

## **DECODING THE SWEET SPOT OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION IN EASTERN AUSTRIAN WINE TOURISM**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the pivotal role of experiential wine cellar visits in fortifying the applied marketing system of traditional wineries operating in North-Burgneerland, Austria; thereby contributing to the current discourse on Central European wine tourism and regional development. Drawing on the experiential marketing framework, the research examines how winery tours and tasting experiences can build customer loyalty, drive repeat purchases, and elevate brand image, all of which are critical for sustainable wine destination development. Using a netnographic approach, the study analyzed approximately 1,900 customer reviews harvested from the Vivino platform to rigorously assess the multidimensional nuances of the visitor experience. This analysis was anchored by the experiential marketing framework, focusing on the key dimensions of learning, recreation, and aesthetic pleasure. The empirical results demonstrate that co-creational aspects of knowledge transfer, specifically in the form of professionally assisted tours and structured cellar door experiences, make a significant contribution to overall visitor satisfaction. Crucially, the scenic "winescape"—the environmental and sensory qualities of the destination—alongside tailored entertainment offerings, were also found to play essential and synergistic roles in shaping the holistic customer experience. This evidence strongly reinforces the contemporary shift in wine tourism research, specifically relevant to Central European regional development, where the focus moves from the mere product to the comprehensive, integrated wine destination concept (as highlighted in recent *Deturope* research). The study also identifies practical challenges faced by Central European tourism providers, such as the imperative to differentiate unique offerings in a competitive market and address staffing issues. This work is looking to optimize the marketing strategies for family-owned wine businesses through experiential engagement, particularly concerning the effective development and promotion of the winescape in a cross-border Central European context.

Keywords: Wine Marketing, E-WOM, Marketing Strategy, Experiential Dimensions

### **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary tourism scholarship, the focus has fundamentally shifted from viewing individual attractions in isolation to analyzing the complete destination experience (McCabe, 2024). For the wine industry, this shift is encapsulated by the concept of the "winescape," which recognizes that the value proposition of a winery extends far beyond the product in the bottle (Carlsen, 2006, Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). The winescape integrates the nature, folklore, culture, architecture and history of a touristic destination, positioning it as a complex product – service bundle (Kubát et al., 2022, 2023). This phenomenon is prevalent in the Central Europe: as its historical and cross-border nature of wine regions demands a

nuanced approach to regional development and marketing (Gyurkó & Gonda, 2024; Kubát et al., 2023). Wineries, especially the numerous family-owned enterprises, are crucial custodians of this winescape, embodying the unique natural and cultural values of their locale. Their on-site operations—specifically tours and tasting experiences—are not merely points of sale, but vital mechanisms for communicating the entire regional identity to the consumer. Consequently, the act of a visitor stepping onto a winery premises and participating in a tasting is an intentionally designed experiential encounter. While the immediate, short-term goal remains the commercialization of the product portfolio, the strategic significance lies in leveraging this experience to build long-term value. This practice is foundational to establishing customer involvement and, ultimately, loyalty (Joy et al., 2021, Pícha et al., 2025). Due to the changing business climate wineries – particularly market-competitive, traditional SMEs – develop sophisticated, forward-thinking marketing strategies to ensure their longevity. Academic literature has increasingly recognized that the conscious construction of a memorable visit contributes vastly to the successful survival of the wineries (Králiková et al., 2025). This is rooted in the Experiential Marketing Framework, which asserts that direct, multi-sensory engagement creates powerful synergies: converting a transient, single-instance leisure experience into sustained long-term relationships (Donavan & Stantic, 2024). A well-executed tour and tasting, therefore, strengthens the brand and offers a compelling opportunity for encouraging repeat purchase and re-visit behavior. The academic scrutiny of how these physical, direct experiences translate into strategic marketing outcomes is currently emerging (Thach & Charters, 2016; Novotná & Kunc, 2019). The literature confirms that the quality of these experiences, coupled with a positive brand image, demonstrates a fundamental correlation with customer loyalty (Indradewa & Riyanto, 2024, Joy et al., 2021; Juliana et al., 2025). As a complex, strategically relevant touchpoint, the winery visit requires careful design to ensure that the immediate experience always effectively points back to the wine product and its future purchase. The Lake Neusiedl region of Austria, with its unique geographical and climatic conditions, serves as an exemplary case study for Central European wine tourism. The region is characterized by a dense concentration of small and middle-sized family-run wineries that must effectively differentiate their experiential offerings in a competitive market. Furthermore, these regional SMEs grapple with operational obstacles, such as the widely reported difficulties in securing suitable staffing for specialized wine tourism roles (Kubíčková & Holešinská, 2021). Despite the consensus on the strategic importance of the experiential winery visit, a specific, holistic advisory framework remains absent. No existing study provides empirically-derived, granular

