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Preliminary Analysis of the Profitability of Wine Tourism by Quantifying the Use of Customer Information Obtained During the Visit to the Wineries. The Case of Spain

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ABSTRACT
Wine tourism offers a unique opportunity for wineries to promote wine and the brand directly to the end consumer, resulting in a positive impact on the winery's gross profit margin and growth rates. Winery visits are a fundamental pillar of wine tourism, however, making a profit with the usual methods is difficult, and it is necessary to assume that the true profitability of wine tourism begins when the visitor leaves the winery. This implies understanding the profitability derived from wine tourism in the medium term. The focus should be on visitor relationship management and customer retention. Loyalty therefore begins with data collection at the winery, to develop a customer database that allows for subsequent follow-up, and thus connects the strategic wine tourism business unit with the winery's digital, direct-to-consumer sales channel. Therefore, the objective of this communication is to evaluate the profitability of strategic business units of wine tourism by quantifying the use of customer information obtained during visits to these wineries.

Keywords: wine tourism, visits, loyalty, profitability
JEL Classification: Q13, M31, Z32

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Introduction

Wine tourism has become a buzzword within the wine industry. It is promoted as the golden ticket of a winery to increase wine sales, convert visitors into brand ambassadors, attract recurring visits and achieve brand recognition and loyalty (Carlsen, 2004; Nowak & Newton, 2006).

In fact, wine tourism can be an attractive option for any winery. It offers a unique opportunity for wineries to promote wine and the brand directly to the end consumer, resulting in a positive impact on the winery's gross profit margin and growth rates (Carlsen, 2004; Nowak & Newton, 2006; Newton et al., 2015;). The growing importance of direct-to-consumer sales has led winemakers and owners to pay more attention to wine tourism, and an organic evolutionary process has been observed, with some wineries slowly upgrading their offerings to a wide range of tourism services.

Winery visits are a cornerstone of wine tourism, and with increased competition it is vital to offer quality experiences, which compensate for the time and money of those who visit (Roberts & Sparks, 2006), where tasting, learning and buying wine on the spot is a great motivation to carry out the experience (Carsen, 2011; Insel, 2011; Byrd et al., 2016), and to maintain high standards of service, hospitality and communication on an ongoing basis.

The tourist experience is complex. There are several elements and attributes that affect visitor perception and that must be considered (Carlsen & Boksberg, 2013) since the moment the user becomes aware of the winery until the end of the visit. It is vital to offer a quality experience and maintain high standards of service, hospitality and communication on an ongoing basis. With increasing competition, the goal of the winery is to offer an experience that compensates the time and money of those who visit them (Roberts & Sparks, 2006).

An organic evolutionary process has been observed, with some wineries slowly improving their offerings from "basic" informal tours and the ability to purchase wine on site, to "total" highly professionalized and personalized services.

As several studies on key metrics to make a first assessment of the profitability of wine tourism have observed, (Friedman, 2015; Fritz, 2015; Lee et al., 2021; Nella & Christou, 2014) making a profit with the usual methods is difficult, and it is necessary to assume that the real profitability of wine tourism begins when the visitor leaves the winery. This implies understanding the profitability derived from wine tourism in the medium term. The focus should be on visitor relationship management and customer retention. It is essential to analyse and understand the reasons why wine tourists have chosen to visit the winery and the activities that meet their expectations. Loyalty thus begins with the collection of data in the winery, to develop a customer database that allows subsequent monitoring, and thus connects the strategic business unit of wine tourism with the digital channel of direct sales to the consumer of that winery.

Social media practices increase online wine purchases (Pucci et al., 2019; Thach et al. 2016), with lack of traffic being one of the main reasons why online shops and direct-to-

consumer channels do not achieve the desired sales (Kauffman & Wang, 2008).

The online advertising market in the wine world is tremendously competitive, because it involves highly experienced players and large advertising budgets from the most well-known platforms (Denić et al., 2018; Gebauer & Ginsburg 2003). Therefore, the information obtained through winery visits is fundamental, and very advantageous with respect to these platforms, for increasing visitor traffic through own media, avoiding the erosion of purchase margins that paid media entails.

