



## **MASTER THESIS**

### **DEVELOPING THE SET OF PRO-SUSTAINABLE CORPORATE VALUES OF A WINE TRAVEL AGENCY AND INCLUDING IT IN THE BRAND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this master's thesis is to help a grassroots wine tourism company Pagus Wine Tours to better practise and communicate its values as an action towards sustaining the current economic circumstance, an effort towards tourism responsibility for tourism sustainability, and as a marketing competitive advantage by aligning the communication strategy with business goals, following the "doing good to do well" concept. A responsible tourism aspiration, which is reflected in the company's belief system, can be carefully translated into a set of corporate values and be included in the communication strategy. Consequently, it is believed to improve the performance of the company among competitors, act as a value driver for tourism sustainability on the regional level and influence a more sustainable choice for the visitors of the region. For these objectives, a set of research steps will be presented in this work. The communication-related assets of the internal and external marketing context will be analysed, followed by the creation of the draft set of corporate values and analysis of assessment of its perception and communication by the team. The gaps between the projected, desired and perceived value communication will be studied, and the analysis of the post-lockdown target markets will be presented to further be addressed with the strategic proposal steps. Taking into consideration the current circumstances of the tourism crisis, caused by a complete stop of any kind of tourism activity due to international lockdown measures, it is important to take advantage of this time to rethink company strategy and tactics in order to come up with solutions that will allow the company to gain the business activity in a more resultative and sustainable way.

**Keywords:** Responsible Tourism, Sustainability Perception, Corporate Values, Value Communication, Communication Strategy.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**B&B:** Bed and Breakfast  
**B2C:** Business-to-Consumer  
**COVID-19:** Coronavirus Disease 2019  
**CSR:** Corporate Social Responsibility  
**CSV:** Creating Shared Value  
**CV:** Corporate Values  
**PWT:** Pagus Wine Tours  
**SARS:** Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome  
**SEO:** Search Engine Optimisation  
**SSCM:** Sustainable Supply Chain Management  
**SWOT:** Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats  
**TBL:** Triple Bottom Line  
**Valpolicella RRR:** Reduce, Retrench, Respect  
**VFR:** Visiting Friends and Relatives

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The knowledge obtained during the WINTOUR programme about tourism being not only a source of benefit but also “a transformative engine” for territories; a common lack of a professional business approach inside wine tourism business especially in rural areas; the importance of “smart” wine tourism for the development of rural areas and their sustainability, drove the interest to take a closer look at one of the wine tourism destination actors in the Valpolicella wine region that combines an entrepreneurial and educational model. Promoting the culture of the region through wine tours, the tour operator “Pagus Wine Tours” (PWT) not only educates and entertains tourists and brings economic activity to rural areas, but also plays an educational role for wineries on how to start and maintain their wine tourism; at least ten wineries have opened their doors for wine tasting with the initiative and assistance of PWT. The research and suggestions conducted for this company are believed to influence more than 70 connected family-owned winery partners positively, arguing the value driver role of this company within the local tourism supply chain.

### **1.1 The company: Pagus Wine Tours**

The internship hosting organisation celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, since it was founded in the form of “Cultural Association Pagus” in October 2000 in order to promote the history and culture of the Valpolicella region. During more than ten years, the association worked on the creation of several tourism itinerary catalogues, created and participated in events that promoted local culture and wine. The idea of this association started from a thesis, written for the University of Verona, about the production of wine and the extraction of stone in Valpolicella during the Roman times. In 2013, the association became a company with the licence of a travel agency that organises group and private wine tours to explore, through wine and gastronomy, the culture and history of the region, including the areas of Valpolicella, Soave, Bardolino, Lugana, Custoza, Valdadige, Prosecco, Franciacorta, and Trento. Some offers include full course meals, cooking workshops, teambuilding and organised holidays. The company is represented by eight local employees, operates three of their own minivans, and has the office in the historical city centre of Verona – which, starting from this year, is officially recognised as an “Info point” for the Valpolicella Wine Route Association. The local partners of the company are more than 70 wineries, boutique hotels, and restaurants, and the decision of cooperation with them, according to the management of the company, is based on their offer and corporate values as well as their friendly partnership attitude.

## **1.2 Internship activities**

During the first month of the internship, the company provided training in the administrative office routine, which included analysing direct requests and bookings received from the TripAdvisor aggregator, preparing the tour offers, contacting the providers, and planning the tours using the company's calendar. The wide variety of offers and local collaborators – including wineries, restaurants, and accommodations – were introduced to the intern. It was also possible to participate in several meetings with the wineries representatives for negotiating potential cooperation and offers as well as in the last tour organised by the company before the quarantine measures took place and put further tourism activities on hold. The intern analysed the available data of the previous years' sales, online communication channels and printed promotional materials and provided detailed suggestions for their improvement; conducted offline and online interviews with the company team in order to inquire about the company values and provide suggestions for the implementation of the strategy to make them more coherent, resonant and effective in corporate communication.

## **1.3 Business situation and context**

### ***1.3.1 Wine tourism business context***

Italy's most productive wine region, Veneto, which grew significantly since the middle 1990s, owing to the success of Pinot Grigio followed by the similar boom of Prosecco (Robinson, 2006, p.776), is an important geographical context for the operation of tourism businesses, including one of the world's top tourist destinations, Venice. The wine growing surroundings of the city of Verona, of which Valpolicella plays the most important role taking the background of the company, offer selection and information reflected in the sales data of 2017-2019 – the years when the company started to analyse such information. Valpolicella is among Italy's most ancient wine regions, it started producing wine 600 years B.C., had a period of expansion during the Roman period (Valpolicella Wine Board, 2017a) and later went on to become one of Italy's best-known exports (Wines and spirits: Understanding style and quality, 2012, p. 143). Since the Roman period, Valpolicella has also become a renowned place for vacation with its picturesque landscapes covered with olive and cherry trees as well as vines.

The modern Valpolicella wine region is situated 12 km from the tourist centre of Verona, covered with 7 800 hectares of vines. It encompasses 19 municipalities with 136 wineries (Valpolicella Wine Board, 2017b), 57 of which are part of the Valpolicella Wine Route Association, as well as 9 restaurants and 23 boutique hotels and B&B establishments (The Association Valpolicella Wine Route, n.d.). According to statistics provided by the representative of the association for this research, in 2019 there were 125 832 tourists who

stayed at registered accommodation facilities in the area, spending 2.6 nights on average (A1). In 2016, the Valpolicella Wine Board “Consorzio per la Tutela dei Vini Valpolicella”, representing 80% of the vine-growers and wine producers, launched the “Valpolicella RRR” (Reduce, Retrench, Respect) project – “a sustainable production protocol based on sustainable practices” (Valpolicella Wine Board, 2017c). Within the project, the certification for both wines and grapes produced is provided as well as training and information on respectful soil use, reduction of the use of herbicides and pesticides, landscape preservation, water management and vineyard management amongst others (Valpolicella Wine Board, 2016).

### ***1.3.2 Slow movement tourism context and sustainability perception***

An important point of the overall context in which the company operates is related to the concept of slow travel, which, according to Fullagar, Markwell and Wilson (2012), “emerged from the Slow Food and Slow Cities (Cittaslow) movements that both originated in Italy” (p.3) and similarly emphasises “the local consumption of food that draws upon culinary heritage or organic principles, as well as the sensory embodiment of the journey” (p.4). As an organisation, “Slow Food” was founded in 1989 “to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life and combat people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us” and operates in more than 160 countries (Slow Food, 2015).

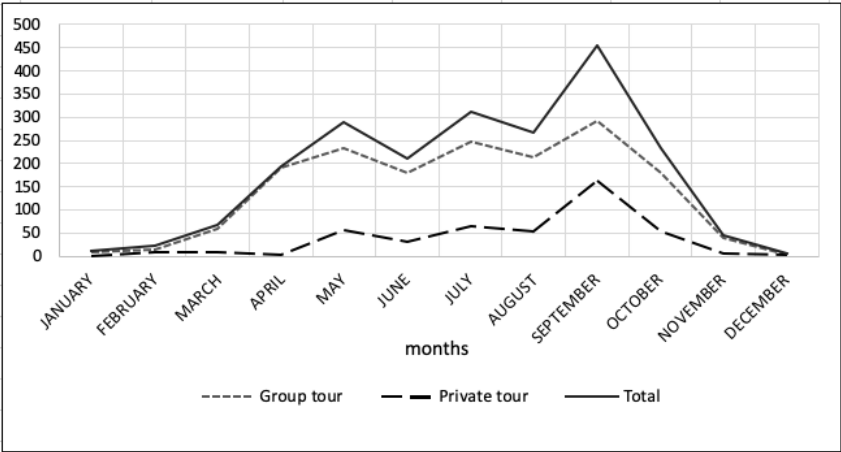
Verona and Valpolicella are not among the members of the Cittaslow association, but “Slow Food Verona” and “Slow Food Veneto” are associated with the Slow Food movement and are active in the organisation of the educational and promotional activities of local wine and gastronomy (Slow Food Italy, n.d.). Pagus Wine Tours’ philosophy seems to fit the concept and is inviting its customers to experience the territory as “co-producers”, the term used by Hall (2012) with a reference to the Slow Food concept, whereby the person turns from a passive consumer into an active seeker who cares for the wider circumstances backgrounding the product (p.57).

