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TOURISM MARKETING IN RURAL CONTEXTS – THE POTENTIAL OF WINE TOURISM IN THE DÃO WINE REGION

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Abstract

Wine tourism represents a particularly interesting activity that can improve the development of rural areas, especially less developed ones. Indeed, the opening of wineries to visitors is a marketing tool for increasing their direct wine sales, but it also constitutes a diversification strategy for the winery's core business and for rural wine destinations, regarding both tourism and the overall local economy. However, to contribute to these dynamics, wineries need to conduct an integrated and sustainable marketing approach. This study researches marketing actions developed by wineries involved in wine tourism within the Dão wine region, located in the Region Centro of Portugal. Results show that wineries have difficulty promoting their tourist product and fail to establish a fruitful collaboration with other entities. The results may help identify strategies aiming at more successful management of rural wine tourism businesses and destinations.

Keywords: Rural Wine Tourism, Wineries, Tourism Marketing, Agro-business diversification, Rural Development, Dão

1. INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing challenges facing rural areas and traditional rural economic activities, the future success of many of these territories is closely linked to the capacity of rural actors and communities to innovate and identify new business opportunities that create wealth and improve local living conditions (Pato and Teixeira, 2018). An increased demand for rural amenities for leisure and tourism purposes has brought such opportunities. In fact, in the last 50 years, tourism has grown continuously, with new travel markets seeking new places, destinations and experiences (Sánchez et al., 2017, Lane and Kastenzholz, 2015). One trend is the increasing interest in wine and food tourism, leading to a lifestyle-defined market for tourists sometimes called 'foodies', with diverse degrees of culinary versus other motivations (Andersson et al., 2015, Crespi-Vallbona and Dimitrovski, 2016). Sometimes the culinary product becomes the main reason for visiting a certain area and is no longer a mere complementary attraction (López-Guzmán et al., 2012), even though most tourists travelling for food and wine tasting additionally wish to explore the landscapes and culture of the region visited (Andersson et al., 2015, Mitchell et al., 2012, Holland et al., 2017).

For wine producers, the opening of wineries to visitors is a marketing tool for promoting their wines and increasing their direct sales, but it also constitutes a diversification strategy for the winery's core business, and a means of regional and rural development (Carlsen and Charters, 2006, Sidali et al., 2011). Also, territorial brand enhancement through wine tourism may, in the end, benefit their wine sales again, thus triggering a virtuous circle of wine tourism leading to additional wine sales and positive region-of-origin effects, implying increased (post-visit) wine sales. Simultaneously, as a new form of experiential tourism, it provides an effective way of enriching a destination's overall

tourism product and responding to new tourist interests, while reinforcing the destination's appeal, competitiveness (Mancino and Presti, 2012) and sustainable development (Kastenholz et al., 2012, Sidali et al., 2015).

Rural areas thereby benefit from tourism, but need to acquire new cultural, social and business competences, where rural entrepreneurship with a sound, desirably regionally integrated, marketing approach is vital to success. This is a challenge for wineries, since it is not easy to adapt to the new role of tourism suppliers, with most suppliers preferring to focus on wine production (Hall and Mitchell, 2000, Correia and Brito, 2016). Others even see tourism as antithetical to their core business and identity as winemakers (Canovi, 2019). As a matter of fact, only a few studies focus on the marketing of rural tourism businesses (Pato and Kastenholz, 2017), which is also true for rural wine tourism enterprises.

Here therefore, from an integral tourism marketing perspective, we explore the marketing approach, strategies and actions undertaken by wineries to promote their wine and tourism products, as well as the overall wine-producing region. Specifically, our research questions are:

- How do wineries define their target market and communicate with it?
- How do wineries relate to networks in their marketing strategy?

To answer these questions, data obtained through in-depth interviews with winery managers from the Dão wine region (DWR), located in central Portugal, were analysed. Results may help identify strategies aiming at more successful management of wine businesses and wine producing rural regions.