guidance on how exactly the key dimensions of the visitor experience—namely knowledge acquisition, entertainment, and aesthetic engagement—must be structured and delivered to reliably support the customer's return in the form of re-purchase or re-visit. Without tailored instruction, the capacity of wineries remains restricted. The goal of this research is therefore to advise the family-run wineries in the Lake Neusiedl region by systematically analyzing extensive consumer narratives (e-WOM) as follows:

- Isolate and quantify the contributions of educational, aesthetic, and entertainment dimensions to visitor satisfaction and perception of the winescape.
- Develop actionable recommendations for optimizing the winery visit as a strategic touchpoint for building long-term customer engagement and generating reliable re-purchases.
- Identify and illuminate common pitfalls and regional challenges (e.g., operational issues and market differentiation) to aid SMEs in creating a sustainable and profitable wine tourism model.

### **The Target Area: The Lake Neusiedl Wine Region in its Austrian Context**

The following description of the Austrian wine landscape and its structure, particularly the characteristics that define its quality and market position, is highly reliant on the strategic framework and data provided by the Austrian Wine Marketing Board (AWMB, 2023).

Austria is globally recognized for its high-quality, distinct wines, which are warmly welcomed by wine experts and wine lovers domestically and internationally. The national winemaking scene is overwhelmingly dominated by small and medium-sized family-run estates, with mass production playing only a minor role. Most wineries average a size of five hectares, resulting in high labour intensity and strict yield restrictions that position Austrian wines particularly well in the upper and premium price segments. This inherent focus on small, family-owned structures directly reinforces the rationale for this study, as these entities rely heavily on direct, experiential sales channels to compensate for minimal price competition at the entry-level (Wieschhoff, 2022). Furthermore, Austria is a world leader in environmentally friendly practices: no less than 21 per cent of its agricultural land and 13 per cent of its vineyards are managed in accordance with organic farming guidelines.

Of Austria's total vineyard area, approximately 13,300 hectares are located in Burgenland, in the north-eastern part of the country. Burgenland is unique within Austria because its production is predominantly dominated by red wines, differentiating it from other wine-growing regions. The region boasts five different wine appellations with clearly distinguished

profiles: Neusiedlersee DAC, Leithaberg DAC, Rosalia DAC, Mittelburgenland DAC, and Eisenberg DAC. Burgenland's cuisine, heavily influenced by its proximity to Hungary, also plays a crucial role in its wine marketing, emphasizing food and wine pairing.

The specific target of this study is the Lake Neusiedl (or Neusiedlersee) wine producer area is situated in the northeastern part of Burgenland. The region is highly competitive, home to 471 wineries, which are mostly handcrafted by local winemakers with close ties to their homeland (AWMB, Sieben Elemente, 2023). This intense, family-driven competition underscores the need for non-product differentiation, which is the core subject of this research: How do wineries leverage experiential tours and tastings to stand out in this crowded market?

The distinctiveness of the Lake Neusiedl region stems from several factors:

- Climate and Lake Influence: The dry continental Pannonian climate is the predominant force, especially along the eastern shores. The steppe lake itself is significant because of its unparalleled influence on the surrounding environment. It regulates temperatures, provides humidity, and creates ideal conditions for the development of grape varieties.
- Wines and Terroir: Besides Zweigelt, the region is internationally famous for its noble sweet wines from the Seewinkel area (Trockenbeerenauslese and Eiswein). The largely calcareous soils of the Leithagebirge hills, on the western side of the lake, provide an excellent home for both white Burgundies and the distinctive Blaufränkisch variety, Austria's most prominent red wine.
- Cultural Heritage: The transboundary region around Lake Neusiedl was admitted to the list of UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Sites in 2001, reinforcing the appeal of the area's Winescape (Cascio, 2025) and providing a unique aesthetic backdrop for the visitor experience.
- Winery Structure: Burgenland boasts a higher proportion of organic winemakers than the rest of Austria. The focus on quality, family legacy, and regional typicity confirms that the thriving of these wineries are inseparable from to their internal ability to communicate these unique attributes directly to the customer, primarily through experiential marketing efforts.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The present study is grounded in a robust theoretical framework that bridges the conceptualization of the physical wine setting with the psychological mechanisms of consumer experience and long-term loyalty. This foundation integrates three core areas of academic inquiry: the winescape from terroir to tourism destination, the experiential marketing framework including the „sweet spot” of flow, and the perception and integration of post-visit customer behavior shown in independent businesses.

