



Master Thesis

From Browsing to Bonding: Optimizing the Digital Wine Tourism Journey with The Human Touch

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Abstract

The immersion of digital technology in wine tourism is demanded to enhance the experiences without replacing the human connection. This study identifies the challenge of transforming online lookers into bookers, and ultimately brand advocates in the digital age while maintaining a sense of human connection and build relationships with customers. The objective is to examine how technology and interpersonal relationships are strategically married in the context of digital wine tourism. This thesis employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the wine tourism customer journey. The qualitative method includes email interviews with academic professionals and wine travel agents and observation during the wine tourism conference IWINETC in April 2024 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Interviews with a total of 20 wine tourists were held to get a better understanding of wine tourists' preferences. In addition, there are two quantitative surveys: one distributed to wineries practicing wine tourism (n=68) and the other distributed to wine tourists (n=200). This method aims to gather data from both wineries as wine tourism providers and wine tourists as wine tourism customers. Finally, a comprehensive literature review is conducted to establish the theoretical foundation and the secondary quantitative data for the research. The study emphasizes the importance of embracing technology without losing the human touch by examining the customer journey model, the synergy between digital technology and the human touch in the wine tourism industry, and how to not only satisfy but also retain customers. While the research draws insights from a global perspective, the technical aspects of implementing digital marketing or in-depth analysis of specific technologies and specific wine regions are outside the scope.

Keywords

Digital Wine Tourism, Customer-Centric, Customer Journey, Human Touch

Abbreviations

B2B: business to business
SEO: search engine optimization
CRM: customer relationship management
UGC: user-generated content
AI: artificial intelligence

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I am sincerely grateful for the professors who have given their valuable insights for my internship project and thesis: Professor Antonio Russo, Professor Paul Wagner, Professor Belém Barbosa, Professor Salvador Anton Clavé, and Professor Llinka Terziyska. Travel agents who have shared their insider insights in wine tourism from agents' perspectives: Fernanda Buenfil and Masami Yasui. Additionally, all other interviewees and survey respondents which inputs are valuable for this study.

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1. Introduction

The wine tourism industry is going through a digital transformation. The journey customers took to discover and experience wine tourism has quickly evolved. The world of digitalization encourages customers to demand seamless online transactions and personalized recommendations and experiences. The immersion of digital technology is demanded to enhance the experiences without replacing the human connection.

This study examines how technology and interpersonal relationships are strategically married in the context of digital wine tourism. The use of digital technologies and data to craft an engaging online experience for wine tourism will be analyzed while maintaining the warmth and human touch that builds long-lasting relationships with both new and returning customers. Wineries can convert online explorers into bookers and devoted brand ambassadors by optimizing the digital experience from initial browsing to post-visit involvement.

1.1 Introduction of Vintrail Pro

Vintrail Pro is an all-in-one software solution for wineries, designed to streamline operations, connect with guests, and boost revenue. Vintrail Pro seamlessly integrates everything from online booking and tasting experiences to sales and loyalty programs. The integration eliminates the need for multiple software solutions, saving wineries time and money. The company equips wineries with end-to-end solutions for easy workflow which include intelligent reservations, plugin integrations, payment systems, automatic emailing, group bookings, gift cards, e-commerce, and more innovative tools. The company is targeting wine businesses such as wineries, tour operators, wine regions, cellars, and merchants.

1.1.1 Internship Duties

The internship started on the 30th of January 2024 and is predicted to end on the 28th of June 2024. The scope of the internship includes digital marketing and event planning focusing on the B2B.

Wine tourism activity e-book guide for wineries

The project began with the creation of a Wine Tourism Activity E-book Guide for wineries which aims to inspire wineries with 60 diverse wine tourism activities. The e-book explores 11 distinct categories: nature, workshop, gastronomic, innovative, active, playful, cultural, ethical, wellness, events, and accommodation, with detailed key requirements and insider tips for planning the perfect wine tour itinerary. The process of creating this e-book includes

research, copywriting, interviews with academic professionals and wine professionals, and design for a user-friendly guide.

Other e-books and user guides

Based on the research for the initial e-book, the student and owners discovered the importance of publishing the extensions of the wine tourism guide as many aspects can affect the wine tourism experience. Therefore, further research and projects were conducted to create more e-book guides focusing on customer journeys and digital marketing aimed to assist wineries in refining, establishing, and effectively managing their wine tourism operations. These resources will be distributed on social media, communication channels, and our resource center/academy. Below are the titles of the e-books:

1. 10 Ways to Improve Instagram Content
2. Wine Club Management
3. LinkedIn for Wineries
4. Influencer Marketing for Wineries
5. 10 Ways to Improve Your Tasting Room

Marketing and communication for Vintrail Pro

The internship covers a leading project for marketing and communication for Vintrail Pro. This responsibility includes social media marketing strategy and content planning for Instagram and LinkedIn.

Event planning in the digital era

Vintrail Pro is developing a new service for the company based on the tourism activity guide. This mission is based on a popular request from wineries in France that need help designing and promoting their activities. This project focuses on implementing an audit process designed to enhance the wine tourism activities of our partner wineries.

1.2 Master Thesis Proposal

In this digital age, the importance of digital tools is undeniable (Mala et al., 2020; Perez-Vega et al., 2022). However, a gap exists in understanding how to integrate technology with the irreplaceable human touch to maintain customer engagement, loyalty, and brand advocacy throughout the wine tourism journey (Wu et al., 2022; Pol, et al., 2022). Existing research focuses on optimizing the general tourism journey, but there is a lack of study to tailor the digital wine tourism experience (Iakimova, 2019).

Research problem

The primary research problem in this thesis is to identify the challenge of transforming online lookers into bookers and brand advocates. In addition, it is crucial to identify the issue of the lack of human touch in the customer journey in this digital era. Nowadays, despite the existence of online interests, wineries are still struggling to convert them to tangible bookings and long-term brand loyalty. According to the State of the Connected Customer report survey with 15,000 global customers and business buyers, 66% of respondents expect brands to demonstrate empathy, but only 37% claim that brands succeeded. Customers felt that just 34% of companies treat customers as unique individuals (McGinnis, D., 2024).

Research questions

1. How can wineries utilize digital marketing tools and strategies to improve customer engagement and satisfaction at each stage of the customer journey?
2. How can wineries maintain a sense of human connection and build relationships with customers despite the increasing reliance on digital tools?
3. How can wineries manage long-term relationships with wineries even after the visit?

Research objectives

This thesis aims to explore how wineries can take advantage of the use of digital marketing in order to optimize the customer journey. By analyzing the challenge in each step of the customer journey, the research aims to guide wineries to identify effective strategies to attract customers, convince customers to book the experiences, engage, build a relationship, and ultimately, gain trust and loyalty. In addition, this thesis aims to explore how the wine tourism industry can embrace technology without losing the human touch.

Conclusion

There is a lack of synergies particularly in understanding customer journeys in the digital era and how to maintain the human connection for wine tourism practitioners.

2. Literature review

2.1 Tourism customer journey in the digital age

Rodríguez-Negrón, M & Sosa-Varela, J (2024) explore the customer journey within the tourism industry. The literature examines different touch points of customer journey which include pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Each stage of the tourism customer journey influences customer perceptions, experiences, decision-making, and satisfaction

(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Considering each stage of tourism customer journey is beneficial for companies in order to identify pain points, opportunities for improvement, and areas where they can meet and enhance customer satisfaction. This exercise leads the company to build a strategy to attract, convince, deliver, and satisfy customers. Kim et.al., (2012) mention that tourism experiences are accumulations of sequential customer journey phases, including the pre-, during-, and post-purchase stages.

According to Neuhofer et al., (2012), the tourism customer journey has been revolutionized in this digital age with the internet and digital technologies significantly impacting the ways travelers gain inspiration, reserve, plan, and expect experiences. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) believe that it is crucial to connect various touchpoints within the customer journey in order to carry out positive outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty, and enhanced well-being. Nowadays, e-commerce has transformed into social commerce with the emergence of digital technologies such as websites and social media, encouraging companies to develop customer-centric platforms and content. Rodríguez-Negrón, M & Sosa-Varela, J (2024) highlight the importance of not only creating diverse activities during visits or experience stage but also optimizing each step of the tourism customer journey to converting customers' interests into bookings, engagements, and loyalties.

