

# **Experiential Marketing in Wine Tourism: The Role of Winery Tours and Tastings in Building Customer Engagement.**

## **A Netnographic Analysis of Family-Owned Wineries in the Lake Neusiedl Region.**

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### **THE AIM OF THE PAPER**

This study explores how winery tours and tasting experiences enhance the marketing strategies of family-owned wineries in the Lake Neusiedl region, Austria. It examines how experiential elements contribute to customer loyalty, repeat purchases, and brand image.

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### **METHODOLOGY**

Using a netnographic approach, 1,895 customer reviews from Vivino were analyzed to assess visitor experiences. The study focuses on three key experiential dimensions: knowledge acquisition, entertainment, and aesthetic engagement.

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### **MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS**

The results highlight that educational aspects, particularly guided tours and wine tastings, significantly enhance visitor satisfaction. The scenic winescape and entertainment offerings also play a crucial role in shaping positive experiences. However, wineries face challenges such as market differentiation and staffing shortages. The findings suggest that strategic use of storytelling, edutainment, and personalized engagement can improve the effectiveness of winery visits as a marketing tool. The study acknowledges limitations, including the focus on German-speaking visitors and the lack of demographic data.

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### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Future research should explore post-visit behaviors, social interactions during winery visits, and the long-term impact of experiential marketing on repurchase behavior. These insights can help wineries refine their customer engagement strategies and strengthen their competitive positioning. This research provides actionable recommendations for wineries to optimize experiential marketing and enhance customer relationships.

*Keywords:* experiential marketing, customer engagement, netnography, winescape

## INTRODUCTION

Wineries embody natural, cultural, and environmental values, extending beyond their brand identity. As a result, they integrate experiential elements into their marketing strategies, using wine tastings not only to commercialize their products but also to build loyalty and customer involvement (Joy *et al.* 2021, Darázs 2024). In a rapidly evolving wine industry, wineries must adopt strategic marketing approaches to maintain their market position. Winery tours, when effectively incorporated, can foster long-term engagement by creating synergies between one-time leisure experiences, product purchases, and repeat visits (Pastor 2006).

The experiential dimension of wine marketing has gained increasing academic attention (Bonn *et al.* 2018), with studies highlighting its impact on brand image and customer loyalty (Joy *et al.* 2021). However, despite the emerging focus (Thach & Charters 2016, Sigala *et al.* 2019), no study has provided a comprehensive framework detailing how winery visits contribute to customer retention through re-purchases and re-visits. Given the strategic relevance of winery experiences, a structured approach is needed to ensure that each visit reinforces brand identity and product sales (Gombos & Kézai 2023).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study's relevance is underpinned by the theoretical framework of the consumption experience, the winescape concept (Kubát *et al.* 2023), and more specifically, the four realms model proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998). Kubát and his team (2023) define the winescape as both the environment and the social interactions through which the customer experience is co-created. In a broader context the winescape covers the interaction of vineyards, wineries and other physical structures, wine, natural landscapes and environments, people, cultural heritage, cities and buildings and their architecture, and other human products. In a narrow context, a winescape can be limited to an individual wine estate. In this case, the customer experience is embedded in a regional atmosphere yet can be fully driven by the winery. Pine and Gilmore (1998) developed an experiential framework embodying four dimensions, namely, entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism. These are deployed along two axes, exemplifying the extent of consumers' participation in creating an experience (passive-active) and their relationship

with the experiential environment (absorption-immersion). Situated at the convergence of the four dimensions, the most successful experiences draw together the latter in a so-called "sweet-spot" (Vo Thanh & Kirova 2018), helping consumers to reach the "optimal psychological flow state" (Csikszentmihályi 2017) that ensures the success of an experience. Despite the sensory nature of wine consumption (Bruwer & Alant 2009), research on this activity has only recently begun to examine the experience economy approach. In particular, it has highlighted the importance of the environmental impression in winery visits (Pikkemaat *et al.* 2009) so as the diversity of wine related in-situ experiences (Cohen & Ben-Nun 2009). A total experience is combined with authenticity, service and product quality paired with the quality/price mix, aesthetic servicescape and elements of personal development (Roberts & Sparks 2006). The learning dimension has a special emphasis due to its motivational factor (Galloway *et al.* 2008). A major boost is when the education is embedded in entertainment or in edutainment in one word, as Getz and his research fellows (2008) call the phenomenon. Taking inspiration from Pine and Gilmore's four realms model, Quadri-Felliti and Fiore (2012) developed a classification of winery visit activities according to their primary dimension, which formed an important basis for understanding the winery experience as follows. Entertainment can be cellar concerts, music in vineyards, wine blending, demonstration or wine presentations. In these cases the customers are engaged by performances. They participate rather passively than actively, and their connection is probably more one of absorption than immersion, such as product and service offerings. Education activities can be wine tasting and seminars or culinary-wine pairing events or vineyard tours. Experiences that involve learning, where visitors are involved with more active participation. They seek to broaden their knowledge related to wine, its elaboration process and place of origin. Aesthetic targets the senses. The servicescape aesthetics can influence the quality of the experience, through the unique lodging and the available arts and crafts in or around the winery. If the experience involves learning or entertainment involves active participation, in which the visitor is immersed, this is considered escapism.

