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MASTER THESIS

The growth of booking platforms in Wine Tourism: new trends and challenges for Winalist, a leading platform in France

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As a master's student and referring to what I cited from Albert Einstein, this was my mindset during this adventure and it was what kept me focused even though there were not always moments of clarity. During the two years, I have experienced significant personal growth. Pursuing higher education has equipped me with a range of valuable skills and experiences that have contributed to my overall development. Let this thesis be a reminder of that. Moreover, this program has afforded me a deeper understanding of various fields, thereby broadening my knowledge and expertise, and developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and analytical skills that are crucial for the different spectrums of life.

Stepping out of my comfort zone has enabled me to communicate effectively and articulate complex ideas with clarity and precision. As a result, I have been exposed to diverse perspectives, which have allowed me to form meaningful connections with individuals from different backgrounds leading me to find my passion.

Abstract

In the present days, travelling has become one of the main motivations for people to spend their leisure time. This activity was in the first place only for wealthy people. However, the advancements in transportation made travel more affordable and accessible for the middle class. The rise of the low cost and increase of touristic offers permitted a global opportunity to travel around the world. This led to developments in all agents that are included in the industry, such as hotels, resorts and all the infrastructures that are part of a touristic experience. As the effect of globalization continued interconnecting people, tourism followed the process and evolved exponentially. The transition to the digital had a significant impact on the sector because it transformed the way people researched and book an experience. Travellers can now plan and book an entire trip online, give reviews and share their experience with others through social media platforms, influencing people on their decisions and desires to replicate the same experience. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has enabled companies to automate part of the booking process and give recommendations for the intended targets. This said it is likely that technology will continue to play a crucial role in tourism and shaping it in the future. Later on, with the emergence of wine tourism as a trendy travel niche, it is notable that the impact of technology had a slower progression compared to conventional travel activities. The fact that wineries are usually concentrated in rural areas, in which infrastructures are currently developing, created a barrier to their growth. However, it also created an opportunity for e-commerce to enhance the experiences and to encounter the lack of accessibility.

The purpose of this thesis is to first introduce concepts of online booking platforms and its rise and then to segway into the importance of these in the wine tourism industry. After that, an analysis of the offers and trends within this industry will be provided. The focus will be on finding new challenges and defining strategies to improve the customer experience. Furthermore, the results will demonstrate the application of the defined strategies.

Following the guidelines mentioned above, the thesis starts with the introduction where all the research is displayed as well as the company overview. After that, the methodology is presented as well as the strategy. The outcomes are shown in the section of results throughout a SWOT analysis and semi-structured interview. Moreover, the discussion relates to the results and a proposal is made. Finally, the conclusions are provided in the context of the purpose of this study.

Keywords: online booking, tourism trends, digitalization, tourism experience, challenges

List of Abbreviations:

AI: Artificial Intelligence

B2B: Business to Business

B2C: Business to Consumer

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

DTC: Direct to Consumer

KPI: Key Performance Indicators

OTA: Online Travel Agency

SEO: Search Engine Optimization

SWOT Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats Analysis

Introduction

In recent years, the wine tourism industry has witnessed a significant transformation due to the rise of online booking platforms. These digital platforms have revolutionised the way wine enthusiasts plan and experience their wine-related journeys. By offering a convenient and streamlined booking process, online platforms have opened a world of possibilities for wine lovers, fostering a new era of wine tourism. Since the late 1990s, the wine industry has expanded in providing engaging experiences for visitors. As a result, wine tourism started growing fast and implementing ideas to entertain travellers. One of the ways to make this happen was to use technology to inform people about new ways of enjoying wine. Later on, a natural adaptation to online occurred and people started to understand how the experiences were being crafted (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2022).

Innovative initiatives started to be shared within online platforms for wine reservations and virtual marketplaces through advanced technology (Garibaldi and Fodera, 2019).

In 2020 the global health crisis had a significant impact on wine businesses, both positive and negative. Firstly, due to the discovery of wine tourism as a chance to increase revenue and secondly, wineries stopped receiving visitors for a long period of time. In both cases, the digital was seen as an opportunity to be integrated into their marketing strategy to counter the lack of revenue. With the emergence of the virtual concept of visit, along with the virtual reality implementation, innovative activities were becoming popular, and people were willing to visit a place without physically leaving their house (Garibaldi and Pozzi, 2020).

The wine tourism experience

Nowadays, people are seeking for experiences that demystify the wine and simplify the way it is understood. Hedonism has become a philosophy of many and it brings an opportunity in wine tourism to create a connexion to spirituality and escape from reality or daily routines (Garibaldi, 2022). Online booking platforms have created a sense of accessibility and convenience for tourists all over the world. People can now plan a trip with months in advance and avoid travel agencies or direct contact with wineries. This way, they can book instantly or propose a time and the reservation is confirmed moments after. In addition, travellers are able to customise their own experience which allows them to choose accordingly to their preferences and define their own itineraries. These platforms are considered user-friendly and enhance information while creating the desire to visit a place by showing reviews to future

customers. It is evident that having feedback on the quality of the experience can make a difference in the decision-making (Goar and Yadav, 2022).