### **The Winescape: From Terroir to Tourism Destination**

The contemporary understanding of wine consumption extends beyond the product itself to encompass the complex environment in which it is produced and presented. This integrated setting is captured by the term "winescape," which Kubát et al. (2023) define as the total sum of the environment and human interactions that enable the co-creation of the customer experience. The winescape is multiscalar. In its narrower context, the winescape is defined by the individual wine estate, where the producer fully manages the immediate service environment, or servicescape, to embed the customer experience within the regional atmosphere (Cascio, 2025). This concept highlights that the ultimate success of the Lake Neusiedl region, for instance, hinges not just on the quality of its DAC wines, but on the ability of its wineries to translate their unique local characteristics into a memorable and compelling physical experience. It is within this specific servicescape that the winescape can be consciously manipulated to encourage customer engagement and loyalty (Santos et al., 2020).

### **The Experiential Marketing Framework and the Sweet Spot of Flow**

To operationalize the winery visit, this study adopts the seminal Experiential Marketing Framework articulated by Pine and Gilmore (1998), which categorizes experiences into four dimensions—Entertainment, Education, Aesthetics, and Escapism—based on the consumer's participation (passive/active) and connection with the environment (absorption/immersion) (Haller et. al. 2021). While all four dimensions are present, wine tourism research has specialized their application:

Education has a specific, high-priority motivational factor, as customer are eager to familiarize themselves with wine, the production pathways and the terroir itself (Bekar & Benzergil, 2025). Activities such as formal wine tastings and vineyard tours fall under this realm. When education is smoothly integrated with entertainment, it creates "edutainment," enhancing both engagement and learning retention (Tomay & Tuboly, 2023).

Aesthetics is critical due to the sensory nature of wine consumption, as this dimension pertains to the visual appeal and atmosphere of the servicescape (e.g., lodging, architecture, and surrounding landscape), which directly targets the senses and influences the overall quality of the experience (Kladou et. al, 2024).

Entertainment (e.g., cellar concerts, demonstrations) and Escapism (e.g., active participation in blending or harvesting) provide the necessary diversity of in-situ experiences (Franceschini et. al., 2025). Optimal experiences, sometimes referred to as the "sweet spot"

(Terziyska, 2024), successfully blend these realms. This convergence helps consumers attain an optimal psychological "flow state" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2017), a state of deep focus and enjoyment that is crucial for ensuring the visit is not merely transactional, but a genuinely rewarding event that fosters a strong, positive brand association.

### **The Link to Post-Visit Behavior and SME Challenges**

The ultimate metric for the success of an experiential marketing strategy is its influence on post-visit consumer behavior. The direct experience is a powerful tool for generating two key strategic outcomes: brand evangelism and brand love generation, both of which fundamentally correlate with the brand image and positive emotional experiences (Joy et al., 2021). Winery visits, by offering a cluster of attractions and experiences, are essential for producers not just for immediate sales but for building this long-term loyalty (Ortega-Pérez et al., 2025). Research confirms that visitors' perceptions of wine tours and tastings form expectations that evolve over time (Hall et al., 2000). Crucially, future behaviors, such as re-purchasing or re-visiting, are demonstrably shaped by the satisfaction derived from previous experiential encounters (Mitchell & Hall, 2004, 2006). This established relationship highlights the cellar-door experience as the central point in a continuous cycle of pre-consumption phase, in-situ encounter, post-encounter behavior (Hall, 1996). This strategic necessity is intensified within the Central European wine tourism sector. The Lake Neusiedl region is characterized by small, family-run estates. These SMEs often face structural hurdles that complicate the delivery of a seamless experiential product (Kubičková & Holešinská, 2021). Primary challenges include:

- Differentiation: Many local wineries share similar advantages (tradition, terroir, organic focus), making it difficult to stand out beyond the Austrian Wine Marketing Board's generic branding (Wieschhoff, 2022, König et. al. 2022).
- Human Resources: A persistent challenge across German-speaking wine regions is the difficulty in securing competent, service-oriented staff who can perform the multi-faceted role of tour guide, wine professional, and salesperson simultaneously (Grechi et. al. , 2024, Průša et. al. 2025).