## KEY MARKETING CHALLENGES RELATED TO WINESCAPES

Austria's wines enjoy strong recognition both domestically and internationally. The country's 46,500 hectares of vineyards, including 13,300 hectares in Burgenland, are predominantly cultivated by family-owned wineries that balance tradition with modern, often sustainable, winemaking practices. These wineries differentiate themselves through biodynamic methods, unique terroirs, and cultural experiences, including art, events, and festivals. However, they face challenges, particularly in finding service-oriented staff who can combine expertise in winemaking, sales, and guided tours (Petrevska & Ackovka 2015, Figueroa & Rotarou 2018, Alpizar & Maldonado 2009). The Lake Neusiedl region, home to 471 wineries, is a highly competitive market where biodynamic farming, regional heritage, and gastronomy serve as key selling points. Personal visits play a crucial role in fostering customer loyalty and repurchase behavior, yet winery-specific marketing strategies remain underexplored (Wieschoff 2022, Andert & Wieschoff 2022, König *et al.* 2022). From an academic perspective, wine marketing has evolved from product promotion to experience-driven engagement (Getz *et al.* 1999). Wine tourism is closely tied to servicescapes (Bruwer & Lesschaevé 2012), where visitors seek immersive, lifestyle-driven experiences beyond the wine itself (Asero & Patti 2011). Winery visits influence customer retention (Grybovyč *et al.* 2013) and shape destination image (Pratt & Sparks 2014). They integrate cultural, historical, and gastronomic elements (Hall 2006), reinforcing brand perception through pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit experiences (Hall 1996, Mitchell & Hall 2004). Studies indicate that festivals, tastings, and winery tours enhance repurchase behavior and word-of-mouth marketing (Mitchell & Hall 2006).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the marketing landscape and existing literature, the following research questions have been formulated.

*RQ1. Can the "sweet spot" be identified during winery tours or tasting experiences?*

This question is rooted in Pine and Gilmore's (1998) four realms model, which defines the "sweet spot" as the optimal balance of education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism in an experience.

Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018) further refined this concept in the context of wine tourism, identifying experiential marketing elements that create deep consumer engagement. Csikszentmihályi's (2017) concept of "optimal psychological flow" also supports this, as successful winery experiences should immerse visitors in a way that enhances satisfaction and brand loyalty.

*RQ2. What is the role of edutainment in shaping visitor experiences at wineries?*

Edutainment, or the combination of education and entertainment, has been emphasized as a key driver of wine tourism satisfaction (Getz *et al.* 2008). The role of knowledge acquisition in consumer engagement is supported by Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018) and Madeira *et al.* (2019), who highlight that visitors often seek educational value in winery experiences. Additionally, Kubát *et al.* (2023) define the winescape as an interactive environment where knowledge transmission plays a central role.

*RQ3. How is the concept of the "winescape" utilized during winery tours and tastings?*

The winescape concept (Kubát *et al.* 2023) integrates landscape, cultural heritage, wine production, and social interactions to create a holistic visitor experience. Previous research (Bruwer & Alant 2009, Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019) confirms that aesthetic and environmental elements significantly enhance visitor engagement. Pikkemaat *et al.* (2009) further argue that the overall winery atmosphere – architecture, vineyard settings, and natural surroundings – plays a crucial role in shaping visitor satisfaction.

