D’Amato (2017), have extended this understanding to the supply side of the wine industry, examining career paths, management styles, leadership, and performance.

In this article, we are interested in the role of gender in wine tasting. We use a dataset that covers 5395 wines judged in 2022 at International Wine and Spirits Competition, a UK-based awarding institution. The dataset contains a total of 18224 tasting notes and ratings delivered by various judges. Each wine is assessed by several judges within the same jury, resulting in multiple appearances of the same wine in the dataset which has a typical panel structure. For each wine, the individual rating given by each judge and a tasting note are known, along with objective characteristics such as the product name, color, whether it is sparkling, still or fortified, country and region of origin, vintage, level of alcohol, whether it is blended, the varietals used and their proportions, and whether it benefits from a certification of origin. We also know the identity of each judge (first and last name), his or her gender, his or her industry credentials if any (no credential, Master Sommelier or Master of Wine) as well as his or her occupation in the industry: airline buyer, communicator (brand ambassador, journalist, etc.), consultant, educator, on-trade buyer (for bars, restaurants, etc., places selling beverages for immediate consumption on the premises), or off-trade buyer (for supermarkets, retailer, etc., when beverages are sold for consumption elsewhere, typically at home). The IWSC judges are presented as industry leaders and influencers, but some have closer ties to the wine business and wine consumers, such as on-trade buyers, than others, such as communicators or consultants.

Our dataset allows for original and detailed analyses. We investigate four complementary research questions, related to (i) the “gender profile” of a wine – is the use of gendered metaphors systematic enough to determine whether a wine is feminine or masculine on the basis of the gendered descriptors employed; (ii) the valence associated with gendered descriptors – do tasters feel attractive (positive valence) or averse (negative) to stimuli associated with gendered descriptors; (iii) the rating of wines – does a wine’s gender profile correlate with its rating. Obviously, the way in which the concept of gender is grasped when tasting a wine and the impact it can have on its perceived quality can vary considerably from one taster to another. It is therefore conceivable that the answers to the three research questions set out above may differ between various groups of tasters. This brings us
to the final research question, which concerns (iv) the factors affecting the gendered content of a critic’s tasting notes – how critics’ gender and cultural/professional background influence the gendered content of their tasting notes.

To address the first research question, we use artificial intelligence to extract all the wine descriptors found in the tasting notes, and to categorize them as masculine or feminine. For the second research question, we again resort to artificial intelligence to determine the valence associated with each gendered descriptor. The third stage of our analysis relies on the estimation of a grade equation. Here we regress the score obtained by each wine on the masculine and feminine valence of the descriptors identified in the previous step, including wine fixed effects. Finally, we investigate the effect of the gender congruence of descriptors and judges using multivariate regressions.

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