By using netnography to analyze extensive consumer narratives, this study aims to precisely identify which elements of the experiential framework (Education, Entertainment, Aesthetics) overcome these structural challenges and are most potent in driving the desired post-visit outcomes of re-purchase and loyalty.

## **Research question**

This study is designed to move beyond the descriptive analysis of wine tourism experiences toward establishing the predictive power of specific experiential dimensions on critical strategic marketing outcomes. The core logical twist introduced here shifts the focus from identifying the presence of experiential realms to quantifying the differential impact these realms have on converting a satisfied visitor into a loyal, repeat-purchasing customer. The overarching research objective is to empirically examine the direct and mediated relationships between the key components of the Pine and Gilmore (1998) model (namely Education, Aesthetics, and Entertainment) as perceived in the regional winescape. Like the ultimate strategic outcomes of customer loyalty and post-visit behavioral intentions (re-purchase and re-visit). The study's objectives are synthesized into the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: The Core Driver: Edutainment and Knowledge Acquisition. The educational dimension, particularly when delivered as edutainment is often cited as a primary motivator for winery visits. To what extent does the Edutainment dimension of the winery visit, as perceived by consumers, significantly drive visitor satisfaction and perceived knowledge acquisition in North – Eastern Burgenland. This question tests the efficacy of knowledge-transfer strategies as a foundational element of the overall positive experience.

RQ2: Differential Impact: Aesthetics vs. Entertainment Wineries often invest heavily in both the physical setting (Aesthetics/Winescape) and organized social activities (Entertainment). This question seeks to compare their relative power in achieving loyalty. What is the differential predictive power of the Aesthetic (Winescape) dimension versus the Entertainment dimension in fostering customer loyalty (affective and cognitive) and the feeling of Escapism among winery visitors? This question moves beyond description to compare which element of the servicescape is the more efficient strategic investment for long-term customer bonding.

RQ3: The Strategic Link: Satisfaction as a Mediator The concept of the "sweet spot"—the optimal flow state—is academically understood as maximizing satisfaction. The real-world marketing value, however, lies in whether this satisfaction leads to future sales. To what extent does visitor satisfaction with the on-site experience (the proxy for reaching the "sweet spot") mediate the relationship between the three experiential dimensions and post-visit behavioral intentions (re-purchase and re-visit)? This question is central to the study, establishing the chain of causality.

RQ4: Actionable Strategy: Optimizing the SME Touchpoint The final objective is to translate theoretical findings into a practical guide for the target demographic. Based on the

analysis of consumer e-WOM narratives, what actionable, experience-design recommendations can be formulated to help family-run wineries differentiate their unique offerings and effectively, mitigate the documented operational challenges (e.g., staffing and competitive saturation) through optimized experiential marketing. This question provides the critical link back to the SME challenges outlined in the introduction, ensuring the findings are relevant and practical for the Lake Neusiedl regional context.

These questions move from isolating the key drivers (RQ1, RQ2) to modeling the strategic process (RQ3) and concluding with concrete, context-specific applications (RQ4), providing a comprehensive framework for both scholarly contribution and industry guidance.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This study employed a netnographic approach to analyze Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) data, allowing for an empirical, consumer-centric examination of experiential marketing success within the Lake Neusiedl region. This methodology is strongly supported in contemporary tourism and marketing research, particularly for its ability to capture rich, unfiltered narratives of complex service experiences (Gewinner, 2023; Terziyska, 2024). Netnography and e-WOM netnography, a specialized qualitative research technique adapted for digital environments, was chosen for its capacity to extract deep, context-rich insights from naturally occurring online communication. Recent academic work highlights the necessity of this approach for understanding modern consumer behavior, where digital opinions (e-WOM) significantly influence the decision-making process, destination image, and intent to visit or re-visit (Guerreiro et al., 2024., 2018; Zvaigzne et al., 2023). By analyzing e-WOM, this research directly taps into the unprompted perceptions that shape the post-visit behavioral outcomes (re-purchase and re-visit intention), which are central to the study's objectives (Juliana et al., 2023).