2.2 Wine tourism journey in the digital age without neglecting the human touch

According to Iakimova, E (2019), it is necessary to analyze each type of wine tourist while examining tourism customer journey in the wine tourism industry as each type of tourist may act differently in each of the tourism customer journey stages. Discovery and evaluation are the two essential points in the tourism customer journey. However, the author encourages wine businesses to explore the crucial stage of the decision-making process when customers re-evaluate and re-consider if they would refer, return in the future, or choose to never return. Although understanding this process is complex and time-consuming, the trade-off is that businesses will better understand how consumer segments learn about winery tasting rooms, who they are, why they want to visit, what they want from a visit, and the actions businesses need to take after defining the issues and opportunities that are necessary to exceed visitor expectations. The importance of digitalizing each step of the customer journey is undeniable. Logging every customer interaction, collecting, and archiving customer interaction data allows the use of data analysis for future improvements (Kelley, K., 2023).

The human touch

Zakiah, S et al. (2023) claim that the human touch is beneficial in improving customers' intention to return and it remains irreplaceable in the tourism industry. Technology is not always the only optimal solution as it is challenging to meet the added value of the human ability to respond with empathy and flexibility. Positive interactions with staff create an emotional and social connection that enhances customer experiences and loyalty (Wu et al., 2022). Therefore, the tourism experience in this digital age will remain authentic by integrating the human touch as a balancing element (Zakiah et al., 2023).

2.3 The role of digital marketing in influencing customer behavior

Mala et al., (2020) define digital marketing as the marketing of products or services using digital channels to reach customers. The authors mention digital marketing channels such as pay-per-click advertising, content marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, affiliate marketing, video marketing, and short messaging service marketing. SEO and Search engine marketing are also considered crucial in digital marketing. A survey was conducted involving 227 respondents aged 18 and 30 years with the result that 89% of respondents use different websites and social networking sites for seeking information about a product or service (Mala et al., 2024). Muda et al., (2016) state that companies' brand images are crucial since the perceived reputation has a noteworthy and statistically significant influence on customers' inclination to engage in online purchases. Brands that maintain a good online reputation have a better opportunity to attract a greater volume of visitors followed by the possibility of conversion to purchase (Martins et al., 2019). Additionally, utilizing data-driven advertising is recommended to optimize digital marketing.

The effectiveness of Social CRM

Perez-Vega et.al. (2022) state that, unlike traditional CRM, social CRM includes upgraded features with extensive support and integration with diverse communication channels including booking systems, websites, email, and social media that target the full cycle of the customer journey. Therefore, CRM has shifted from a tactical approach to a strategic one with data-driven communication and decision-making to manage customer relationships. Customers often encounter information overload, fragmented buying processes, a lack of personalization, and a lack of relationships (Chen et al., 2009). Data-driven social CRM system benefits customers in the decision-making process and eventually will benefit companies by increasing overall customer satisfaction (Filiari et al., (2015). Customers trust systems that employ UGC such as online reviews and tagged posts by past visitors.

The challenge

Unfortunately, the overwhelming number of competing online ads available often leads to difficulty in capturing customers' attention. As a result, companies need to be aware and to keep analyzing customers' needs and behaviors. Pol et al. (2022) also mention the challenge for companies in the rapid change of digitalization without having an understanding of the effect it carries on customer experience and customer relationships.

2.4 The conclusion and the gap in current academia

Table 1: The gap in current academia

Area	Gap
Wine Tourist Segmentation & Tourism Customer Journey	Rodriguez-Negrón & Sosa-Varela (2024) emphasizes optimizing the tourism customer journey for conversions. However, there is a lack of research on how to customize the digital wine tourism experience for different types of wine tourists (Iakimova, 2019).
Human Touch in Digital Wine Tourism	Despite the rise of digitalization, it is essential to develop more studies on embracing technology without losing the human touch in wine tourism (Neuhofer et al., 2012; Kelley, K., 2023) Zakiah et al., 2023).
Measuring the Impact of Human Touch	There is a lack of research on how the human touch is still very desirable in the digital age and how it may affect customers' loyalty in the wine tourism sector (Wu et al., 2022).
Data-Driven Strategies & Human Touch	There is a knowledge gap about maintaining the human element in applying data-driven strategy in the digital wine tourism experience (Mala et al., 2020).
Social CRM & Human Interaction	While data-driven communication is the main emphasis of social CRM research (Perez-Vega et al., 2022), there is a lack of investigation into how these platforms might preserve human engagement during the wine tourism experience.
Attention Capture in Wine Tourism Marketing	In wine tourism marketing, there is a knowledge gap on how to not only attract customers, but also encourage them to book, ensure that they enjoy the experiences, become a brand advocate, and ultimately bond with the brand (Pol et al., 2022).
Digitalization & Customer Relationships	With the fast speed of digitalization in wine tourism, it is necessary to explore how to keep building strong customer relationships (Pol et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

This thesis practices a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the wine tourism customer journey. The qualitative method includes email interviews with academic professionals and wine travel agents (total n=10), and an observation during the wine tourism conference IWINETC in April 2024 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria leading a broader perspective and discussions. Interviews with a total of 20 wine tourists with equal distribution of each type of wine tourist: wine

novice, wine lover, wine interest, and wine connoisseur were held to get a better understanding of wine tourists' preferences. In addition, there are two quantitative surveys: one distributed to wineries practicing wine tourism (n=68) and the other distributed to wine tourists (n=200). This method aims to gather data from both wineries as wine tourism providers and wine tourists as wine tourism customers. A comprehensive literature review is conducted in order to establish the theoretical foundation and the secondary quantitative data for the research.

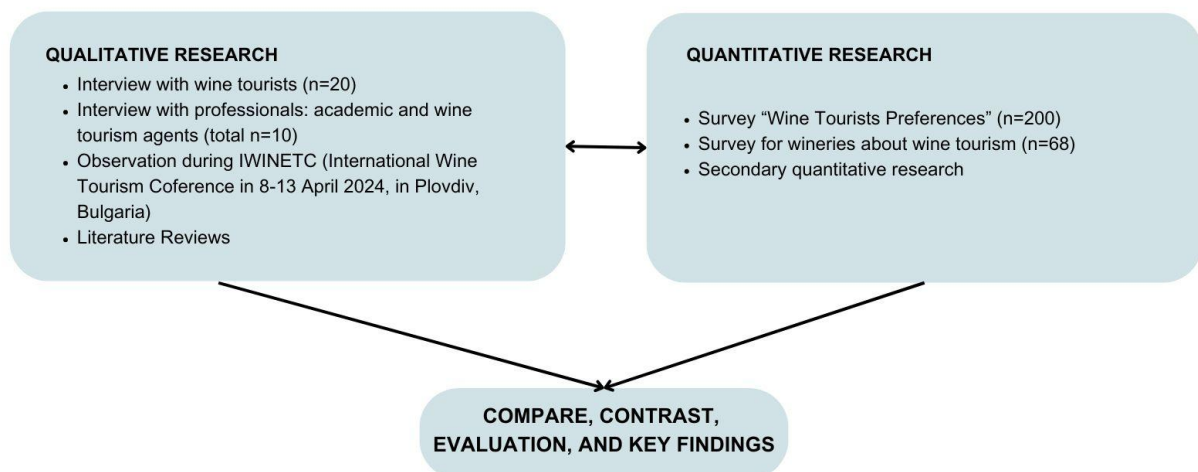


Figure 1: Research methodology

Finally, thematic analysis, which pulls recurrent themes and patterns from data is utilized. Through the use of thematic analysis, the study examines how a customer-centric approach and digitalization might coexist in the wine tourism sector. The main focus will be on how wineries may improve customer experiences by using community building, storytelling, personalization, and cultural immersions. This strategy makes sure that despite the digital environment, the human touch always comes first.

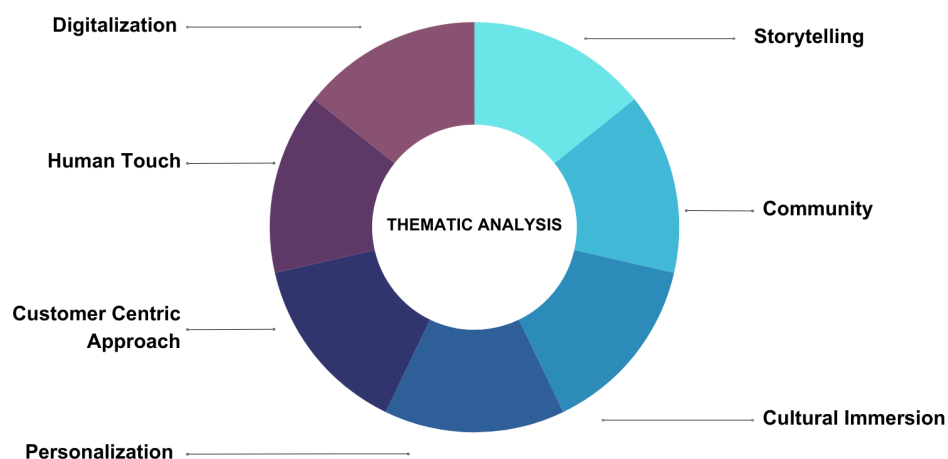


Figure 2: Thematic analysis

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Customer Journey Model

For many years, the customer journey model was presented as linear and the relationship between marketers and customers was largely one-way traffic. Initially, this model expected customers to remain loyal to the brands, thanks to the minimal distractions and side paths.