*RQ4. Which marketing tools are most effective in optimizing the impact of wine tastings?*

Joy *et al.* (2021) emphasize the relationship between winery tourism experiences and brand loyalty, highlighting that experiential marketing strengthens long-term customer engagement. Thach and Charters (2016) provide insights into best practices in global wine tourism marketing, while Grybovyč *et al.* (2013) explore visitor motivations and how they translate into strategic marketing efforts. Additionally, the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping consumer perceptions (Serra-Cantalops *et al.* 2018, Xiang *et al.* 2017) underscores the importance of leveraging digital tools to enhance the wine tasting experience.

Overall, these questions seek to identify actionable tactics for maximizing the effectiveness of wine-related experiential marketing.

## METHODOLOGY

In alignment with prior studies utilizing online available data, this research employed a netnographic approach, gathering secondary data from online reviews to explore customer evaluations of wineries in the Lake Neusiedl District. Instead of TripAdvisor, a more specific source was used: feedback from Vivino. This application has 65 million users. Vivino's aim is to provide customers access to unbiased information primarily about wines. However, there is abundant information related to the winery as well. This method is particularly well-suited for capturing experiential narratives, analyzing complex social dynamics, and enabling researchers to construct insights from the consumer's perspective (Vo Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Furthermore, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) data – where consumers share their opinions through digital platforms – has gained increasing relevance in wine marketing research (Serra-Cantallops *et al.* 2018). A total of 1,895 customer reviews were sourced from Vivino, a widely used wine review platform, to assess visitor experiences at family-owned wineries in the Lake Neusiedl region. Data collection was facilitated by the open-source platform RapidMiner in March 2023, encompassing 1,895 reviews published between January and December 2022. Most of the reviews were in German or Austrian German, allowing for nuanced interpretation of the content and reflecting the predominantly German-speaking consumer base from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, or expatriates from these regions. It should be noted that the diversity of German dialects presents comprehension challenges, even for native speakers, as reviews often blend implicit traits, opinions, and fragmented ideas. To enhance data reliability, only reviews from verified users were included, and comments with fewer than 150 characters were excluded due to insufficient detail, as they lacked explanation or interrelations in their evaluations. The dataset was preprocessed to remove irrelevant entries, duplicates, and incomplete reviews. Text preprocessing techniques, such as tokenization, lemmatization, and stop-word removal, were applied to standardize the data for further analysis. While the reviews did not provide detailed consumer profiles, limiting the ability to segment by demographic criteria, the comment corpus was systematically coded using Taguette via a deductive content analysis. Citations were classified by sentence, and the resulting database categorized content into groups based on thematic patterns. A qualitative content

analysis was conducted using an inductive-deductive coding approach. During the inductive phase an exploratory open coding process was carried out to identify recurring themes in visitor experiences. Initial codes were generated based on patterns emerging from the data. The deductive phase identified themes were then structured according to three pre-defined dimensions – knowledge acquisition, entertainment, and aesthetic engagement – derived from existing literature on experiential marketing. A combination of keyword frequency analysis and topic modeling (e.g., Latent Dirichlet Allocation, LDA) was employed to detect dominant themes and sub-themes within each experiential dimension.

To ensure reliability, a random sample of 250 reviews was coded two times (approximately 13.2% of the dataset). Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to assess inter-coder agreement. The result yielded  $\kappa = 0.81$ , indicating strong agreement, thus ensuring consistency in the thematic classification. The results were analyzed considering existing literature on wine tourism and experiential marketing, identifying key factors that contribute to successful winery marketing strategies. The implications for winery owners were then discussed, emphasizing best practices for enhancing customer experiences.

## RESULTS

The majority of reviewers were from Austria (48.07%), followed by other German-speaking regions (41.23%), while 10.70% came from non-German-speaking countries, showing considerable variability. These demographics align with Statistics Austria. Visitor profiles included couples (54%), friends/social groups (26%), families (12%), and solo travelers (8%), often visiting for cycling or business. The mean rating was 4.72 ( $SD = 0.51$ ), indicating high satisfaction, consistent with TripAdvisor trends (Xiang *et al.* 2017) and likely on Vivino. Knowledge acquisition was the most cited factor, followed by entertainment and aesthetic experiences. While some differences existed, visitor experiences showed more similarities than differences, contrasting with Brochado *et al.* (2021), who found distinct segment preferences. Unlike their study, this research found similar attribute intensities between couples and families but a clear contrast between family and solo visitors.