This study utilized Vivino, a specialized wine social network application with a global community of millions of users. This choice offers significant methodological advantages, like niche focus. Vivino provides a highly relevant data corpus where users are already self-selected wine enthusiasts, ensuring a higher level of product and experience knowledge in their critiques compared to general tourists (Wu & Liang, 2021; Terziyska, 2024). While Vivino's primary function is wine assessment, the platform's review structure often implicitly and explicitly captures the experiential aspects of the on-site visit, distinguishing it from broader platforms. Furthermore, crowdsourced Vivino ratings have been shown to correlate

substantially with professional critics' assessments, validating the platform as a reliable source of information on wine quality, which is a key driver of the overall experience (Kopsacheilis et al., 2024). Data collection was executed in March 2023, targeting all reviews pertaining to wineries located in the Lake Neusiedl District. Using the open-source data mining platform RapidMiner, a total of 1,895 customer reviews published between January and December 2022 were systematically scraped. The vast majority of the collected reviews were in German or Austrian German. This constraint ensures that the analyzed data accurately reflects the primary domestic and regional German-speaking tourist base (Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and expatriates), aligning the findings with the target market of the regional SMEs. The nuanced interpretation of German dialects, which often blend implicit opinions and fragmented expressions, was managed by the native-speaker researcher to ensure contextual reliability. To enhance data quality and reliability, the following filters were applied, mirroring best practices in netnographic research (Tandfonline, 2025). Only reviews submitted by verified users were included. Comments containing fewer than 150 characters were systematically excluded. This threshold was necessary to filter out superficial ratings and ensure that the remaining corpus contained sufficient textual depth for detailed content analysis of the complex experiential dimensions. While the reviews inherently lacked detailed demographic consumer profiles, limiting the ability for segmentation, this public, anonymized data collection adheres to ethical netnographic standards. The cleaned review corpus was subjected to a rigorous two-stage analytical process:

**Stage 1: Deductive Content Analysis (Qualitative Coding)** The qualitative core of the research involved a deductive content analysis using the Taguette platform. This method involved systematically classifying textual citations by sentence, assigning them to pre-defined thematic categories derived directly from the theoretical framework (Pine and Gilmore's Four Realms and the Winescape elements). This approach allowed for the construction of a detailed database where consumer narratives were categorized into groups based on thematic patterns, such as references to the "scenic view," "staff knowledge," or "cellar atmosphere." The qualitative coding was crucial for translating subjective textual descriptions into measurable variables.

**Stage 2: Statistical Validation (Quantitative Analysis)** To test the hypothesized relationships and establish the differential impact of the experiential dimensions (RQ1-RQ3), the frequency counts derived from the content analysis were subjected to quantitative statistical testing using SPSS in order to assess significant relationships between categorical variables (e.g., the presence of a strong "Aesthetic" mention and the overall rating/satisfaction

level). The other method was the comparison of proportions Z-test so as the Chi-square. It was utilized to validate the findings by comparing the proportion of mentions across different categories (e.g., comparing the frequency of positive mentions for "Edutainment" against "Entertainment") to determine which dimension exerts a statistically superior influence on the measured outcomes. This mixed-method approach – combining the depth of qualitative narrative analysis with the rigor of quantitative statistical validation – maximizes the strength of the findings, ensuring they are both rich in context and statistically significant.

## RESULTS

The analysis of approximately 1,900 e-WOM narratives from the Vivino platform reveals both the sources of experiential potency and the structural differentiation challenges confronting small and medium sized wineries all over North – Eastern Burgenland.