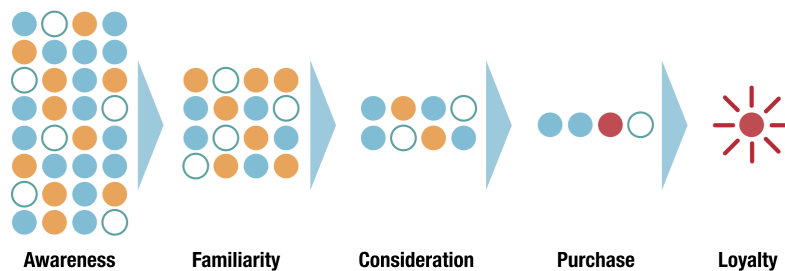


Figure 3: Linear customer journey model (Court, D et al., 2009)

However, with the emerging digitalization and the growing influence of social media, the traditional linear model is no longer valid. McKinsey (Court et al., 2009) believed “the decision-making process is a more circular journey with four primary phases representing potential battlegrounds where marketers can win or lose.”. According to this model, the entire cycle starts anew after the post-purchase allowing customers to encounter various options, consider them, make a decision, and evaluate the experience.

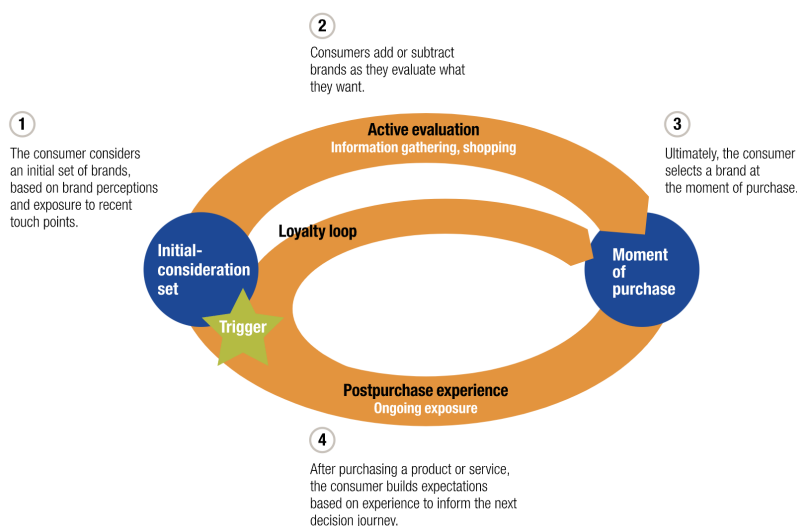


Figure 4: Circular customer journey model (Court et al., 2009)

On the contrary to the linear customer journey model, the circular customer journey model does not guarantee loyalty even though brands succeed in navigating the journey. McKinsey

(Court et al., 2009) distinguishes two types of loyal customers: passive and active. Passive loyal customers are open to changing brands if approached by competitors. Therefore, it is crucial to employ an optimal CRM post-purchase. On the other hand, active loyal customers will not only be faithful to a certain brand but also actively promote it.

The loyalty loop

With the rise of data-driven CRM, McKinsey's customer journey model was adjusted into a new model- the loyalty loop. While the previous customer journey model allowed customers to have a longer consideration and evaluation phase before entering the loyalty loop, the new model compresses the consideration step and shortens or eliminates the evaluation step. As a result, this model leads customers directly into the loyalty loop and keeps them within the ecosystem.

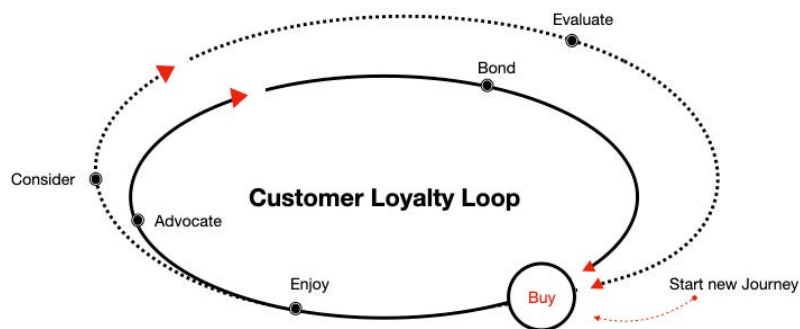


Figure 5: Customer loyalty loop (adapted from McKinsey & Co Loyalty Loop)

4.2 The Importance of Digital Strategy in Wine Tourism

A digital strategy in wine tourism includes a range of online tools and tactics designed to achieve specific goals, typically attracting visitors, encouraging booking, fostering loyalty, and driving sales. The key elements may include customer-centric content, SEO, email marketing, targeted online advertising, user-friendly digital booking systems, e-commerce, and data-driven analytics.

This table is developed based on the interview results regarding wine tourists' preferences with 20 wine tourists with equal segmentation of each type of wine tourist: wine novice, wine interested, wine lover, and wine connoisseur (Charters, S., Ali-Knight, J., 2002). This exercise was held to define wine tourists' expectations and preferences in each stage of the tourism customer journey. The interview questions can be found in **A1X - Interview questions: wine tourists preferences**

Table 2: Wine tourist customer journey: a segmented approach (n=20)

Theme	Novice (n=5)	Interested (n=5)	Lover (n=5)	Connoisseur (n=5)
Inspiration & Discovery	Word of mouth, social media, winery websites	Word of mouth, social media, winery websites	Word of mouth, social media, winery websites, wine blogs	Winery website, industry conferences, direct communication with winemakers
Decision Factors	User reviews (including wine influencers), reputation, friendly atmosphere, Instagram-able location	User reviews (including wine influencers), reputation, friendly atmosphere, Instagram-able location	Reputation, professional reviews (including trusted User reviews (including wine influencers or bloggers), variety and quality of wines	Innovative practices, limited-production wines, meet the winemaker
Booking & Pre-Trip Communication	User-friendly booking, clear pricing, secure transactions	User-friendly booking, secure transactions, personalized recommendations	Secure & seamless booking with customization, pre-visit consultations	Secure & efficient booking with customization
The Winery Visit	Welcoming, friendly, and fun atmosphere, staff explain things simply, Instagram-able	Engaging & informative atmosphere, knowledgeable staff	Personalized & immersive experience, staff create a connection	Expert-level discussions, unparalleled access, stimulating conversations, personalization
Post-Trip Follow-Up	Thank-you email, basic wine education resources	Thank-you email, educational resources on tasted wines, personalized future visit recommendations	Thank-you email, post-visit discussion, access to exclusive online forums	Personalized communication, ongoing dialogue, access to exclusive online communities
Loyalty	Referral programs, discounts for repeat visits, local events	Exclusive discounts, early access to events, limited-edition wine purchases	Loyalty programs with tiered benefits, appreciation events	VIP memberships, exclusive benefits, co-create experiences, winery advisory boards

Survey results for wine tourists' preferences (n=200). See A2X for the complete survey questions.

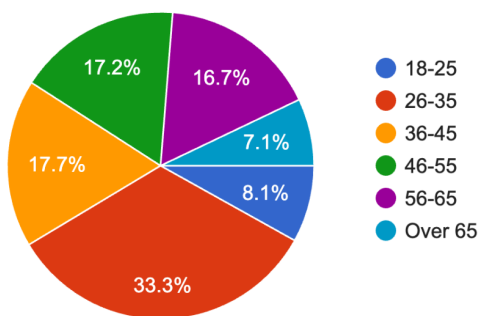


Figure 6: Respondents' age

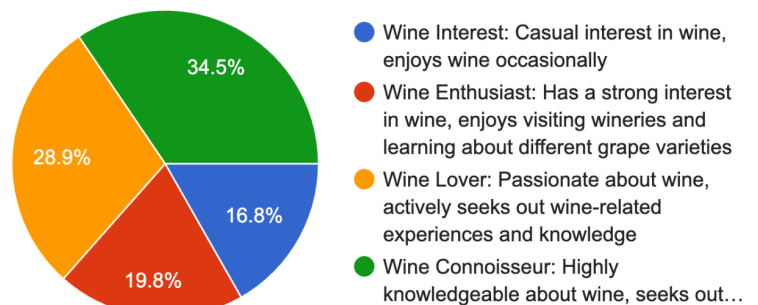


Figure 7: Type of tourists

According to the survey, 35.2% of respondents believe that the active presence of wineries on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) and clear, informative, and user-friendly websites are very important, and only 11.7% of respondents claim that they are irrelevant to their decision-making process in choosing wine tourism activities.