Contrary to this grassroots Italian project whose values can be considered as aligned with aspirations of sustainability, research on the perception about sustainability demonstrates a certain lack of awareness and understanding of its core principles among Italian wine consumers (Capitello & Sirieix, 2020) and producers (Szolnoki, 2013).

### ***1.3.3 Pre-lockdown business analysis***

According to the management of the company, more than one third of its customers during the 2017-2019 period were from North America, with Scandinavian countries and the United

Kingdom being a close second, followed by travellers from Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Brazil. More precise data were collected during 2018 and 2019 and compared to 2017 for the number of participants and sales of private and group tours. Based on this information, the total number of tours increased in 2018 and 2019 compared to 2017 by 7,8% and 8,4% respectively. However, the total number of participants decreased by 8,7% and 5,3% respectively. This can be explained by the increasing number of private tours with fewer participants. The bestselling group tour of the company was a half-day tour “A taste of Valpolicella” which is the most inexpensive and includes transfers, tour leader coordination services, a visit with wine tasting at one winery and a walk in the historical location of Valpolicella. The bestselling private tour was “Valpolicella and Amarone with lunch”, which, comparing to the bestselling group-tour, includes two wineries and a full lunch meal as well as the possibility of a transfer from the hotel, and costs exactly double that of the bestselling group tour offer. According to the sales, the high season is the period from April to October included, with the highest number of sales in September (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: The number of PWT tours participants in 2019**  
**Source: PWT Sales Report 2019**

Information about the customers` background, sex, age, reason for travel and method of booking is not collected by the company and, thus, cannot be analysed to understand the correlation with, for instance, the choice of the tour. The main sale channels are online, through the website of the company and through the TripAdvisor aggregator, and offline, through hotel recommendations and brochures distributed at tourist accommodations in Verona. TripAdvisor bookings are responsible for approximately 20% of sales and are subject to a fee of 23%, according to the company's management. There is no agency discount or motivation policy for sales through the tourist accommodations. Direct sales in the company`s office by walk-in customers are not common. The feedback from customers is not collected by the company, except for those available on TripAdvisor, where the company ranks second out of 61 in the

“Food and Drink in Verona” category, and has 478 reviews, with 457 of travellers rating it as “excellent”. There were five reviews with “average”, “poor” or “terrible” ratings, emphasising the lack of personal attention from the representatives of the visited wineries, overcrowded wineries and lack of personal care by the tour leader (Pagus Wine Tours – TripAdvisor, n.d.). There was no previous analysis on competitors available either; yet, according to TripAdvisor, the tour operator “Veronality” is the main competitor of PWT, being listed as №1 in the same category and proposing a wider range of tourism products, including wine tourism offers.

#### **1.3.4 Current hindrances**

During the internship, several factors recognised as requiring proactive action, relating to both through- and post-quarantine stages, emerged. Those related to communication will be discussed in this paper for the purpose of creating a close alignment of communication targets and business goals which are described as “a key prerequisite for contributing to value creation” (Volk, S. C. et al., 2017, p.29). Pre-quarantine goals, such as strengthening the company’s position in relation to its competitors, increasing direct sales, increasing low season sales, the adjustment of cooperation with partners and creating and communicating the values to partners and consumers, became even more relevant when analysing the situation during the COVID-19 lockdown, which required a complete redirection of marketing efforts. Pagus Wine Tours does not have a marketing or communication strategy and deals with the tasks on a more tactical level, cooperating with a local professional marketing company. It is moved by the vision of the founder within a rather short-term planning time frame. This style of tactic actions is relevant in the current situation, but a broader strategic approach is believed by the intern to be fundamental for future sustainable development.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Sustainable development and tourism**

The concept of sustainable development was first popularised in 1987 in the “Our common future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development” report (also known as the “Brundtland report”) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The sustainability concept is widely demoted as consisting of environmental, social, and economic dimensions and is used as an entry point in different research related to tourism sustainability (Forbes et al., 2020; Holden, 2009; Genç, 2017). The above-mentioned dimensions were introduced as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) by Elkington (1994) as a tool to assess the profits the business makes through sustainable solutions.

In the research on sustainability-oriented innovation in tourism, it is stated that sustainability is “a key driver of innovation and value creation” (Nidumolu, Prahalad, and Rangaswami 2009 as cited in Garay, Font & Corrons, 2018, p. 622). The fundamental principles for making tourism more sustainable are thought to be well-presented in the fair-trade tourism definition: “a commitment to finding positive and practical solutions for the tourism industry as well as consumers, local communities and destination governments, so as to benefit local communities through trade, in preference to aid” (Kalisch, 2002, as cited in Font, Tapper, Schwartz, & Kornilaki, 2008, p.266).

Wine tourism is recognised to have a deep impact on all the components of wine destinations (Sigala, 2019, p.57), and, just like tourism in general, is often viewed as having potential transformative impacts on places that may involve negative implications for local communities. However, it is argued that with the right approach, it can become “a tool for sustainable community development” (Beeton, as cited in Wearing, Wearing & McDonald, 2012, p.43). Simultaneously, it is important to mention that there is a certain lack of a “consistent definition of the [sustainability] concept among wine industry practitioners” (Forbes, Silva, & Gilinsky, 2020, p.6). This was suggested based on the research described by Szolnoki (2013) with the interviews of 55 winery representatives from seven countries.

## **2.2 The role of intermediaries as sustainability drivers in the tourism value chain**

Pomering, Noble and Johnson (2011) suggest that to meet the challenge of sustainability in tourism, a conjunct of different agents and industry partnerships should cooperate to ensure the active effort towards sustainability on both the supply and demand sides on a practical level (p.954). Such an approach is also described in research using the creating shared value (CSV) concept that considers the collaboration between multiple stakeholders involved in the decision-making process as producing mutual distributed benefits (Zhang, Font & Russo 2020, p.14). It is also relevant for partnership through sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), which is suggested and described in the application for sustainable development of tourism destinations by Font et al. (2008, p.1). These authors argue that it is important for sustainability-oriented companies to track the sustainability of each product or service they depend on from suppliers, suggesting a scheme where a sustainability approach is a priority not only towards the consumer, but also for the “upstream chain towards the producer” (Font et al., 2008, p.2). The research argues that for tour operators, such a management approach is of particular importance, suggesting a high level of dependency on their way towards sustainable practices and, at the same time, of their increased power as value drivers inside the value chain to influence destination management actors on the demand side and customers on the supply side. Supporting this argument, the stated role of tour agents is now

changed into “gatekeepers with specialized knowledge” of the destination, with a “significant power to shape the relationship between tourism products/services and the tourists themselves, preferentially selling some tours over others” (Mossaz & Coghlan, 2016, p.990).

It is widely argued that, among the three sustainability dimensions, the social dimension has been the least researched and is the least quantifiable (Nilipour, 2019); it is more difficult to define, assess and communicate than, for instance, the environmental one (Sharpe & Barling, 2019; Font, Tapper & Cochrane, 2006). However, throughout the works consulted in this literature review, it is not considered as less important. Social sustainability is connected to people, meaning conducting beneficial and fair business practices towards increasing the well-being of customers, workers and communities; aligning the company's missions with the interest of society; and contributing to the quality of life for future generations (Elkington; Rezaee, Tsui, Cheng & Zhou, as cited in Nilipour, 2019).

The social dimension is of particular interest for this thesis, being closely related to the internship company's beliefs, which are studied, translated into a system of values of the company, and suggested to be implemented in the communication strategy. The thesis analyses this social dimension focusing on a broader understanding of how this can be represented in the company than, for instance, through corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is argued to be limited in measures, similar to philanthropic activities, when comparing to the CSV concept, as argued by Zhang, Font and Russo (2020, p.8).

### **2.3 The interconnection of marketing and sustainability, the role of corporate values**

Pomeroy et al. (2011, p.954) are strongly convinced that marketing serves as “an appropriate vehicle to drive increased sustainability”. In his report, Genç (2017) argues that communication is fundamental for sustainable development and the legitimisation of its implementation, emphasising the highly complex nature of sustainability that requires overcoming through communication. A strong interconnection and interdependence of marketing and sustainability were also described by Jones, Clarke-Hill, Comfort and Hillier (2008). Different works on this topic emphasise the importance of sustainability practices' communication in the form of reporting and promoting, pursuing various aims: “maximization of shareholder value, social legitimacy and risk management associated with the corporate reputation” (Adams & Whelan, as cited in Nilipour, 2019, p.8), competitive advantage (Porter, as cited in Kotler & Keller, 2012, p.19), establishing a dialogue and building the relationship with consumers and market actors, and strengthening loyalty toward the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

In the case of PWT, their corporate values and communication are believed to serve as a foundation for such interconnection of marketing and sustainability. The company's core values or corporate values (CV) are its fundamental beliefs, described as "principles that guide an organization's internal conduct as well as its relationship with customers, partners, and stakeholders" (Business Dictionary, n.d.). Furthermore, the CV represent the affirmation of the company towards specific qualities and attributes of its operation and results and influences the company's strategic and tactic management actions even if they are not documented in the form of management plans, as it is the case with PWT. The values of the company are believed to benefit brand equity and added value for customers and may be reflected in the way customers feel about the product or service or in the company's price and market share (Keller, as cited in Kotler & Keller, 2012, p.115).

