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## Drivers of memorable wine tourism experiences – a netnography study

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**Abstract.** This study serves a dual purpose: firstly, to identify the pivotal architectural components within wine tourism offerings that contribute to a lasting and memorable experience; and secondly, to explore their correlation with the four customer experience realms (4Es). The investigation operates at a micro level, focusing on a specific category of winery – small, family-owned establishments – in an emerging wine destination. Employing a netnography approach, the research design centers on a thematic analysis of visitor reviews sourced from TripAdvisor. The ensuing results are quantified to ascertain the significance of individual factors. A total of 137 reviews spanning the period from June 2013 to May 2022 were manually extracted and coded using MaxQDA. This study’s rationale rests upon two key premises: firstly, the scarcity of research within the specific context of emerging wine destinations from the post-Eastern bloc; and secondly, the limited exploration of the nexus between wine tourism drivers and consumer experiences. The most influential drivers shaping memorable wine tourism encounters that we identified are “people” and “wine”, predominantly associated with the escapist and aesthetic dimensions of experience. These findings diverge markedly from prior research, where the escapist dimension typically received minimal attention. Theoretically, our results enrich understanding by elucidating how the four dimensions of the wine tourist experience intersect with the attributes of the tourism offering, thereby serving as a potential model for future investigations. Moreover, wineries stand to gain valuable insights for product design aimed at enhancing the overall consumer experience.

**Keywords:** wine tourism experiences, 4Es, family-owned winery, netnography, Bulgaria.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the introduction of the experience economy concept in the late 1990s [1], customer experiences have been a buzz word for marketers of different fields, including tourism. Memorable wine experiences exert a positive influence on customer satisfaction [2,3] and significantly shape the image of the winery or wine destination [4]. Furthermore, these encounters can stimulate revisit intentions [2,5]. The impact is amplified when all four dimensions of the experience – educational, entertainment, aesthetic, and escapist – converge, forming a compelling “sweet spot” [1]. However, it’s

essential to recognize that various studies underscore the distinct roles played by individual dimensions across diverse tourism contexts [2].

In wine tourism, experiences have been studied at both the macro (destination) [2,4] and the micro (winery) level [6,7]. A number of them have been based on the 4Es model of Pine and Gilmore, according to which customer experience can be defined by four distinct dimensions, or realms: educational, escapist, aesthetic, and entertainment. There are, however, some differences in the conceptualization of individual dimensions that make comparisons difficult [2], the most problematic being the escapist one, which was originally defined as active involvement by Pine and Gilmore [1], but is sometimes more broadly described as a departure from daily routine. In addition, the vast majority of studies to date have looked at the notion of active involvement primarily from a physical point of view (participating in various activities such as grape picking, etc.), completely neglecting the possibility that an experience can be described as active also because of its social aspect, e.g. engaging oneself in interaction with winery employees.

Despite the abundance of research, there is still a call for contributions to the theoretical framework of wine tourism experiences by providing evidence from different contexts (Old and New World regions) and identifying the supply-related elements that are positively linked to each of the four dimensions [8]. Furthermore, in methodological terms, there is a need for in-depth qualitative studies, complemented by quantitative measures, to provide more insight into individual experience dimensions [3].

This study operates at a micro level, aiming to discern the architectural components within wine tourism that significantly shape memorable customer experiences. It focuses on a specific winery, deliberately chosen to represent a distinct context: a family-owned establishment situated in an emerging wine destination, which is an example of a good practice – it ranked among the top 100 world's best vineyards for 2020, 2021, and 2022 [9]. The main method that was used is thematic analysis of user-generated content and TripAdvisor was chosen for data collection because of its wide popularity, which results in a large number of reviews available, and its high degree of reliability [10], [11]. Diverging from prior studies that begin with the four experience dimensions and associate them with specific winery-related activities, our investigation centres on the winescape, exploring how its constituent elements contribute to memorable experiences and align with the four experience dimensions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Tourism and the experience economy*

The term experience economy was coined in 1998 by Pine and Gilmore to denote a shift to an economic state where instead of selling goods or services, companies orchestrate memorable experiences [12]. Being memorable is the main characteristics of this new type (or even a new genre) of economic offering that differentiates it from the previous ones. While services, for example, could be customized, but yet remain external to the customer, experiences are inherently personal and exist “only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level” [13]. Innovative experiences are a process of co-creation, with the customer being actively engaged in an interaction with the provider [14].

In the years following the introduction of the concept, it has attracted the attention of a large number of researchers from various fields, adopting different perspectives. In an attempt to summarize the vast amount of literature, Helkkula [15] identified three major approaches to researching consumer experiences, based on different epistemological assumptions:

- 1) Phenomenological characterisation. Regarded as the stem of customer experience research, it focuses on the nature of the phenomenon and is usually customer-centred although other actors (such as the service provider) are also a relevant subject of research.
- 2) Process-based characterisation. Service experience is seen (and studied) as a process, the attention is driven to its architectural elements and the stages through which it goes, and there is often a special emphasis on the transformational aspect. Again, the customer is the primary research subject.
- 3) Outcome-based characterisation. This approach refers to linking certain variables to different outcomes (such as satisfaction or repurchase intention), usually in a quantified manner. The antecedents of service experience are sometimes also included in this research string. Unlike the previous two approaches, here the focus has been shifted from the individual person to „the aggregated service experience of multiple respondents“. [15, p. 379].