The paper consists of five parts. After the introduction, Section 2 contains a review of the concepts of wine tourism and marketing in wine tourism. Section 3 presents the

methodology of the empirical study, the results of which are discussed in section 4. Finally, Section 5 concludes with an attempt to answer the research question and discusses relevant additional avenues of research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Wine tourism – a “new” strategy towards the development of rural areas

Wine tourism can be conceptualized “*as the development of the tourism and productive value of a territory around its traditions, culture, activities and landscape associated with wine producing*” (Correia and Brito, 2016). Indeed, wine tourism is based on an encounter between the wine tourist and the wine tourism product, the latter being defined as the union between tourism and the wine industries within the wider context of the wine region (Benavides and Rotarou, 2018). It is therefore understandable that wine tourism can be understood as the product of a complex ‘eco-system’ (Salvado and Kastholz, 2017) with a wide range of components, which are important for the development of both the wine and tourism industries (Mancino and Presti, 2012). For that reason, it is also understandable that the concept has grown significantly in popularity in the past decades, leading to a notable increase in wine festivals and events, which are now being introduced and promoted as part of regional and national tourism strategies (Hall and Sharples, 2008, Getz and Brown, 2006) and/or as a tool for rural development (Benavides and Rotarou, 2018).

From a rural development perspective, wine tourism is a structural diversification strategy into new, non-agricultural activities carried out on farms (Mancino and Presti, 2012) and in wine-producing regions (UNWTO, 2020). This diversification strategy offers significant scope for increasing the economic feasibility of farm businesses, (Barbieri and

Mahoney, 2009, Barbieri et al., 2019), and if well managed, local identity (Harvey et al., 2014). Moreover, diversification into rural tourism stimulates the production of local products (Kastenholz et al., 2018). Further yet, wine tourism can also provide other benefits for the local, regional or national economy: it creates local jobs, introduces new business opportunities in rural areas, and attracts investment and other types of tourism (Kunc, 2010, Benavides and Rotarou, 2018).

This trend is expected to continue in the future, pushed by the growing number of consumers seeking locally produced food and desiring to reconnect with local farmers and culture (Kline et al., 2016). Even the United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recognizes the power of wine tourism towards the development of rural areas. In particular, the Georgia Declaration (presented at the 1st UNWTO Conference on wine tourism held in Georgia) underlines, amongst other aspects, that wine tourism: i) provides an opportunity for underdeveloped tourism destinations, in most cases rural areas, to mature alongside established destinations, and enhance the economic and social impact of tourism on a local community; ii) is capable of generating substantial economic and social benefits for key players of each destination, in addition to playing an important role in terms of cultural and natural resource preservation; iii) provides an innovative way to experience a destination's culture and lifestyle, responding to consumers' evolving needs and expectations (UNWTO, 2016).

From a broader perspective, wine tourism not only contributes to a more profitable wine industry, but also helps the reputation of a country and/or region as a whole (Schlüter and Norrild, 2015, Hall et al., 2003).

2.2 The significance of marketing in wine tourism

For the desirable development of a wine destination area, special attention should be given to certain elements, such as the presence and quality of a set of attractions and services and the development of sound strategic and marketing plans (Getz, 2000). Following this idea of defining a comprehensive strategic destination development approach, Skinner (2000) suggests that an understanding of the attitudes and aspirations of tour operators, government, local residents and tourists within a wine destination should be amongst the first steps in wine tourism planning and management. This issue is particularly important for the tourism industry because a region's attractiveness and its development depends not only on a territory's endogenous resources, but also on interaction of a region's companies and all other stakeholders (Salvado, 2016, Festa et al., 2020).

Moreover, globalization and worldwide access to information has resulted in a more knowledgeable and empowered wine consumer with a more sophisticated understanding of product value and a selective demand for wine quality (Benavides and Rotarou, 2018) and appealing wine tourism experiences (Hall et al., 2002). Therefore, the use of marketing practices, appropriate to the aims, capacities and resources of the rural business, is a tool for improving their respective performance as well as the benefits generated for the local communities they are connected to (Pato and Kastenholtz, 2017).

