

Branding strategies: the keys to achieve sustainable wine tourism

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Abstract:

Wine tourism is a strategic axis in the wine sector. The generation of preference for a wine brand is a key factor in increasing visits to wineries. Therefore, knowing the main elements that influence brand preference represents an added value for the sector. There is research that refers to the relevance of brand communication and brand image as antecedents, but without considering the recent advances in the conceptualization of these constructs or the combination of both factors in the sector under study. This paper presents a model of wine tourism that considers the role of brand communication, with conventional, digital and social tools, and brand image, in tangible and intangible terms, as determinants of wine brand preference and, consequently, on the intention to visit the wineries where it is produced. For this purpose, we collected a representative sample of visitors to wineries located in a country with a long tradition of wine, Spain. The results obtained present useful recommendations for tourism and winery managers offering a set of practical ideas that have great applicability in the business are.

Keywords: brand communication, brand image, wine tourism

Track: tourism marketing

1. Introduction

Wine tourism is a young industry that is rapidly growing and one that represents a significant commercial and financial interest for wineries (Eustice, McCole, & Rutty, 2019; Gaetjens et al., 2023). Wine tourism represents one of the five main strategic axes set for the Spanish wine sector for the coming years (OIVE, 2022). Although wineries utilize many mechanisms to attract potential consumers and increase in-person visits, some of these mechanisms are changing. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors underlying visits to wineries (Byrd, Canziani, Hsieh, Debbage, & Sonmez, 2016; Gu, Qiu, King, & Huang, 2020). This topic addresses a primary gap in the literature that the current research seeks to fill by applying a branding model involving a core wine product.

When a consumer prefers a wine, the probability of that consumer visiting the winery where it is produced increases. Thus, one should consider how the interface between consumers and wineries can be improved to meet or increase consumers' brand preferences. Sales of core products like wine can be increased by improving key elements, such as branding. Strengthening a brand may be the best way to achieve the goal mentioned above (Aaker, 1997). A brand is one of the most valuable assets of any firm that wishes to develop competitive advantages (Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013). Building strong brands improves brand preference, so how a brand is communicated and its image strengthened may influence brand preference (Ebrahim, Ghoneim, Irani, & Fan, 2016; Schultz et al., 2013).

Brand communication is central to transforming product value into consumer behavior (Arya, Paul, & Sethi, 2022; Lynch & Chernatony, 2004; Mangiò et al., 2024). Brand image increases product memory and has several advantages for business expansion (Keller, 1993; Martínez & Pina, 2009). A well-communicated brand image is essential for improving a brand's position in market competition. This paper improves the understanding of brand communication components in the context of wine tourism in which digital and social activities have been increased, as well as the comprehension of brand image considering tangible and intangible elements.

This paper aims to analyze the novel instruments of brand communication and brand image as specific drivers of wine brand preference and their influence on wine tourists' intention to visit associated wineries. The specific purposes are to cover gaps in background literature and, more specifically: (1) to develop and empirically test a model based on wine as a primary attraction in the wine tourism context; (2) to examine and assess which brand communication strategies work best with wine tourists, who are important to the praxis of branding (Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014); (3) to measure brand communication as a multidimensional concept with conventional, digital and social measures; (4) to measure brand image as a multidimensional construct based on tangible and intangible dimensions; and (5) to incorporate into scholarly literature on winery tourism the Old-World wine-producing country of Spain, which ranks as the top destination in Europe for wine tourism.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. *Wine brand communication and wine brand preference*

Brand communication can influence brand preference because a brand's marketing efforts are continually evaluated by consumers. By creating favorable preferences, brand communication generates competitive advantages for companies (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005; Mangiò et al., 2024; Voorveld, 2019). It is a key component in managing brand relationships with users and with the community at large. Brand communication helps consumers feel more attached to a brand, can strengthen relationships over time, and generates a preference (Schultz et al., 2013).