About two decades later, the above typology was complemented by a fourth research string – the designed perspective on service experience. Based on the service design theory, Schallehn et al. [16] identified three types of antecedents to experience co-creation: at the field, interactional and personal level. The field level is important because of the antecedents it contains, and

which refer to the structure of the respective sphere of economic activity. The interactional level, on the other hand, is about consumer motives and expectations related to their interaction with the service provider and includes all the phases of the service experience. It also encompasses the realization stage, where the offering-related antecedents of experience can be identified. Last, the personal level refers to the individual characteristics of consumers that are not directly linked to their expectations but still have some effect on motivation. The model incorporates the phenomenological aspect by claiming that the offering is just a medium conveying meaning to the customer, emphasizing the value-in-use concept [17], while the outcome-based one is used “to map descriptive knowledge related to the phenomenological perspective and to, thus, provide the grounds for applying prescriptive knowledge that is related to the process-based perspective” [16, p. 214].

One of the central themes in user experience research is its dimensions. The four dimensions are presented by the authors in a matrix of four quadrants, based on the opposition of two pairs of qualities: active-passive (refers to participation) and absorption-immersion (refers to connection). In an experience characterized by absorption, a person’s attention is occupied, but they are not part of the event, while in immersion, the customer is physically (or virtually) involved and becomes part of it. An active experience implies that the customer can have an impact on the event, while in a passive experience they are only an observer, with no opportunity for real intervention [1]. The four realms of experience that are situated in this matrix are: entertainment (passive, absorption), educational (active, absorption), aesthetic (passive, immersion), and escapist (active, immersion). According to Pine and Gilmore, the optimal option combines educational, recreational, aesthetic and escapist elements at the same time, thus creating the so-called “sweet spot” [1].

In tourism, the 4Es model has been the basis for a significant amount of research. Within Kim So’s model of research themes in tourism [18], it usually falls in the nomological group, connected to the development of experience scales and identifying cause-effect relations. It has been found applicable to examining the outcomes of tourism experiences [19], including loyalty [20], satisfaction [21], and intention to recommend [22]. Much of the research on the measurement of the tourist experience is also based on the four realms of experience introduced by Pine and Gilmore. In this regard, the scale proposed by Oh et al. [23] in 2007 is still the most widely used one.

Given the enormous diversity within the tourism sector, studies can also be grouped according to the spe-

cific area they are investigating. In Kim and So’s typology [18], this is reflected in the conceptual understanding category, which includes specific cases such as medical tourism experiences or memorable dining experiences. As a niche form of tourism, wine tourism also requires special attention due to its characteristic features that distinguish it from other forms of tourism. It has also been established that individual experiential dimensions have a different impact in different contexts, even when it comes to the same type of product, for example festivals [21], which in turn necessitates studies on different types of destinations/wine regions (e.g. Old and New World) and different type of sites (e.g. family wineries and larger wine cellars).

## 2.2. Wine tourism experiences

Wine tourism experiences have a complex, multi-dimensional character [24] and encompass numerous encounters and activities: the esthetics of the natural environment [25] and the winery architecture [26], interactions with the winery staff, learning about the production methods, wine tasting, appreciating the cultural and historical context of the region. While the hedonic character of wine tourism experiences seems undisputed [27], authenticity [28] and a sense of connection [29] are also of key importance.

Given their importance, customer experiences have been a popular topic in wine tourism research. In a systematic literature review, Kotur [30] identified four major themes: winescape, wine tourist behaviour, dimensions of the wine tourism experience, and co-creation and satisfaction. This study combines two of the themes – winescape and experience dimensions, with the aim of providing a better understanding of link between the supply-related drivers and the four Es of wine tourism experiences.

The first studies on wine tourism experiences appeared after in the late 1990s, shortly after the seminal work of Pine and Gilmore. In the last two decades their number has increased significantly [30] and they are mainly of the outcome-based and the process based types (following the typology of Helkkula [15]). The outcome-based type of studies are usually focused on the effect of wine tourism experiences on different aspects of wine tourist behaviour such as the intention to revisit [5], satisfaction [31,32], willingness to recommend [28] and positive word-of-mouth [5]. The process-based type explores the architectural elements of the wine tourism offering that a crucial for creating a memorable tourism experience. Most of these elements coincide with the winescape dimensions (as defined by various authors,

such as Quintal et al. and Bruwer et al. [33,34]), which is quite natural, as the winescape is sometimes defined as the environment, where wine tourism experiences take place [35]. Below is a presentation of the main themes that have been identified in the scientific literature so far.