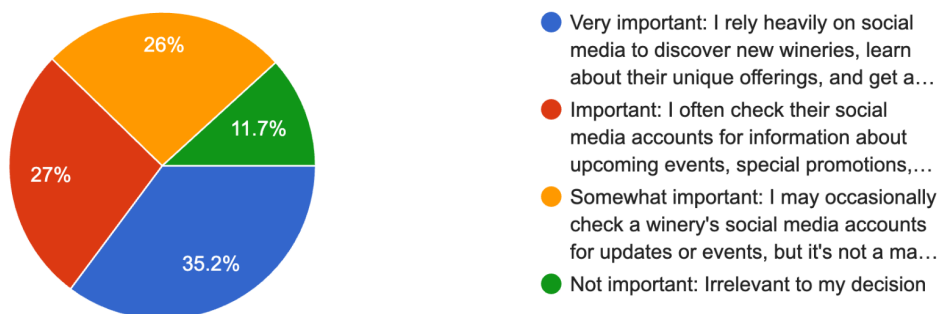


Figure 8: Wine tourist's digital marketing and social media preferences

The interview results with academic professionals (A3X) and wine tourism agents (A4X) show that digital strategies are crucial for wineries aiming to achieve growth, retain customers, and gain a competitive advantage.

"I think digital strategies are crucial both from the perspective of the digitalization of the wine tourism operations and from the perspective of the virtualization of the visitor experience. It should be noted however that the virtualization of the visitor experience can be done at different degrees, all of them equally valid depending on the winery's strategy when designing its experience offering. It may include a vast range of experiences from the real

one supported by digital contents before or after the visit to the inclusion of virtual components, tools, or components during the visit itself.”

(Clavé. S.A, personal communication, March 14, 2024)

This is supported by a survey result of wineries globally where a resounding 74.7% of respondents (34.4% very important + 40.3% important) consider a digital strategy guide to be crucial for promoting wine tourism activities. Only 1.5% claimed that they do not need to employ digital strategies (A5X). Additionally, according to Storybook (2002), 60% of customers state that they would abandon a purchase if the online booking process is too complex and 42% say that they would take only 10 seconds (20% within 5 seconds) to decide whether to stay on a website. These statistics emphasize the necessity for wineries to implement and optimize digital strategy in all stages of pre-travel, during, and post-travel. In fact, wineries utilizing CRM tools see a 22% increase in customer retention rates (Salisbury, B., 2018)

4.2.1 Wine Tourism Customer Journey Touchpoints with a Focus on Digitalization

Table 3: Wine Tourism Customer Journey Touchpoints with a Focus on Digitalization

Stage	Touchpoints (Digital Focus)
Awareness	- UGC on social media and travel-related blogs - Influencer marketing - A winery's website with SEO optimization - Online travel agencies (OTAs) - Industry publications (articles, sponsored content)
Consideration	- Clear information (awards and recognition, blog posts, tasting experiences) on the winery website - Interactive maps highlighting wineries and attractions - Mobile and tablet-friendly website - Multilingual website
Buy	- User-friendly winery website (booking system, secure transactions) - Mobile app (if available) with booking & information access - Booking partnerships (e-commerce platforms) - Livechat or chatbot
Enjoy	- Pre-visit confirmation emails (itineraries, maps) - Digital winery & wine exploration tools (interactive maps, Augmented Reality (AR) experiences) (website/app) - Skilled Personnel - Tailored tastings according to preferences (obtained via CRM system) - Integration of social media to share the experience with others - Gamified wine tourism experiences

Advocate	- Social media sharing and online reviews incentives (contests) - Referral programs (trackable codes or links) - Co-creation opportunities (social media/website) (e.g., suggesting new wine blends) - Social media campaigns for brand ambassadors
Bond	- Automated follow-up and recommendation emails following a visit, along with educational resources - A loyalty scheme with rewards - Online networks and forums to meet other wine enthusiasts - Customized offers driven by data and based on prior experiences and preferences - Email newsletters

4.3 The Human Touch

Terziyska, I., (2024) indicates that the most important factor in wine tourism is people. From data extraction insight of 137 wine tourism reviews of a winery in Bulgaria, people factors have been defined as the main drivers of escapism to create memorable wine tourism experiences with three key features: warm and proactive welcome, friendly and polite attitude, and passion for their job (Terziyska, I., 2024). Additionally, storytelling, especially related to family narratives and special circumstances in the wine-making process, is considered important for engagement. On the other hand, although fundamental to the wine experience, tasting is mentioned in just 25% of reviews. This fact is supported by the thematic analysis of qualitative research data on the wine tourists' previous experiences and future expectations in wine tourism focusing on human touch (A1X and A2X) presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Thematic analysis of human touch

Theme	Illustrative Quotes	Actionable Insights for Wineries
Engaged & Knowledgeable Staff	- "The right guide is the most important. They need to be a people person or it won't work." - "Guides that don't adapt their delivery of information based on the visitor's profile..." - "Employ passionate knowledgeable people; storytellers"	- Invest in staff training on wine knowledge and customer service. - Encourage staff to tailor tours and engage with guests according to their interests and degree of expertise. - Hire passionate staff who are eager to share their expertise and story with others.
Personalized Experiences	- "First and foremost, adapt to each group and their varying levels of wine knowledge..." - "Understanding why they are visiting, their level of wine interest..." - "Don't think that you are in a classroom, people want to be entertained not educated"	- Provide a range of experiences to suit the needs of various visitor profiles, such as wine novices and wine lovers. - Enable customized tours and tastings to the preferences of visitors. - Create an engaging and educational experience by striking a balance between both.

Warm & Welcoming Atmosphere	- "Friendly staff is still very important..." - "A smile makes the wine taste better" - "Open and friendly... listen to the room more!"	- Establish a warm, inviting atmosphere with personable, responsive staff. - Train staff to be friendly and build relationships with guests. - Promote a welcoming, inclusive environment that accommodates many types of guests.
	- "Lack of engaging storytelling and no linkage of it with the tasted wines." - "Promote the culture, people/history of the place..." - "The best experiences... were the ones with very nice, interesting people."	- Incorporate storytelling that highlights the history, people, and culture of the winery into the wine tourism experience. - Showcase the impact of terroir, winemaking techniques, and the human element by tying the wines to the stories. - Train staff how to deliver compelling stories to captivate guests and leave them with a lasting impression.

The result shows that human factors such as engaged and knowledgeable staff, personalized experiences, a warm and welcoming atmosphere, and authentic storytelling are desirable and considered essentials in wine tourism.

4.3.1 Customer-centric approach in digital marketing in wine tourism

McGinnis, D. (2024) defines a customer-centric approach as providing amazing service before and after a transaction. The author emphasizes the importance of offering greater personalization and more highly valued, connected experiences across all channels.

Social Media and UGC

Nowadays, it is also essential to showcase the human side of the brands on social media. Torres, C (2024) mentions the importance of the real human angle in social media marketing. He expresses his satisfaction when greeted by the exact same tour guide he saw on instagram and in real life; thus, giving a sense of familiarity and belonging. The service industry demands friendliness and delight, profoundly human and emotional elements (Young, A., 2024). Therefore, it is recommended that brands showcase the human side of the winery such as the staff, events, and behind-the-scenes glimpses.

Furthermore, brands can focus on increasing UGC as 60% of marketers shared that UGC (including influencer marketing content) performs better than branded content (Bennet, S., 2024). According to a survey by Vinepair, a magazine with a readership of over 5 million, 70% of respondents listed friends as their most trusted source for wine recommendations and wine influencers provide the closest replication of that 'friend' relationship in the digital space (Colangelo & Partners., 2024).

4.3.2 Memorable Experience with Diverse Activity Offerings & Personalization

Diversity Activity Offerings

Terziyska, I., (2024) claims the importance of memorable experiences to drive customer loyalty, satisfaction, and repeat visits. Satisfied customers encourage the possibility of spreading positive feedback through word of mouth, leading them to become brand ambassadors, and sharing their experiences with friends and family. In addition, memorable experiences lead brands to differentiate themselves in the competitive market (Terziyska, I.,2024). Based on the survey (A2X), figure 9 shows the types of wine-related activities/events that wine tourists expect to find in the wineries. While gastronomy-focused events or activities show a high percentage of interest, other activities such as nature-oriented experiences, events and festivals, workshops and educational experiences, and cultural immersion remain desirable by wine tourists. It shows no one activity fits all and wineries have to be aware of the types of wine tourists they want to attract and what type of activities they want to showcase.