## **2.4 Post-COVID-19 and sustainability trend**

The pre-lockdown trends towards sustainability and market perception of companies that communicate their values are revealed by the results of an online survey conducted by Pollfish among 1 139 Americans for a Clever Real Estate report on "Marketing to Millennials in 2019" (2019). The results indicate 74% of millennials would choose a product or service of the brand that supports a cause they personally believe in. According to a study conducted by the third largest social network in the United States, Pinterest (2019), "Pinterest 100: the top trends to inspire and try in 2020", "Caution consumption", "Re-wilding" and "Responsible travel" are mentioned among some of the most important trends of 2020. "The evolution of sustainability mindset" (2018) report by Nielsen Global Connect – the international market research company – showed that 81% of their global survey respondents feel strongly that companies should help improve the environment, whereas the reporting of proactive commitment towards a sustainable future is expected from companies, according to "Sustainability and reporting trends 2025" (Global Reporting Initiative, 2015).

The complete stop of any offline tourism sector activity left PWT with online channels as the only way of communication and interaction with customers and partners. This means that online communication became the most important activity of the company. One of the steps that have been undertaken by the company since April 2020 is targeting the internal market with communication in the Italian language, expecting it to be the most important market shortly after the lockdown is over. Different researchers would approve this action, suggesting that domestic leisure activities, the use of ground transport, short distance travel and last-minute planning will be the only possible travel framework if – according to positive scenarios – tourism mobility will be reactivated by the end of the summer 2020, with expectations of full recovery by summer 2021 (Buhalis, 2020). It is also suggested to give priority in communication to

potential first post-lockdown visitors, such as VFR (visiting friends and relatives), repeat tourists and crisis-resistant tourists (Backer & Ritchie; Senbeto & Hon; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty; Hajibaba, Gretzel, Leisch & Dolnicar, as cited in Peters, Peters & Peters, 2020), which will be discussed further in this thesis. However, considering the most similar situation in the modern history, by the opinion of the thesis' author, which is the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic crisis, and the post-SARS recovery patterns, "the travellers might recover their travelling in a different way and speed, both from virus-affected and not affected backgrounds" (Mao, Ding, & Lee, 2010).

There is no research found specifically on the influence of sustainable practices and their communication on a wine tourism company's financial performance or readiness of consumers to pay the extra price for a sustainable wine tour. However, with this literature research, it can be concluded that the companies that implement and communicate sustainability practices can benefit from the endorsement of sustainability itself and strengthen the business performance especially in the frame of the current situation and the post-lockdown trends towards "willingness to create stronger connections for more sustainable future" (Peters et al., 2020, p.11).

### **3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Based on the context analysed, the information obtained during the internship and the background knowledge of the author, a SWOT analysis is presented in subchapter 4.1.1. For the purpose of this research, it was important to define the communication-related assets of PWT's internal and external marketing context with the purpose of strengthening the communication programme. An "outsider" look is believed to help the company avoid the limitation of emotional connection and allow the analysis to be more objective. The origin of the SWOT analytic framework is believed to be uncertain (Friesner, 2011). However, it is a widely used tool by the researchers and businesses of different types (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

For the purpose of creating the set of PWT corporate values, the belief system of the company (A2) was used as a starting point. It was discussed with the founder of the company to further be developed in a list of corporate values. In order to be a tool, the set of CV cannot be solely a list of theoretical statements. Hence, with the initial approval of the founder, company's team was invited to answer an anonymous online questionnaire, which consisted of two parts. The questionnaire received responses in the English language from eight team members, including the founder, on April 28-29, 2020. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for analysing the results.

The first part of the questionnaire contained a set of questions with a rating scale, using the Likert's method of summing scaling (Plumeyer, Kottemann, Böger, & Decker, 2017) to analyse to which extent the team agrees with each of the statements of the draft set of CV. Following the evaluation, respondents were asked open-ended questions about what could be improved in the company if there was a disagreement on such statements and to share what the main values of the company are in their opinion. In order to find out how well the values of the company were communicated to partners and consumers, in the opinion of PWT team members, they were additionally asked to make assessments in separate questions using a Likert rating scale. In the following open-ended questions respondents shared their opinion about what could be improved in communication for better results. The results are presented in the subchapter 4.1.2 "Corporate values: defining and evaluating".

The second part of the online questionnaire was dedicated to the perception and knowledge of sustainability and tourism sustainability principles, the company's sustainable practices, customers' reactions to sustainable practices, and how easy or difficult practising sustainability is in the opinion of the PWT team. The set of questions was inspired by the "Cross-national comparison of sustainability in the wine industry" (Szolnoki, 2013), which investigated the perception of sustainability from the point of view of wine producers from seven countries, including Italy. The congruent opinions of the PWT team were collected with open-ended questions; the qualitative analysis of the results was applied and is presented in the subchapter 4.1.3 "Sustainability and tourism sustainability perception of PWT team".

For the purpose of this research, it was important to find the gaps between projected, perceived and desired value communication and whether it serves as a competitive advantage, making it different from the competitors' communication. It was not possible to conduct proper interviews with the customers or collect feedback from them; such information was also not collected by the company before. Hence, it was decided to use a general approach, explained in the research conducted by Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell (2018) but with a different tool that was easier to operate, considering that the amount of information to be analysed and goal of the research was different. The following content was obtained online for analysis and comparison:

- **Desired** value communication – a combination of the draft set of CV (Figure 2) and the text of the questionnaire responses on the main values of the company in the opinion of the PWT team (A3.1 Table 2).
- **Projected** value communication (induced) – textual content of online communication from:

- the PWT website with the descriptive textual information including the following sections: About us, Group wine tours, Private wine tours, Cooking at the vineyard, Wine tasting events, Wine holidays and “Why you should choose Pagus” article from the Magazine section (Pagus Wine Tours, n.d.). The articles about wineries and events from the Magazine section were not used for the purpose of dissociating the descriptor words of the company's brand from the partners' brands;
  - the website of the main competitor “Veronality” with the selected descriptive textual information extracted from the English language versions of the following sections: Our team, Wine tasting tours, Online Experiences (Veronality, n.d.).
- **Perceived** value communication (organic) – the user-generated content from TripAdvisor PWT customers' feedback section. This travel review platform is a consumer-generated media, which in 2019 influenced the travel decisions of 463 million travellers a month (TripAdvisor Media Center, n.d.). The reviews are believed to influence the decision of potential customers and represent the perception of the brand and its services, based on their own experience and information received with online and offline PWT communication. 145 unique reviews of participants of PWT tours in 2017-2019 (Pagus Wine Tours – TripAdvisor, n.d.) were collected and combined in one textual file to be analysed.

For this analysis, the tool called word cloud (tag cloud) was used. The word cloud is usually used to display text through graphics and is believed to be useful for this assessment. This tool is helpful when summarising a large amount of textual information for further investigation of patterns, identifying the repetition of words or phrases in the text, and making “visual presentations of a set of words, typically a set of tags, in which attributes of the text such as size, weight or colour can be used to represent features (e.g., frequency) of the associated terms” (Havley & Keane, as cited in Depaolo & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 38). This visual presentation is believed to be easy to understand and comprehend and is, thus, presented with the comparative analysis in the subchapter 4.1.4 “Comparative analysis of communication patterns”.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Presentation of results

#### 4.1.1 SWOT analysis

**Strengths.** The geographical location of the company predetermines, creates and helps the demand; the company is situated inside a famous wine region, which also offers particular wines, such as Amarone wine, that can attract a separate interest. The office in the historical city centre allows for face-to-face communication and provides multiple attributes and possibilities – starting with a higher trust in the company that exists “offline”, creates an additional opportunity for sales to walk-ins, and allows for the possibility of events for different purposes such as sales, promotion and partner-connection. The founder of the company and the majority of the team members have strong background connections with the territory and friendship-based connections with many of the partners: wineries, accommodation providers, restaurants. PWT officially became an “Info point” of Valpolicella Wine Road in 2020 and can thus use its promotional materials and status to take advantage of the additional tourist flow.

The particularities of the team are worth mentioning. The company was based on the cultural association and can rely on and promote 20 years expertise of the Valpolicella context, and the guides are certified or soon-to-be certified sommeliers (which is important to meet professionalism related expectations of different tour participants). The company owns three minivans, which are branded with logo stickers and are used only for the company’s tours and to increase brand awareness, safety perception, and trust of the potential and existing customers. The company has a well-designed website optimised with SEO (search engine optimisation) that allows for direct booking with a built-in tool. Cooperation with TripAdvisor aggregator through business account allows for better brand exposure, possibly directs part of the searches directly to the website, increases sales, and provides proof of good, in this case mostly “excellent”, reviews. PWT is active on social media and has 3 393 subscribers to the newsletter – these are the main tools for the company's online communication.

**Weaknesses.** Most weaknesses, as the points where the company is believed to lose opportunities, were discovered to be situated on the level of business-to-customer (B2C) communication and can be improved in order to be transformed into the company's strengths. The most significant was the lack of information about the customers collected before and after the tours, connected to the level of awareness, expectations, the occasion on which the tour is made, followed by the absence of follow-up communication through a feedback form or promotional campaigns targeting existing clients to turn them into repeat customers or brand ambassadors when suggesting the company to friends and relatives. The information collected

by the company (only for the last few years) is limited to numbers of private or shared groups, the number of participants in the groups, and the number of different tours sold. This can lead to a lower ability to provide a personalised tour, create a long-lasting connection with the customers, and increase sales with personalised targeting based on sales information. For instance, if the tour “Horseback riding and wine tasting” was mostly purchased by American tourists of age 55-65, it gives an idea of which communication channels to use toward which target group to increase sales of this specific tour. Currently, PWT loses such an opportunity.