1. Wine. This is the core wine tourism product and most usually the main purpose for winery visits. The main characteristics that increase its attractiveness and act as a driver for memorable experiences are quality, uniqueness [36], and authenticity / local character [37].
2. Winery. The two features that stand out are architecture and design [26], and atmosphere [38].
3. View/scenery. Wine tourism is not limited to a single winery visit, it's a holistic experience, in which the whole wine region plays a significant role and even defines its "flavour" [39]. The attractiveness of the scenery has been therefore identified as an important element in a number of studies [36,40,41].
4. Staff. Interactions with winery staff have often been cited as one of the most enjoyable elements of the wine tourism experience [39]. The key qualities identified so far are politeness/friendliness [25,42], passion [35], and knowledge/professionalism [38].
5. Food. The natural companion and best match of wine, food and food-related activities have been identified as one of the supply-related factors that have a positive impact on wine tourism experiences [40].

Most of the above studies, however, only identify the factors leading to memorable wine tourism experiences without examining the relationship between them and Pine and Gilmore's 4Es. One of the first empirical studies to make a direct link between dimensions of tourist experience and product characteristics of wine tourism is that of Pikkemaat et al. [43]. Using a quantitative method (visitor survey), they identified importance-performance gaps for the four dimensions, using in the South Tyrolean Wine Route in Italy as a case study. To do this, the authors distributed wine tourism activities among the four experience realms, thus implying that a certain activity is directly linked to a given experience dimension, e.g. a guided winery tour results in an educational experience. This model was further developed by Thahn and Kirova [44] and is currently the most widely used one in studies measuring wine tourism experiences, with very few differences in the distribution of wine tourism activities in terms of their relation with the experience dimensions. Below is a summary of the drivers most commonly attributed to each of the four experience dimensions.

#### The entertainment realm

Experiences that are within the entertainment realm are defined by passive participation, meaning that the consumer is not directly involved in the event and cannot affect it. They are also absorptive in terms of the relationship of the consumer and the environment, i.e. the event occupies "a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind from a distance" [45, p. 46]. Some of the examples for entertainment activities as far wine tourism is concerned include: wine events [4], [43,44], concerts [36,46], wine blending [36,46], museum and heritage site visits [36,46], farm and food demonstrations [36,46], tasting in vineyards [43].

#### The educational realm

Just like entertainment experiences, educational ones are characterized by absorption, i.e. the guest's mind is occupied by the event. The difference, however, lies in the type of connection – here, it is a participatory one, expressed through an active engagement of the mind or body [1]. Examples for educational experiences in wine tourism include wine tastings [36,46], wine and food pairing [36,46], wine-making seminars [36,46], cooking classes [36,46], interactions with staff and owner [4,44].

#### The escapist realm

Pine and Gilmore [45] define the escapist realm of the tourist experience as immersive and active participation, the absolute opposite of the entertainment one. With this type of experience, there is detachment from the everyday environment (home and work) and immersion in a completely new one - which can have purely social dimensions. Pine and Gilmore compare this new environment to Oldenburg's 'third place' – "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" [47, p. 16].

Most studies to date have neglected this social aspect of the escapist experience and have emphasized its active nature. Common activities mentioned are: hiking or cycling in the vineyards [36,46], hot air ballooning [36,46], vineyard tour by horse & carriage [36,46], grape picking [36,46]. One exception is Charters et al. [29], who argue that engaging the visitor with the place (the winery) is central to a compelling experience – and this is mainly done through communication with the staff.

## The aesthetic realm

The aesthetic dimension denotes an experience, where the visitor is immersed in the environment or event but has no effect on it [1]. The drivers of such experienced are usually characterized by visual attractiveness, e.g. the winescape [36,46], unique lodging [36,46], unique wines [36,46], rural roads lined with vineyards [36,46], art and craft at the winery [36,46], well-tended wine bars and wine shops [4,43].

There is no consensus on the importance of each of the individual dimensions in the wine tourism context. According to some studies, aesthetics have a dominant role [2,43], others prioritize the educational aspect and entertainment [44]. In most empirical studies so far, the escapist dimension is almost inexistent, which is somehow illogical, given the fact that tourism itself is often described as an escapist experience. One possible reason for these results is the way in which escapist experiences are identified in wine tourism. As Quadri-Felitti et al. [2] note, some researchers define them as a getaway from daily routine, while others focus on their transcendence and immersiveness. In addition, in all studies to date, the activities associated with escapist experiences are mainly (if not exclusively) characterized by physical immersion (e.g. picking grapes, cycling in the vineyards, etc.), while the social aspect is completely ignored. At the same time, a number of studies indicate that it has a leading role for creating a memorable tourist experience [48]. Interaction with the winery staff and especially the owners are paramount to creating a sense of connection to the place [29,49], which can be described as an escapist experience – it is both immersive and active, and transcends the visitor beyond their usual social and physical environment.