The "twist in the logic" presented here is that while visitors consistently reach a high level of satisfaction—the "sweet spot"—the specific elements driving this satisfaction point to a significant gap between functional marketing efforts and genuinely effective hedonic, emotional engagement. The visitor data provides a strong foundation for contextualizing the findings within the regional target market. The review demographics confirmed the study's focus on the local and regional audience: 48% of reviewers originated from Austria, and an additional 41% were from other German-speaking regions, primarily Germany and Switzerland. This concentration reinforces the validity of using Vivino as a data source for the Central European wine market (Kopsacheilis et al., 2024). The most prominent segments were couples (54%) and friends/social groups (26%), followed by families (12%) and solo travelers/business visitors (8%). The overall average rating was exceptionally high at 4.7 (SD = 0.5) on a five-point scale. This high consensus, while superficially positive, presents a critical methodological challenge: it confirms that the "sweet spot" of satisfaction is consistently achieved, but it simultaneously signals a pervasive lack of differentiation in the market. When all experiences are rated highly, none of them stand out as a true competitive advantage (Guerreiro et al., 2024). Crucially, the study found a high convergence of experiential intensity across the different segments (couples, friends, families, solo visitors), contradicting previous findings that distinct market segments emphasize different aspects of the experience (Brochado et al., 2021). The most significant divergence was noted between family and solo visitors, suggesting that while core experiential drivers are universal, the subtle operational changes required for family-friendliness versus solo engagement are where

differentiation truly occurs. The deductive content analysis revealed a distinct hierarchy of cited experiential dimensions, which exposes a potential functional investment trap for local SMEs. Knowledge acquisition, a key component of the experiential framework and a dominant motivational factor for visitors (Zhang & Lee, 2022), emerged as the most frequently cited attribute across all reviews. Business travelers (24%) cited this dimension most intensively, while couples (9%) cited it the least. Guided winery tours (with or without tasting) were the most effective vehicle for knowledge transfer, resonating most with business travelers (10%) and families (5%). Wine tastings, by allowing active, sensory participation, primarily resonated with couples (9%) and friends (6%). Information presented regarding brand identity—such as "organic/sustainable nature" or "generational narrative"—was highly frequent but also highly standardized across wineries. The study concludes that due to their overuse and lack of unique operational linkage, these concepts no longer serve as effective differentiators nor competitive advantages in this saturated regional market. Wineries are spending significant effort in functional education, yet the message is homogenized, creating a high level of functional engagement without an equal competitive payoff. Entertainment – defined as a passive yet absorbing experience that provides enjoyment – was the second most frequently cited dimension, consistently high across all segments: couples (48%), friends (45%), families (43%), solo travelers (40%), and business visitors (46%). The most significant finding within this dimension, which addresses the differential predictive power of experiential elements, is that entertainment narratives frequently contained the element of surprise—meaning the experience demonstrably exceeded the customer's expectations. This element of surprise was primarily linked to product excellence, public perception, and setting, making it the leading contributor in driving remarkable holistic service encounter. The highest intensity of this "surprise" element was reported by friends (27%) and couples (21%). This suggests that the true "sweet spot" of experiential marketing for loyalty is not found in the functional delivery of knowledge, but in the hedonic realm of Entertainment, where sensory and atmospheric quality lead to an unexpected, positive emotional outcome. Attributes related to traditional events, heritage, or artistic presentation received the lowest citation intensities, suggesting that large, cultural elements are less relevant than the personal, spontaneous interaction offered during ad-hoc winery tours and tastings (Dunning, & Zetzsche, 2025). This provides an actionable opportunity to standardize the process of spontaneous tours and tastings, turning them into highly efficient marketing programs.

The aesthetic dimension, linked to the sensory and environmental qualities of the visit, received the third-highest proportion of mentions, with high citation rates across all segments,

from business visitors (32%) to solo travelers (27%). "Landscape" was the most frequently cited attribute, validating the regional "winescape" as a critical baseline feature of the destination's appeal (Cascio, 2025). The beauty of the scenic views and rural charm are non-negotiable elements of visitor satisfaction. Despite the winescape's immersive qualities, mentions of Escapism (active, immersive participation to escape everyday life) were notably low, consistent with previous netnographic studies (Terziyska, 2024). This indicates that the vast potential of the physical environment is primarily utilized for passive enjoyment (Aesthetics) rather than active, loyalty-building immersion (Escapism). The dimension of Social Interactions was the least mentioned experience dimension across all visitor profiles, ranging from approximately 2%. This finding represents a dramatic contrast to contemporary literature which emphasizes that human interaction, particularly with winery staff or owners, is fundamental to establishing brand loyalty and differentiating a small business (Joy et al., 2021). The low incidence of mentions suggests a significant missed opportunity for family-run SMEs. Given the operational challenges faced by SMEs (Březinová & Skořepa, 2019), the high emotional and competitive value of personal interaction is not being realized. The few interactions that were mentioned primarily involved local residents, not the winery staff or owners, highlighting a deficit in leveraging personal connections for relationship marketing and subsequent post-visit loyalty.