Furthermore, the occasional promotions were not used, such as for St. Valentine’s Day or Christmas, which would cost the company less than, for instance, cooperation with TripAdvisor and would increase sales in the low season. Collecting feedback will also help manage the company for a constant increase in the quality of the service and allows it to mitigate any negative circumstances. The office does not look approachable for potential walk-ins and does not organise events to create a flow of visitors. Poor understanding of the market caused by the lack of collected information does not allow for the differentiation of communication on Facebook and Instagram social medias; in this case, Facebook is not, but should be, used to stimulate sales by constantly directing followers to the website.

The newsletters are not regularly issued, and consumers are not motivated to subscribe. For instance, the 15% discount is offered for the next purchase only after one has subscribed and not before as a condition for the subscription. Most of the team members do not usually participate in professional events, which weakens the position of the company in the professional sphere, does not provide additional knowledge and tools for the team, and possibly decreases motivation for development.

**Threats.** The external factors indirectly or directly influencing the company are seen here mostly as strategies used by competitors and ignored by the company, social trends as well as unforeseen economic situations such as the one faced this year. Competitors of PWT in some cases offer similar tours with lower prices, and, for instance, when the potential customers compare the brochures, they might find the offer of PWT not competitive enough. The PWT brochure offers a limited amount of information and communicates very little about values – emphasising company values could be one of the solutions to distinguish PWT from the competitors. The company’s competitors also provide monetary motivation to the staff of the hotels for the reference of their tours, while PWT does not recognise such an approach. In this case, the company should create a set of non-monetary motivations for better loyalty cooperation with partners. The company does not collect information about the wineries’ price for regular visitors and, thus, cannot be sure of the competitiveness of the offer price. Furthermore, the company does not have a set of principles of cooperation, leaving it for a

customised approach but, as believed by the author, not using its power of the tourism flow influencer and value driver inside the value chain to the full as well as strategically weakening its position among partners and against competitors.

Another threatening point is that PWT does not cooperate with Booking.com, Airbnb, Ryanair, and similar travel aggregators. It is one of the internal principles that one might find respectful, but it is important to track their offers and be aware of competition from their side. Wine tour exclusivity is the specialty of the company and is one of the weak points at the same time – as PWT is concentrating all its efforts in one area and depending on the market trends towards wine tourism. However, in this case while competitors offer a wider choice of tourism offer, they can obtain clients for wine tours after selling them a bicycle tour, for example. With all that being said, the most important threat at the moment of the internship is the pandemic lockdown and the uncertainty the company finds itself in with the possible scenarios. Some of them can be mentioned as follows: repeated travel ban, extra slow recovery process for the unpredictable period, unpredictable recovery patterns among different countries, different perception of risk to travel (in general and in the Northern Italy region in particular), increased tourism competition on national and international levels, and the increased competition for customers' attention online.

**Opportunities** are the external counterpart of strengths and can rely on trends in the industry and beyond, the circumstances that do not depend on the company but can be taken advantage of (Willoughby, 2019). One of the important opportunities that appeared this year and can be used by PWT is becoming the "Info point" of Valpolicella Wine Route "Valpolicella Strada del Vino", which can bring higher brand awareness for new customers, strengthen its position among competitors, serve as a driving force for creating events in the office, and position the company as the representative of the wineries of Valpolicella in Verona. The trend towards sustainability, as discussed before, is not yet proven to make customers pay the extra price, but can serve as an advantage if well communicated. The possibility for tourists to join the group and share the van can be communicated as an eco-friendlier way of travelling, as well as creating the tours dedicated to sustainability effort of the wine region, including sustainable wineries. Continuous pre- and post-tour communication will make the satisfied client a brand ambassador (birthday wishes, refer a friend discount, etc). Collected and properly analysed information about customers will help for better targeting and will positively influence financial performance with increased sales. Constant monitoring of competitors' activities, offers, and prices will help to sustain the competition.

The through and post-disaster context suggests such opportunities: targeting internal market travellers, an increase of private tour sales as a social distancing potential effort, comparatively

higher demand for “fresh air” tourism, communication of the call for international solidarity through the choice of tourism destination, the possibility for wine shipping and experience packages, strengthening connections with local partners being similarly influenced by the disaster, and building trust and connection with existing and potential customers by providing relevant information about up-to-date travel conditions and opportunities. Repeated tourists, according to the Peters et al. literature review (2020), are believed to have a different image of the territory and might perceive it to be less dangerous, as well as VFR category, crises-resistant tourists, and “young extroverts willing to take physical risks”.

#### 4.1.2 Corporate values: defining and evaluating

##### 4.1.2.1 PWT belief system analysis and the creation of the set of corporate values

The belief system (A2) was created by the team of PWT using brainstorming sessions in 2018. The draft set of CV statements was created by the author based on the belief system in addition to the founder’s vision and the mission of the company. This list of the draft set of CV was evaluated by the team of PWT with an online questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements, potentially representing the set of CV. Each statement had seven response categories in a forced-choice format ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The obtained draft-set of CV and the team estimation of it are presented in Figure 2. Consult the annexes for detailed evaluation information (A3.1 Table 2).

##### Draft set of PWT corporate values:

- V1** Exercises fair economic activity for the prosperity of the local community;
- V2** Provides a comfortable working environment;
- V3** Wine tourism professionals, territory experts;
- V4** Commitment to promotion and development of the region and local community;
- V5** Support for small and medium-size local and family-owned businesses;
- V6** Support and promotion of local sustainable producers;
- V7** A “voice” of Valpolicella producers in Verona (through website/social media and future Info point);
- V8** A trusted and fair business cooperation with partners, based on friendship;
- V9** A hospitable local friend for visitors motivated to get to know the region;
- V10** Commitment/affirmation to providing responsible tourism offer for tourism sustainability.

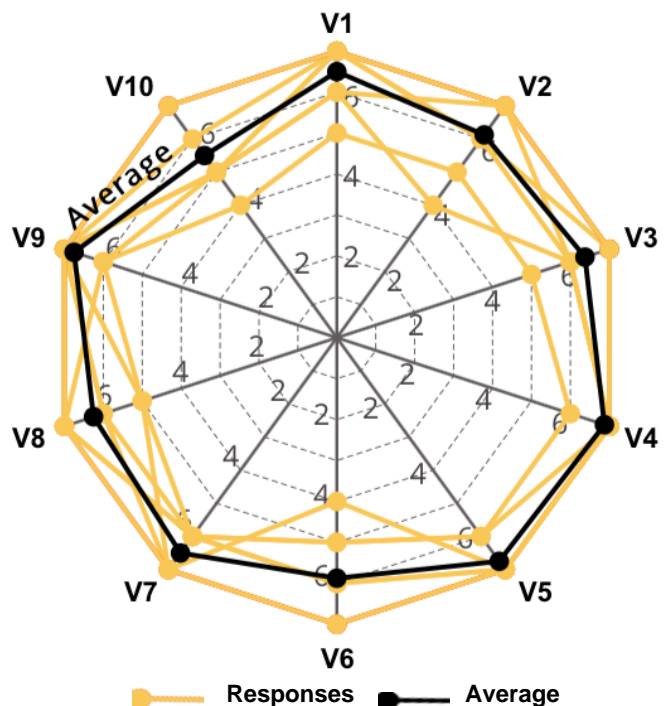


Figure 2: Team evaluation of PWT draft set of corporate values  
Source: PWT Team Questionnaire

The most alerting results with the smallest average score bring attention to the statements: V10 “Commitment/affirmation to providing responsible tourism offer for tourism sustainability”, V6 “Support and promotion of local sustainable businesses”, as well as the statements which were the least supported by some of the respondents, such as statements V2 “Provides a comfortable working environment” and previously mentioned V6 and V10. The presented results are believed to not only express agreement/disagreement level, but could be influenced by the difference in knowledge, perception of activities, and the statements themselves.

Following the evaluation of the draft set of CV, respondents were asked what could be improved in their opinion. Suggested improvements were mostly related to the working environment: office and transportation, changing to less polluting transportation, in particular; education of the team about wine and region; sustainability; and sustainable practices.

With the next open-ended question, the respondents were asked to state the main value of the company based on their opinion. The author finds it interesting that even though the respondents were not limited to choose from the presented draft set or provide their own ideas, all of them provided unique answers and did not choose any of the presented before. The main current values of the company according to the respondents were mostly related to friendly relationships – inside the team, between the guides and customers, between the company and partners. Being operated by locals, honesty, professionalism, and hospitality were also among the mentioned main values as well as “care for small producers and team”. Consult the annexes for detailed responses (A3.1 Table 3).