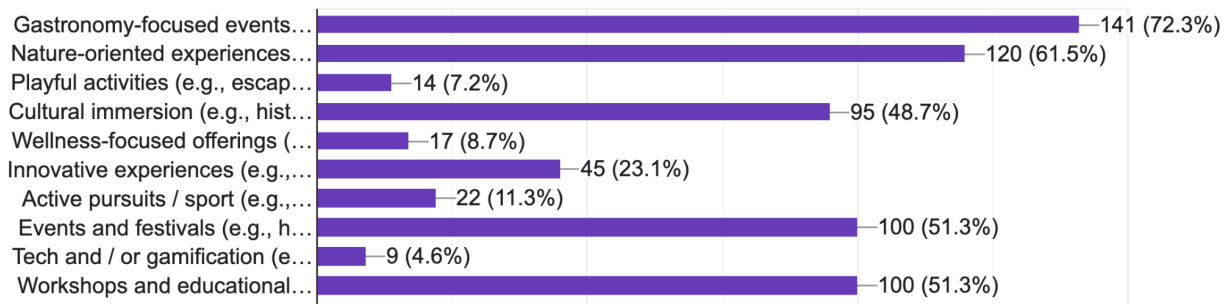


Figure 9: Wine tourists' preferences for wine-related activities or events

This data is supported by Table 5 showcasing interview results with academic professionals, wine travel agents, and wine tourists (A1X, A2X, A3X, and A4X). Employing thematic analysis, identifying patterns of the importance of diverse activity offerings and customer-centric approach in tailoring wine tourism experiences.

Table 5: The importance of diverse activity offerings and customer-centric approach in tailoring wine tourism experiences

Theme	Illustrative Quote by Professionals	Importance for Wineries	Illustrative Quote by Wine Tourists
Strategic Targeting and Tailored Approach	- "The answers depend... What is it trying to achieve?... Once you answer that question, we can effectively evaluate..." - "All of them are important... depending on the image they strive to build and their target audience."	Define the specific marketing goals and align the activities offerings	- "I suggest that you tailor the event to your audience, and also provide something memorable that is not done by others..."

Multiple Wine Activity Options (Cultural Immersion, Gastronomy, Rejuvenation, Educational)	- "Gastronomy oriented, Personally regenerative, Skills development focused" - "Cultural immersion goes first for me... traditions and learning how to prepare/savor local food that is immersed in a tradition and territorial specialties."	- Cater to different interests and types of wine tourists. - Local food as a part of the cultural experience is a crucial part. - Understanding the broader cultural context beyond wine.	- "I truly believe that wine and culture are strictly connected; therefore, wineries should take this into consideration when providing activities to be culturally oriented to some extent."
Client-Centric Approach	- "It depends on the client tho... some that look for a pretty place... some that prefer hidden gems..." - "It depends on the groups and clients I am catering to... wine festivals, harvest experiences, city wine shop tours..."	Tailoring experiences to client preferences.	- "First and foremost, adapt to each group and their varying levels of wine knowledge among your visitors..." - "...the wineries we have visited are really all about the wine. And that is great for die-hard wine lovers like my husband but not so good for me who, although I do have a good palate for wine it is not a taste I seek"

Personalization

Epsilon (2018) states that based on their survey of 1,000 customers ages 18-64, it is obvious that personalization is highly desirable by customers. The study found that 80% of respondents are more likely to do business with a company that provides personalized experiences and 90% of respondents indicate that they find personalization appealing (Epsilon, 2018). In this digital era, brands often focus more on the use of technology to promote and deliver activities quickly and efficiently. They often neglect the undeniable fact that customers still demand to be heard, known, and appreciated. Table 6 shows the thematic analysis of qualitative research data on the wine tourists' previous experiences and future expectations in wine tourism focusing on personalization (A1X and A2X).

Table 6: Wine tourists' previous experiences and future expectations in wine tourism focusing on personalization

Theme	Illustrative Quotes	Actionable Insights for Wineries
Understanding Visitor Needs	- "Focus on what the visitors are looking for, not what the winery thinks is best." - "The most important thing is for wineries to train their employees to inquire into the background of their guests... Understanding why they are visiting, their level of wine interest..."	- Understand visitor expectations, knowledge level, and preferences. - Train staff to ask open-ended questions and engage in conversation to personalize the experience for each visitor.

Tailoring Experiences by Knowledge Level	- "Adapt to each group and their varying levels of wine knowledge..." - "Having options to do visits/tours aimed at visitors who are knowledgeable about wine..."	- Offer tiered experiences catering to different levels of expertise (beginner, intermediate, advanced). - Provide in-depth experiences for wine connoisseurs, such as meeting the winemaker or discussing specific viticulture and vinification methods.
Creating a Personal Connection	- "It really depends on the customer. For me, I want to have a relaxed tasting experience..." - "The personal touch, the personal story of the winery..."	- Train staff to be attentive and responsive to individual visitor needs and preferences. - Incorporate storytelling into the experience by highlighting the winery's history, unique features, and the passion behind the winemaking process.
Enhancing the Experience with Details	- "Being in nature, I think including tasting snacks, local cheese biscuits, etc. is important..." - "More spittoons and water available..."	- Go beyond the basic tasting by offering local food pairings or snacks that complement the wines. - Provide thoughtful amenities such as adequate water stations, spittoons, and restrooms to ensure visitor comfort.
Customization Options	- "I guess it depends on the customer profile. a questionnaire prior to a visit..." - "cultural experiences"	- Develop customizable itineraries that allow visitors to choose their desired level of detail, focus areas (e.g., viticulture, winemaking), and activities. - Offer add-on experiences such as cultural excursions or vineyard hikes to cater to diverse interests.

Personalization can be as simple as recognizing customers by their name, writing handwritten names on the tasting mat, paying attention to customers' dietary requirements, asking what types of wines they would like to taste, and tailoring the experience to individual preferences. Terziyska, I., (2024) suggests that to create a memorable experience, it is also crucial to understand the type of tourists wineries are dealing with. In her speech, Terziyska, I., (2024), quotes one of the reviews from one winery in Bulgaria:

"The winery is set in the middle of nowhere. The conducted tour is in English and although interesting it is much the same as other wineries. Everything is stainless steel and oak..."

The speaker encourages wineries to be different, although it doesn't have to be high technology. For example, instead of being over-complicated explaining highly technical winemaking techniques that wine novices may not be interested in, practicing simple gamification can be more engaging: "Tell me which wine you liked the most, and I'll tell you something about your personality...", "What flower would you associate this wine with?", or "Which city would you associate this wine with?" (Terziyska, I., 2024).

4.3.2 Focus on Human Interaction and Storytelling

Beyond the product itself, wine tourism is about creating an unforgettable experience that revolves around human connection. A memorable impression is mostly dependent on creating a sense of connection with the establishment, the personnel, and the brand narrative, even though the wine quality is still important (A6X). The table below is generated by thematic analysis from an interview with 20 wine tourists (A1X).

Table 7: Thematic analysis of the importance of storytelling in wine tourism

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Missed Storytelling Opportunities	Wineries often neglect the opportunities to connect with visitors through storytelling.	"The tours were too the same and not unique. I want to hear about the people behind the wine".
Visitor Expectations	Customers demand a personalized and engaging experience that goes beyond basic wine education. Storytelling is a key element in creating this experience.	"I want to hear it all, who owns the vineyard and what's the story behind it?"
Memorable Storytelling	Customers appreciate the history of the wineries, not only about the wine itself.	"One of the most memorable visits I've had was when I visited a winery with a very thoughtful family story" "It's simple, most of the time I'm most excited when they have dogs in the winery and they name the dogs based on the most planted grape variety in their vineyard."
Recommendations for Improvement	Wineries can improve the customers' experience by incorporating storytelling into various aspects of their operations.	"A little storytelling goes a long way..."

Terziyska (2024), based on the speaker's wine tourism review sampling data research, citing how the staff excitement boosted the tasting experience, beautifully depicts the power of real human enthusiasm in wine tourism:

"I've been to many wine tastings and it's easy to tell when the exhibitor is only working and when there's passion involved, which is this case..."

"Then, we sat down with the extremely hospitable winery owners and had great wine and terrific conversation. Coming from California, this kind of an experience where the owners engage and share their wine with you on such a personal level is unique and very special, an experience we will never forget."

Wineries can maintain this impact by educating staff members to be passionate about winemaking and the history of each vintage, in addition to having a thorough understanding

of the wines. Customers are able to quickly and easily distinguish between dry narrated information and a sincere and authentic explanation. Wineries can enhance the experience by providing interactive aspects, that go beyond conventional tasting room narrative.

“...the larger issue is online communication presence. The wine industry does a miserable job of communication, focusing on education rather than joy and pleasure. And its online presence continues that error. Create as many websites and social media posts as you'd like, if you only talk about geology, enology, and chemistry you will never change the problem. Wine is sold on a human connection. If your social media talks about the wine, it will fail. You need to talk about the people.”