For this reason, wine enthusiasts feel empowered to replicate this behaviour for forthcoming experiences and a sense of reliability is now present in their further desire to book. The fact that the payment can be done online and with certified payment methods, secure any scepticism about the booking process.

This said, there is no doubt that the digital is drawing more attention, especially among the young generations that are well prepared to manage their lives online.

Technology in wine tourism

Digital innovation has been implemented by an increasing number of companies in the travel industry. Technology plays a significant role in transforming the wine industry. It has revolutionised the way wineries operate, engage with visitors and provide immersive experiences (Menghini, 2015).

The online presence is an opportunity to expand any business and develop a new product, creating a service and interconnecting with other operators with complementary offers.

Virtual reality and augmented reality have transformed the way people do wine tourism by offering the possibility to experience a place remotely and access to sensory aspects of tasting wine and exploring it profoundly. Mobile apps have also become popular for wine tourists as they concentrate on all the features of the website but in a more accessible way.

The possibility to have real-time availability and pricing integrated into a website that provides interactive maps and user-friendly information has transformed wine tourism in many regions. Users can virtually explore vineyards and cellars prior to their booking for a better decision. Thus, they can also read customer reviews and ratings and rethink their decision with more information (Han, H. *et al.*, 2016).

With all the collected information that the system has gathered, it is now possible to suggest the user accordingly to their preferences, search history and booking patterns. This algorithm is being developed to be more efficient and personalize memorable experiences that resonate with visitors and foster long-term loyalty (Han, H. *et al.*, 2016).

A great advantage of the use of technology is that the post-booking support is more clear and easier to manage due to cancellation policies and customer service assistance. There are many channels such as live chat, email or phone available for the user to connect with the platform without any intervention from the winery.

In addition, it is possible to do mobile payments in a more secure way and with various methods not having the risk of payment cards being rejected in the country of destination.

The technological advancements in online booking platforms have made wine tourism more accessible and sustainable. There are several opportunities for wine tourism to embrace and improve for its continuous success. (Pelet, J. *et al.*, 2019)

The trends in online booking platforms

Wine tourism has increasingly evolved over the past decades due to its competitiveness between wine regions. The most recent approaches are extended to a larger diversity of offers. Wine museums, wine festivals, gastronomy pairings, workshops, and art activities are now integrated into these activities (Bruwer and Rueger-Muck, 2019). This brings a different panorama to the wine business as it is now possible to congregate other businesses and attract a wider public.

Travellers will keep relying on online platforms to gather consistent information about wineries, reviews, photos and ratings. The number of bookings is continuously increasing. This way, customer feedback is an essential tool to improve the operated services (Han, H. *et al.*, 2016).

While there are recent studies about the role of technology in wine tourism (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2022), the realization of a new paradigm (Costa *et al.*, 2022) and the importance of gathering online feedback for a better customer satisfaction (Gunasekar *et al.*, 2022) there is a gap in the conception of the future of wine tourism and the challenges attached to it in the context of online booking platforms.

This thesis explores the key factors behind the growth of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), the benefits brought to this industry, and how they will transform the way people conceive wine tourism. Moreover, the new trends and challenges that appeared with this new format of travelling are the focus of this study.

Research overview

After identifying the concepts of OTA, referring to various authors and analysing the trends, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to future prospects. There are topics of examination that could be explored further such as personalization on user satisfaction and the decision-making in the context of online bookings. While there are many booking platforms that offer the possibility to customize their options, there is a lack of research that dissects its effectiveness and implications for the future of OTAs. There is also a lack of studies that report the behaviour of the consumer in such platforms. To the present days, it has been clarified in the general context of tourism that technology has a relevant influence on the consumer behaviour. However, in the context of wine tourism and booking platforms, it is noticeable that this is not well reported or elucidated.

Therefore, potential research queries could include:

- What is the role of online reviews on consumer trust in wine tourism?
- How does web design affect the user in the booking process?
- Which trends will shape the future of wine tourism?
- Is the user perceiving the quality of the experience when booking on a platform?
- How are technological advances affecting the wine tourism business?

By addressing these research questions, platform developers can optimize the user experience and improve the booking experience driving it to better customer satisfaction.

In order to answer them, a collection of relevant literature was reviewed and since these are all important matters to consider, an identification of future challenges will be presented in this essay. Taking into consideration aspects such as the digital transformation, the new trends in the industry and the connection with other industries, a proposal is made at the end of this study. The main goal of this thesis is to promote a full understanding of what these platforms will need to pay more attention to if they want to continue thriving in this industry.

Following the research goals mentioned above, this paper seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge on wine tourism and provide valuable insights from the student and working perspectives. Understanding the goals and implications of booking platforms will enable future researchers to develop effective strategies to improve their working environment in those terms.

Company overview

Created in 2017 in Champagne, Winalist is an online booking platform for wine tourism experiences.