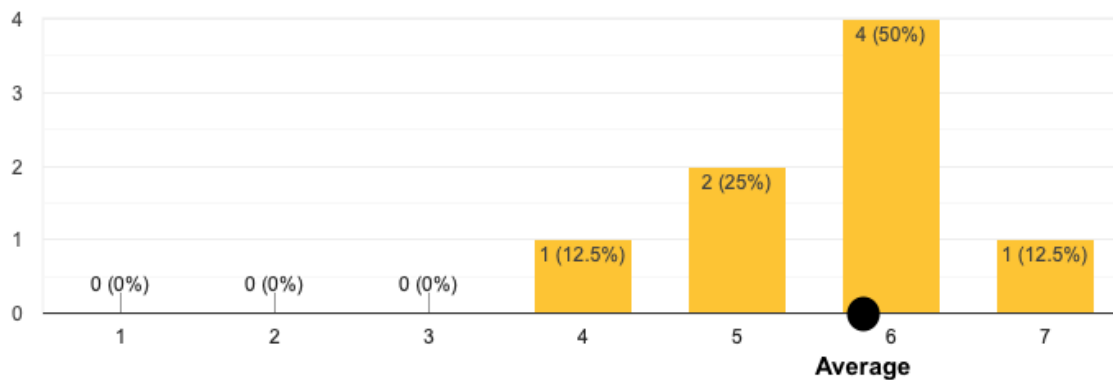
#### *4.1.2.2 Communication of the value: PWT team evaluation analysis*

With the questionnaire, the company team was also asked to assess the quality of value communication towards partners and consumers. Figure 3 illustrates the assessment of the latter. The result of the Likert rating showed the following average ratings between the two categories: 5.6 (out of 7 as a maximum for “strongly agree” at the given scale) for communication towards the customers and 5.8 for communication towards the partners, making the results similar, with less approval of the quality of CV communication toward consumers.

However, when respondents were asked to suggest what can or should be improved, there were discreet and valuable comments, summarised in Table 1.

Please estimate, how well are these values communicated to the customers of the company (online and offline)?

8 responses



**Figure 3: Corporate values communication assessment by PWT team**  
Source: PWT Team Questionnaire 2020

**Table 1: Suggestions for improvement of CV communication**

Partners-oriented communication	Customers-oriented communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletter and annual presentation;</li> <li>• Constant informing about the news;</li> <li>• More promotional events;</li> <li>• Discuss sustainability with them;</li> <li>• Regular meetings focused on new projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better customisation of email and in general;</li> <li>• Newsletters on the regular base;</li> <li>• More worth-oriented communication;</li> <li>• More interaction with customers through social media;</li> <li>• Communication of values in online communication.</li> </ul>

As can be seen from the results, most of the communication suggestions reflect the results of the SWOT analysis and are believed to find support for the argumentation of the importance for improvement. One of the answers was not related to the improvement of communicating values and thus is not included in the Table 1 summary, but is believed to be valuable as a brainstorm idea for the company: “We should ask all the wineries to follow a standard pattern for the tasting”.

#### **4.1.3 Sustainability and tourism sustainability perception of PWT team**

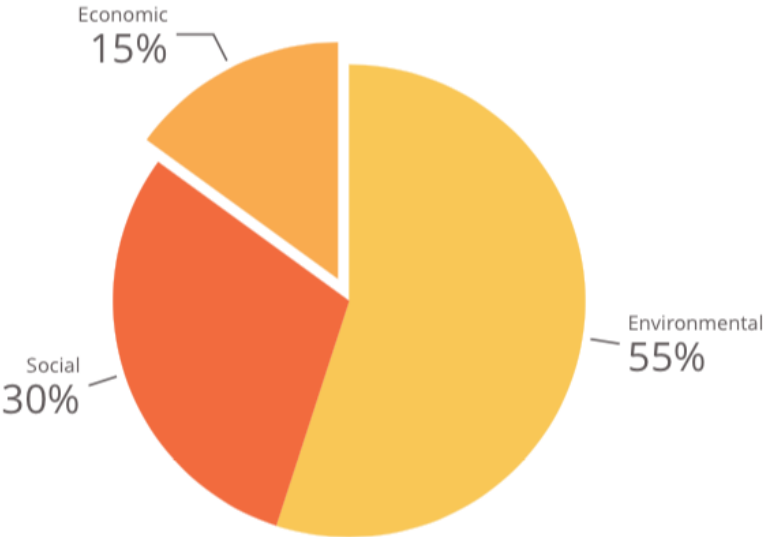
##### *4.1.3.1 Sustainability perception analysis*

The questions for the sustainability perception part of the questionnaire were partially based on those used in the research, mentioned in the methodology and adapted for the current research case. Table 2 contains the most used words or phrases that respondents used to define sustainability, grouped by the author according to sustainability dimensions defined by the United Nations in 2005 (as cited in Szolnoki, 2013, p.246).

**Table 2: Overview of the meaning of the term “sustainability” for PWT team**

Dimension	Perceived principles
General/Unspecified	Fair; development that satisfies the needs of modern generations but doesn't compromise the needs of future ones; preservation and improving.
Environmental	More good consequences than bad; reduce human impact on nature; respect nature and environment (x2); care for the environment; customer satisfaction with respect for nature, the territory; less pollution; something that can work mostly from an ecological point of view.
Economic	N/A
Social	Respect people; customer satisfaction with respect for its inhabitants; something that can work mostly from a social point of view.

To better illustrate the tendency of perception, the statements were translated into points and calculated accordingly. The general statements were included in each of the three dimensions, the statements that included several dimensions were used several times in relevant groups. For example, the statement “Customer satisfaction with respect for nature, the territory and its inhabitants” gave one point for both: environmental and social dimensions. The results are illustrated with the Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Perception of sustainability term of PWT team by dimension**  
**Source: PWT team Questionnaire**

The results support research on the perception of sustainability mentioned in the literature review, showing the most common perception through the environmental dimension. It is important to note that there were no responses directly related purely to the economic dimension.

Explaining the term “sustainability”, which is also considered to be confusing by researchers on the topic, might not be easy for the team of PWT and to support the question the

respondents were also asked to name the companies they know in the region that practised sustainability well in their opinion. Five of the eight respondents found this question difficult to answer, and three answered by providing the names of two wineries that use sustainable, organic, or biodynamic practices and one company that produces reusable packaging. Hence, the results of these questions support the opinion reflected in Table 2, and show limited knowledge of the sustainability practices and/or is a result of unsuccessful communication of sustainable practices by the companies, who implement such strategies in the region. The team was advised in the preamble to the questionnaire that there were no right or wrong answers because the purpose of the study was to collect the real opinions. However, a useful observation can be suggested: that the project of the Valpolicella Wine Consortium was not mentioned in the responses. “Valpolicella RRR” a “sustainable production protocol based on sustainable practices” that provides certification for winemakers and winegrowers (Valpolicella Consorzio Tutela Vini, 2016). Therefore, several assumptions can be made for further idea development. The team, in general, might not be well aware of sustainability practices of the producers in the wine region; might not connect the eco-friendly wine-producing activities as those important to be mentioned in overall sustainability-related ones; and the wineries might not communicate these activities well or might not be willing to communicate them. Consult the annexes for detailed responses (A3.2 Table 4).

#### *4.1.3.2 Tourism sustainability perception analysis*

The opinion of the respondents on the principles of sustainable tourism was mostly reflected through the environmental dimension, mentioning the importance of decreasing seasonality and preservation and respect of local people, culture, and nature. Fewer arguments were presented for social and economic dimensions, such as fair payment for industry workers and the importance of the authorisation of business activity. One of the principles was mentioned as the education of tourists about sustainability.

Among the sustainability practices of PWT in the following open-ended question the respondents mentioned the necessary authorisation for the company’s activity, good payment and no money-wasting, respect of local people and attractions, cooperation with organic farmers, promotion of the territory and local producers, bringing customers in direct contact with producers, using electronic devices for collecting authorisation instead of using paper, and using vans instead of buses.

As for customers’ reactions to the company's sustainable practices question, it was seen by the respondents as something appreciated by some customers and ignored by others. According to the responses, the majority of the respondents thought that practising

sustainability is difficult; two respondents thought it was easy; and one thought it could be both complicated and easy. The arguments suggested difficulties due to being money and time-consuming attributes, with extra management effort “requiring change”, and the one that decreased the comfort of travellers. The contrasting response argued that practising sustainability was easy: “if you really believe in that and you want to create it for your activities (in general), it's important to start with a few things and go on”.

The results of this part of the questionnaire suggest the lack of understanding of principles of sustainable tourism among the team members; the knowledge and perception were diverse. The mutual agreement and communication of values, including sustainable tourism affirmation value, is required not only towards partners and customers, but, more importantly, on this stage towards the team members.

#### ***4.1.4 Comparative analysis of communication patterns***

The analysis was based on word clouds of PWT corporate values, the PWT website, company competitors' websites, and PWT customers' feedback on TripAdvisor. For this part of the research the free online resource Vizzlo.com was used to convert the analysed textual data into the word cloud infographics. The standard text pre-processing steps were undertaken, such as changing characters to lowercase, changing plural to singular forms, and filtering the unnecessary words that could confuse the results, such as “what”, as well as the words from the company's name and geographical locations. Consult the annexes for the full list of words that were filtered during the word cloud creation (A4). The names of the guides were mentioned often in the feedback responses; therefore, they were replaced with the word “guide” to be grouped into one category. The number of words in each word cloud was limited to 35. There were four figures created in order to be analysed according to the description in the methodology section.

Comparing desired value communication patterns from Figure 5 to the rest of the figures, it is possible to see only a partial connection of the main “value words” in the customer feedback patterns on Figure 6 and projected PWT communication in Figure 7. On the contrary, when visually comparing website communication of the company (Figure 7), with one of its main competitors (Figure 8) and the reviews of the company's customers (Figure 6), it is possible to find a lot of similarities. Whereas the textual patterns of corporate values of PWT look very different from the competitor's website communication pattern.