The capitalisation of databases is the way in which wine tourism and online sales collaborate to make each other profitable. In this sense, the aim of this preliminary work is to evaluate the profitability of the strategic business unit (SBU) of wine tourism by quantifying of the use of customer information obtained during a visit to these wineries. To achieve this objective a structured data recap through a questionnaire will be realized, to be statistically analysed and to find out relevant inferences.

Literature review

Wine tourism visit evolution is nowadays based on the importance of the experience importance (Festa et al., 2020). Therefore, many wineries and researches have oriented their investigations to find out the attitudinal perceptions and consumption behaviours of wine tourists, to achieve a significant impact on their subsequent evaluations (Gómez et al., 2023). But also seeking to identify segments of wine tourists, using statistical segmentation techniques for strategic decision-making recommendations (Molina et al., 2015).

Researchers make use of the latest global facts and trends. Hence, assuming the modifications that the COVID pandemic has played on consumer purchasing behaviour, there are studies that have contributed to analyse the main categories of wine producers´ online marketing strategies and the use of their websites to promote wine tourism information (Marzo-Navarro & Pedraja-Iglesias, 2021). Moreover, as sustainable development has become the most urgent objective, a number of investigations, which have recently been conducted in the field of wine tourism, have focussed on sustainable development´s effect on economic, social and environmental performance focussing on an analysis of the cause-effect relationships, also taking into consideration sociodemographic categories (Martínez-Falcó et al., 2024). Furthermore, researches have also considered wine tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development objectives in Spanish industry (Martínez-Falcó et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, although some investigations have explored the financial impact of wine tourism on winery competitiveness in Spain (Baixauli et al., 2024), paradoxically, there are no studies covering the use of wine customers' data collected during a visit to strengthen the generated connection, and link the strategic business unit of wine tourism with the winery's digital, direct-to-consumer, sales channel, as the current preliminary research submits.

A key aspect of wine tourism as a strategic business unit (SBU) is its evaluation as part of the winery. There are studies on the key

metrics for the success of wine tourism in wineries. The first and most obvious is the measure of visitor satisfaction at the winery. Successful winery visits are key to attracting and retaining tourists. Previous research mentions that users that are satisfied with a winery are loyal to it, which increases winery income (Lee et al., 2021; Nella & Christou, 2014).

Carlsen (2011) and Nella and Christou (2014) have examined the key factors that affect the satisfaction of visitors at the winery and they can be divided into two dimensions:

- The intangible winery service: refers to the hospitality and sincerity of the winery staff who interact with visitors, their responsiveness, their attention and safety.
- The tangible winery service: it is related to physical aspects such as the quality of the environment, the cleanliness of the tasting room, its design and its distribution.

According to Nguyen and Leblanc (2002), service takes place when there are social interactions between the client, the employees and the environment. Carmichael (2005) states that there is a notable disparity between the expectations of wine tourists about the quality of the service of a winery and the actual quality of the service they perceive. Specifically, there are significant differences between customer experiences and expectations in areas such as the knowledge of the winery staff and the consistency and speed of the service.

A study by Lee et al. (2021) on the expenditure of visitors in the winery highlights the importance of the intangible service offered. It reveals that the hospitality of the staff is the main element that affects customer spending, curiously, more than the quality of the wines tested. Therefore, the closeness of the employees is key to the satisfaction and experiences of wine tourists (Lee et al., 2021).

According to Berry and Seltman (2007) *customer satisfaction with the winery is the accumulated experience of interacting with it*. Also, Berry and Seltman (2007) affirm that the customer experience affects the brand equity of a company. Those who have a positive experience will visit the winery again and spend more money, as they trust it.

A second type of metric is related to the effectiveness of the winery's tasting room. The tasting room of a winery is the nucleus of wine tourism, since most wine tourists visit them to get to know, taste and buy wine. Authors such as Friedman (2015) and Fritz (2015) have proposed indicators to quantify it such as:

- Conversion to purchase, defined as *Number of transactions / Number of visitors to the winery*. It indicates how many visitors to the winery make an actual purchase of wine and/or winery merchandise.
- Average order value, defined as *Total net income / Number of transactions*. It indicates the average amount of money per transaction in the winery.
- Membership to the Wine Club, defined as *Number of visitors in the tasting room who join the Wine Club / Number of visitors*.
- Work as a percentage of income, defined as *Total Labour Costs / Net Income*. It helps to define the number of employees required in the wine tourism SBU.
- Profit, defined as Total labour costs / Net income, being the Income (number of boxes sold x price per box).
- Costs (Cost of goods sold + Cost of sales + administrative expenses + Interest expenses + taxes).