Its mission is to connect wine lovers and travellers with wineries and wine businesses through experiences, sharing the history and unravelling the mystery behind the wine. At the same time, their purpose is to grow digitalization and innovation in an industry that is considered old-fashioned. The website is built in eleven different languages that allow people to have a more personalised experience.

Their goal is to become the leading guide in wine experiences on a global scale. The values shared by the company are quality, simplicity, responsiveness, and inspiration.

At the moment, the website can, in fact, deliver these, especially because of the diversity of its offers. The company is sharing wine tourism around the world, considering the passion for wine and sharing a deep understanding of the wine-making process, including a focus on sustainability and organic farming practices to promote promising approaches within the community.

In terms of quality, Winalist is likely to value quality over quantity in its offer. The priority is to select wineries that have a distinctive offer in their wine tourism catalogue. Regarding simplicity, Winalist built the website in an intuitive way, simplifying the booking process which is visually appealing and easy to manage.

Providing an exceptional customer experience, from their website's design to the accessibility of information, it is possible to assure good responsiveness, timely communication and client satisfaction. In terms of inspiration, the company offers a wide range of options in Europe for people to choose what best suits them and what creates the desire to book. The reviews are also a way of inspiration to motivate others to try the same experience. The website's design was performed in a meticulous way to attract the users and keep them in the process for longer, as it provides suggestions and gift ideas accordingly to country, language, price, number of people, type of visit and duration.

Recognizing that every wine lover has unique preferences, Winalist enables users to tailor their wine tours and experiences to their specific interests. Whether one desires a guided tour through vineyards, a specialized wine tasting session or an in-depth wine education class or workshop, the platform allows users to create their ideal wine-centric itinerary.

By embracing the rich heritage and diversity of the wine world, Winalist encourages exploration, discovery and a deeper connection to the culture surrounding wine, demystifying it through the senses.

In order to become the leading guide in wine tourism experiences, the company continues to expand its global reach, connecting wine enthusiasts with remarkable wineries and vineyards

worldwide. The company remains dedicated to enhancing the wine tourism experience by leveraging innovative technologies, nurturing partnerships with wineries and listening to evolving needs of its user base.

When analysing the partners of the company, the quality is more valued than the quantity. This means that their focus is more on negotiating with wineries that are considered established and successful businesses with all the structure to receive more bookings and grow in wine tourism activity. Therefore, the not so established companies tend to join organically because they want to be positioned next to the bigger ones. This effect caused a very positive impact on the strategic plan of the company by redefining priorities and optimizing work in a more efficient way in terms of acquisition.

At the moment, Winalist is working in Business To Business (B2B) meaning that partners choose the platform to manage bookings as a service and Business To Consumer (B2C) meaning that the tourists choose the wine experiences as a product they pay for. For a better understanding of the functionality of the platform, a business model diagram was performed in Figure 1.

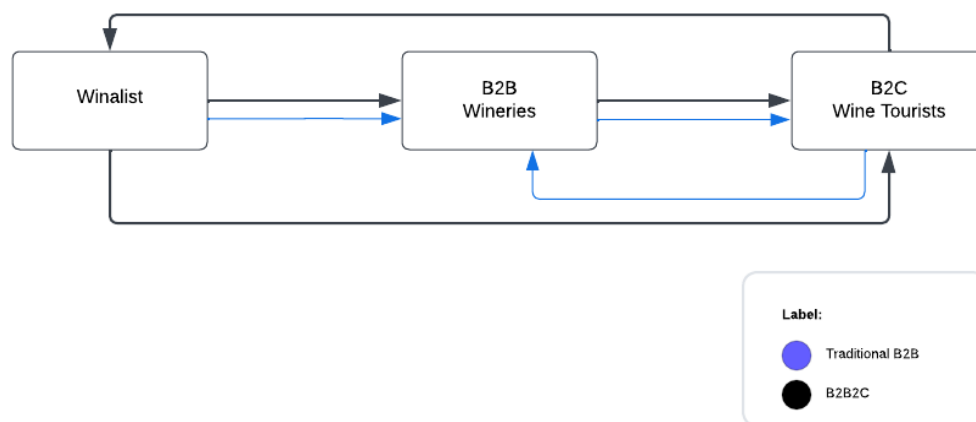


Figure 1. The business model of Winalist.

Activities during the internship

The assigned activities during the internship were integrated in the action plan to expand the Portuguese and Spanish markets. The focus was on the following tasks:

- ❖ Identify potential clients: wineries; museums; tour agencies; wine bars.
- ❖ Study the partner's values and offers for an accurate rating.
- ❖ Analysis of the competitors and proposition of a distinctive offer when electing an experience to promote on the platform.
- ❖ Monitor the onboarding calls to help them with the process of registration.
- ❖ Weekly brainstorming with the Business Development team to identify challenges in different markets and compare them to implement strategies to encounter any.
- ❖ Reach wineries by phone to propose a collaboration.
- ❖ Reach existing partners by phone to follow up on the partnership and improve their image; Ask for direct feedback.
- ❖ Development of Winalist's future strategy: product development; website configurations and design; market positioning.
- ❖ Plan the social media strategy: Instagram stories.