Considering the particularities of tourism services and the chance of delivering broader, more appealing and diversified rural destination products and in an attempt to match the needs of single, small enterprises, the community and tourists (Pato and Kastenholtz, 2017), one interesting concept of marketing in rural tourism is that of integrated and sustainable marketing proposed by Kastenholtz (2006). Integration is desirable due to

the complexity of the tourism product as well as the range of tangible and intangible resources it involves. Sustainability, following the principals of respect for and conservation of environmental, cultural and historical heritage of the community and the destination region and the enhancement of all stakeholders' interests, should yield the best possible outcomes for all in the long run (Pato and Kastenholtz, 2017).

Due to its usefulness in this perspective, the following sub-points will address issues related to (1) management of demand and communication and (2) networks.

2.2.1 Management of demand and communication

“Management of demand” has the purpose of attracting the tourists that bring most benefits to the rural area (Kastenholtz, 2004) and the interconnectedness of diverse suppliers, community, visitors and the cultural and natural resources of the area (Ping-Tsan and Chun-Te, 2020, Saxena and Ilbery, 2010) and is crucial to sustainable rural development. Indeed, management of demand and market segmentation is significant for wine tourism operators and destinations in terms of product development and for developing more successful and differentiated marketing strategies, specifically targeting distinct tourist groups according to specific preferences and behaviours (Mitchell et al., 2000, Alebaki and Iakovidou, 2011), which may further sustainable development (Kastenholtz et al., 2018). To ensure effectiveness in achieving these goals, the messages that reach consumers about the products and services that convey the value proposition must be clear, succinct and integrated (Ribeiro et al., 2006).

Gathering information and developing long-term relationships with visitors also allows cellar managers to learn more about their customers and establish more tailor-made contacts in the future (Castray and Francis, 2003).

However, this is a challenge for rural wine tourism suppliers (WTS) because for many of them, *“their product is their wine rather than the bundle of experiences that a customer may attach to wine consumption”* (Hall and Mitchell, 2000). Several studies confirm this difficulty. For instance, Barroco and Amaro (2020) state that the small size of wineries in the DWR and their limited access to qualified human resources to manage websites and social media to communicate their product has led to little investment in marketing and web technology. Quaresma et al. (2017) also state that many companies of the Lisbon Wine Route used the web to promote their offer, but not always in the most appropriate way to attract tourists and new consumers.

2.2.2 Networks

In recent years, the emergence of relationships between the public sector, private sector and local community, encouraging communication and connectivity among these entities, has led to the development of regional networks (Brás et al., 2010). Indeed, partnerships and coordination between these stakeholders are also essential for the creation of a unique, credible, surprising tourism experience (Kastenholz et al., 2012), emphasizing the image of destinations and the value of these destinations' brands (Wargenau and Che, 2006, Gómez et al., 2015). Networks and other forms of inter-firm cooperation may be identified as being integrated horizontally (e.g., within the wine industry or the tourism industry), vertically (e.g., alongside a supply chain among different industries) or diagonally (e.g., complementary or symbiotic firms add value to the activities of others) (Michael, 2007). For instance, the study of Wargenau and Che (2006) shows that trail members have formed strong horizontal relationships (i.e. through joint advertising, promotion, production) as well as important vertical

relationships with tour operators, lodging businesses and restaurants, which also helps the marketing of wine tourism.

To sum up, we agree with Gibson and Lynch (2007) who argued that the adoption of a structured network can bring several benefits, particularly: (1) knowledge, marketing and information exchange, (2) economic activity and (3) community.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

3.1 Procedures

For the empirical research, a case study approach was adopted, because, on the one hand, it draws attention to the question of what especially can be learned about the single case (Stake, 2005) and, on the other hand, as this approach is particularly adequate for this exploratory investigation. The case analysis implied the administration of interviews with WTS of the DWR, particularly those who belong to the wine route of the region. In this study, the focus was on open questions (based on a literature review) related to integrated and sustainability-yielding marketing approaches, namely: target-market selection, types of promotion, collaboration with other entities and businesses, and marketing-related contribution of the business to local economy, culture and well-being of the community.