What unites the majority of studies of the tourist experience to date is their predominantly deductive nature. Each of the four Es is assigned a specific winery activity/characteristic, usually based on logical reasoning. The main disadvantages of this approach are that: 1) it rejects the possibility that the same activity has several dimensions, and 2) it does not take into account the contextual features, i.e. the same activity, depending on the specific conditions, may or may not deliver a given experience dimension. An inductive approach would overcome these weaknesses by identifying the potential of different winescape elements to contribute to a particular dimension and determine whether in a particular context this potential is realised. However, this type of research is extremely rare. One recent example is the work of Kastenzholz et al [50], who used a netnographic approach to identify the relationships between Pine and

Gilmore's experience dimensions [1] based on a cross-sectional analysis of TripAdvisor reviews. The present study attempts to fill this gap by adopting an inductive bottom-up approach – the potential dimensions of the tourist experience for each of the individual winescape elements will be identified through the analysis of winery visitor reviews on TripAdvisor. The research questions of the study are:

- 1) What are the supply-related drivers of wine tourism experience at the winery level?
- 2) What dimensions of the tourist experience (following the four Es theory) do these drivers deliver?
- 3) Which of them are the most important for creating a memorable experience?

The first research question is related to identifying the main architectural elements of the wine tourism offering that contribute to a memorable experience and the second and third one – refer to the relationship between winescape elements and the four customer experience realms (4Es).

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This section delineates the framework employed to investigate factors influencing memorable wine tourism experiences. This section encompasses three key components: Approach, Methods, and Data collection. The Approach subparagraph presents the overarching strategy guiding the study, while the Methods detail the specific techniques employed. Subsequently, the Data collection subsection provides insights into the gathering and analysis of pertinent information.

### 3.1. Approach

This study will adopt the design-led approach as defined by Schallehn et al [16], which is holistic in nature and takes into account all three traditional approaches: phenomenological, outcome-based, and process-driven [15], but will narrow its focus on the interactional level, and more specifically – the architectural elements of the wine tourism offering that shape the consumer experience. In this sense, it is predominantly process-driven, i.e. focused on “the design of the interaction between the service provider and the user and, thus, the configuration of the elements of the service offering” [16, p. 213], but also has an outcome-based element, expressed through the identification and measurement of the experience dimensions these elements (later called drivers) can deliver.

### 3.2. Method

In this study, the identification of the main drivers of memorable experiences in wine tourism is based on the quality of some impressions to be more prominent, or in other words, come first to one's mind and, as a consequence, to be verbalised more frequently - in this case, in TripAdvisor reviews. In scientific literature, this quality is known as salience [51, p. 163], and is broadly used in tourism marketing to identify critical product attributes [52-54]. It is also the principle notion that stands behind user-generated content (UGC)/netnographic studies, including the ones focused on wine tourism experiences [8,40,41,55]. Netnography, on the other hand, is claimed to be particularly relevant to analysing tourist experiences [56].

The salient attributes of the wine tourism offering that shape consumer experiences were identified through thematic analysis of TripAdvisor reviews.

The research stages were as follows:

- 1) Choosing a dataset: a Bulgarian winery with high rating on TripAdvisor.
- 2) Extraction of visitor reviews: a total of 137 reviews in English. The reviews were extracted manually and transferred to the MaxQDA software.
- 3) The third phase of our study involved in vivo coding of titles, specifically targeting the identification of the most influential drivers shaping wine tourism experiences. The rationale behind this approach lies in the observation that titles often encapsulate the elements (or drivers) of the experience that impressed visitors the most and were most memorable. Through this process, we derived a set of seven distinct codes. Notably, one of these codes - related to "food" - was subsequently excluded from our analysis due to its infrequent occurrence (constituting less than 1% of mentions). However, it is essential to recognize that the significance of food as a factor varies across different contexts. For instance, in the specific context of our study, the winery did not offer full meals; instead, appetizers accompanied the wine tasting. This stage directly aligns with our primary research objective: the identification of drivers contributing to memorable wine tourism experiences.
- 4) Data coding: In the process of manual data coding, each review was treated as an individual case, including its title. To prevent redundancy, we selectively coded title content only if it provided information not already present in the body text. Employing a predetermined system of categories and codes, we utilized the categories identified in the preceding stage: wine, people, winery, tour, setting, and tasting), while the codes were based on Pine and Gilmore's 4 E's model of consumer experiences (educational, entertainment, aesthetic, escapist) [1]. For each of these four codes, we applied specific inclusion criteria. The *educational* dimension was discerned through reports of acquiring new knowledge without the ability to influence the event. Segments of text were categorized as *entertainment* if they explicitly referenced visitors having fun, such as "tried so many locally produced wines, very interesting and entertaining" (Ivaylo K, Jan 2016). Similarly, to qualify as *aesthetic*, a text segment needed to exhibit clear evidence of either 1) enjoying the visual beauty of the setting or 2) appreciating the quality of the wine. The *escapist* experience involves venturing into an environment distinct from the everyday (work and home). In alignment with Pine and Gilmore's definition [1], a text segment was coded as *escapist* if it demonstrated: 1) immersion in the environment/event (physically, emotionally, or cognitively), and 2) active participation (where the visitor could influence the environment/event). During the coding process, we introduced a new dimension - the *hedonic* aspect - for the wine category. Instances where a specific experience driver was mentioned positively but did not meet the aforementioned criteria (e.g., "the guide was excellent") were categorized as general. The aim of this additional coding, which is not connected to the experience dimensions, was to quantify the salience of the wine experience drivers. This stage is linked to the second research objective - it identifies the links between the drivers of wine tourism experiences and the 4Es of Pine and Gilmore's model [13].
- 5) Quantification of Results: Calculating Category and Code Frequencies. In this stage, we quantified the results by calculating the frequency of categories and codes as a percentage of the total cases. Specifically, we identified the proportion of reviews that mentioned the respective category or code. Throughout this process, as in the preceding two stages, we utilized MaxQDA for data processing.
- 6) In-depth qualitative analysis of coded segments for a deeper insight.