(Wagner, P., 2024)

4.3.3 Building Community and Authenticity

Events provide rooms for social interaction and local immersion and are considered important tools for building community. It is recommended for wineries to host harvest festivals, music and wine festivals, wine tastings and dinners, or other events for the local community which will provide a platform for guests to engage with one another on a deeper level into the local culture. According to Salvatory, H. (2024), 78% of event attendees are more likely to make a purchase after attending a well-executed event and 65% of customers say they better understand a product or service when they experience it through live events.

Table 8 based on the wine tourists' preferences (A1X) indicates the importance of community and crafting events even for all types of wine tourists. Additionally, nearly 52% of wine tourists expect to find events or festivals as one of the wine tourism activities in the winery (A2X).

Table 8: The importance of community and crafting events even for all types of wine tourists

Tourist Type	Feedback	Illustrative Quote
Wine Connoisseur	Collaboration & Innovation	"Try innovative experiences, visit wineries in the same area/region to understand where it's possible to improve as a community; more collaborations with restaurants/bike rentals/gastronomies."
	Local Focus	"Have a look at different wine regions around the world and see what offers they have and how they promote them. COPY OTHERS IN A GOOD WAY."
Wine Lover	Community Engagement	"Connect with the community! Partner with prominent individuals within the community to host a collaborative event."
	Approachable Atmosphere	"Universal approachability. Stop making events so...entitled."

All Tourists (Except Connoisseur)	More Festivals	"More festivals"
All Tourists	Improved Guided Tours	"Yes, especially when the guide is not very prepared, but I understand it's a difficult job and often the wine tour guides don't have a winemaking background."
	Transparency in Pricing & Experience	"Yes, sometimes crowds and/or price affect the experience"

Cultural Immersion Beyond the Tasting Room:

Soumintob, V (2024) believes that offering more experiences that go beyond the tasting room crafts the sense of place and human connection even more. The speaker suggests including cultural immersions in wine tourism such as visiting a museum, watching a play, visiting an art exhibition, music and wine, movies and wine, and visiting nearby farms. This leads customers to engage with the various landscapes of the area. Although it is expected that the main reason customers visiting wineries is to drink the wine, including a cultural touch in the itinerary can help brands to differentiate themselves and to showcase their value (Soumintob, V., 2024). However, including cultural immersion does not have to be grand, offering local cuisine from local farms or restaurants can be an interesting way to a cultural discovery. Cultural immersion enhances the possibility of an emotional connection between the customers and the brands. This will lead to memorable experiences, encourage brand advocacy, and ultimately brand loyalty.

Russo, A. (Personal communication, 8 March 2024) agrees that crucial immersion is necessary (A3X) and wine tourists show their excitement to cultural immersion in wine tourism activity during the interview (A1X).

Table 9: Wine tourists show their excitement to cultural immersion in wine tourism activity

Interviewee	Quote	Insight	Source
Professor Antonio Russo	"Cultural immersion goes first for me. I hardly can see possibilities of business expansion if not catching upon markets that are enticed by the wider culture of the territory...The gastronomy focus... traditions and learning how to prepare/savor local food that is immersed in a tradition and territorial specialties."	- Cultural immersion is crucial - Local gastronomy is a big part of culture and tradition	Personal communication , March 8, 2024
Wine Tourist (Wine Interested n2)	"I had a wine tasting in Bali, Indonesia and they paired the wine with a traditional local snack made of cassava. It was a great discovery, understanding how the culture differs while in Europe cheese board is more commonly served."	- Pairing local food and wine is an interesting way to learn about the culture	Personal communication , May 6, 2024

Wine Tourist (Wine Lover n1)	"I like to visit a wine festival with music and food stalls from the local restaurants or chefs."	- Collaboration with local producers or restaurants is desirable - Wine and music festival is demanded	Personal communication , May 22, 2024
Wine Tourist (Wine Lover n3)	"I always join harvest activity every year. It is a fun way to spend time with family and friends, including kids. Some people will harvest and some will cook in the kitchen. After the harvest, we will have lunch together in the vineyard with plenty of wines. Nothing fancy, but it's a heart-warming experience."	- Interactive experiences like harvests that connect visitors to local traditions and create a sense of community are highly valued.	Personal communication , May 22, 2024

Additionally, 36.8% of respondents claim that they actively seek out opportunities to learn about the local culture during wine tourism trips, and 41.5% state that they are open to cultural experiences if included in the itinerary (A2X).

4.4 The Synergy of Human Touch and Digital Technology

"You've got to start with the customer experience and work backward for the technology ... Not start with 'Let's sit down with the engineers and figure out what awesome technology we have.'"

Steve Jobs, Founder, Apple (Jobs, S., 1997)

Young, A. (2024) emphasizes the understanding the existence of technology is to enhance, not to replace human interactions. The author argues that although technology can take over mundane tasks such as making a reservation, the staff is going to be on the front line of the service allowing the understanding of unique needs and personalization. The service industry demands friendliness and human and emotional elements. In this digital age, it is crucial to ensure that staff is not only capable of optimizing technology, but also trained in soft skills such as emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and problem-solving (Young, A., 2024). It is undeniable that technology cannot replace the warmth and personal touch provided by human touch. Therefore, the key to successfully integrating technology in the service industry, including tourism is balance.

4.4.1 Utilize Data

Seth Godin states "Don't find customers for your product. Find products for your customers." (as cited in Hennekam, P., 2024). It has been discussed how both digital technology and human touch are beneficial in the wine tourism industry. However, combining both is

preferred. Optimizing digital technology enables data gathering that can be utilized to deliver not only exceptional customer service but also experiences with personalization and meeting unique customers' needs. According to one study (as cited in McGinnis, 2022), 85% of business buyers and 79% of consumers said that the experience a company provides is as important as its products and services. Peter Schwartz (as cited in McGinnis, 2022) believes that digital transformation, including AI, allows businesses to gather comprehensive data that can be used as necessary insights to anticipate customer's needs. For example, a frequent business traveler walks into a hotel room and is greeted by her favorite music playing, photos of her family in digital frames, and an email in her inbox asking if she wants the Caesar salad, without croutons, she ordered from room service last time. The temperature and lighting are set to her preferred levels, and when she turns on the television, it suggests a movie she's yet to see, starring her favorite actress.

"This isn't marketing to a category of consumers. It's applying AI and all the customer data to cater to the needs of a single individual, which is much more powerful."

Peter Schwartz (as cited in McGinnis, 2022)

Therefore, businesses can optimize the right digital technology, and most importantly, hire capable individuals to seamlessly connect the data into a customer-centric service. For instance, an Amazon Prime subscription enables the company to trace customers' past purchases and repurchase behavior. These data empower the company to understand the customers' purchase behavior and to propose customized recommendations. Catharine Findiesen Hays (as cited in McGinnis, 2022) believes that this is an intuitive and frictionless mutually beneficial digital service. In the wine tourism sector, companies can adopt this approach by encouraging customers to become members or join a wine club in order to obtain loyalty program data. Letting the customers to be inside the company's ecosystem will not only make them a part of the community but also to gather their data and purchase behavior in order to obtain a deeper understanding and offer personalization products or services. Furthermore, customers' preferences can be learned from user browsing history, booking preferences, point-of-sale data, and survey data.

"Without data, you're just another person with an opinion."

W. Edwards Deming (as cited in Hennekam, P., 2024)

4.4.2 Humanizing Technology for a Deeper Connection

Nowadays, the question about what can AI (or technology) do for travel and tourism businesses appears very frequently (Syme, P., 2024). However, the author believes that the more complicated question and the one that businesses have to analyze more is "What can AI NOT do in the travel and tourism business".

“I see huge value in the future in areas of travel and tourism that AI does not change. AI struggles with the nuanced understanding of human emotions and cultural sensitivities. While AI can analyze data to predict preferences, it cannot fully comprehend the emotional connection and satisfaction that travelers derive from personalized human interactions. Yes, emotional AI is being built and coming but it is on the of the scale hard of the hard things to do list.”

Syme, P. (2024)

Yet again, the human touch and the digital technology in wine tourism are inseparable. The relationship between these two factors is two ways. The utilization of data gathered through digital technology encourages personalization and digital technology without human touch will be considered cold and out of touch.

Table 10 indicates how businesses can humanize digital technology in order to craft more meaningful connections.