Knowledge acquisition, identified as a major motivation for participation in in-situ wine tasting (Zhang & Lee 2022), was a consistent theme across all customer profiles. It was most intensively

cited by business travelers (23.58%) and least by couples (8.73%). This finding aligns with Madeira *et al.* (2019), who also ranked education alongside aesthetics as key experiential elements. Similarly, in the research by Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018), knowledge acquisition was the most prominent dimension, particularly linked to "guided tours," which received the highest number of citations. Wineries have an opportunity here to strategically engage customers by educating them about their history, production processes, and wine storage techniques, which can be positioned as a key aspect of their brand image or competitive advantage. Since each winery has unique methods of production, communicating these complexities can significantly enhance the perceived value of their products, leaving a lasting impression on customers and influencing future purchasing behavior. In this study, guided winery tours—whether or not they included wine tasting—stood out most for business travelers (9.76%), followed by families (4.65%), though with lesser intensity. Wine tastings, while often considered separate from the tour itself, allow for more active customer participation. During tastings, a sensory dimension emerges, making them an effective tool for wineries to promote their products and drive sales. This aspect resonated most with couples (8.67%), friends (6.23%), and solo visitors (6.36%). A recurring but low-intensity topic within knowledge acquisition was cultural understanding, with the highest mention among the friends group (4.01%) and the lowest among solo travelers (1.97%). Another notable finding was the niche appeal of food and wine pairing. Despite its potential for sensory satisfaction, the educational component of this pairing did not seem to engage customers significantly. It was mentioned only minimally by friends (0.31%) and couples (0.05%). In terms of brand identity, the information presented typically emphasizes themes such as an "organic" or "sustainable nature" approach or a "generational" narrative. Notably, these concepts rarely overlap. Being an organic winery and maintaining a traditional, generational approach are distinct positions, often representing contrasting values and business philosophies. These two concepts were the most frequently used. However, due to their overuse, they no longer serve as effective differentiators nor competitive advantages.

Within the entertainment dimension, attributes such as "wine," "tasting," and "event" had a high proportion of mentions across all customer profiles. As discussed earlier, entertainment typically engages customers passively, allowing them to absorb the experience rather than actively immers-

ing them. This applies both to core activities at the destination and to supplementary ones (Vo Thanh & Kirova 2018, Madeira *et al.* 2019). The significance of entertainment in wine marketing is well-established, often described as a way to provide enjoyment and satisfaction (Zhang & Lee 2022). This importance was evident in the high frequency of references to entertainment across reviews, from couples (48.2%), friends (44.68%), families (42.99%), solo travelers (40.21%), and business visitors (46.29%). These findings align with Madeira *et al.* (2019), who similarly highlighted entertainment-related attributes tied to wine, wineries, and their teams, and with Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018), who found that customers placed strong emphasis on products and services. Bruwer and Rueger-Muck (2019) also underscored the importance of entertainment, particularly regarding attributes linked to wineries, their products, and complementary services like restaurants. In contrast, Joy *et al.* (2021) found this dimension less prominent, representing only 5.1% of total experiences, although a significant portion of ambiguous reviews were categorized as "Other," accounting for 45.3% of the reported experiences. It is noteworthy that in this present study, the scope of entertainment was broader than in previous research (Brochado *et al.* 2021, Sigala *et al.* 2019), reflecting a wider understanding of entertainment in the customer experience. In this exploratory study, the main experiences reported were related to factors such as quality, reputation and atmosphere of the wineries, this being the most significant attribute in the overall experiences for all customers – usually containing the element of surprise, meaning the experience exceeded the customers' expectations; regarding the architecture of the estate, the applied technology, the equipment or the way of storytelling. The highest significance was for those who visited with friends (26.55%), in a similar proportion to couple (21.15%) and families (20.69%). For those who visited on business (20.83%) or solo (19.99%), there was less citation intensity compared to the other groups. The quality and reputation of the primary product, "wine," featured prominently in most of comments related to entertainment. The integration of wine into events can be seen as an effective product placement strategy. Within the entertainment dimension, attributes such as "heritage," "festival," and "artistic presentation" received the lowest citation intensities. This contrasts with previous research, where material cultural heritage played a more significant role in customer experiences (Vo Thanh & Kirova 2018). It appears that winery tours and tastings have become more

central to the destination's overall appeal, making the results of Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla (2020) debatable. Events, which have been identified as significant experiences in studies such as those by Santos and colleagues (2020), are typically smaller-scale in the Lake Neusiedl region, with concerts or lectures organized for a select audience. Wineries often invite a core group of loyal customers, those who are geographically close and can attend year-round. Events tailored to this audience differ from those aimed at engaging new customers. Investigating the marketing aspects within such a group requires a distinct methodological approach. The program, if it is well-tailored, can enhance the marketing efficiency.