### 3.3. Data collection

The data for this study was collected from TripAdvisor, a platform chosen for its high degree of reliability and widespread popularity, ensuring a substantial volume of reviews [58,59]. Specifically, we focused on

**Table 1.** Reviewers' profile.

Gender			
Value	Frequency	Total percent	Valid percent
male	53	38.7%	50.5%
female	52	38.0%	49.5%
Total	105	77.0%	100.0%
Type of party			
Value	Frequency	Total percent	Valid percent
solo	7	5.1%	5.6%
couple	49	35.8%	39.5%
friends	46	33.6%	37.1%
family	16	11.7%	12.9%
business	6	4.4%	4.8%
Total	124	91.0%	100.0%
Country of origin			
Value	Frequency	Total percent	Valid percent
Bulgaria	41	29.9%	38.0%
Abroad	67	49.1%	62.0%
Total	108	79%	100%

reviews related to Villa Melnik, a winery located in Bulgaria. The selection was based on two key factors:

1. Positive Reviews: Villa Melnik boasts predominantly positive reviews, including 168 “excellent,” 9 “very good,” 1 “average,” only 1 “poor,” and no “terrible” ratings.
2. Global Recognition: The winery consistently ranked among the top 100 world’s best vineyards for the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 [9].

Founded in 2013, Villa Melnik is a relatively new family-owned establishment with a strong emphasis on wine tourism. The vineyards and the winery itself are situated in the picturesque region of Melnik, in southwest Bulgaria, in an area with centuries-old traditions in wine-making and a signature local variety – the Broad-leaved Melnik and its siblings, of which the most popular is Melnik 55, also known as Early Melnik. Bulgaria as a wine destination, and the region around Melnik in particular are a typical example of an emerging wine destination from the Eastern (post-socialist) bloc.

A total of **179 reviews** spanning the period from **June 2013 to May 2022** were available for analysis. Among these, only reviews written in English and providing at least an average rating were imported into MaxQDA, resulting in **137 cases** that included both the full review texts and their corresponding titles. Additional information related to reviewers' country of origin, type of party (solo, friends, family, couple, business), and gender was also collected. Reviewers were evenly distribut-

ed by gender, and most of them travelled as a couple or with friends (40 and 37 valid percent respectively), followed by families (13%), while solo and business travellers accounted for about 5% each. About one-third were domestic visitors, while international ones came from countries on almost every continent, including UK, USA, Canada, Israel, The Netherlands, France, Germany, Australia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Brazil and others.

#### 4. RESULTS

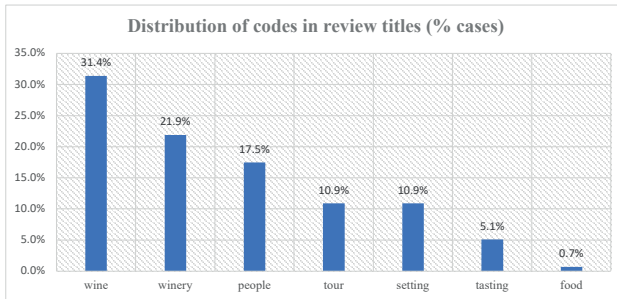
In the initial stage of our study, we conducted open coding exclusively on the review titles. The objective was to identify the most prominent supply-driven factors influencing the wine tourism experience. Through this process, we identified seven key drivers: wine, winery, people, tour, tasting, setting, and food, which closely align with the winescape attributes previously identified in scholarly research [33,34,60]. However, it is noteworthy that the category of food emerged in only 0.7% of all cases. Subsequent analysis failed to yield significant evidence supporting its inclusion in the model. This finding can be attributed to the specific context of our study – the examined winery primarily offers food as appetizers accompanying tastings, rather than full-fledged meals. Consequently, we opted to exclude food from further consideration.

While we quantified these results (as depicted in Figure 1), their primary purpose lies in delineating the categories that will inform the subsequent stages of our investigation. The ultimate significance of each of these factors in shaping a memorable tourist experience was established through comprehensive coding of the full review texts.

##### 4.1. Factors shaping the wine tourism experience

In the second stage of the study, a framework coding procedure was applied, using the themes identified in the previous stage as categories and the four dimensions of the customer experience (educational, entertainment, aesthetic and escapist) as codes. As explained in the research design section, an additional code was included for each category to signify mentions that do not fall into any of the four experience realms, but indicate importance to creating a memorable experience.

