Expectations of German Tourists Regarding Wine Tourism Experiences

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Abstract

◦Purpose – Wine tourism in Germany still falls short of its potential. In order to benefit from the long-term trend towards sustainable tourism, this study aims to explore different target groups for wine tourism experiences such as wine tastings, vineyard, or cellar tours.

◦Design/methodology/approach – We applied an exploratory research approach and conducted four qualitative group discussions with German tourists selected based on prior wine tourism experience (yes/no) and age (below 40/above 40).

◦Findings – Results show that German tourists have distinct expectations regarding wine tourism experiences along the customer journey. The 'perfect' wine experience goes far beyond just tasting the wine and tourists have a relatively high willingness-to-pay for these events. We derive four distinct personas representing different target groups for wine tourism experiences for the German market.

◦Practical implications – The findings can guide German wineries in designing customer-oriented wine tourism offerings and identify important trends in wine tourism.

Key words: wine marketing; wine tourism; customer experience; wine tourism experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is of high economic importance for the German wine-growing regions. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 26 billion in gross sales were generated with tourism annually (Tafel and Szolnoki, 2020). However, wine tourism makes up only a small part of it, as only five billion were generated with wine tourists who actually visited a winery (Tafel and Szolnoki, 2020). Accordingly, wine tourism in Germany is still lagging behind its potential. To promote

wine tourism in the German wine-growing regions, wine tourism experiences (WTEs) such as wine tastings or cellar and vineyard tours, need to be designed in a more customer-oriented and professional manner.

Before deriving recommendations for the design of WTEs, it is crucial to understand tourists' motivations and expectations for booking and participating in wine tourism offerings during their stay in a wine-growing region. It is therefore necessary to take a holistic view along the customer journey from the information phase to booking an offer, participating in the offer, and making a recommendation afterwards. Following a qualitative research approach, our results of four group discussions with potential German wine tourists show that customers have distinct expectations regarding WTEs. The 'perfect' wine experience goes far beyond just tasting the wine and thus includes a certain willingness-to-pay for these offerings. We derive four distinct personas that represent different target groups for WTEs for the German market. The findings can guide wineries in designing customer-oriented and professional WTEs and lower tourists' inhibitions to visit a winery when staying in a wine-growing region.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Santos et al. (2019, p. 720), "wine tourism has to be seen as a system centered on wine tourism experiences and activities [… and] has to provide for the creation of unique and genuine tourism experiences, which must be more personalized and differentiated".

Due to the increased importance of wine tourism, several studies have addressed the motivation, needs and expectations of wine tourists in recent years (e.g. Bruwer and Rueger-Muck, 2019; Carlsen and Boksberger, 2015; Cohen and Ben-Nun, 2009; Madeira et al., 2019). Other studies have dealt with co-creation aspects in wine tourism (e.g., Sigala and Haller, 2019), addressed the question of how to optimize the customer experience of wine tourism offers using the experience economy model (e.g., Garibaldi and Sfodera, 2020; Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012; Thanh and Kirova, 2018), or identified wine tourism segments and distinguished them from non-wine tourism customer segments (e.g., Szolnoki, 2018). However, these studies do not provide a holistic understanding of tourists' motivations and expectations regarding WTEs along all phases of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The studies therefore remain superficial when it comes to the concrete target group-oriented design of WTEs and respective recommendations for wineries along all phases of the customer journey.

Our research aims to close this gap and provide a holistic overview of tourists' motivations and expectations around WTEs along the entire customer journey (Figure 1), taking into account current developments associated with the Covid 19 pandemic, sustainability, and digitalization. Specific target groups for WTEs are to be identified for the German market, which should help wineries to act in a customer-oriented manner in their day-to-day business.

Figure 1: Customer journey with four process stages; image source for icons: pixabay.com

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of this research is to understand German tourists' motivations and expectations in booking and participating in WTEs, thereby focusing on all phases along the customer journey and incorporating current developments associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, sustainability, and digitalization. To approach this research objective, it is necessary to explore (1) tourists' information behaviour and needs when planning and booking (domestic) trips, (2) tourists' expectations regarding WTEs during their stay in a wine-growing region, and (3) post-stay behaviour. Finally, target-group specific profiles in the form of personas are developed to derive customer-oriented recommendations for wineries to improve the design of WTEs.