As a business development intern at Winalist, the duties were to contribute to the growth and success of the company, especially focusing on the Portuguese market.

During that process of expansion, the support given was actively focused on the strategy and improving abilities to negotiate while creating an empathic relationship with all the partner wineries, agencies and museums.

One of the key responsibilities was to do market prospection and identify potential target markets and new business opportunities. This involved staying informed about the new trends and developments in the wine tourism industry. Researching the competitor's offers helped to get insights into customers' preferences and better drive the strategy.

When reaching out to potential partners such as wineries, tour operators and relevant stakeholders, it was required to have effective communication skills and the ability to build the need to join Winalist, not only as a short-term solution but also as a long-term perspective. To understand their business and get a good involvement and knowledge of how the partners work, several visits were made to spend the day experiencing their activities. After closely understanding their philosophy, a presentation meeting was performed to explain all the conditions and prepare the onboarding registration of the experiences considered to be the

most distinctive ones to integrate the platform. Another important aspect of the role was to assist the business development team and discuss the differences between different target markets. From the point of view of improving ways of approaching and engaging with clients, it helped general growth.

Overall, the contribution to the sales of the company was favourable as new businesses were acquired and the Portuguese market was elevated. The experience was enriching, and it provided with the opportunity to work in an organised and multicultural environment while learning about different departments every day. The dynamics of working in a start-up atmosphere allowed persistent motivation and encouragement to bring new ideas and share them for continuous improvement.

Methodology

The methodological basis behind the development of this Master Thesis will include data collection regarding Winalist's growth; a SWOT analysis to identify the potential chances and obstacles of the booking platforms; an interview to the CEO of Winalist analysing the challenges for the future of the company and personal observations about the new trends and challenges for Winalist.

These choices were made based on my experience and involvement at the company. When analysing the actual literature, there is little information that connects the actual reality to future realities.

When collecting data from the growth of Winalist, it is possible to find patterns in the business and replicate that success in non-explored target markets. This means that there is an opportunity to look at the numbers and interpret which strategy thrived in that specific market. After that, it is possible to compare exponential numbers with numbers from a different background market and evaluate if the trends and challenges are the same to better implement a strategy.

Looking at the qualitative evaluation, a SWOT analysis is performed to collect enough information about what aspects to consider in the future of wine tourism booking platforms. Initially, it is possible to see the positive prospects. On the other side, the negative prospects are also revealed. This method allows to develop a strategic planning, understand the business environment and identifying competitive advantages. Moreover, it helps to access risks, resource allocation and further collaboration.

Regarding the interview, I decided to choose Mr. Nicolas Manfredini, CEO of Winalist, as one of the persons to interview because of his presence in the start-up environment and tech

conferences as a speaker. He is considered a reference in the world of wine tourism businesses, and he is invited to the biggest wine fairs all over the world as a guest speaker. Because of its vanguard in terms of business vision and experience in various fields such as Web Design, Tech, E-commerce, he is considered as the person with the knowledge to unwind about the challenges ahead. Not only he owns Winalist but he also has connections to other food and beverages businesses which provides him in-depth knowledge and expertise in the wine tourism sector. As a leader in the online bookings in wine tourism, he has gained insights into the latest trends, challenges and opportunities, offering a unique perspective. Having access to market data analytics and performance metrics allows him to provide with concrete information and statistics related to booking patterns and emerging trends. By doing the interview, it is possible to obtain qualitative insights which provide a complex analysis of the company's growth.

As a CEO, Nicolas is the person in charge of shaping the strategy and directing the business onto that. Besides that, he can provide useful insights on the initiatives, innovations and implemented strategies for product development, showing how the company is adapting and staying competitive. His broader perspective enhances the credibility of the interview and provides concrete knowledge capable to anticipate obstacles and respond actively to them with solutions. Therefore, he is a valuable source for this research.

Moreover, I chose Ms. Valentine Copper - the Country Manager of Italy at Winalist, as an important source of feedback. As the person responsible for the Italian market, Valentine has valuable insights of the growth of the company as she was the person to elevate and progress this market. Besides that, she is the person in charge of gathering the Business Development team to brainstorm ideas, new trends and appearing challenges that we are facing in this industry, as well as discuss ideas to improve our performance. Having a significant amount of experience and responsibilities, she is able to provide relevant perspectives that come across the future of the industry.

Results

Data collection

As it is observed in the following map in Figure 2, it is possible to see the growth of partner wineries joining Winalist since April 2019 to March 2023.



Figure 2. Representative map of the growth of Winalist. Source: winalist.com, 2023

In four years, the company has gathered more than a thousand wineries and at the moment it is onboarding an average of 30 hosts per month.

Although Covid-19 caused lockdowns and affected a lot of businesses, wine tourism has increased its demand due to the need for leisure activities and its rising interest. The predictions for the upcoming years are positive for Europe as it is the continent where wine tourism grows the most due to wine consumption patterns and emerging regions.