Advertising reflects the willingness to tell the world about a product or service and can be used to project brand personality and ethos (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Advertising and promotion are primary contributors to consumer perceptions, which create value and generate positive brand evaluations that affect attitudes or behaviors toward a brand. Customer appreciation of brand sponsorship can also make a brand more attractive. A good fit between a firm and its sponsorship activities can lead to the achievement of public relations goals and positively impact brand preference (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). It is also the case that CSR impacts brand preference and, consequently, purchase intentions and intention to visit (Heikkurinen, 2010; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). Brands communicate their integrity to society through CSR, which positively promotes brand preference due to firms' moral authenticity. Social media activities improve brand preference by expanding the interaction between firms and consumers (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019).

The brand communication implemented by vineyards directly influences wine preference (Dolan & Goodman, 2017; Mundet Pons et al., 2024). Visitors search for information to aid in their decision-making about wine tourism destinations (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Wineries can differentiate themselves from competitors by understanding of how to communicate the attributes of their wine, or the special activities they provide (Gu et al., 2020). Any exposure to brand communication affects visitors' responses, but wine tourists respond differently to brand communication messaging (Chopdar & Paul, 2024; Eustice et al., 2019). Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis 1: H1 Wine brand communication is positively related to wine brand preference.

2.2. Wine brand image and wine brand preference

Brand image provides signals that can improve consumer preferences for products or services, creating considerable advantages that increase brand preference. This result is particularly true of the functional or tangible aspects that affect brand preference. A positive brand image emphasizes unique brand associations (Keller, 1993). In the generation of a strong brand image, it is also important to work on intangible elements to create unique experiences in the so-called tourism of the five senses, particularly relevant in an experience-based context such as wine tourism differential positioning (Haller, Hess-Misslin, & Mereaux, 2021).

Brand image also plays a relevant role in customers' decision-making process (Braun et al., 2014). It is developed through a network of biased evaluations (Kapferer, 1992) that impact the responses of consumers' brand preference and, consequently, their intention to buy or to visit. Most academics agree that a stronger brand image is correlated with charging a premium price, with loyalty, and brand preference (Aaker, 1997; Godey et al., 2016; Keller, 1993; Scorrano, Fait, Maizza, & Vrontis, 2019).

The quality and variety of wines affect consumer purchase preferences (Byrd et al., 2016) and are crucial factors that can positively affect preference for specific brands. Wine is more affected by supplementary elements, and the purchase of wine is positively correlated with brand preference (Mundet Pons, 2024; Schultz et al., 2013; Scorrano et al., 2019). Therefore, we propose a second hypothesis: H2 Wine brand image influences wine brand preference.

2.3. Wine brand communication and brand image

Communicating a brand image is an important marketing activity that helps establish a brand's preference (Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2015). Effective communication helps firms increase brand value through strategic business processes (Madhavaram et al., 2005). Given that brand image is derived from a perception that is influenced by brand communication, a common marketing goal is to develop brand communication strategies that convey a well-coordinated brand image which is crucial for a company's success (Park, Jaworski, &

MacInnis, 1986). How brand values are communicated directly affects brand image (Chang & Liu, 2009). Communication via traditional activities, or through positive word-of-mouth and physical activities, influences brand image, and improves the brand's success (Braun et al., 2014). Marketing communication strategies allow the market to learn about a brand, creating value that enhances brand image, which can lead to a positional advantage in the market (Luxton et al., 2015).

Traditional and social media communication have an important influence on brand image (Madhavaram et al., 2005). Advertising can influence brand image in different ways, since individuals' attitudes toward advertisements play a relevant role in developing it (Keller, 2003). Advertising and price promotions affect brand image by generating value for brands (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez, 2013). Sponsorship can also enhance brand image effectively, though sponsorships that are not a "good fit" can dilute brand image (Madhavaram et al., 2005). Although public relations, like sponsorship, can both enhance brand image and generate different outputs whose respective effectiveness can be measured by brand image (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). CSR attracts consumers, strengthens relationships with stakeholders, motivates employees, and improves the image and reputation of brands (Heikkurinen, 2010). Social media marketing efforts influence the two main dimensions of brand equity: awareness and image (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019).