Table 10: Humanizing digital technology

Digital Technology	Human Touch Inclusion	Goal	Example	Additional Considerations
Social Media with personality	- Showcase team members and tell their stories (owners, winemakers, vineyard crew, tasting room staff) - Share behind-the-scene stories (harvesting, winemaking process, team celebrations, cellar visit) - Respond to comments with warmth, personality, and relevant information - Host live chats or Q&A sessions with staff members	- Create a sense of connection with the audience - Build trust and authenticity - Encourage a community feel - Humanize the brand	- Familia Torres Winery showcases the winemakers explaining about 2023 harvest - Celler La Vinyeta often highlights the owner explaining about their wines, vineyards, or events	- Personalize greetings and responses by referencing user profiles (if possible) or previous interactions. - Encourage user-generated content by hosting contests or asking specific questions. - Highlight upcoming events or promotions.
	- Audio descriptions of vineyards narrated by owners or staff (winemaker, viticulturist) - Interactive virtual tours hosted by staff members, allowing guests to virtually "experience" the winery - Interactive elements (e.g.,	- Engage multiple senses and bring the winery experience to life - Create a more immersive and memorable experience - Allow for user participation and interaction	- Château Smith Haut Lafitte includes not only aesthetic images, but also voice recordings of the owners or staff explaining the wine, terroir, or their stories - VIK Winery for their La Piu Belle series uses interactive website design and videos	- Use music, voices, or videos to generate a more authentic experience - Offer downloadable content (e.g., maps, wine guides) narrated by staff - Integrate gamification elements like points or

		- Encourage emotional connection	and videos telling poetic stories related to the wine	
Online Communities	- Host online events (e.g., virtual wine tastings led by staff, and food and wine pairing) - Share wine pairing tips and recommendations based on user preferences - Encourage guests to share photos and stories about their winery visits - Create online forums for discussions and knowledge-sharing	- Create a sense of belonging and connection among guests and staff - Allow for ongoing engagement and interaction beyond the physical visit - Create user-generated content that feels authentic	- Really Grape connects wineries, influencers, and customers by organizing online tasting events through their online wine club	- Partner with local businesses (e.g., cheese shops, and restaurants) for co-hosted online events. - Utilize social media listening tools to identify topics of interest and tailor content accordingly. - Feature guest stories and photos within the community platform.
Booking System & Direct Sales	- Integrate a user-friendly booking system - Offer personalized recommendations for tours and tastings based on guest preferences - Provide a live chat option for booking inquiries - Highlight staff expertise when showcasing specific tours or experiences - Offer exclusive online discounts or promotions - Offer curated wine recommendations in e-commerce for members	- Create a seamless experience from browsing to booking. - Allow for flexibility and cater to individual needs. - Personalize the sales experience and showcase the human touch behind the product. - Increase conversion rates and online sales.	- Integrate the booking system with your CRM to personalize recommendation s and track guest preferences.	- Consider offering video consultations for personalized wine recommendations or virtual tours. - For the e-commerce platform, consider incorporating staff-curated wine collections or personalized gift options. - Train staff to be available for live chat and answer booking inquiries in a friendly and helpful manner.

4.5 The Loyalty Loop

According to the survey result (A5X), 49.3% of wineries state that when setting up a wine activity, guests' experience satisfaction is the most important. In addition, 26.9% of wineries claim that the impact on direct sales on site and brand notoriety is an important goal of wine tourism activity. Customer satisfaction, the increased number of direct sales, and customer

retention are interconnected (Hure, D., 2024). At this point, human touch has been discussed frequently. It becomes a key factor in creating a satisfying customer experience, reinforcing the intention to return, and making interactions among tourists, staff, and robots more positive which impacts customers' intention to return positively (Zakiah, S., et.al., 2023).

Retention matters

Referring to McKinsey's new model- the loyalty loop (figure 4), it is crucial to compress the consideration step and shorten or eliminate the evaluation step which will lead customers to dive directly into the loyalty loop and keep them within the ecosystem. Hure, D (2024) claims that acquiring a new customer can be 5 to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one. In addition, repeat customers tend to spend up to 67% more overtime. Therefore, retaining customers can cut costs and increase revenue significantly.

Table 11 presents the updated customer journey framework which combines digital touch, human touch, and data integration in order to determine an actionable strategy in order to reach customers; satisfaction and personalization in each touchpoint of the customer journey.

Table 11: Customer Journey framework focusing on human touch in the digital age

Stage	Digital Touchpoints	Human Touch	Data Integration	Action
Awareness	Social media ads, travel blogs, influencer marketing, wine-themed content	Voice recording, team photos, interactive quizzes, personality tests suggesting ideal wine styles, live Q&A sessions with winemakers	Analyze demographics, online behavior, interests	Showcase the winery's unique story, cultural experiences, and human element (staff profiles, family history) through targeted content.
Consideration	Winery website, virtual tours user reviews, online awards & recognition	Live chat support for inquiries and personalized recommendations based on preferences	Analyze website behavior, browsing habits, inquiries	Offer personalized recommendations for experiences (beginner-friendly, food pairings), and flexible booking options.
Buy	User-friendly booking platform, secure payment options pre-visit surveys	Live chat support during booking, personalized add-on experiences suggestions	Analyze booking patterns, purchase history	Offer discounts or loyalty program incentives, and personalize pre-visit communication based on preferences (language, dietary restrictions).

Enjoy	Interactive tasting notes with multimedia content, digital maps, sensory quizzes	A warm welcome from staff, personalized tours with local history & winemaking insights, opportunities to interact with winemakers	Analyze in-visit surveys, and feedback from staff interactions	Staff customize tours based on live feedback & questions, and offer opportunities to meet winemakers or local artisans.
Advocate	Social media sharing options during visit, Post-visit surveys, Email follow-up with photos & special offers	Personalized thank-you notes, Invitations to exclusive online communities, encourage participation in loyalty programs	Analyze post-visit engagement, purchase history, and social media mentions	Highlight personalized recommendations for future visits, offer exclusive content or discounts for loyal customers, and encourage positive online reviews.
Bond	Wine club memberships, exclusive event invitations, personalized recommendations for future purchases	Personalized birthday greetings or special occasion gifts, ongoing communication about cultural events & winery updates	Analyze purchase history, club membership, and communication preferences	Offer opportunities for continued engagement, and curate personalized experiences based on past interactions and preferences.

Consistency

Consistency is the foundation of trust for customer retention. According to the interview (A4X) with a wine travel agent (n=1), one of her biggest challenges in choosing wineries for the clients is the lack of consistent services delivered by the wineries. “The first feedback from my clients was excellent, but then the service quality is constantly decreasing despite me being a repeat customer (travel agent) who books for my clients frequently” (Travel agent n=1). Hure, D (2024) believes that companies must regularly review and enhance their offerings to keep meeting the same level or a better quality. Furthermore, the author suggests that companies train the staff to follow standardized procedures in order to deliver a consistent service experience which ultimately reinforces reliability.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

A data driven strategy that prioritize human connection is essential in the wine tourism customer journey in this digital age. Wineries are recommended to **find out, listen, and learn** about their wine tourist’ preferences which can be gathered through website analytics, social media analytics, surveys, and social media engagement. This will allow wineries to gain a better understanding of their audiences’ preferences, encouraging them to tailor the customer journey touchpoints with a **digital strategy** together with a **human touch**. For

example, a user-friendly booking system with authentic and human touch integration such as videos, voice notes, and interactive design. It is advised to integrate human touch in each customer journey touchpoints which aim to build a meaningful connection and warmth. This can be accomplished by showcasing the team members, sharing behind-the-scenes stories, and responding to inquiries with friendliness and genuine enthusiasm. A **memorable emotional connection** can be attained by incorporating an authentic digital narrative that presents a unique story and people. Ultimately, encouraging customers into brand advocates and loyalists.

In conclusion, wineries may establish a seamless and engaging customer journey by implementing a human-centric digital strategy. By using this strategy, clients can transition from being lookers to bookers, develop relationships, and remain part of the **loyalty loop**. Additionally, it is important to note that delivering **consistent** products and services is fundamental for retaining customers to remain in the loyalty loop.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this paper explores the significant potential of strategically combining technology and human connection in digital wine tourism, there are limitations to consider. Firstly, a larger sample size for surveys with wineries could be done to gather more generalizable results. Additionally, the impact of cultural differences and demographic group profiles on digital preferences and the human touch has not been fully analyzed. Further research could examine customer behavior in specific cultures and specific demographic groups, the impact of specific digital tools (e.g., virtual reality experiences, augmented reality in vineyards) on customer engagement and satisfaction, the cost-effectiveness and operational challenges of implementing advanced digital technologies, and a longer-term study observing customer journey in each touch point to investigate the brand advocacy and retention rate. In addition, while the challenges and benefits of digital transportation have been addressed, each winery needs to study further its own markets and brand strategies considering their unique setting, location, brand, and needs for successful implementation.