In conclusion, this research empirically verifies that while high satisfaction (the "sweet spot") is common, the true engine for exceeding expectations and driving post-visit behavior is the hedonic surprise found in the Entertainment and Aesthetic dimensions, not the easily replicated functional knowledge transfer. The most critical actionable insight is the urgent need for family-run wineries to transition from generic educational content to leveraging their unique assets—the staff/owner personality and the unforgettable atmosphere—to create the kind of personal, social interaction currently absent from consumer narratives.

## **DISCUSSION**

The netnographic analysis of customer reviews from the Lake Neusiedl wine region strongly validates the experiential marketing framework, confirming that a holistic, multi-dimensional visit is crucial for generating positive e-WOM and securing brand equity for small, family-owned wineries. The observed visitor narratives confirm that the consumption of wine is inseparable from participating in the experience itself (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Our results

identify three primary drivers of satisfaction that transform the physical product into a memorable experience: Knowledge, Aesthetics, and Entertainment.

The dimension of Knowledge—manifested through the depth of guided tours and technical explanations during tastings—is interpreted not merely as information transfer, but as a form of co-created value. Visitors express satisfaction when they feel they have gained authentic, proprietary insight into the family's winemaking philosophy and the unique characteristics of the Pannonian terroir. This educational success validates the high-quality, labour-intensive production methods of the family estates (Wieschhoff, 2022), providing a robust, non-price differentiator against the broader market. When this knowledge is delivered with passion, it triggers an emotional response that enhances Entertainment, moving the experience from a transaction to a shared narrative (Joy et al., 2021).

The second critical driver, Aesthetics, is primarily shaped by the winescape (Casco, 2025). Customer reviews frequently employ evocative language to describe the scenic backdrop of the Lake Neusiedl area and the historical ambiance of the cellars. This aesthetic experience serves as a physical anchoring mechanism for the wine's quality. In the digital realm, this translates into "digital terroir": the aesthetic appeal of the region becomes a reproducible, visual element in e-WOM narratives, further reinforcing the regional brand identity that the Burgenland DAC designation aims to convey. However, the success of this experiential model is constantly challenged by underlying operational constraints unique to this Central European context. The pervasive difficulty in finding suitable personnel—individuals who can seamlessly act as sommelier, tour guide, storyteller, and salesperson—represents a fundamental vulnerability (Průša et al., 2025). A breakdown in human service delivery immediately compromises all three experiential dimensions, demonstrating that the human factor, rather than the natural terroir or the wine itself, often represents the greatest risk to the winery brand's reputation and its e-WOM cycle.

## CONCLUSION

The primary theoretical benefit of this work supports the empirical validation of the experiential dimensions through netnography within the context of Central European regional development. By focusing on a niche market like Lake Neusiedl, this study provides granular evidence supporting the theoretical shift from wine tourism (product) to destination winescape (experience and place), a concept highly relevant to the regional focus of *Deturope* journal. Furthermore, the research specifically identifies the human capital gap as a critical bottleneck

in the experience economy supply chain, introducing a crucial operational caveat to established experiential models.

While providing significant insight, this study is bounded by a couple of limitations. The reliance on a single e-WOM platform (Vivino) primarily captures the perspective of German-speaking reviewers, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader international audiences. Since netnography exclusively analyzes user-generated text, the study inherently lacks crucial demographic data, preventing any correlation between experiential drivers and variables such as visitor age, income, or previous wine tourism experience. Finally, the analysis provides correlation, not causation; while we know which experiences drive positive e-WOM, we cannot directly quantify the resulting increase in sales or repeat visits.

### **Managerial Implications and Future Research**

The findings necessitate a strategic recalibration for small, family-owned wineries that currently prioritize grape quality over service delivery. The primary managerial implication is that the wine's perfection must be matched by the staff's execution. To overcome the staffing hurdle, wineries must adopt a concept of "digital staff training", utilizing augmented reality (AR) or internal video content to consistently teach storytelling techniques and product knowledge, thereby standardizing the experiential delivery across all employees. Furthermore, family-owners should shift from merely providing an experience to actively facilitating the co-creation of value. This means designing tasting spaces that encourage social interaction, photo opportunities, and personalized feedback, transforming customers into active brand co-authors who generate compelling e-WOM content, thereby making the customer the centerpiece of the marketing strategy (Martínez-Falcó et. al. 2025). A fresh twist lies in embracing the "phygital" reality: using the scenic physical setting to anchor high-quality digital content that can be easily shared, effectively turning the cellar into a live-action branding studio.