Perceptions of wine brand image are influenced by communicated messages, which play a relevant role in the wine market (Dolan & Goodman, 2017). Wineries communicate to consumers using different methods that directly affect wine brands. Visitors will prefer the brand that has the highest recall. Consequently, we propose a third hypothesis: H3 Wine brand communication positively affects wine brand image.

2.4. Wine brand preference and wine tourism intention to visit, to revisit and/or to recommend

Purchase intention is influenced by brand preference, the effective development of which leads to an increase in purchasing (Chang & Liu, 2009). Brand preference is a fundamental aspect of consumer choice behavior (Gu et al., 2020). It is a crucial element of a successful destination brand and can enhance the intention to visit that destination. Intention to visit correlates strongly with brand preference (Wu, 2015; Wu & Liang, 2020). The greater the preference is for a wine brand, the greater will be the interest in visiting the winery. In the wine market, the wine, brand, and preference are intercorrelated with the intention to visit (Byrd et al., 2016). Our fourth and final hypothesis follows: H4 Wine brand preference influences the intention to visit wineries.

3. Method

We used a survey questionnaire for data collection purposes from visitors to wineries in Spain. The instrument rating scales were created based on information from current background literature. The measures were designed to avoid common method bias using a procedure recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). Brand communication was measured using a 16-item scale proposed by Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) that was adapted to the wine sector. This instrument considers the following dimensions: advertising promotion, sponsorship-public relations, social media, and CSR, which are consistent with the results of our content analysis. Brand image was assessed using Martínez and Pina's (2009) 8-item scale that considers three dimensions: functional image, affective image, and reputation. Finally, Ebrahim et al.'s (2016) 3-item scale was used to measure brand preference, and Byrd et al.'s scale (2016) was used to assess intention to visit.

We used a 7-point Likert scale for all the items. Brand communication and brand image were conceptualized as a higher-order construct.

We used partial least squares regression to examine the accuracy of the scale and the model (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). The proposed model includes both unidimensional constructs (brand preference and intention to visit) and multidimensional constructs (brand communication and brand image). The latter involves a second-order model: brand communication is formatively measured across four dimensions (advertising promotion, sponsorship-public relations, social media, and CSR) and brand image is formatively measured across three dimensions (functional, affective, and reputation). In this study, we use a reflective-formative-type model (Becker, Klein, & Wetzels, 2012).

4. Results

We tested the accuracy of the model and all the measures present adequate reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. The results indicate that brand communication has a positive and significant influence on brand preference; thus, H1 is supported ($\beta=0.257$, $p<0.01$, $t=2.940$). Brand image has a positive and significant influence on brand preference; thus, H2 is supported ($\beta=0.267$, $p<0.001$, $t=3.373$). Brand communication exerts a positive influence on brand image; thus, H3 is supported ($\beta=0.822$, $p<0.001$, $t=51.797$). That is, brand communication has an indirect influence on brand preference through brand image, which mediates the relationship between brand communication and brand preference. This indirect effect (brand communication \rightarrow brand image \rightarrow brand preference) is positive and significant ($\beta=0.219$, $p<0.001$, $t=3.369$). VAF (Variation account for) was used to determine the indirect effect, resulting in a value of 0.46, which confirms partial mediation ($0.2 \leq \text{VAF} \leq 0.8$) (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). Thus, this model identifies brand image as a mediator. Finally, brand preference exerts a significant positive influence on intention to visit; thus, H4 is supported ($\beta=0.471$, $p<0.001$, $t=11.064$). Confidence intervals confirm the significance of the results (Henseler et al., 2016) (Table 1).