Figure 5: Word cloud of PWT corporate values



Figure 6: Word cloud of PWT customer feedback on TripAdvisor 2017-2019



Figure 7: Word cloud of PWT website descriptive textual information



Figure 8: Word cloud of Veronality website descriptive textual information

There could be several assumptions based on the results: the CV of PWT might not be practised, the CV might not be communicated adequately, or there might be a misalignment with the values upheld by PTW’s consumers. To understand the real contingency of these reasons further research is required, and one of the important ways to achieve that is to get to know the consumer better through continuous communication and information collection. Lack of communication activities aiming at consumer data collection and, therefore, the absence of relevant statistics, were previously mentioned by the author in the SWOT analysis.

It is also possible to assume that it might be hard for potential customers to understand to what degree PWT is different from its competitors, merely based on the textual information provided on the website. Thus, one might rely on the set of additional attributes to make a choice between the companies, such as reviews, visual attributes, and price (Levitt, 1980), which means that without communication, the values of the company do not dissociate it among the

competitors and do not serve as an added value for the customer and value driver inside the tourism value chain. Kotler and Keller argued that the consumer must be convinced that there are “meaningful differences among a category’s brands” in order for “branding strategy to be successful and brand value to be created” (2012, p.115).

#### **4.2 Summarising discussion of the results**

The overall idea of implementation and communication of sustainable practices in the tourism sector remains difficult to practise for the reason that tourism is a complex service industry that includes a wide range of different actors inside the supply chain, whose practices are a lot harder to analyse compared to, for instance, the production of a tangible product. However, one of the important limitations discovered both in literature research and while studying the company itself is the lack of knowledge on what exactly sustainability is and how it can be practised on different levels while operating wine tours. Looking through the lens of sustainability, and its TBL: environmental, social, and economic, it was possible to discover how differently they are perceived among the team members and some uncertainty in whether it can be practised successfully and affordably at the same time. The only strategy-related written document created by the team – the belief system that included mostly social dimension of sustainability – as well as offline and online interviews were used as a base for the study. The brief critical analysis of this system can give an idea of the absence of the customer-centric approach, which is also supported by above-presented SWOT analysis, showing that the company does not collect enough information to understand who is the customer and what are the customer's needs, values and expectations.

The initial objective of this research was to translate the company's belief system into a set of values in order to include the attributes that distinguish the company from its competitors into the external communication strategy. However, while working on this objective a deeper issue was discovered, that is believed to demand priority attention – the misconception of sustainability principles and disagreement on the level of the performance of the company's values. While being one of the limitations for following the path for initial objectives, it would be totally wrong to ignore the “crack in the fundament, while building a house”. It is believed by the author to be an important basic audit result that gives an idea for the company management in the field for improvement and growth.

The disastrous circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown and the “immobilisation” of intern as a researcher as well as that all the parties involved remains the biggest limitation for extending this research approach and suggesting an implementation based on these results. For the full audit, it would be necessary to interview other value-chain stakeholders – partners and

customers. The inability to build a trusted relationship with partners and have access to customers to conduct interviews because of the lockdown leaves this open for further research. The author would not be able to have relevant honest responses conducting such interviews online. The perception of sustainability of all stakeholders is important to be analysed not only for better communication of corporate values, but also for driving sustainability values in the value chain.

The created set of corporate values is suggested by the author to remain a draft for the management of the company to finalise based on the results of the research. However, this draft was used for further analysis to illustrate the gaps between the desired and projected value communication of the company and how it is perceived by the customers. This gap was partially illustrated through presenting an analysis of textual patterns with the Word Cloud tool. While being illustrative enough to suggest that the company is not communicating its values well as unique attributes, the author is convinced it is not exhaustive. It would be a lot more beneficial for the research to work with the customer reviews collected by the company and not from the travel aggregator. The absence of such information, caused by the fact that the company does not perform continuous communication, in which the pre- and post-tour feedback would play a crucial role, is seen by the author not only as a limitation for this particular research but as a weakness and threat for the business development from the strategic point of view, especially considering a fragile position of the business in tourism sector. Hence a strategic proposal is included in this work, tackling the target markets, the possible communication styles, and the steps needed to adjust and implement the communication of PWT corporate values.

## **5. STRATEGIC PROPOSAL**

Based on findings presented in SWOT analysis, questionnaire results and website communication patterns analysis – considering the current industry’s fragile position and absence of company strategy – the aim of this chapter is to address the communication side of strategic planning with more detailed attention to tactic actions applying pro-sustainability practices. As suggested by Bordelon, Kirillova and Schaffer (as cited in Peters et al., 2020, p.12), “recovery planning should use a travel ecology approach, which considers economic growth, social development, and ecological sustainability”.

### **5.1 Early-return visitor markets analysis**

In the PWT supply chain, the pandemic-related circumstances are believed to influence customers, urging the analysis for redirecting communication efforts. As mentioned above, the

company made the decision to start targeting the internal market. The suggested future targeting segments and characteristics (Table 3) is based on the early-return visitor segment analysis from “Visit People. Tourism Recovery after disaster” literature review (Peters et al., 2020) and serves as a more detailed target market analysis and a base for communication plan adjustment.

**Table 3: Communication approach toward early-returners, based on characteristics**

	Early-return visitors’ segments		
	Visiting friends and relatives	Repeat tourists	Crisis-resistant tourists
Characteristics	Pure VFR (mostly internal) will travel to the region encouraged by government and to support local businesses, but less concerned with tourism activity; Commercial VFR (mostly external) – the focus of market development, families of international students; Exploitative VFR – expect the full tourism experience on the budget.	Have different cognitive processes in the image formation and travel behaviour than first-time visitors and are more likely to act as an effective word-of-mouth reference group or an informal channel of advertising to disseminate positive information about the destination.	Have exciting lives and are highly involved in travel and related planning activities; are more likely to be young, extrovert, willing to take physical risks; are motivated to travel by opportunities related to sports and health; and are actively engaged in activities such as mountain biking, horse riding, and hiking.
Communication approach	Sustainability dimension: social and economic Language: Italian and English Target geographical level: regional Message: support your country's economy, support local, safety Channel: online, offline, word-of-mouth  Suggestions: lifestyle social media influencers; press release for regional media; cooperation with students' organisations.	Sustainability dimension: social and environmental Language: English Target geographical level: international Message: safety, open for business, support Italy, benefits of travelling outside touristic routes Channel: online  Suggestions: sales through newsletters; returner special offer; refer a friend offer; promotion through Pinterest.	Sustainability dimension: social, economic and environmental Language: English Target geographical level: international Message: travelling outside touristic routes, slow tourism, nature-related tourism, education Channel: online, word-of-mouth  Suggestions: lifestyle social media influencers; promotion through Pinterest; active tours promotion, picnics promotion, wedding-related travel offers.

**5.2 Self-assessment of the company for their pro-sustainable initiatives**

The previous analysis of the perception of PWT corporate values suggests that there is a gap not only in the desired, projected and perceived value communication, but more importantly on this stage, a gap between the perception of the list of values related to sustainability inside the team. Hence, a realistic self-assessment of the current position is necessary to be conducted by the management of the company. For this purpose, it is suggested to use the matrix created by Baldassarre and Campo (Table 4) as a tool when they were researching sustainability as a marketing tool in the context of “to be or to appear to be”. This matrix enables

top management of the companies to “self-assess their degree of corporate sustainability in terms of commitment to sustainable initiatives and the ability to communicate these to different stakeholders” (2016, p.422).

**Table 4: A self-assessment tool for sustainable initiative transparency**  
 Source: F. Baldassarre, R. Campo (2016)

		<b>Translucent companies</b>	<b>Transparent companies</b>
<b>Being sustainable</b>	<b>High commitment</b>	Sustainability is <i>de facto</i> realized, but is not exploited as a marketing opportunity. Sensitivity toward sustainable issues is demonstrated by definite actions, but the company is not completely aware of the strategic importance of communication. There is a gap between the sustainable performance and the perception of customers.  <i>“We should communicate better what we are. We are doing the hard work—why not celebrate it?”</i>	Sustainability is an important topic of the overall corporate strategy. Consequently, the marketing and communication approach to sustainable initiatives is consistent with what the company actually does. ‘Sustainable value’ is made up of definite activities, well-communicated to stakeholders, and the reputation of the company is supported by facts and figures. Sustainability is a competitive advantage.  <i>“We communicate what we are”</i>
	<b>Low commitment</b>	<b>Dark companies</b>	<b>Opaque companies</b>
		Companies are not at all aware of the relevance of sustainability as a strategic topic. There is no company website on sustainability and no possibility for stakeholders to know anything about the organization’s mission, values, etc. Sustainability is not a concern.  <i>“What are you talking about?”</i>	Sustainability is used as opportunistic leverage. Management overpromises and underdelivers on sustainability, and this could put the company’s reputation at risk. ‘To appear’ is more important than ‘to be’: the marketing and communication strategy regarding sustainable initiatives is emphasized, but is inconsistent with what the company actually does.  <i>“We are (we pretend to be) what we communicate”</i>
		Low-profile communication	High-profile communication
<b>Appearing sustainable</b>			

In the same research, the authors discuss the degree of “transparency” of the companies for the stakeholders through the quality of communication, using the geological metaphor of transparency adapted from Lamming, Caldwell and Phillips’ “The behaviour of light as an analogy for communication of sustainable operational activities to stakeholders” (as cited in Baldassarre & Campo, 2016). The authors suggested that the “transparency” level in terms of the communication relationship with stakeholders about sustainability activities is dynamic and can thus be managed. For building a realistic strategy it is important for the management to “map” itself by asking “where the company is”, followed by the “where the company wants to be”. Only in the next step would be the third basic strategic approach question be asked: “what should be done to move towards the point where the company wants to be?”.