In the map on the right of the graph, it is possible to see which regions Winalist is present in a consistent way.

As observed, western Europe has the biggest representation. However, new markets such as Greece, Germany and Switzerland are emerging and investing in wine tourism activities.

The global demand for wine tourism keeps increasing which means that this industry is likely to reach a considerable presence in the tourism industry in the future years. Recently, the United States have opened its doors to the platform joining with the goal to gain global visibility. On the other hand, social media integration has an important role in this projection.

After looking at the graph represented, data were also collected from Winalist's internal reports as a way to show its growth and impact on the wine tourism industry. In figure 3. it is possible to observe the recent achievements in terms of the digital reach of the platform.

As mentioned in the annexe 3, since the year of 2019, 1512 wineries have joined Winalist. From this number, approximately 500 wineries have reviews on the website, meaning that the sense of reliability is starting to be noticeable. In 2021, Winalist had 821,000 visitors on the website, 50% of which were international visitors, and the average booking was 100€. This means that in one year, the platform had significant marks. Its geographical expansion also contributed to such results. At the moment, is it possible for tourists to book their experiences in 6 countries: France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Switzerland. Since its creation, 14 employees are focused on the individual growth of each country and working with different strategies for different targets.

Semi-structured interviews

Due to the qualitative character of the interview, presented in the annexe 1. and in the annexe 2., it was possible to collect relevant feedback about the current analysis and future perspectives of Winalist and the wine tourism industry. Several key questions were made to gain insights into the differentiation, trends, challenges, customer preferences, emerging markets, sustainability practices and technology adaptation. While Mr. Nicolas stated that the biggest challenges for Winalist are the strategies of acquisition, Ms. Valentine stated that the competition online, especially Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and presence on Google are the biggest challenges for these online booking platforms. Referring to the customer behaviour, Valentine stated that it is difficult to understand patterns and preferences. Both believe that technology is not detrimental but can be beneficial and increase brand awareness. Additionally, they mentioned that it is difficult to make wineries believe in the importance of Direct to Consumer (DTC) and how users are being dragged into this new form of marketing that is more attractive and engaging and is able to keep the loyalty of the consumer.

When asked about the differentiation factors that Winalist represents, the respondents tended to believe that the platform prioritizes the user experience rather than being a booking solution, providing the right match to their preferences, a translation into 11 languages, the flexibility to adapt to the customer queries and the quality it provides in terms of photo selection. For wineries and partners, the main advantage is that Winalist doesn't require exclusivity, since the platform motivates these businesses to be in as many platforms as possible for a better reach. Moreover, it is possible to share analytics to partners as a way to prove the relevance to be present online.

In terms of the trends that might shape the wine tourism industry, Nicolas pointed out that with the increased demand of visitors, wineries will not be able to respond to everyone, resulting in the prioritization of loyal customers with higher spending profiles and he expects to deliver that tourist profile as a goal. On the other hand, Valentine suggested that the target segment of wineries should be more focused on younger generations considering that this segment is increasing interest and it is also the target that books the most online.

When asked about emerging regions in wine tourism Valentine mentioned Portugal as a recent and fast-growing market, Romania due to its different and more intimate concept and the United States, on the contrary, for its business orientation rather than the entire focus on the wine. Additionally, Nicolas referred to Greece as a country with significant growth opportunities.

In terms of opportunities to make Winalist grow and keep with the market trends and evolution, both suggest sustainable practices and focus on responding to the user needs and requests, making sure Winalist is able to adapt.

At the moment, collecting data analytics is non-conclusive in some cases and for this reason, Nicolas mentioned it is not a priority while Valentine pointed out that qualitative feedback would be more useful.

For the future strategy, Valentine stated that Winalist needs to create a voice to empower wine tourism and exploit this possibility with communication tools resulting the creation of a community. Nicolas, on the other hand, stated that it is important to invest time in reaching out to wineries and exchanging ideas to improve performance and establish stronger connections.

As a final suggestion in terms of the next technological steps for these platforms, both focused on alternatives such as Virtual Reality, integration and Artificial Intelligence.

SWOT Analysis - Booking Platforms in Wine Tourism

A SWOT analysis is a qualitative method that is used for the strategic planning of a company. It provides a general characterization of the business in an internal and external environment. The purpose of conducting a SWOT analysis in this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the internal and external aspects that are faced in wine tourism platforms. This analysis can provide practical insights and lead to strategies to enhance performance and competitiveness.

By evaluating the internal strengths, it is possible to note its benefits and features. These key points allow to leverage growth and positioning of platforms.

Analysing the internal weaknesses will help identify areas of improvement and enhance its operations and overall performance.

The external opportunities provide significant aspects to consider for a brighter future of the company, allowing market expansion.

Finally, when considering the external threats, it is possible to identify the main obstacles in the wine tourism industry and therefore prevent risks and stay ahead in the market.

Overall, a SWOT analysis is convenient to gain insights into the dynamics of the internal and external environments and establish strategic decisions. It is meant to perform the success of any platform.