All four dimensions of brand communication contribute positively to form its multidimensional nature in varying degrees: advertising promotion most strongly ($\beta=0.454$, $p<0.001$), followed by sponsorship-public relations ($\beta=0.366$, $p<0.001$), CSR ($\beta=0.270$, $p<0.001$), and lastly social media ($\beta=0.131$, $p<0.001$). With respect to brand image: reputation has the highest influence ($\beta=0.540$, $p<0.001$), functional image is the second ($\beta=0.346$, $p<0.001$), and affective image is the last one ($\beta=0.324$, $p<0.001$).

5. Discussion and conclusions

This research contributes to the fields of brand and wine tourism by proposing and testing a model of core wine products and important antecedents, providing evidence of the link between wine and wine tourism and, thereby, addressing a gap in the literature on wine tourism by deepening the understanding of relevant marketing factors that affect the inflow of visitors to wineries.

The results have theoretical and practical implications. The present study contributes to marketing literature in several ways. First, this paper provides insights on the drivers of wine brand preference and intention to visit in the context of wine tourism. Second, this study contributes to the field of brand communication as a multidimensional concept that can be adapted to the wine sector. It identifies the four elements of brand communication: advertisement promotion, sponsorship-public relations, social media, and CSR (Arya et al., 2022). Third, this work provides new insights into the definition and measurement of brand image by validating Martínez and Pina's (2009) scale, which considers three dimensions:

functional image, affective image, and reputation. Finally, consistent with Gu et al. (2020), this study provides knowledge about the impact of wine brand on the intention to visit wineries. Intention to visit is conceptualized following previous studies (e.g., Wu, 2015).

Relative to practical implications, this study provides a valuable tool that wine tourism managers can use to attract tourists to wineries. First, in order to develop compelling brand campaigns, managers should continue to use traditional advertising and promotions, and reinforce sponsorship and public relations, whose effects persist over a more extended period. Attending national and international trade fairs is an excellent way to promote brand, both face-to-face and virtually. Developing CSR should also be part of marketing strategy due to its positive effects on brand preference and reputation. Finally, social media should be part of the marketing communication agenda, particularly for younger people, who tend to trust conventional advertising less (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Second, managers should improve the functional, affective, and reputational attributes of their vineyards, wines, and wineries. Wine should have a consistent quality over time, and it should be presented with appropriate packaging. It is also important to work on the creation of experiences during visits to the wineries, in order to strengthen the brand image projected by the wines and their wineries. Wine should have a strong regional brand, and it must respond to the needs and tastes of its target market.

This study has its limitations. First, this study is limited to wineries located in Spain. Second, we used the most widely accepted dimensions to measure brand communication and brand image, but other components do exist and could be considered in future studies. Third, additional drivers, such as brand equity, brand knowledge, or corporate credibility (Ebrahim et al., 2016), could be considered in future studies. Future research could analyze variables that moderate the relationships among the research constructs (e.g., gender, age, income, or education), or bidirectional linkages.

Tables

Table 1. Structural model

	Hypothesized path	Estimate	T-value	Contrast	R ² / R ² adjusted	F ²	Mean	5%	95%
H1	COM → PRE	0.257**	2.940	Do not reject	24.9% / 24.6%	0.028	0.262	0.117	0.404
H2	IMA → PRE	0.267***	3.373	Do not reject		0.031	0.264	0.135	0.395
H3	COM → IMA	0.822***	51.797	Do not reject	67.6% / 67.6%	2.089	0.823	0.795	0.848
H4	PRE → INT	0.471***	11.064	Do not reject	22.2% / 22.0%	0.285	0.470	0.399	0.538

Notes: COM: wine brand communication; IMA: wine brand image; PRE: wine brand preference; INT: intention to visit, revisit and/or recommend wineries; t (0.05; 4999) = 1.645*; t (0.01; 4999) = 2.327**, t (0.001; 4999) = 3.092***; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

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