### 5.3 Finalising the set of corporate values and performance improvement plan

The next step following the self-assessment for the company would be finalising the set of values, using the findings of this research. The management of the company can decide whether to keep all statements or filter some of those that were not supported. With the new list, strategic planning has to be implemented, analysing weaknesses in the performance of each value, creating the list of actions to be implemented, and setting KPIs for the ways in which the company is planning to assess the performance in each statement of corporate values and understand the progress. Full honesty and team participation are crucial in order to create an enhanced communication strategy and achieve positive realistic results. The evaluation can further be organised on a seasonal/annual basis to track and speed up the progress. Table 5 below gives an example of how each corporate value should be strategically approached.

**Table 5: Strategic analysis and plan for improvement for CV “Support of sustainable producers”**

Weaknesses	Actions for improvement	Ways to assess & KPI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of database of sustainable producers;</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about sustainability practices in wine production;</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about sustainable tourism;</li> <li>• Lack of sustainability information circulation in the communication inside the team; with partners and customers, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of Valpolicella sustainability project to the team;</li> <li>• Studying sustainable offers;</li> <li>• Including information about sustainable producers in the website and social media communication;</li> <li>• Educating customers about sustainable approach;</li> <li>• Educating and promoting SSCM concept among partners;</li> <li>• Promoting the importance of communicating sustainability among team and partners, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability production principles team knowledge testing;</li> <li>• Database of sustainable producers;</li> <li>• Information about sustainable wine producers is included in the tour description;</li> <li>• Sustainability practices included in online communication;</li> <li>• Collecting and analysing customers' feedback on the topic;</li> <li>• Sustainability effort is mentioned in the customers' feedback, etc.</li> </ul>

Following the strategically approached final set of corporate values, the more precise tactics and actions should be planned. Such plan will give a more practical guideline for implementation/practising each of the corporate values and their communication towards the team, partners and customers using available channels of communication. Table 6 below illustrates the preliminary tactics and actions plan, based on findings obtained during the internship. It is believed to be useful for the company as an illustration of the way of implementation and communication of CV, and to serve as a more precise tool a time frame for each of the planned steps is required.

**Table 6: Tactics and actions for the implementation and communication of corporate values**

Corporate Values	Implementation	Communication
<p>1. Exercises fair economic activity for the prosperity of the local community;</p> <p>8. With partners: a trusted and fair business cooperation based on friendship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect price lists of the wineries to understand how fair is the price inside the package;</li> <li>• Create and provide wineries with a set of cooperation principles;</li> <li>• Monitor competitors` offer and economic activity - bench marketing;</li> <li>• Implement strategic planning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise annual reporting to partners;</li> <li>• Include a message of fair economic activities in tours` description and general information section of the website;</li> <li>• Provide guides with branded name badges;</li> <li>• Practice transparent financial reporting;</li> <li>• Report to customers any positive changes via newsletters.</li> </ul>
<p>2. Provides a comfortable working environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting the working space for the needs of the team.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant evaluation of the working environment by the team members;</li> <li>• Report to customers any positive changes via newsletters.</li> </ul>
<p>3. Wine tourism professionals, territory experts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support team members in obtaining/improving wine and tourism education;</li> <li>• Monitor professional wine events, encourage team`s participation;</li> <li>• Office reorganisation, allowing space for presentations;</li> <li>• Collect feedback with the post-tour questionnaire, to let customers assess the level of professionalism.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide details about wine-related education of the guides;</li> <li>• Present company in the industry events;</li> <li>• Team communication through social media to show knowledge and to promote the people behind the brand;</li> <li>• Organise presentations in the office by the tour guides and invited winemakers;</li> <li>• Report to customers any positive changes via newsletters.</li> </ul>
<p>4. Commitment to promotion and development of the region and local community;</p> <p>5. Support for small and medium-size local and family-owned businesses;</p> <p>6. Support and promotion of local sustainable producers;</p> <p>7. A "voice" of Valpolicella producers in Verona (through website/social media and Info point activities).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Office reorganisation, allowing space for presentations, tasting space;</li> <li>• Introduce the possibilities of the office space for the partners;</li> <li>• Organise events presenting the region of Valpolicella with wine tasting in the office;</li> <li>• Participate in the industry events, such as fairs and conferences for networking and representation of the community;</li> <li>• Present to wineries the sustainability-oriented ways of improving the visits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the company's social media as a platform for interviews/live streams from the wineries of partners;</li> <li>• Promote wine presentation events in the office through social media;</li> <li>• Create a separate newsletter for the partners about sustainability, marketing, and trends;</li> <li>• Promote the set of company`s cooperation policies among partners;</li> <li>• Keep track and conduct reporting about the support of local producers via newsletters.</li> </ul>
<p>9. A hospitable local friend for visitors motivated to get to know the region.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create an internal check-list with the set of questions for pre-booking communication to understand the occasion on which the booking is made; expectations, how the customer learned about the tour/company (which communication channel was successful in each case);</li> <li>• Organise customer feedback collection after the tour to track the quality of performance and progress within the strategy;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage pre-booking communication according to the check-list;</li> <li>• Customise the greetings of customers if they travel on special occasions (depending on the purchase it could be a bottle of wine and/or personalised card);</li> <li>• Invite tour participants to answer the post-tour anonymous feedback form sent by email with a message of gratitude from the founder/team, "join us for your next wine tour" special discount as the motivation to give feedback;</li> </ul>

9. A hospitable local friend for visitors motivated to get to know the region.

- Use the database with collected information for strategic planning, more personalised and precise future communication and promotion towards existing and potential customers;
  - Plan occasional promotions on a yearly basis, depending on seasonality and public holidays, both national and international, avoid discount promotion during high season;
  - Create repeat customers and “refer a friend” loyalty programs;
  - Analyse and plan cooperation with lifestyle&travel (not only the wine oriented) opinion leaders for promotion.
- Provide the discount motivation for newsletter subscription;
  - Explain why should one subscribe to newsletters and how often it will be sent – within the constant schedule;
  - Promote newsletters through social media with “check your emails” messages;
  - Provide up-to-date information with wine-related events and safety in the region with the newsletters and social media channels;
  - Communicate holiday promotions in advance;
  - Communicate the loyalty programs;
  - Organise online promotion in cooperation with lifestyle&travel bloggers.

10. Commitment/affirmation to providing responsible tourism offer for tourism sustainability.

- Self-assessment of: how sustainable are the practices of the company and how sustainable are the activities of the company's partners;
  - Create a plan of actions for improvement;
  - Force strategic planning sessions for sustainability promotion and protection of destination, and the development of local standards among the team and businesses involved in the wine tourism value chain.
- Communicate and discuss the value with team members and within the local wine tourism value chain;
  - Communicate to customers when they are making sustainable choices, such as using shared van, buying from locals, etc;
  - Raise awareness with communication about responsible travel choices;
  - Report to customers any positive pro-sustainable changes via newsletters.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to forecast the results of the current pandemic situation, which is found to be similar and different at the same time from any other resembling circumstances in the modern history in terms of its economic impact. However, it is quite obvious for many researchers that tourism is unlikely to return to the same economic level any time soon. The role of sustainability seems to be increased for the post-lockdown industries' practices, besides its constantly increasing trend for the past years that is seen in research mostly targeting millennials and their willingness to buy from or cooperate with responsible businesses. These circumstances are believed to drive the necessary change either pushing the companies to be more responsible because the business itself wants to be more responsible or because buyers demand that from companies. This research proves that in the case of Pagus Wine Tours – it is both.

For creating a communication strategy based on values, this research analysed how the communication is aligned with the corporate values and how it is not different from the communication of competitors. The research found the gaps between desired, projected and perceived value communication of the company with its different perceptions inside the team

and made suggestions for overcoming these gaps. The detailed “portrait” of the customer markets that are believed to be the most relevant in the near future for better targeting when communicating the corporate values and offers was presented. The research also offered several tools and ways to estimate each of the stated values, to shed some insights on how congruent it is for the company and how the performance can be improved, together with some practical suggestions that can be implemented with no or little costs.

With this research, there is a hope to suggest the possibility of the incredible power of this small company inside the regional tourism supply chain. Acknowledging the position of Pagus Wine Tours, it is up for the management to decide how far the company is ready and willing to go when taking the role of the sustainability value driver in order to implement a sustainable supply chain management approach. Using sustainability principles in treatment of workers, when cooperating with the local community, minding ecosystem, when choosing the principles of business cooperation and deciding on how to communicate these choices and efforts, the company is believed to serve as a driver for important change inside the supply chain and not only successfully develop itself but the tourist region as a whole without “compromising the future generations”.

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## ANNEXES

### A1. Wine Tourism Business Context

Official statistics on arrivals in the Valpolicella Wine Route area. "Arrivi" - the number of all visitors hosted in hospitality establishments in 2019. The "Presenze" refers to the number of nights consecutively spent by the customer in the same accommodation facility.