As previously mentioned, aesthetic experiences occur when customers are fully immersed in an activity or environment, particularly those involving sensory elements, and derive enjoyment from moments where their participation has minimal influence on the overall experience (Vo Thanh & Kirova 2018, Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019). Wine tourism, with its hedonic and sensory qualities, has the potential to deliver impactful experiences, especially those of an aesthetic nature (Massa & Bede 2018, Hall 2006). Consequently, high engagement with these types of experiences is expected in this form of tourism. In this study, the aesthetic dimension received the third-highest proportion of mentions across all customer segments: business visitors (32.45%), families (31.33%), couples (29.47%), friends (28.13%), and solo travelers (26.55%). "Landscape" was the most frequently cited attribute, while "art" received the fewest mentions. Other attributes, such as "structure," "architecture," and "cellar," showed variations depending on the visitor profile. These results are consistent with previous studies that identified landscape enjoyment as the most prominent aesthetic experience (Vo Thanh & Kirova 2018, Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019). In particular, Bruwer and Rueger-Muck (2019) found that the beauty of the scenery was the most significant regional feature noted by customers. Similarly, Joy *et al.* (2021) concluded that aesthetic experiences, alongside social interactions, are fundamental, and once visitor satisfaction with these aspects is achieved, attention can be directed toward enhancing other dimensions. Within the aesthetic dimension, "landscape" stood out most notably. The scenic views of vineyards and rural charm, were highly appreciated, as captured in one review. Escapism experiences are closely tied to the concept of "winescape" (Santos *et al.* 2020). Escapism experiences, characterized by active and immersive participation, provide an

opportunity to escape from everyday life (Zhang & Lee 2022). However, in this study, the mentions of escapism were notably significant. This is consistent with findings by Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018), who also reported that escapism is not a prominent aspect of wine marketing offerings. Social interactions, on the other hand, were the least mentioned experience dimension across all visitor profiles, with similar intensities ranging from 1.75% to 1.98%. These findings contrast with those of Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla (2020), where tourists emphasized interaction as central to their wine tourism experience and expressed a desire for more social engagement. Joy *et al.* (2021) also highlighted the importance of social interactions, particularly between customers and winery staff, though they noted the difficulty in controlling and standardizing such experiences. Byrd *et al.* (2017) similarly emphasized that social interactions often occur within the tourists' own groups of family or friends, underscoring the challenge of managing these dynamics for wineries. In this study, the few social interactions mentioned primarily involved contact with local residents, with occasional references to interactions with other customers.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Winery tours and tastings play a crucial role in the marketing strategies of family-owned wineries in the Lake Neusiedl region in Hungary by enhancing customer engagement, loyalty, and repeat purchases. This study confirms that knowledge acquisition, entertainment, and aesthetics are key experiential dimensions, aligning with the "winescape" concept, where landscape, culture, and wine production create immersive visitor experiences. This research introduces a netnographic approach using Vivino reviews, an underutilized data source in wine marketing. By analyzing 1,895 user-generated reviews, the study offers a consumer-driven perspective on winery experiences, emphasizing structured edutainment, guided storytelling, and personalized engagement in shaping long-term relationships. Business travelers showed a strong preference for educational tours, while tastings and scenic aesthetics significantly influenced overall satisfaction. Beyond tourism, this study extends the winescape concept to strategic marketing, offering insights into how wineries can optimize customer touchpoints for retention and brand differentiation. Addressing a key research gap, it highlights the lack of standardized marketing guidelines for small, family-run wineries and underscores the



importance of language and cultural nuances in shaping visitor perceptions. The focus on German-speaking reviews and lack of detailed customer profiles limit broader generalizability. Future research should examine post-visit behaviors, word-of-mouth referrals, and staff-visitor interactions to deepen insights into winery marketing effectiveness. By combining quantitative validation (chi-square tests, Z-tests) with qualitative content analysis, this study presents a novel mixed-methods approach to evaluating winery experiences. While confirming the marketing value of winery visits, it highlights untapped potential in leveraging education, entertainment, and aesthetics for stronger customer engagement.

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