As evident from the results presented in Table 2, the most salient factor (mentioned in 80% of all reviews) for a memorable tourist experience is people, or in other words, the quality of service and communication with the winery staff and its owners. Not surprisingly, the wine category comes second in importance, followed by



**Figure 1.** Distribution of codes in review titles (% cases).

the winery tour, the winery itself (which is mainly commented in terms of design, architecture and facilities), the setting and the tasting.

More insight on the potential of these drivers to deliver a compelling customer experiences was gained by an in-depth analysis of their experience dimensions.

#### 4.2. Dimensions of the wine tourism experience

After identifying the core drivers of memorable wine tourism experience (People, Wine, Tour, Winery, Setting, Tasting), additional coding was carried out to determine their relationship to the four experience realms of Pine and Gilmore [1]. In addition to the quantified data presented in Table 3, an in-depth qualitative analysis was carried out, the results of which are presented in the next few paragraphs.

##### 4.3.1. People

The category of “people” was identified as the most powerful driver for compelling wine tourism experiences, which is evidenced not only by the high level of saliency (80.3%), but also by direct reference by visitors:

This is the best winery visit we have ever experienced. Not once has any winery owner sat down with us to explain in detail his winery operations and his business philosophy. We started the winery tour with very warm welcome from a wonderful lady who spoke excellent English, and later owner Nikola joined us. His hospitality was amazing, and he made our tour very special. (8snowflake8, Oct 2016)

Interaction with winery staff and owners is associated with three dimensions of the experience - escapist, educational and entertainment, with the escapist being the most pronounced one, mentioned in 67.2% of all cases/reviews (Table 2). There are several features that

**Table 2.** Frequency distribution of categories and codes (drivers and dimensions of the wine tourism experience).

Category	Count	% Cases	Code	Count	% Cases
people	128	80.3%	escapist	93	67.2%
			education	23	16.8%
			general	10	7.3%
			entertainment	2	1.5%
wine	107	70.1%	aesthetic	91	65.7%
			hedonic	11	8.0%
tour	82	59.1%	educational	46	33.6%
			general	28	20.4%
			entertainment	5	3.6%
			escapist	3	2.2%
winery	51	35%	aesthetic	38	27.7%
			general	13	9.5%
setting	44	32.1%	aesthetic	44	32.1%
tasting	34	24.8%	general	25	18.2%
			educational	9	6.6%

should be present to create a memorable escapist experience. First of all, a warm and proactive welcome encourages people to more active engagement and is critical for creating an escapist experience:

We were very surprised when we stop and one young lady came immediately to welcoming us. She proposed us to show the winery and a small tasting of wines. It was amazing and very interesting. (Bogdana B, Nov 2015)  
A friendly welcome, informative tour & tasting from enthusiastic staff. We will be transported back to this beautiful spot whenever we enjoy the selection of wines we bought here. (customerexpert, July 2016)

In a broader context, it is the overall friendly attitude that predisposes to more open communication (active participation) and connects the visitor to the place (immersion). The experience becomes even more special, if the visitor has the chance to interact with the winery owners:

Then, we sat down with the extremely hospitable winery owners and had great wine and terrific conversation. Coming from California, this kind of an experience where the owners engage and share their wine with you on such a personal level is unique and very special, an experience we will never forget. (Lisa S, June 2015)

In certain cases, this sense of connection can be as intense as feeling like a family:



And what I like people are polite and not extravagant – which makes you feel very fast like with family. (Gabriel, Aug 2017)

Another feature that has a pronounced impact is passion, which captivates the visitor and enhances the feeling of immersion. In addition, this quality causes a desire for closer, more personal communication (friendly relations), witnessed in one of the reviews through the commenter regretting that he did not ask for the name of the wine guide.

“I’ve been to many wine tastings and it’s easy to tell when the exhibitor is only working and when there’s passion involved, which is this case... I regret not asking the name of the young lady who guided us through the winery, very professional and wine enthusiast! Thanks for the experience!” (Gustavo, Dec 2017)

The educational dimension is expressed mainly through comments on the guide’s knowledge, which often refers not only to wine, but also to being able to provide information about the region and its history:

Our guide was so warm and welcoming; she spoke amazing English and had so much information about the wine-making process and the history of the region. (customer-expert, July 2016)

The entertainment dimension is very poorly represented – references to it are found in only 1.5% of cases, identified through the guide/owner being described as funny or entertaining.

#### 4.2.2. Wine

As a category, wine is mentioned in 70% of all cases, which is a significant level of salience. To identify the experience dimensions it can provide, a further coding was implemented, under the following criteria:

All text segments that denoted aesthetic appreciation, i.e. evaluation of the wine’s quality, which is intersubjective, or as Burnham defines it: “valid with reference to a group of tasters who share competencies and experiences” [57, p. 12], were coded as aesthetic. This resulted in a share of 65.7% of all cases, which makes the aesthetic dimension the most pronounced one for this category. The following text segment depicts this dimension, at the same time emphasizing the link between local wine and culture:

Yes, this are wines to move you! Of course they are solid, balanced, nuanced. They tell the sweeping story of on old

culture and unforgettable nature. (Pepina Mac, August 2020)

For this category, no examples of the educational, entertainment or the escapist realm were found.