Based on these metrics, it is possible to make an initial evaluation of the profitability of wine tourism as a SBU in a winery.

Other researchers believe the focus should be on visitor relationship management, and so they emphasise the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) metric (Dipak & Singh, 2002; Dowling & Uncles 1997; O'Brien & Jones 1995; Blattberg & Deighton, 1996). Furthermore, there are proposals about how to measure it (Borle et al., 2008; Gupta et al., 2006). However, this has not been analysed for the wine tourism SBU of a winery. CLV consideration by a winery offers insights into its emphasizing on the significance of customer retention. A winery can develop a customer database that allows it to track the recurring revenue from each customer. In this way, it is possible to capture the CLV of a winery visitor. By identifying those who spend the most each year, decisions can be made such as giving away a bottle of wine or organizing an event to invite loyal customers as a token of appreciation for their loyalty.

A further step in this evaluation is realizing that wineries that attract visitors achieve something tremendously complicated: among all the available leisure options, a tourist chooses to visit a winery, among all the possible Protected Designations of Origin (or wine areas) a tourist chooses to visit the one where the winery is settled and finally, among all the wineries in this area, the tourist chooses the winery. Therefore, it is essential to understand the reasons for this decision and offer an experience that meets tourist's expectations. So, analysing the reasons for visiting the winery (and the activities that are offered) and linking them to the CLV is the third step of the metrics for evaluating wine tourism SBU profitability. Customer satisfaction will extend CLV.

The objective is to connect the strategic business unit of wine tourism with the digital channel of direct sales to the consumer of that winery, whose efficiency will be analysed by the present investigation.

Research methods

In order to choose an appropriate sample, the research focussed on wineries which actively participated in wine tourism. According to the Central Business Directory (DIRCE) of the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2024), the lastest published data shows 3925 wineries in Spain in 2023. However, only 796 wineries were associated with one of the 37 official Spanish wine routes (ACEVIN, 2023). This means that only about 20% of Spanish wineries is clearly oriented to wine tourism. From that statistical population of 796 wineries associated with an official Spanish route, a sample objective was settled in order to achieve a 95% confidence level and a 5% error range. An online survey was then carried out among these wine tourism-oriented wineries covering data collection since 2019. The questionnaire was structured in three sections (Table 1).

Table 1. Questionnaire presented to wineries

Section 1. Winery wine tourism activities analysis
P1a. Do you have a web page?
P1b. Do you have a structured wine tourism programme?
P1c. If yes, how many products do you offer?
P1d. If yes, do you evaluate the profitability of each wine tourism product?
P2. How long have you been offering wine tourism products? Less than 1 year: More than 1 year but less than 5 years: More than 5 years but less than 10 years: More than 10 years:
P3a. Have you been investing in the digitization and automation of visitor loyalty processes? Less than 1 year: More than 1 year but less than 5 years: More than 5 years but less than 10 years: More than 10 years:
P3b. Do you have an online reservation centre? Less than 1 year: More than 1 year but less than 5 years: More than 5 years but less than 10 years: More than 10 years:
P3c. Are reservations made by phone?
P3d. Do you have an automated visitor data capture system? Less than 1 year: More than 1 year but less than 5 years: More than 5 years but less than 10 years: More than 10 years:
P3d. Is visitor data collection done manually?
P3e. Do you have an automated system of visitor loyalty rewards? Less than 1 year: More than 1 year but less than 5 years: More than 5 years but less than 10 years: More than 10 years:
P3f. Do you reward visitor loyalty?
Section 2. Winery leads analysis
P4a. Do you know how many leads you had last year? Please, specify:
P4b. Do you know how many leads you had last year by month? Please, specify:
P4c. Do you know how many leads came from wine tourism visitors last year? Please, specify:
P4d. Do you know how many leads came from wine tourism visitors last year by month? Please, specify:
P4e. How much is your average direct-to consumer ticket sales?
Section 3. Volume data analysis
P5a. How many bottles do you sell per year?

Source: own compilation.