From a universe of 46 members of the wine route, 14 interviews were carried out between November 2019 and July 2020. The majority of interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to identify the main discourse of winery managers, interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and subjected to content analysis. The purpose of this is to systematically transform a volume of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key results (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017).

For methodological procedures, respondents are identified here by numbers (e.g. WTS1, meaning wine tourism supplier nº1), while frequencies of cases are briefly referred to in brackets with the respective number.

3.2 The case study

The demarcated DWR is located in the centre of Portugal. Established in 1908, it was the first demarcated region of non-liqueur wines of Portugal (ARVP, 2020), in the seven sub-regions: *Alva, Besteiros, Castendo, Serra da Estrela, Silgueiros, Terras de Azurara and Terras de Senhorim* (Figure 1). Presently, the DWR promotes the wine route (created in 1995) and other types of events and festivals which are intended to revitalize the region and the actors involved (Barroco and Amaro, 2020). Moreover, in the DWR tourists can also taste local gastronomy, appreciate beautiful landscapes and enjoy the historical, architectural and cultural heritage of its rural areas (Barroco and Amaro, 2020).

Figure 1

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Brief characterization of the sample

The 14 respondents correspond to 17 member companies of the wine route, since one represents three entities and another represents two (see table 1).

Table 1

Respondents are at different stages of tourism development, with some offering an integrated wine tourism experience and others still taking their first steps. All

respondents offer wine sales, wine tasting and guided tours. These tours may include visits to the winery and to vineyards. In two of the route members' establishments it is not possible to visit the vineyards because they are located far from the cellar (WTS6, WTS10). In one case (WTS6), they developed a "pedagogical vineyard", which shows the main grape varieties they use for wine production.

In nine establishments, visitors may engage in wine tasting combined with local food matching and in five establishments, visitors may have picnics in the vineyards. In addition to the members who own a restaurant, another five provide lunches or dinners by appointment. Occasionally, they organize events such as "sunset dinners" and "harmonized meals" (WTS6) or gala dinners and carriage rides through vineyards (WTS7).

In four of the establishments, tourists are allowed to participate in the harvest. Some of the members also offer other experiences, such as "Paper Chase in the Vineyards"; "Winemaker for a Day" (WTS1); "Aroma Game" (WTS1, WTS13); "Cheese and Jam Workshops"; "Shepherd for a Day" (WTA14). In some of the wine stores it is possible to buy other products like olive oil (WTS5), books, soap, chocolate (WTS6), cheese, jam or Portuguese ceramics (WTS14), showing diverse degrees of innovation and product development.

4.2 Target market, evaluation of the wine experience and communication

When asked about their desired target market, the majority of WTS (8) focus their activities on the international market. According to them, these tourists seem to value what the destination has to offer most, specifically its natural beauty, traditional culture and unique, memorable experiences in the countryside. To a certain degree, this

understanding reveals these suppliers' concept of management of demand, as suggested by Kastenholz (2004) and illustrated in the following statements:

"We have been getting a very large audience from the USA and Brazil. These are the two strongest markets we have. Very educated people looking for different wines, which they call boutique wines, they take holidays specifically just for wine (...)" (WTS12).

"(...) most of our visitors are international and not only looking for wine tourism, they are looking for the complete experience (...)" (WTS13).

Surprisingly, despite the reported attention given to the desirable market, many WTS (6) do not currently have a – formal or informal – system to collect opinions from visitors about their wine experience (e.g., questionnaires, analysis of social networks, registers of suggestions or opinions, etc.). Some justify this option, explaining that tourists do not like to participate in surveys: (...) *"but sometimes we feel that people don't want to be disturbed, and so we decided to put this questionnaire aside"* (WTS5). Other WTS justify this option, referring to a more systematic approach being *"expensive and the business goes well (...)"* (WTS3) and as *"(...) a direct relationship exist[s] with tourists"* (WTS11), this approach would not be necessary.