All instances where wine was mentioned only in terms of its taste (tasty or delicious) were coded as hedonic. Such references were found in only 8% of all cases.

#### 4.2.3. Tour

The winery tour, along with the tasting, is one of the central elements of the tourist experience. According to the analysed reviews, the main dimension it delivers is the educational one (33.6% of all cases), but although with a lower share, the entertainment and escapist dimensions were also registered, with 3.6% and 2.2% respectively. The main emphasis is on the tour being informative and interesting, which is considered a very effective way to introduce the visitor to the entire winemaking process:

The tour is informative and interesting, and takes you through the whole process--I’ve visited a number of wineries (California, Virginia), and this was the most thorough and engaging tour I’ve had. (Alexandra, February 2020)

Consistent with Pine and Gilmore’s criteria for the four realms of experience, as well as the common practice in wine experience research, grape picking was coded as escapist (active participation and immersion): “... the tour was very good, amazing experience! We had the opportunity to pick up grapes and try them” (Vili Popova9, August 2015). In some cases, however, visitors described it as an entertaining experience: “...then we went to pick up grape, that was the most funny part” (Viktoria P, August 2015).

#### 4.2.4. Winery

In reviews, the winery was mainly discussed in terms of its design and modern facilities:

Plus the winery itself is beautiful, with fresh new décor. (thetravelingl, Nov 2015)  
Beautiful constructed with top notch equipment. (Richard S, Oct 2014)

All text segments with reference to the appeal of the building, the equipment or the interior design were cod-

ed as aesthetic and these were registered in 22.7% of all cases.

4.2.5. Setting

The setting, or more specifically the beauty of the area in which the winery is located, is one of the first things that impresses the visitor and accordingly affects their overall experience. *“At first, the winery gets you with its location - the extremely picturesque road to it, the white winery below a hill with a 180 degrees + view.”* (Aleksandra A, Sep 2015). It is mentioned in about one-third of all cases and is only associated with the aesthetic dimension. There are two types of references: the road to the winery, with the natural beauty of the winescape, and the well-maintained vineyards, and the view from the winery:

And last but not least, the views! We were lucky to visit the place at sunset, which was really beautiful and a perfect finish of the whole day of travelling! The view from the winery, on rolling hills and little village is beautiful, reminding me of the Italian Tuscany. The region of Melnik is very pretty and the village itself a real gem. (George N, May 2022)

4.2.6. Tasting

Tasting is usually considered one of the main elements of the wine experience, but surprisingly, in this study it has the lowest degree of salience - only 24.8% of all cases. One necessary clarification that probably explains this result is that wine and tasting are separated here – under tasting in the present study only the process of wine presentation is considered, while wine as a product is the subject of a separate category. In the context of the studied winery, the tasting is an educational experience with an emphasis on the opportunity to obtain detailed information about each of the wines:

We tasted a few of their best wines in different classes. She told us in detail about every one of them. It was a very unique experience and we loved it - and, of course, we left with a lot of wines. (Yoanisimus, February 2016)

5. DISCUSSION

The study has identified six major supply-driven factors for memorable wine tourism experiences: people,

wine, winery, tour, setting, and tasting. Two of them (people and tour) were found to deliver more than one experience dimension, and one more – the tasting, probably has the same potential, but it was not realized in the specific context (Figure 2).

Consistent with some previous research [29,49], winery staff and owners were identified as the most significant factor in memorable experiences. Social interaction and conviviality are particularly important for co-creative tourism experiences [48,49,61,62], but until now they have not been associated with the escapist experience dimension. We argue that interaction with winery staff is an escapist experience because it meets both of the criteria set forth by Pine and Gilmore [1]: 1) it is active in nature, i.e. the visitor has the opportunity to directly affect it, and 2) it has an immersive character, realized by creating a connection with the place. The latter has also been demonstrated in previous studies [29], [63], where this connection is of particular importance for a memorable experience. The opportunity to encounter the winegrower has also been identified as one of the major factors for shaping an authentic experience [48].

There are three features of staff behaviour that facilitate the escapist dimension – warm and proactive welcome, friendly and polite attitude, and passion for their job. All these were also identified as very important by Charters et al. [29], who also emphasize the role of sharing a story or a myth for stronger engagement. In this study, there were several mentions of storytelling, mainly related to family narratives and stories connect-

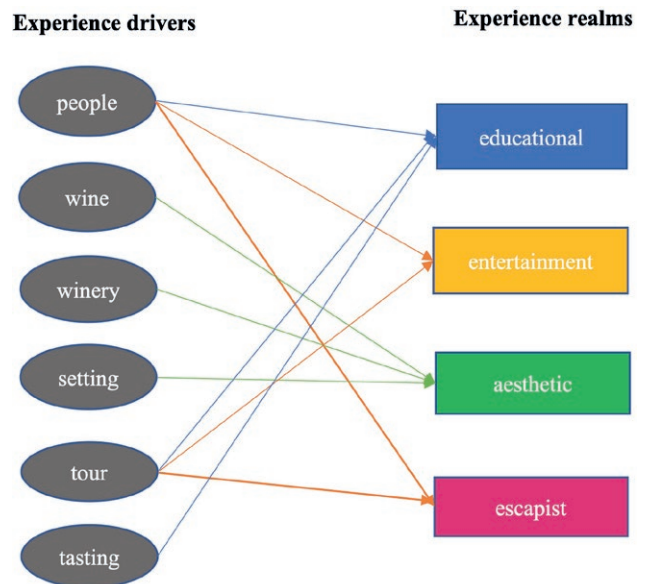


Figure 2. Links between experience drivers and the four experience realms.

ed to special circumstances in the wine-making process, e.g. a hailstorm that was used as to highlight a special wine edition.