The objective of the first section was to analyse the profile of the winery regarding its wine tourism activity. Five aspects were studied:

1. The winery develops a structured wine tourism programme.
2. The winery offers wine tourism activities for more than 1 /5 /10 years.
3. The winery has an online reservation centre.
4. The winery has an automated visitor data capture system.
5. The winery has an automated system of visitor loyalty processes.

The second section of the questionnaire asked wineries about the number of total leads, number of leads that come from wine tourism activity and the average direct-to consumer ticket sales.

The third part of the questionnaire centred on winery volume data.

The collected data underwent statistical analysis in order to process answers. The results were subjected first to one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and secondly to Tukey's multiple range test to compare the means. The differences were considered statistically significant at $p<0.05$. These statistical analyses were performed using StatGraphics Plus 5.0 software (Manugistics Inc., Rockville. MD).

Research findings

The online data collection process was conducted over a long period of time to ensure the best possible sample size, and to take into consideration variation in participation. Calculations were based on 132 completed responses to the questionnaire, which corresponds to a 7.8% margin of error. While this error range is slightly higher than initially anticipated, it remains within acceptable limits for the preliminary study. This is particularly understandable given the specific data profile and the challenging circumstances surrounding data collection during the pandemic, which affected response rates and made it more difficult to gather a larger sample within the desired timeframe.

Statistical analysis offered a sample classification of wineries into six groups, whose features are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Wineries group features

Group	Features
B1	It does not develop a structured wine tourism programme. Visitor data collection is done manually.
B2	It develops a structured wine tourism programme. It has been offering wine tourism activities for more than five years. It is currently beginning investments in the digitization and automation of visitor loyalty processes.
B3	It develops a structured wine tourism programme. It has been offering wine tourism activities for less than a year. It has an online reservation centre for less than a year. Its automated data collection system has been in place for less than a year. Its visitor loyalty process automation system is less than a year old.

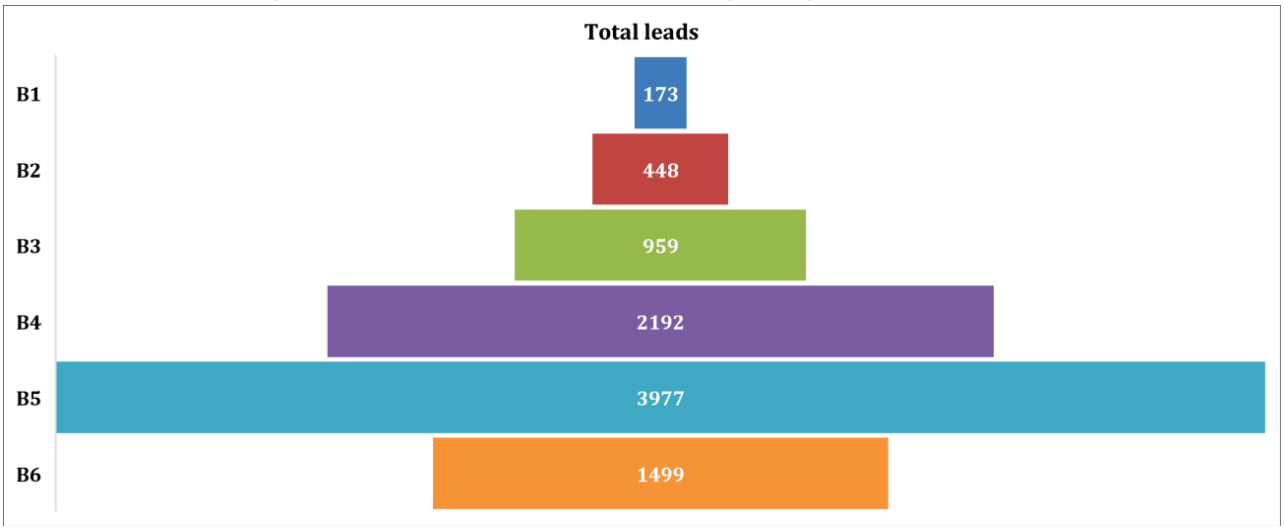
Table 2. Continued

Group	Features
B4	It develops a structured wine tourism programme. It has been offering wine tourism activities for more than five years. It does not have an online reservation centre. Visitor data collection is done manually.
B5	It develops a structured wine tourism programme. It has been offering wine tourism activities for more than 10 years. It has an online reservation centre. It has an automated visitor data collection system. It has an automated system of visitor loyalty processes.
B6	It develops a structured wine tourism programme. It has been offersing tourist activities for less than five years. It has had an automated visitor data collection system for less than a year.