Concerning market communication, in a world dominated by technology (Keller, 2009), social networks and other digital means, mainly provided through the internet, are presently the main tools used by most WTS (10) in the present study. These digital tools

are even more important for a product that is spatially isolated from its markets, such as rural and wine tourism as they help to reduce remoteness and dependence on traditional intermediaries (Hernández-Maestro and González-Benito, 2013, Gössling and Lane, 2015, Pato and Kastenholz, 2017), as expressed below:

“Social networks allow us to have very close communication with the customer. We are in Nelas [town] and our consumers are from many places, which is somehow limiting So social networks allow us to have a relationship with the final customer that would not be possible otherwise” (WTS1).

At the same time, these tools are designed to engage customers and direct or indirectly raise awareness and improve image or elicit sales of products and services of the company (Keller, 2009): *“so we opted for Instagram and Facebook. I will post events and photos from the farm (...) my idea is really to transmit the [atmosphere of the] place, where we live, that this is magical” (WTS12).*

Despite many companies' apparent online promotion, there is a lack of promotion/communication from DWR (Barroco and Amaro, 2020). Having a website does not mean that people know it exists. As confirmed by some respondents, some websites have incomplete information (WTS2) and do not work as it should (WTS12).

Apart from social networks, other communication tools used by WTS, albeit less frequently, are direct marketing approaches, mainly using telephone, email or WhatsApp contacts as well as public relations through participation in wine trade fairs.

4.3 The challenge of networks

All respondents are aware that collaboration with other entities/companies in the region is crucial to the success of the DWR. This vision is supported by other studies (e.g., Francioni et al., 2017, Kastenholz et al., 2012, Gómez et al., 2015), which emphasize the importance of networks in the success of a destination and wine route. Accordingly, WTS note the need to work together and develop partnerships (WTS2, WTS4, WTS5, WTS6, WTS9, WTS12, WTS13, WTS14) and to establish joint actions with local accommodation and other local producers (WTA2). The role of municipalities is also recognized as very important (WTS4, WTS6, WTS8, WTS13, WTS14), and considered essential to support and streamline the events promoted by these municipalities alluding to wine and gastronomy (WTA8). Moreover, *“it is necessary to promote actions where people can get to know each other, because when this happens we become much more affectionate and develop a much greater connection”* (WTS5). Specifically, WTS4 suggests meetings amongst producers to discuss tourist visits and tasting experiences.

Regarding other entities/companies that respondents consider to be a relevant part of the wine route, some members mention accommodation units, cheese and sausage producers (WTS2, WTS9, WTS11, WTS12; WTS14), museums and spaces related to handicraft, embroidery and other endogenous products (WTS5, WTS8; WTS14), restaurants (WTS6, WTS9, WTS12, WTS14), museums, galleries and theatres (WTS12). WTS5 stresses that the DWR has a duty to unify not only wine producers, but also all tourism-related entities, since wine is not an isolated product; it is part of people's culture, so it does not make sense to isolate it (WTS12). Wine tourism has the ability to connect everyone through wine, also involving the local community (WTS5).

In this sense, there are some members who promote local culture by integrating local food products into their meals (WTS5, WTS6, WTS14) by hiring small local producers to provide meals (WTS2) or by recommending local restaurants (WTS8, WTS12). They harmonize wine tasting with local products and organize visits to artisans (WTS4). WTS5 developed a pedestrian route that leaves the cellar and passes through archaeological monuments, visits a local craftsman and involves sausage tasting. WTS10 suggests their clients visit a cheese producer for buying cheese. For this member, *“wine is culture, so every time you take a guided tour or taste a wine you are already promoting local culture, the stories and products of the territory”*. WTS7 always uses local staff when organizing his events (security, sound, light, catering and artists).

There are also partnerships with social solidarity Institutions, such as *Santa Casa da Misericórdia*, the *Guide Dog School for the Blind – ABAADV* (WTS13) and *Firefighters* (WTS14). In the opinion of WTS13, *“it is part of our company's social responsibility to maintain good relations with the place where it is integrated”*. According to WTS14, *“practically all employees are from the region, so there is great involvement with the community in all aspects”*.