Internal factors

Strengths:

- Convenience for travellers: the booking process is easy and faster and does not involve calls or contact with the winery.
- Possibility to do an instant booking.
- Increased visibility for wineries: website exposition of smaller businesses to a global audience.
- Integration on cross-selling: packages that allow multiple visits during a day trip.
- Customer service responsiveness: able to help customers and adapt their needs avoiding the winery intervention.
- User-friendly platform: intuitive tools for both wineries and visitors, simplifying the process.

Weaknesses:

- Saturated market: there are many booking platforms in wine tourism business. Difficulty to prove excellence.
- Dependency on partner organizations: number of wineries/tour operators/agencies.
- Limited offers: some platforms have few experience options invalidating its quality and trustworthiness.
- Commissions: the quota is high for small businesses.
- Management of calendars: wineries have the obligation to update the calendar accordingly with their availability.

External factors

Opportunities:

- Emerging regions: growth in unpopular regions due to the promotion on the digital.
- Growth in wine tourism: increasing popularity and diversification of experiences.
- Global competitiveness: centralised and accessible marketplace for wine tourism
- Technology: keeps improving and transforming the business.
- Collaborative partnerships: integration with other stakeholders

Threats:

- Competition: established tour operators that are specialised in wine tourism already have a good business relationship with wineries.
- Volatility: in the wine industry there are a lot of unpredictable situations such as pandemics, weather or economic reason that could negatively affect the business.
- Sustainability: consciousness about the environment may influence decision making when booking.
- New travel trends: the unpredictability of changes could impact the success of the online booking platforms.
- Lack of services: platforms will need to develop new ways to attract tourists either by providing a new service or developing a new product.

After pinpointing all the aspects of online booking platforms, it is clear that there are more positive outcomes in the use of online booking platforms. How do we know that they will keep being an advantage for the future of wine tourism? When analysing the trends and opportunities in the industry, it is noticeable that technology will continue to play a decisive role in its evolution. Therefore, it is undeniable that the future challenges are all concentrated in that base. This said, the advancements in technology will shape the future of wine tourism in terms of being fully integrated and used by most of the wineries, otherwise they will be considered outdated or may be missed by their targets. Since the future customers are the young generations, they will conduct their choices based on what they see online and what they are able to explore in advance to make a better choice. Without having an online presence, companies will struggle to create their image and they are likely to face many challenges in reaching a broader audience.

Discussion

After collecting the necessary data and having the testimony of both important people in the field through interviews, along with the structured ideas fitted into a SWOT, it is now possible to outline the new trends and challenges for online booking platforms in wine tourism.

Trends in wine tourism

Travellers who rely on online platforms to research and book their experiences may look at the ones that are not present and automatically assume they are not as powerful as the other ones that have a clear image and reputation.

As the most common users are well adapted to technology, there is a clear trend on following the websites that integrate it in a visually appealing and modern way.

One of the key trends identified in previous chapters are focused on the rise of the specialized wine tourism websites that offer more detailed info and provide with blog content to drag more attention online. The increasing use of mobile bookings has also transformed the industry as well as the personalized recommendations that are part of the process. This customization enhances the travel experience and opens possibilities for both wineries and customers.

Besides, the reviews and customer feedback play a crucial role in the decision making of the potential future customers. This transparency builds trust and credibility and is practically effortless from the platform side.

The complementary offers that connect other businesses are becoming popular to build packages that integrate an immersive experience of a destination.

Additionally, Virtual reality has been integrated in wine experiences and it offers an alternative way to face problems such as pandemics or low season. This option has potential to extend reach of wine tourism and offer educational and immersive ways to experience wine.

Lastly, the social media presence is a tool that is able to create a community and engage with wine enthusiasts, promoting businesses in original and natural ways.

When wineries do not adapt and establish an online presence, they will have to rely on tourists in their region and create a sustainable strategy to connect the agents that are close to them. However, having a solid online presence can only benefit them and be a complementary strategy.

Challenges in Wine Tourism

Concerning the challenges faced by online booking platforms and its implications for this sector, it is possible to identify solutions and strategies to anticipate obstacles.

The abundance of information and competition in the industry is significant and difficult the vision of the tourist when making a choice while navigating online. This leads to confusion and challenging to analyse reliable information.

Moreover, the authenticity and quality assurance are dependant of the ratings and reviews which may generate a false idea of an experience. Wineries have to protect their image to assure the online reputation and transparency.

Although the personalization is becoming popular within these platforms, it is also under development due to the lack of information about traveller's preferences.

The payment methods are a relevant concern for travellers to feel confident about their data protection and financial security. For this reason, wineries should prioritize data security measures.

The mass tourism may be too overwhelming for both travellers and wineries. By promoting wine experiences online, this can be a consequence and the structure of the winery may have to adapt to be able to respond to higher demand.