Source: own compilation.

Inferential analysis reveals significant differences in the total leads among the categorized wineries. Figure 1 illustrates the data variations, and provides a clear overview of lead generation performance depending on category.

Figure 1. Total leads number among categorized wineries



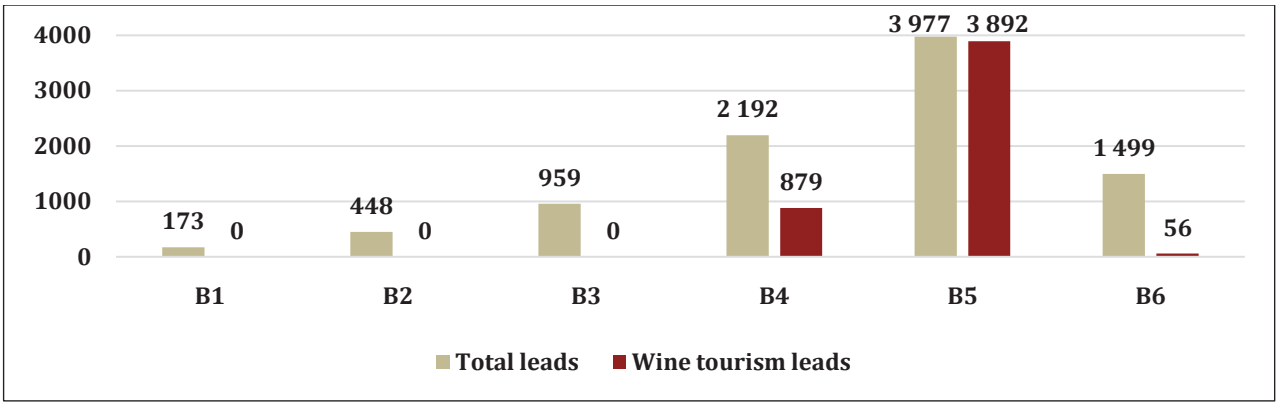
Source: own compilation.

Furthermore, focussing on the number of leads coming from wine tourism, wineries categorized as B1, B2 and B3, which are characterised either by not having developed a structured wine tourism programme or by having little history in the automation of data collection and customer loyalty processes, show a lower number of leads, none of which come from wine tourism (Figure 2).

It also highlights that the major number of leads coming from wine tourism are achieved by B5 group, that is 97.87% of its total leads. As a recap, B5 wineries have wide experience in wine tourism activities, an online booking

centre with automated data collection and a visitor loyalty system. B4 group is in second place with 879 leads coming from wine tourism, which means 48.07% of the total leads.

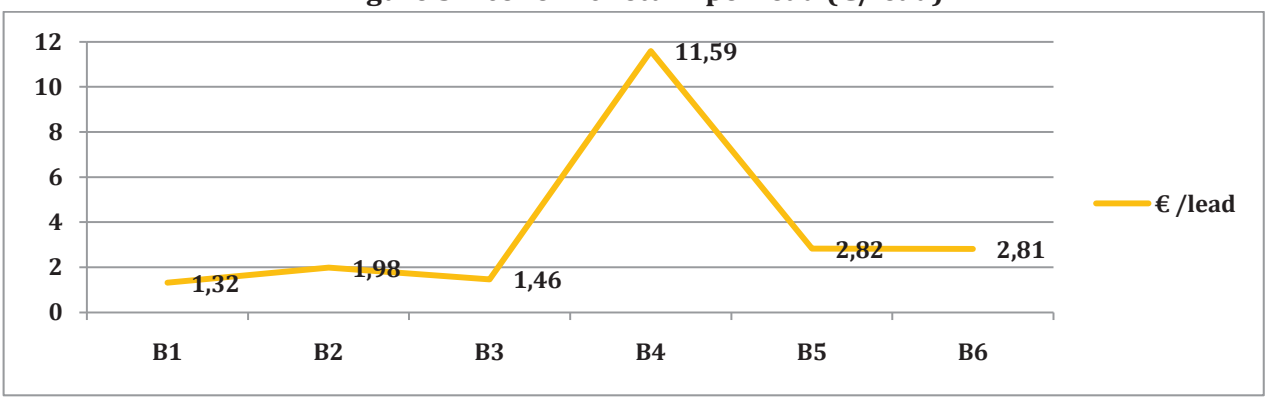
Figure 2. Wine tourism leads among categorized wineries



Source: own compilation.