A.1 Table 1. Touristic movement in the Valpolicella Wine Route area

Source: Strada Del Vino Valpolicella, extracted from the Office of Statistics of Veneto Region

Movimento turistico nel Veneto						
Anno 2019						
Tutti i comuni del Veneto - Provenienza: italiani + stranieri						
(*) Per tutelare la riservatezza dei rispondenti il dato è omesso ai sensi dell'articolo 9 del D.Lgs. 322/1989						
comune	Totale Alberghieri		Totale Complem.		Totale	
	Arrivi	Presenze	Arrivi	Presenze	Arrivi	Presenze
23031 - Dolcé	*	*	*	*	1,614	4,466
23035 - Fumane	2,356	5,267	4,737	14,340	7,093	19,607
23046 - Marano di Valpolicella	0	0	2,954	6,070	2,954	6,070
23052 - Negrar di Valpolicella	34,956	86,158	11,694	52,152	46,650	138,310
23058 - Pescantina	*	*	*	*	24,266	47,432
23076 - San Pietro in Cariano	25,078	55,598	7,056	28,426	32,134	84,024
23077 - Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella	*	*	*	*	10,305	24,013
23078 - Sant'Anna d'Alfaedo	*	*	*	*	816	2,270
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>125,832</b>	<b>326,192</b>

Fonte : Elaborazioni dell'Ufficio di Statistica della Regione del Veneto su dati Istat - Regione Veneto

### A2. Pagus Wine Tours Belief System

The following list of statements is the result of an internal brainstorming session in 2018, provided by the company and translated from Italian language:

1. Pagus wants to make a pleasant experience in our land, tasting its typical products, in particular wine;
2. Unforgettable experiences to discover the Verona area with tasting of wines and typical products;  
Beliefs of the target.
3. Tours organised very well. Nothing left to chance, every choice is the result of experience gained over many years and of established relationships;
4. Good organisation of local tours. The perfect knowledge of the territory and the dense network of relationships with the wineries allows Pagus to offer personalised and very varied tours;
5. Guides prepared and attentive. The guides know the reality of the area very well and know how to satisfy the guests' needs;
6. Very prepared guides. The guides know the area deeply and are able to offer customized solutions for guests;
7. The meeting with the "locals" is one more element. The ability to deal with producers, restaurateurs and locals makes the experience more real;

8. Meeting with the locals as an added value. The tours are characterised by direct contact with producers, restaurateurs and local operators who bring a point of view on completely authentic territory;

9. The landscape is very beautiful. Each itinerary is designed to offer the most beautiful views;

10. Beauty of the landscape. The itineraries are studied and proposed for the enhancement of the territory in its most surprising views;

Brand beliefs.

11. Exceptional guides. The guides are local, prepared (all sommeliers), professional and able to organise comfort for guests.

12. The destinations and itineraries are never random. The cellars, restaurants and routes are the result of a long selection and represent the varied reality beyond the preconceptions of foreigners of our territory.

### A3. PWT Questionnaire: team evaluation and responses

A3.1 Table 2. Team evaluation of PWT draft set of corporate values

Draft set of PWT Corporate Values	1-3	4	5	6	7	Average
1. Exercises fair economic activity for the prosperity of the local community (licensed tour agency, official employment, the fair taxpayer);	0	0	1	2	5	6.5
2. Provides a comfortable working environment;	0	1	1	2	4	6.1
3. Wine tourism professionals, territory experts (training, certification, etc);	0	0	1	3	4	6.4
4. Commitment to promotion and development of the region and local community;	0	0	0	1	6	6.9
5. Support for small and medium-size local and family-owned businesses;	0	0	0	2	6	6.8
6. Support and promotion of local sustainable producers;	0	1	2	2	3	5.9
7. A "voice" of Valpolicella producers in Verona (through website/social media and future Info point);	0	0	0	4	4	6.5
8. A trusted and fair business cooperation with partners, based on friendship;	0	0	2	2	4	6.3
9. A hospitable local friend for visitors motivated to get to know the region;	0	0	0	2	6	6.8
10. Commitment/affirmation to providing responsible tourism offer for tourism sustainability.	0	1	4	1	2	5.5

**A3.1 Table 3. Corporate values assessment responses to open questions**

<p><b>If there were any disagreements [with the draft set of CV], please give some reasons why or/and advice what can/should be improved?</b></p>
<p>None          Maybe have a different meeting point where you can have more time to interact with the guests, use less polluting vans or means of transport,          Improve the sustainability and local tourism. And also maybe sometime have more information or lesson to improve the knowledge about everyone.          By doing our best to ensure that there are no disagreements, we always try to evaluate the reasons so that we can solve them and constantly improve our services.          None          The only advice I would give is to train more the people/guides about wine and the region in general, and about the tourism sustainability is more about the single winery that we visit because what can we say about that?!          I think Pagus should improve constantly the working environment (vans and office) because they are the face of the company</p>
<p><b>What is the main value of the company in your opinion?</b></p>
<p>Honesty          Great          In my opinion the relationship that there between the guests and the tour leaders, and the relationship between the staff and the wineries, these give the possibility to the guests to live a good and relaxed experiences and learn more.          Professionalism and hospitality          Friendship          Communication of territory          The care of the small producers and the also about the workers, and the friendship in the team          Pagus is made by local people so we can offer an authentic and genuine experience to people that are interested</p>
<p><b>Please estimate, how well are these values communicated to the partners of the company (online and offline)? Please suggest what can/should be improved:</b></p>
<p>More promotional events          Inform them of changes and news at Pagus          More meetings that are focused only in the new ideas or participate to create some new ideas.          I honestly don't know          Communication          Newsletters, annual presentation          If you meant the winery they can talk more about sustainability even though they talk a lot about that          We should ask all the wineries to follow a standard pattern for the tasting</p>
<p><b>Please estimate, how well are these values communicated to the customers of the company (online and offline)? Please suggest what can/should be improved:</b></p>
<p>Web communication          Tell about it in the brochure and in the emails          About that I don't have a lot of ideas.          I'm sorry but I don't know ... I think we already try to use all possible channels to communicate better with our possible customers          More customised email, communication in general more true and worth oriented          Newsletters, annual presentation          Offline I think it's ok .. you can improve on the online stuff          We should interact more with customers through social media</p>

**A3.2 Table 4. Sustainability perception responses to open questions**

<p><b>What does “sustainability” mean to you; how would you define it?</b></p> <p>Something that can work mostly from an ecological and social point of view  Environmental care, less pollution  In my opinion sustainability means that you respect the environment and all the things, but also people.  Customer satisfaction with respect for nature, the territory and its inhabitants  Fair and with more good consequence than bad  reduce human impact on/ respect of/ nature, environment, people  Preservation and improving  It is a form of development that satisfies the needs of modern generations but doesn't compromise the needs of future ones</p>
<p><b>What are the most important principles of “sustainable tourism” in your opinion?</b></p> <p>Defend the environment to grown up and believe in the people and defend them  Know the country you visit and respect its customs and traditions  Give a fair experience for the price you pay, not to be screw, good pay for the employees working in the company  limit access to "delicate" locations, avoid seasonal tourism in order to spread the flow of tourists during the year,  respect the environment also reducing the transports impact, give value to the professional preparation of operators  To not damage the imagine and the culture of the place we are in, and teach this to our tourists  The respect and valorization of local typicity whether it is natural environment or local culture</p>
<p><b>What are the sustainability practices of the PWT company?</b></p> <p>Probably the attention of people  We try to convey our knowledge of the territory and specifically on the cultivation and production of the wines produced in it, bringing our customers in direct contact with local wine producers both large and small and thus trying to make them live an unforgettable experience  Good pay, not wasting money in stupid things  give value to the professional preparation of operators  The show off of the small companies and to give access to the countryside to the costumers  Pagus involves an active role of local people. We visit organic wineries. We use small vans and not big buses</p>
<p><b>Do you find that practicing tourism sustainability complicated or simple and why?</b></p> <p>In my opinion practicing tourism sustainability is easy only if you really believe in that and you want create it for your activities (in general), it's important to start with few things and go on..  Practicing sustainable tourism simplifies, giving harmony to our life and promises a better future for ourselves and for future generations  Complicated  It's not easy because it means change many usual practises of the agency and try to let change usual practises to tourists  Could be both of them, because you have so many changes  It gives the chance to offer a more authentic experience but it is more expensive</p>
<p><b>How do customers react to sustainable practices?</b></p> <p>I think that they are happy and respect that.  Customers appreciate, feel more involved and responsible and the experience is certainly unforgettable for them  Are happy and alert  Depends: some of them are prepared to, some others not  The apprentice  It depends. Some people are used to mass tourism so they are not impressed or interested in this kind of practices</p>
<p><b>Please name the examples of the companies in your region that practices sustainability well in your opinion?</b></p> <p>Quid, Good morning paper  About wineries there some that practice sustainability, being organic or sometime biodynamic like Tenute Ugolini  I'm sorry, I don't know  Montonale  I really don't know about them;  Honestly I don't know</p>

#### **A4. The list of words filtered for word cloud creation**

The, and, has, shall, that, this, his, which, I'm, I'd, are, with, for, not, but, all, they, she, he, her, what, from, about, its, had, was, you, back, also, where, both, then, very, were, really, out, one, would, have, their, two, went, small, took, made, who, other, did, first, only, there, some, more, afternoon, highly, well, way, much, could, Pagus, wine, tour, Valpolicella, Verona, Amarone, will, can, day, needs, most, born, since, take, lovers, Italy, like, Soave, Garda, Venice, wines, I've, I'm, Prosecco, highlights, decided, around, visit, things, years, Custoza, any, lake, show, tours, such, end, you`ll, DOC.