Despite this, as also found by Mancino and Presti (2012), this research presents a certain lack of cooperation with other local tourism operators in some cases, as mentioned in the following quotes:

“It is not easy to find partners who want to open their door” (WTS4).

“The most important thing is to work in partnership with others, but not everyone has this attitude” (WTS12).

“Partnerships still need to be much more dynamic” (WTS9).

From our point of view, this lack of partnerships and networks may occur because of poor selection of members: *“One of the biggest problem with the DWR is that it does not filter members. Instead of having more than 40 wine producers, there should be those who are actually willing to receive tourists”* (WTS1, WTS4).

5. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND PATHS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Drawing on an exploratory study conducted in the DWR, the present paper makes some important contributions. Firstly, it reveals the attention paid to the international market by the WTS of the region, but at the same time the lack of attention to evaluating their experience and deficit in market communication. Secondly, it exposes the weaknesses of networks and governance in the region, as highlighted in the extant literature (e.g., Mancino and Presti, 2012, Salvado and Kastenholtz, 2017) and unfortunately identified as a weakness in many rural tourism businesses (Pato and Kastenholtz, 2017, Lane and Kastenholtz, 2015). However, many WTS show innovation in product experience development and awareness of the role of networks for more sustainable business and destination development, integrating local resources, stakeholders and the local community. WTS also reveal an understanding of the importance of local culture and identity in wine tourism and wine branding, but show limited capacity in implementing such networks, which they apparently expect from the DWR.

While wine tourism, similar to other types of agro-tourism business, may promote regional development through revitalization of local economies (Novais and Antunes, 2009), stimulate cross-selling between agro-products and tourism services and enhance a territory's cultural identity and regional branding (Harvey et al., 2014), special

attention is required for sound marketing action (Pato and Kastenholz, 2017). An appropriate marketing approach can improve the attraction of a suitable target market that brings most benefits to the region (Kastenholz, 2004). Moreover, sustainable rural development calls for collaboration with all regional stakeholders and local communities (Salvado and Kastenholz, 2017, Pina, 2010). The need to develop consistent networks results precisely from the fragmented and emergent nature of the tourism sector in the DWR, as does the need to develop appealing, coordinated tourism products, to effectively promote them and for the overall development of the destination and its attractions (Buhalis and Molinaroli, 2002). Due to the small size of participating companies, cooperation allows for both economies of scale and scope, providing visitors with complete, coordinated 'tourism + local products' packages that would make them stay longer, increase individual spending and eventually lead to repeat visits (Mancino and Presti, 2012), while offering a complete and unique experience based on the territory's diverse endogenous resources (Breda and Pato, 2014).

From this perspective of integrated marketing, the paper also suggests relevant implications. Firstly, from a practical point of view, all WTS should become more aware of the potential of a systematic and integrated marketing approach, collaborating with all tourism-relevant regional stakeholders, through which their wine companies would:

- a) be able to develop more appealing, unique and coordinated wine tourism products and act more effectively within their markets (Mancino and Presti, 2012); and
- b) enhance regional development that would, in the end, benefit all stakeholders and enhance destination image and regional branding (Harvey et al., 2014).

Second, from a political point of view, strong local governance is needed that can support, promote and unify all stakeholders of the DWR, including those not directly

involved in wine production. Without the necessary policy support, some traditional rural companies abandon the market.

The study has some limitations, most notably time constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which made fieldwork difficult. Therefore, this study should be extended to other WTS. Additionally, for a complete picture of the marketing challenges of the wine route, a study of other regional actors that may be included in the route's development, both from a governance perspective (e.g., municipalities and rural associations) and an extended supply perspective (including accommodation, restaurants, producers and other stakeholders) would be useful. An integrated marketing approach yielding sustainable destination development is only feasible if, apart from knowledge of markets and most appealing local resources, the interests of the diverse actors are understood and consensus is built regarding a global destination vision. Effective engagement of all players in this "wine tourism eco-system" (Salvado and Kastenholz, 2017) is as important as its governance (Lane and Kastenholz, 2015) to allow for its successful and sustainable implementation (Benavides and Rotarou, 2018, Hall et al., 2003).

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