To assess customers' needs and expectations towards WTEs in Germany, an exploratory qualitative research approach was chosen due to its advantage for exploring elusive phenomena like customers' motives and attitudes. We only recruited people who are regular wine drinkers (wine consumption of at least once a month) and who have travelled to a German tourism destination at least once in the last five years (day trip or overnight stay). We divided participants into four different groups along the dimensions "age" and "wine tourism experience". Participants with wine tourism experience are characterized by the fact that they have participated in a WTE at least once in the last five years. Participants without wine tourism experience have not yet participated in a WTE, but are open to them. Moreover, we split both groups with and without prior wine tourism experience into a young (age 20 to 40) and an old age group (age above 40). The target groups thus represent the structure of domestic tourists for whom WTEs could be of interest. A market research institute specializing in qualitative research conducted the group discussions and content analysis. For their participation in the focus group discussions, all participants received 50 euros as an incentive. Between five and

eight participants were recruited for each group discussion. Overall, the results are based on n = 27 participants across all four group discussions. The group discussions lasted two hours each and were professionally guided by a moderator. During this time, a predefined list of topics was worked through and illustrative material was shown. The discussions were conducted in a face-to-face format in a professional test studio on November 19 and 22, 2021. The location where the focus group discussions were conducted was a major city in close geographic proximity to several German wine-growing regions. The group discussions were all recorded and analysed using content analysis methods. Due to the small sample size and data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic, the results can only be generalized to a limited extent, but still indicate important trends in wine tourism.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Planning domestic travel

This results section examines tourists' motivations and needs regarding domestic travel planning, and it explores what type of touristic experiences could delight them, including their selection criteria and information behaviour in planning domestic trips.

Tourists' motivations for booking domestic trips is mainly driven by personal reasons like the intention to visit friends or family or practical considerations like the possibility to spontaneously plan short trips. Landscape and sightseeing opportunities of the target destination play a major role in tourists' decision-making process. Tourists organize and book these domestic trips predominantly on their own without relying on specialized tour operators.

With regard to the selection of the vacation destination, criteria such as the 'character' of the vacation, meaning whether it is an active vacation versus a wellness trip, the travel companions, and aspects regarding a suitable accommodation as well as mobility and transport are highly relevant. Often, a rough travel concept is planned in advance at home. Here, online portals like TripAdvisor, regional websites, and social media play a significant role. Detailed planning, especially with regard to short-term leisure activities, is often done on-site after tourists' have already reached the travel destination. Tourists with wine tourism experience include experiences around regional products in their planning and decision-making process, while tourists without prior wine tourism experience do not.

4.2 Expectations of tourists regarding a stay in a wine-growing region

This section covers participants' associations with German wine-growing areas and awareness of and interest in WTEs, including barriers to accessing these offerings.

The term 'German wine-growing area' is spontaneously associated with sociability, cosiness, and an open and familial way of life. Participants living in proximity to a wine-growing region who have permanent access to WTEs prefer to use the offerings nearby. For them, long-distance journeys with the explicit focus on experiencing wine are less interesting. Other barriers can be seen in a lack of knowledge about adequate offerings or traveling to wine-growing regions with children.

4.3 The 'perfect' WTE from the tourist's point of view: Expectations along the customer journey

To understand what tourists perceive to be an ideal or 'perfect' WTE, we used the customer journey to capture holistically customers' expectations along all relevant phases from planning and booking a WTE to giving a recommendation afterwards (Figure 1).

For the information search and planning phase, the online availability of information is of central importance. Regarding the booking phase, online booking options were desired as well as booking options by telephone and spontaneously on-site. Regarding the WTE itself, it was very important for the respondents that a WTE is something special. Moreover, participants would like to have a motivated and competent person conducting the event. A familiar, open, and cordial atmosphere is important for a 'perfect' stay at a winery. It is not the reputation of the winemaker that matters most, but more the feeling of authenticity as well as enthusiasm and competence on the side of the winemaker and the wineries' employees in general. Group events in a manageable setting (maximum 10-15 participants) are often preferred, among other things, because of the greater sociability factor. After having attended a WTE, tourists are likely to purchase wine and related souvenirs for home. However, they also make use of feedback options and possibilities to stay in contact with the winemaker, e.g., via newsletter. The main drivers for follow-up purchases are discounts or the emotional relationship to a product that has been built through the unique WTE on-site. The anticipation of transport problems or a too commercial atmosphere of the WTE has a negative effect on purchase intention after a WTE. After having attended the event, recommendations are usually made by word of mouth among

friends and family. Online and social media platforms are also relevant at this point, especially among younger people. Most participants are willing to write an online review upon request.