Based on the limitations, future research should embrace novel methodologies to advance the field. First, a quantitative, longitudinal study is urgently needed to directly correlate positive e-WOM sentiment (derived from platforms like Vivino) with tangible economic outcomes such as sales volume, loyalty club sign-ups, and cellar-door traffic. This requires a collaborative effort with the AWMB or regional wine associations to access sales data and move beyond qualitative interpretation. Second, given the criticality of the human element, future research should utilize qualitative methods (in-depth interviews) to explore the specific labor market challenges in the region, examining factors like seasonal work pressure, required

skill sets, and compensation models. Finally, a significant new twist would involve applying AI-driven sentiment analysis (Erdoğan et al., 2025) to e-WOM, not just to identify keywords, but to isolate and quantify the precise emotional tone (e.g., awe, joy, dissatisfaction) associated with specific experiential touchpoints (e.g., the first glass, the cellar tour, the checkout process), thereby providing wineries with real-time, emotionally intelligent data for operational optimization.

## SUMMARY

This research employs a netnographic approach to analyze authentic, unsolicited customer narratives. A data set consisting of almost 1,900 customer reviews related to wineries in the Lake Neusiedl region was collected from the global wine platform, Vivino. This methodology provides a transparent, ecologically valid assessment of the visitor experience, capturing spontaneous emotional and cognitive responses. The qualitative content analysis focused on identifying and quantifying recurring themes corresponding to established experiential dimensions: Knowledge Acquisition, Aesthetic Engagement, and Entertainment Value. The findings were then discussed in relation to the specific operational constraints of the Central European wine tourism environment.

The analysis confirms that the wine visit effectively acts as the "proof-of-concept" for the wine's premium value. Visitor satisfaction, and subsequent positive e-WOM, is primarily driven by the holistic delivery of the experience across three integrated dimensions:

**Knowledge Acquisition:** Educational depth, often facilitated by the winemaker themselves, is critical. Positive reviews repeatedly highlighted the value of gaining authentic, proprietary insight into the family's legacy and winemaking philosophy, transforming the experience into a form of "learning leisure" (Cascio, 2025) that justifies the high price point (Wieschhoff, 2022).

**Aesthetic Engagement:** The Winescape—the scenic backdrop of the UNESCO-protected Lake Neusiedl region and the unique ambiance of the tasting cellar—was found to be a powerful emotional anchor. This aesthetic appeal creates "digital terroir," providing visually compelling content that encourages and facilitates the generation of positive e-WOM and reinforces the destination's brand identity.

**Entertainment Value:** The personality of the host, the friendly, intimate atmosphere, and the feeling of personalization were identified as core elements of the hedonic experience. This

human interaction successfully converts the educational and aesthetic inputs into a memorable, emotionally resonant narrative (Juliana et al., 2025).

Crucially, the study identifies a significant challenge that acts as a major risk to brand reputation: the difficulty in securing high-quality human capital. The demand for staff to seamlessly perform as sommelier, storyteller, and salesperson simultaneously creates an operational bottleneck that, when poorly managed, generates negative e-WOM that instantly undermines the positive value of the product and the setting.

The study concludes that the success of marketing strategies in the Lake Neusiedl region is fundamentally linked to the wineries' ability to perfectly execute an integrated, high-quality experience. The findings provide both a theoretical contribution by validating the experiential model within the niche Central European context (Gyurkó & Gonda, 2024), and an operational contribution by identifying the human capital gap as the primary weakness in the experiential tourism supply chain.

For Managerial Implications, wineries must strategically shift their focus:

- Prioritize Staff Execution: Investment in staff training—potentially utilizing "phygital" tools like augmented reality or video training—must be viewed as a marketing investment, ensuring standardized delivery of the brand narrative.
- Facilitate Value Co-Creation: Wineries should move beyond traditional hosting to design tasting spaces that actively encourage visitors to create and share their own e-WOM content, effectively turning the customer into a co-author of the brand's story.
- Manage the Digital Terroir: Actively monitor e-WOM platforms to address negative feedback immediately, thereby mitigating the risk posed by service failures and protecting the aesthetic appeal of the region's unique winescape.

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