As wine tourism is a global phenomenon, language is of great importance to be integrated in platforms. Language barriers and cultural differences can pose challenges in terms of communication and interpretation of websites as it can lead to missed opportunities. Online booking platforms should seek to offer multilingual interfaces and provide with targeted content according to different backgrounds for a diverse audience.

Finally, the technological barriers in the context of small and medium sized businesses are obstructing the possibility to compete with larger businesses. Moreover, these may struggle to adapt to booking platforms and maintain information updated as well as calendar management. This can lead to potential issues on reservations and affect customer satisfaction.

As a reflection of this project and with the purpose of further progress of Winalist, I would like to describe the suggestions and goals to achieve as a way to increase the performance of the company. For better anticipation of solutions in an industry that is constantly going through changes, I formalised the following recommendations divided into nine key points:

Expanding market reach: Identify key target markets as a priority for expansion; Increase brand awareness by developing marketing strategies with specific timelines and include the partners in the right timing; Translate the website in more languages than the existing ones to capture international users; Onboard wineries that are have the biggest reputation in the region

to attract the other ones easily; Diversify the offers by choosing the most distinctive experiences besides the classic tours.

Enhancing user experience: Collect feedback from the users as a way to improve their experience and improve the success of the platform - reward them for that information with a discount; Invest on implementing user interface and an attractive design to optimise the navigation; Create personalised suggestions based on the user preferences and filters to simplify the booking process; Maintain the platform up to date to ensure clearance for users.

Improve collaborations: Align partner's offers with the target's interests; Develop a concise partner acquisition strategy depending on the internal classification regarding its positioning; Interact with wine business associations; Offer additional services to wineries such as increased visibility on social media; Ensure an appealing selection of experiences and descriptions as well as illustrations.

Motivate the employees: Create a system for commissions depending on the score of the company of acquisition; Incentivize employees to do the onboarding in place for a partner longevity; Propose different challenges within different departments for a better understanding of the business functionalities; Give trainings to the team when necessary to adapt to changes; Define Key Performance Indicators (KPI) as a way to measure the work done and keep the improvement.

Offer additional services: Conduct people for constant market research and identification of new services that connect the user interests with the demand; Develop new collaborations with relevant wine businesses such as event organisers, educational institutions and wine networks; Promote additional services to the right target segment for better results; Integrate selling the wine on the platform.

Engage with community: Facilitate user interactions by providing the community the opportunity to report immediate feedback after the end of the experience; Create a forum where users can interact with each other and classify the wines and the tours they had experienced; Organize virtual events with the smaller businesses to bring the community together; Use social media as a way to educate people and provide gastronomic suggestions and workshops as a way to keep the audience. Create a virtual avatar to interact with customers and answer to their doubts.

Adapt and implement technological changes: Stay informed about the technological advancements that are relevant for the industry; Bring AI to the business to attract younger users; Explore the potential impacts of the implementation of any technology on the platform; Connect with start-ups specialised in this industry to innovate solutions.

Promote sustainability: Progressively require partners to work with sustainable business practices; Highlight the partners that have eco-friendly certifications; Educate the user about

sustainability and its importance; Foster social responsibility and environmental management within Winalist and its partners.

Collect data analysis: Continuously collect data analytics and performance insights; Invest in experts to create a valuable system to collect the relevant data; Provide partners with significant reports and insights on the market trends to create collective awareness and improve both sides.

When implementing this plan, Winalist will be able to reach all the necessary goals for a faster and greater success while being ahead of competitors. The integration of these suggestions will provide an exceptional user-focused experience and elevate connections between wine enthusiasts and wine businesses.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the growth trajectory of Winalist, as well as the upcoming trends and challenges to be faced in the wine tourism industry.

Through a complete analysis of qualitative interviews together with the company's results and patterns of growth, it was possible to predict which are the next approaches to focus on and address strategies to better orient these platforms. By focusing on the user experience, Winalist offers services that permits a better match with the customer.

Online booking platforms are an essential tool for the future of the brands in wine tourism. The online presence is able to connect people and form a powerful community as well as elevate a region or a destination.

The goal of this project was to understand how these platforms need to adapt to the constant change of this industry in order to keep their success and improve performance. Throughout the proposal it is possible to touch every important department and have a complete transformation in the business. This was achieved through bibliographic support and a combination of the SWOT and the interviews.

The results of this qualitative approach reflect the combination of different perspectives and rearrange only result when complemented with each other.

The purpose of this study was to create awareness and innovate the wine tourism behaviour from the point of view of online businesses. Blending all the trends and challenges ahead allows companies to see the vast opportunities that cannot be seen at first sight but should be paid attention to before they happen. Anticipating is the most difficult part of a business despite being as important as responding to the present challenges.

From the academic point of view, this work serves as a starting point for further research in online booking platforms and its endless transformation. As technology is the sector that affects platforms the most, it is important to understand its exponential evolution and have intentions to follow its rhythm.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to deepen research on the customer journey and extract information from data analytics to achieve major success.

The sustainable vision is naturally encouraged by the users, and it is beneficial for a long-term perspective.