As part of a small experiment, participants had to create their own 'perfect' WTE by choosing from different options available. Results show that the majority of participants prefer WTEs composed of a wine tasting including snacks (27 mentions) with a duration of the stay from three to four hours (23 mentions) that includes a guided tour through cellar (20 mentions) and vineyard (20 mentions). An overwhelming majority of participants preferred to visit a single winery instead of engaging in any type of winery hopping. As we directly asked participants to state openly their willingness-to-pay, the results can only be interpreted as tendencies, but they give first valuable indications for the pricing of WTEs. The willingness-to-pay for 'perfect' wine experience shows a median value of 50 euros. Analysing subgroups, we see that especially the younger group with wine tourism experience shows an extraordinarily high willingness-to-pay with median value of 100 euros (n = 8), while the lowest willingness-to-pay with a median value of only 32.50 euros pertains to the older group with wine tourism experience (n = 5). The younger group without wine tourism experience shows a median value of 42.50 euros (n = 6), while the older group without wine tourism experience shows a median value of 50.00 euros (n = 8). Moreover, participants would appreciate the ability to attend wine tastings spontaneously for a small fee. This well-known concept from countries such as the U.S. is currently not popular in Germany, but could help overcome the reluctance of tourists to visit wineries.

4.4 Target-group specific differences: Four persona profiles

The results were then used to identify target groups and develop typical personas for WTEs that allows German wineries to design WTEs in a customer-oriented manner. The need to develop specific personas arises from the fact that trends such as digitalization, sustainability, and experience orientation, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic have changed travel behaviour. The results show that the different target groups differ with respect to WTE related expectations and willingness-to-pay for a WTE. The younger target groups show a strong "experience orientation", tend to focus more on sustainability aspects and consider a stay in nature, outdoor activities and active participation as more important than the older groups. The older target groups are more interested in wine in combination with food and are characterized by their ratherlow willingness-to-pay for WTEs.

5. DISCUSSION

In Germany, we can see a trend towards sustainable tourism. Many tourists want to discover the vacation region in a sustainable way, i.e., spend vacations in a socially acceptable, resource-conserving, and environmentally friendly way (FUR, 2020). Wine tourism in Germany can benefit from this trend, but still falls short of its potential. Thus, it is necessary for wineries to design WTEs in a more professional and customer-oriented manner to overcome the reluctance of tourists to visit wineries.

To design attractive WTEs, it is necessary for wineries to understand tourists' motivations for and expectations of participation in WTEs during their stay in a wine-growing region. Against this background, this study examines German tourists' expectations regarding WTEs along the customer journey. Following a qualitative research approach, we generate first exploratory insights and show that the 'perfect' WTE goes far beyond just tasting the wine. Our findings can guide German wineries in establishing more customer-oriented WTEs.

Our results show that German tourists tend to increasingly obtain their information via social media channels, especially Instagram, apps, and the Internet in general, when planning and booking trips. Thus, wineries need to provide WTE related information online and should increasingly consider digital channels when advertising their WTEs to all age groups. In parallel, this more digital communication approach should be combined with local advertising in hotels or tourist information points. Secondly, German tourists' 'perfect' WTE goes far beyond just tasting the wine. As a recommendation, wineries should strengthen the experience character of their offerings, facilitating an authentic discovery of the wine culture, including the wine production process, the local way of life, and the philosophy of the winemaker. In addition, the experiential character of a WTE can be improved by joint projects with local restaurants as well as by combining WTEs with other touristic offerings, e.g., hiking tours in the nature. Third, the younger people in our sample do not want to contact a winery actively to book an event. Therefore, besides making events bookable online, it is necessary to establish easy access WTEs such as tasting '5 wines for 5 euros' as a permanent walk-in offering. At the same time, the concept of winery hopping – a widespread wine tourism activity in New World countries – cannot easily be transferred to Germany due to different cultural expectations. Fourth, German tourists appreciate a combination of wine experiences with other culinary offerings, especially with other regional products. A combination of tasting and knowledge transfer seems desirable for customers instead of purely focussing on the product itself.

Overall, our study is in line with previous findings about tourists' expectations of WTEs (e.g. Bruwer and Rueger-Muck, 2019; Carlsen and Boksberger, 2015; Madeira et al., 2019; Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012; Thanh and Kirova, 2018), but highlights recent developments regarding tourists' expectations with respect to digitalization (online availability of information and online booking options), a strong experience orientation in the younger target groups, and the special expectations of German tourists, e.g., regarding the duration of a 'perfect' WTE and the negative attitude towards winery hopping events.

The limitations of our study stem from the exploratory nature of our study. Thus, the transferability of our results to other regions is limited due to the focus of our study on German tourists as well as different levels of wine tourism development and culture differences among regions.

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