At the same time, the present findings are in stark contrast with the vast majority of research that focuses on the relationship between the elements of the tourism offer. With only a few exceptions [48], in these studies the staff (or interaction with staff members) is not explicitly present and the escapist dimension is almost absent.

The other two experience dimensions that are associated with winery staff are the educational and entertainment, but they are much less represented. In terms of the educational experience, it is important not only to share detailed information about the wines, but also about the culture and history of the entire region.

The second most important driver of memorable experiences is wine. Similar to previous studies [36,46,64], it is mainly connected with the aesthetic dimension, expressed through appreciation of its qualities, special / local character, and is strengthened by the presence of international awards. The latter may be associated with the notion of cool authentication, introduced by Cohen and Cohen [65], which denotes a process through which the authenticity of a tourist attraction (in this case the quality of wine) is confirmed through an external authority, rather than by the people involved in the process or phenomenon (in this case the visitors tasting the wines). The aesthetic dimension of wine consumptions seems to be neglected in scientific research so far, although it was registered as early as 2005 in a study by Charters [66], where results indicate that consumers recognize certain parallels between the enjoyment of wine and the appreciation of artistic expressions. These commonalities encompass the shared pleasure derived from both experiences, the interconnected influence of sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses, the emphasis on evaluative processes, and the subjective nature of personal preferences. The purely hedonic dimension of wine tasting was also registered, but it was much less pronounced – only 8% of all cases.

The aesthetic dimension is also related to the winery and the setting. The main feature commented on in terms of the winery's aesthetic impact is its modernity – both in terms of design and facilities. The architecture and appeal of the winery is in a certain sense connected to the setting – after all, it is an integral part of the general landscape. In previous studies, the aesthetic dimension has been broadly linked to “consuming the landscape” [46], enjoying a pleasant environment” [48], or “contemplating the architecture” [64].

The winery tour and the tasting are the two most common activities when visiting a wine cellar. Whether

they will facilitate a combination of experience dimensions or not is to a great extent a matter of service design and delivery. In line with previous research [36,46,64], these were mostly associated with education, but future studies (in a different context) could also identify a greater share of the entertainment dimension.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The paper proposes a model that builds upon the existing ones by utilizing consumer feedback to identify both the drivers of memorable wine tourism experiences and their potential to deliver each of the four experience dimensions as identified by Pine and Gilmore [1].

Identifying the sources of the different experience dimensions is of great value to the wine business, as it allows to model the experience and ultimately – to achieve a higher level of customer satisfaction. The present findings suggest a pronounced focus on people (winery staff and owners), who are the most powerful driver of memorable experiences and have the potential to deliver at least three dimensions: the escapist, the educational, and entertainment. The quality and authenticity of wines are of almost equal importance, but are limited to the aesthetic and hedonic experience dimensions.

The winery tour and the tasting are the stage where the full potential of people and wines can be utilized. In the present case, their design has led to mainly educational and to a lesser extent entertainment experiences, which speaks of unused opportunities. Increasing the entertainment aspect and combining it with adequately presented information about the winery, the local wines and the region as a whole would lead to the so-called edutainment, and ultimately, to a more complex and memorable tourist experience. Previous studies have identified the following activities as potential drivers for entertainment experiences: wine events [4,43,44], concerts [36,46], wine blending [36,46], tasting in vineyards [43], museum and heritage site visits [36,46], farm and food demonstrations [36,46]. The purely visual aspect of aesthetics is delivered through the setting and the winery design and delivery. Features that are highly valued by visitors include preserved natural beauty of the region, vineyard landscapes, attractive winery architecture and modern, well-maintained facilities.

The main theoretical implication of this study is related to the new model of the relationship between the architectural elements and the dimensions of the wine tourism experience. In most studies so far, the potential of the visitor-staff interaction to deliver an escapist experience was largely neglected. From a practical point

of view, the findings can offer guidance to wineries, and related businesses on how to enhance the overall visitor experience by designing wine tourism products that deliver the sweet spot of customer experience – a combination of all four experience dimensions.

The study has been focused on a single case – a family-owned winery in Bulgaria, in order to showcase the specifics of a particular context, which however also means the findings may not be fully applicable to other contexts. Future research is needed to identify context-specific differences referring to different types of wineries or wine regions. This would help to establish whether the drivers of memorable experiences have the same influence in different settings and if they are related to the same experience dimensions. It would also be interesting to identify the manifestation of experience drivers and their relation to the 4Es for different visitor segments.

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