As a suggestion for future research, it is important to highlight the fact that the orientation of any business in wine industry should focus on the user experience and collecting feedback is as important to improve.

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Annexes

Annexe 1.

Semi-structured Interview - Answers performed by Valentine Copper

1. What do you consider to be the biggest challenges for Winalist at the moment?

Competition about SEO, presence on google. The blogs are a new alternative to have the keywords and create online presence. Understanding the customers behaviour. Capacity of tourists to click on the right page. Customer preferences option offering more filters redirecting to the best option.

2. How do you differentiate Winalist from other online booking platforms?

Flexibility – Winalist does not ask for exclusivity. Website is performed in 11 languages, and it is user friendly booking. The quality of pictures provides a concise image of the platform and the winery. Providing analytics to partners.

3. What are the new trends that are shaping the wine tourism industry?

Wine tourist is getting younger and likes to book online, 30-50 years old is the most common age range. Having more affordable options and more wine enthusiasts rather than experts. Wineries are understanding that the public is changing.

4. How do you think Winalist has adapted the business according to consumer preferences in the wine tourism sector?

Philosophy of feedback, integrating in the offer by doing the onboarding together. Digital marketing and competitors analysis helps doing the market research.

5. Do you see an opportunity in a region that is emerging in wine tourism?

Portugal is younger for wine tourism, Romania and US – very wine tourism oriented.

6. How does Winalist leverage technology to stay competitive?

Winalist offers a widget that is capable to provide calendar directly on the winery's website. Improved the extras gift cards. Upgrading offers and being more adaptable to requests.

7. What has Winalist implemented to promote sustainability and responsible tourism practices?

Qualify their offer. Create a green highlight for these kind of businesses (eco-friendly, natural wines)

8. Are there any strategies to enhance the user experience for both wineries and customers?

Embracing technology and creating events that gather the community.

9. What is the importance that data analytics has in Winalist's business strategies and decision-making processes?

We are less good at this. We prefer having qualitative/descriptive data.

10. After covid-19 global impacts in wine industry, how did Winalist overcome these challenges and adapted its business model?

Opportunity for wine tourism.

11. How does Winalist plan to stay ahead and remain at the vanguard of the constant evolution of the wine tourism landscape in the future?

Communication and education – be a voice and help wine tourism become popular by creating a community.

12. In terms of technology, what is the next step for these platforms?

Artificial intelligence integration and virtual Tours.

Annexe 2.

Answers performed by Mr. Nicolas Manfredini

1. What do you consider to be the biggest challenges for Winalist at the moment?

Trying to convince wineries that technology is not bad and that they can benefit from it and be more efficient. Making winery understand that DTC is important, and visitors are part of experiential marketing thus becoming loyal customers afterwards.

2. How do you differentiate Winalist from other online booking platforms?

With the focus on the user experience thus not being an average booking platform but mostly a website that curates wine experiences to bring the right one to the right visitor, depending on its knowledge of wine, with whom he's travelling.

3. What are the new trends that are shaping the wine tourism industry?

There are more and more people wanting to come and visit wineries but wineries won't be able to receive everybody. They'll soon be looking to prioritise loyal customers or high spending visitor's profiles.

4. How do you think Winalist has adapted the business according to consumer preferences in the wine tourism sector?

By refining the selection and better curate the partnerships.

5. Do you see an opportunity in a region that is emerging in wine tourism?

Eastern Europe such as Greece could be on the map. Europe is still emerging.

6. How does Winalist leverage technology to stay competitive?

Winalist is a layer on top of other platforms and the focus is representing quality over quantity presenting a rigorous image and offering a user friendly.

7. What has Winalist implemented to promote sustainability and responsible tourism practices?

Creating sustainability labels and tags and emphasising these businesses on the blog.

8. Are there any strategies to enhance the user experience for both wineries and customers?

The feedback allows developers to constantly improve and adapt to their needs.

9. What is the importance that data analytics has in Winalist's business strategies and decision-making processes?

The possibility to reinforce qualitative approach.

10. After covid-19 global impacts in wine industry, how did Winalist overcome these challenges and adapted its business model?

Winalist adapted and used the time to reach out to wineries consequently resulting in having more time to share their ideas and work with the same philosophy.

11. How does Winalist plan to stay ahead and remain at the vanguard of the constant evolution of the wine tourism landscape in the future?

Open new markets in new world wine production countries.

12. In terms of technology, what is the next step for these platforms?

Mostly getting into all the wine markets as fast as possible spreading online.

Annexe 3. Winalist's reach in 2022.



The leading wine experiences booking platform in Europe.

Winalist opens the doors of 1,200+ wine estates in Europe and offers the most beautiful tours and tastings, oenological workshops, escape games, hot air balloon flights over the vineyards or other amazing wine experiences.

Available in 11 languages

With a pre-payment system included

1,8 million

Views in 2022

70%

Of international visitors

150€

Average booking
amount per group

“ **70%** of Winalist's visitors purchase more than
100€ of wine at the estate, after their experience. ”

Source: winalist.com (2023)