The analysis then attempts to evaluate the economic return per potential customer. Once again it can be observed that winery groups B1, B2 and B3 exhibit lower values (Figure 3). In this case wineries belonging to group B4, that didn´t have an online booking centre and collected data manually, receive the highest return from their potential customers (11.59 €). This means four times more return than B5, which has more experience in automated systems, and six times more than the groups with lower wine tourism development (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Economic return per lead (€/lead)



Source: own compilation.

Wineries belonging to the B5 group, which have been offering wine tourism activities for more than 10 years and have an online booking centre, automated data collection and a visitor loyalty system, have the highest number of potential customers (3977) (Figure 1), almost

all of them coming from wine tourism, although their average sales per potential customer (2.82 €/potential customer) is 25% of the amount from the wineries which carry out data collection and customer loyalty manually (Figure 2). It can also be observed that there is no difference in economic returns between B6 wineries, which have only recently developed automated systems, and B5 wineries, which have a longer history of activities and automation.

Discussion

The growing importance of direct sales to the consumer has led winery managers and owners to pay more attention to wine tourism, since they represent more than 20% in the French regions of Burgundy and in Alsace more than 23% (Frochot, 2000). In the case of California, wine tourists spend an average of $ 730 when visiting this region (Pellechia, 2017). In Spain, during 2023, ACEVIN report (2023) indicates that 2,977,115 people (79% of them Spanish) visited wineries (an increase of 17.78% compared to the previous year). The average price of a visit to wineries increased to 15.00 euros, as did visitor spending, which rose to 24.90 euros on average. In most cases, the average expenditure per visitor is higher than the price of the visit, which indicates that the tourist spends more on the purchase of wine and other products offered in wineries than on the visit itself.

Based on these data, wine tourism is not profitable. Expecting to make a profit with the usual variables is difficult. In most cases, as already mentioned (ACEVIN, 2023), in Spain the price of the ticket for the visit is low, significantly lower than in neighbouring countries, and wineries expect that wine purchases in the physical store of the winery after the visit will make this activity profitable.

Small wineries, with insufficient wine production to sell it through a national distribution channel, depend on direct sales to the consumer, that is, on wine tourists (Hojman et al., 2012; Insel, 2011). Byrd et al. (2016) and Carmichael (2005) argue that wine tourism provides winery managers with a number of benefits, including:

- Direct sales to the consumer in a winery generate high commercial margins since they do not need a middleman. The income comes from the products sold in the tasting room, to the members of the wine club, in events that are organized, in transactions through the web, by email or by telephone, and from other direct sales (Pann, 2016).
- Wine tourists can have a personal and authentic experience with the brand by tasting a variety of wines, learning about the history of the winery, and visiting the vineyard (Beverland & Luxton, 2005).
- Successful experiences in a winery are positively appreciated in the subsequent behaviour of tourists. After a visit to the winery, wine tourists buy more wines produced in the visited region. Thus, an entire wine region benefits from wine tourism (Mitchell, 2006; Thach & Cogan-Marie, 2018).

Usually, a medium or small winery cannot compete with large buyers of advertising space. However, there is a space in which a winery has

an advantage in terms of traffic with respect to marketplaces: the capitalization of the databases obtained through wine visits. In this way, wine tourism and online sales collaborate to make each other profitable. In this sense, it is essential that wineries commit to developing a loyalty plan for wine tourism. The main reasons for this are:

- Brand value, very few wineries at this time have automated their loyalty process after a wine tourism visit. Receiving that level of personalized attention from the host makes the customer feel heard and valued and improves their perception of winery brands.
- Improving the brand experience, it seeks to strengthen a long-term communication channel in which to provide customers with more value.
- Knowing the visitor / buyer profile, management platforms provide data obtained through real behaviour when interacting with the content to be analysed.
- Optimization of efforts in content creation and reinforcement in social networks: Interaction with social networks is favoured to create communication synergies and favour the omnichannel experience.
- Upselling, in a double sense: buying wine and repeating a visit to the winery to enjoy other activities that are scheduled throughout the year.
- Traffic, a database directs qualified traffic to the direct sales channels that the winery has enabled, such as its online store or its wine club.