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Annexes

A1X - Interview questions: wine tourists preferences (n=20)

Topic	Questions
Understanding Your Wine Preferences	- Inspiration & Discovery: How do you typically find information for your winery visits? (words of mouth, social media, winery websites, influencer, - Decision Factors: What factors are most important to you when choosing a winery to visit (reputation, user reviews, specific varietals offered, etc.)? - Loyalty Loop: What kind of offerings (discounts, exclusive events) would encourage you to return to a winery?
Enhancing Your Winery Experience	- Booking & Pre-Trip Communication: What features are essential for you when booking a winery visit online (user-friendly interface, secure transactions, etc.)? - The Winery Visit: What type of atmosphere (welcoming, knowledgeable staff, instagramable location) do you prefer during a winery visit? - Post-Trip Follow-Up: Would you appreciate personalized recommendations for future visits based on the wines you tasted?
Digital Experience Optimization	- Booking & Pre-Trip Communication: Would you be interested in a seamless booking experience with customization options for pre-visit planning (e.g., scheduling specific tours)?
Additional Opinion	- Share about your most memorable or disappointing wine tourism experiences. - Do you have any additional insights, recommendations, or expectation about wine tourism?

A2X - Survey questions for wine tourists preferences (n=200)

Question	Description	Answer Options (Select all that apply unless otherwise noted)
1. Age	Your age	18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, over 66
2. Country	Your country of residence	(Drop down list with countries)
3. Gender	Your gender	Male, Female, Non-binary, Prefer not to say
4. Wine Tourist Type	How you approach wine tourism experiences	Wine Novice, Wine Interested, Wine Lover, Wine Connoisseurs
5. Winery Visits per Year	Frequency of winery visits	Rarely (1-2 times a year) , Occasionally (3-5 times a year), Frequently (more than 5 times a year)
6. Visiting Companions	Who you visit wineries with	Solo, Partner/Spouse, Friends, Family, Group Tour, Other (please specify)
7. Winery Preferences	Factors influencing winery selection	Reputation of the winery, Recommendations from friends/family, Variety and quality of wine offerings, Winery ambiance/atmosphere (relaxing, beautiful landscape, comfortable tasting rooms, etc.), Instagrammable location (beautiful wineries, tasting rooms, and landscape for taking photos or videos), Unique wine-related activities/events, Location (reachable by car or public transport, close proximity to cities and other tourist attractions, etc.), Budget considerations, Sustainability and eco-friendly practices, Family friendly wine-related activities/events, Pet friendly wine-related activities/events, Other
8. Winery Activities/Events	Expected activities at wineries	Gastronomy-focused events (e.g., food and wine pairing dinners, cooking classes), Nature-oriented experiences (e.g., vineyard walks, outdoor tastings), Playful activities (e.g., escape game, treasure hunt),

		Cultural immersion (e.g., historical tours, heritage wine tastings), Wellness-focused offerings (e.g., yoga and wine retreats, spa treatments), Innovative experiences (e.g., virtual reality vineyard tours, sensory tastings), Active pursuits / sport (e.g., cycling tours, hiking trails), Events and festivals (e.g., harvest celebrations, wine release parties), Tech and / or gamification (e.g. Augmented reality, Smart wine dispensers), Workshops and educational sessions (e.g., wine appreciation classes, wine blending classes), Other...
9. Wine Activity Discovery	How you learn about wine activities	Booking platform (e.g., Airbnb Experiences, Viator, Tripadvisor), Wine tourism platform (winalist, winetoursim.com, winederling, etc.), Word of mouth (recommendations from friends/family including influencers or wine professionals)), Winery's social media channels and website (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, LinkedIn), Tourist visitor center, Travel agency, Winery's e-mail marketing, Others
10. Local Culture Integration	Interest in cultural experiences	Very Interested, Somewhat Interested, Neutral, Not Interested
11. Winery Visit Planning	How you plan winery visits	Self-made itinerary, Wine tour package, Group tour organized by a third-party such as travel agency, Other...
12. Digital Marketing Importance	Importance of winery online presence	Very important: I rely heavily on social media to discover new wineries, learn about their unique offerings, and get a sense of their overall vibe before making a decision to visit., Important: I often check their social media accounts for information about upcoming events, special promotions, or new releases, Somewhat important: I may occasionally check a winery's social media accounts for updates or events, but it's not a major factor in my decision-making process, Not important: Irrelevant to my decision
13. Disappointment with Events	Experience of disappointment	Yes / No
14. Improvement Suggestions	Suggestions for improvement	(Open ended - text box)
15. Additional Comments	Additional thoughts on wine tourism	(Open ended - text box)

A3X - Interview questions : academic professionals (n=6)

Question	Description
Challenges in Developing Wine Activities	What are the main obstacles wineries face when creating engaging wine tourism activities?
Beneficial Wine Tourism Activities	In the current global tourism landscape, which categories of wine tourism activities do you think hold the most promise for wineries (e.g., gastronomy-focused, gamification, cultural immersion, etc.)?
Importance of Digital Strategy	How critical do you believe it is for this guide to advocate for digital marketing strategies that wineries can use to promote their wine tourism activities?
Additional Comments	Please share any additional insights or comments you have on wine tourism activity development.

A4X - Interview questions : wine travel agents (n=4)

Question	Description
Client Requests	Do clients typically know about specific activities offered by wineries, or do you recommend them?
Client Profile	What type of wine tourists do you typically work with?
Winery Selection Criteria	What factors influence your choice of wineries for client itineraries?
Winery Partnerships	Do you have partnerships with wineries, or do they offer commission on bookings?
Digital Strategy	Do you consider a winery's digital presence when choosing partners?
Popular Activities	What wine tourism activities are most requested by your clients?
Challenges Faced	What challenges do you encounter when arranging wine tours?
Recommendations for Wineries	What suggestions do you have for wineries to improve their offerings?

A5X - Survey for wineries

Wine Tourism E-Book Questionnaire:
 We are assembling a collection of amazing wine experiences to create a helpful Ebook, and YOU can help!
 This survey seeks to grasp your preferences, challenges, and expectations by collecting crucial insights to comprehend better your requirements for crafting unforgettable wine events.

Question	Description	Answer Options
1. Understanding Your Winery	** (Select all that apply)**	* Currently offering wine tourism activities (e.g., tastings, tours, events) * You don't do wine tourism yet but you plan to do so within the next year * Wine activities are delivered primarily through in-house staff (not trained in tourism) * You have a dedicated wine tourism staff (trained in tourism) * You delegate guest care to external partners, such as tour operators * You are considering expanding your wine tourism team in the near future
2. Target Wine Tourists	Who would you like to attract? (Select all that apply)	* Wine novices * Wine enthusiasts * Wine connoisseurs * Wine professionals * Families * Groups * Corporates and businesses (e.g., team building activities) * Local community * International tourists
3. Wine Tourism Categories	** What are you most interested in promoting? (Select all that apply)**	* Gastronomy-focused events (e.g., food and wine pairing dinners, cooking classes) * Nature-oriented experiences (e.g., vineyard walks, outdoor tastings) * Playful activities (e.g., escape game, treasure hunt) * Cultural immersion (e.g., historical tours, heritage wine tastings) * Wellness-focused offerings (e.g., yoga and wine retreats, spa treatments) * Innovative experiences (e.g., virtual reality vineyard tours, sensory tastings) * Active pursuits / sport (e.g., cycling tours, hiking trails) * Events and festivals (e.g., harvest celebrations, wine release parties) * Tech and / or gamification (e.g. Augmented reality, Smart wine dispensers) * Workshops and educational sessions (e.g., wine appreciation classes, wine blending classes) * Other (Please specify)
4. Challenges in Organizing Events	** (Select all that apply)**	* Limited budget * Lack of marketing expertise * Difficulty in securing sponsorships or partnerships * Issues with logistics and planning * Lack of tourists' awareness about our winery * Difficulty competing with other local attractions * Finding human resources to manage the activities
5. Setting Up a Wine Activity	** What is most important to you? (Select one)**	* Budget considerations * Sustainability and eco-friendly practices * The impact on direct sales on site and brand notoriety * Guest experiences * Level of complexity to operate * Innovative offerings

6. Valuable E-book Topics	** (Select all that apply)**	* Budgeting and financial planning * Strategic planning tips * Level of complexity to set up * Sustainable event practices * Insider tips for planning the perfect wine tour itinerary
7. Importance of Digital Promotion	** How important is a digital promotion section in the e-book?**	* Essential: I need specific, actionable recommendations for using digital tools to promote my activities. * Important: I'd like some general guidance and examples of how digital tools can be helpful. * Neutral: I'm not sure how valuable digital strategies would be for my winery. * Unimportant: I already have a strong digital marketing strategy in place. * Not Applicable: I don't use digital tools for promoting my activities.
8. Additional Comments		Share any additional thoughts or insights.
9. E-book Delivery	** Are you interested in receiving the e-book?**	* Yes (Leave your email address below) * No (Leave this blank)

A6X - Factors that influence wine tourists' decision to visit a particular winery