The results of current research confirm the erroneous perception that benefits from wine tourism are achieved automatically simply by offering tours. Wine tourism is more than a sales channel or a way to earn additional income. It is direct marketing, public relations, sales and service, and it all falls under the umbrella of tourism and hospitality. In the competitive current times, it is key to maximize the efficiency of wineries initiatives.

By virtue of the results obtained, the profitability of wineries seems to lie in the perception that visitors have of the personalisation of data collection and customer loyalty processes, confirming the study by Lee et al. (2021) that the importance of the intangible service offered stands out in visitor spending in wineries.

Conclusions

Despite the complex nature of wine tourism, and the limitations of social research, the current study looks for the profits of both parties: i.e. the wine tourist and the wineries. It attempts to offer a brief view of the advantages of changing the classic paradigm of wine tourism. The focus should be on visitor satisfaction, in relation to hospitality and the personalised attention during their experience, as a metric for analysing the profitability of wine tourism.

Results clearly indicate that the development of a well-structured wine tourism programme is crucial for achieving significant business objectives, particularly in generating quality leads. Findings confirm that offering this type of service is not merely an option, but an essential strategy for attracting and

engaging potential customers. By providing a total and appealing wine tourism experience, businesses can not only enhance their brand presence but also foster long-term relationships with visitors, ultimately converting them into loyal clients. The data strongly supports the idea that investing in wine tourism is a vital step in driving growth and securing a competitive edge in the market.

The analysed information also indicates that the automation of data collection and customer loyalty programmes leads to a higher number of potential customers within the wine tourism sector. The professionalization of a system leads to a wine specialization in the interest profile of a potential customer. By streamlining these processes, businesses can efficiently gather and analyze data, enabling them to identify and target a specialized broader audience. Furthermore, the professionalization of these systems contributes to a more refined approach to understanding and meeting the specific interests and preferences of potential customers. This shift toward a specialized system allows for a deeper understanding of customer profiles, fostering a more personalized experience and enabling businesses to effectively tailor their offerings. Ultimately, such automation not only enhances operational efficiency but also drives customer engagement, positioning businesses to attract and retain a highly targeted and loyal customer base.

However, the study also highlights an important nuance: while automating data collection and customer loyalty processes can improve efficiency, it does not necessarily translate to a higher financial return on its own. Findings indicate that customers place greater value on interation with the personnel, and personal experiences and perceptions. These aspects play a more significant role in shaping their spending behaviour. This suggests that wineries must strike a balance between automation and maintaining a strong, personalized customer service to maximize their returns.

Thus, the relevant factor for visitor satisfaction relies heavily on the importance of the intangible service offered. Maximizing a professional personalization of the intangible service will result in the customer´s satisfactory experience, and thus in the enhancement of wineries philosophies and economic development.

The study has limitations regarding the sample size, as it represents only a 16.5% response rate from wineries affiliated to one of the 37 official Spanish wine routes (ACEVIN, 2023), which may introduce some bias in the findings. However, it is important to note that this limitation is primarily due to the difficulty in accessing detailed ticket data from the wineries. Additionally, matching tickets within specific strategic business units, where they exist, proved to be a complex task. Despite these challenges, the study serves as a first step in exploring this decisive subject, shedding light on an important area for wineries' growth and economic development. This initial approach provides valuable insights that can guide future research efforts, offering a foundation for deeper exploration and a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting the industry.

Future researches, aiming to improve data collection, should be conducted to deeply research customers´ expectations with respect to intangible services, to maximize economic returns.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.D. C.-U., A.P; methodology, D. B. L.-L.; software, A. P.; validation, M.D. C.-U., A. P.; formal analysis, D.B. L.-L.; investigation, A.P.; resources, A.P.; data curation, A.P.; writing, original draft preparation, D.B. L.-L., I. A.-N.; writing, review and editing, D.B. L.-L., I. A.-N.; visualization, I. A.-N.; supervision, D.B. L.-L.; project administration, D.B. L.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

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