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## **MEASURING VISITORS' PERCEPTIONS OF EXPERIENCE QUALITY IN CROATIAN WINE CELLARS<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cellar door experiences represent the core of wine tourism activities and provides wineries with an opportunity to offer a memorable experience to the visitor, which in turn can lead to the creation of a long-term relationship between customer and brand. This study aims to measure visitors experience quality perceptions within the tasting room setting. Data was collected during the summer season of 2017 at four Dalmatian wineries (Croatia). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the collected data. Learning was the highest rated experience dimension while environment recorded the lowest mean in our study. The proposed wine experience quality scale offers an empirical framework that is easy to use and generalizable in wine tourism contexts.

**KEY WORDS:** wine tourism, wine experience quality, visitor perception, memorable experience, Croatia

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<sup>1</sup> Review paper

## INTRODUCTION

The fact that the benefits of wine tourism extend beyond cellar doors and cover all areas of the local economy has recently become more apparent to wineries, wine regions and tourist destinations (Carlsen, 2004). According to Hall et al. (2000) wine tourism can be defined as 'visitations to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals and wine shows for which grape wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape wine region are the prime motivating factors for visitors'.

Geißler (2007) underlines that wine tourism embraces and includes a wide range of experiences built around tourist visitation to wineries, wine regions or wine-related events and shows – including wine tasting, wine and food, the enjoyment of the regional environs, day trips or longer-term recreation, and the experience of a range of cultural and lifestyle activities and just as any other consumer in today's fast-growing world of experience economy wine consumers are in search of products and services that have both utilitarian and hedonic components (Sandstorm et al 2008).

The success of wineries as mostly small business entrepreneurs within the wine tourism industry rests on their ability to provide meaningful and satisfying visitor experiences (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012). Reflecting the increasing importance of the topic, customer experience has been highlighted as a tier-one research priority (Fernandes, 2016). The purpose of this paper is to measure the experience quality attributes of the wine cellar experience from the winery visitor's perspective.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the theoretical background of the observed constructs is presented, followed by research methodology and main research results. Finally, conclusions, implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) first recognized the experiential dimension of customer behavior, numerous studies have stressed need for in-depth study of the role of customer experience in marketing, particularly in services (Edvardsson et al., 2005; Jaakkola et al., 2015).

Customer experience has been observed as the aggregate and cumulative customer perception, created during the overall process of learning about, acquiring, practicing, retaining and eventually disposing or discontinuing the use

of a product or service (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994) that involves both customer perceptions and emotions. Chang and Horng (2010) note that goods and services are external to customers while experiences are primarily personal and customers tend to evaluate experience quality emotionally and subjectively as customer experience involves both customer perceptions and emotions. Therefore, we can conceptualize experience quality as an overall customer journey, through emotion toward services or products, which is at an affective level. Because the focal point of customer experience quality is creating memorable and unique experiences for consumers that deliberately influence emotion and future behavior (MohdRais et al., 2016) and since experiences are replacing quality as marketing's "competitive battleground", understanding experience quality and its dimensions is crucial (Klaus and Maklan, 2013, p. 227).

Global wine tourism activities and interest in the segment by academics have been exponentially growing in the last 20 years (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013), however research regarding motivations of wine tourist has been the focal point of academic inquiry (Carlsen, 2004; Mitchell and Hall, 2006). Researchers have explored various approaches to assess the total wine tourism experience (Bruwer and Alant, 2009; Sparks, 2007) however, empirical testing of the 4Es (i.e. educational, esthetic, entertainment, and escapist experiences) in wine tourism while promising has been scant (e.g. Bruwer and Alant, 2009; Galloway et al., 2008; Getz and Carlsen, 2008).

This growing body of research has validated the relevance of the experiential view of consumer behavior to understanding wine tourism and, within this experiential view, the experience economy has emerged as a viable framework for understanding how to enhance the wine tourism value chain in planning and operations (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2013). While wine tourism covers other activities or services, such as festivals or accommodation, it mainly focuses on cellar doors or wineries and as such can be observed as a self-contained setting that, beyond showcasing wineries' products, provides meaningful experiences to the customer that can build long-lasting relationships between visitor and brand (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016). Experiential-hedonic models, such as Pine and Gilmore's (1998) 4Es, provide a logical framework for wine tourism as their suggested realms of customer experience have been discussed in different studies regarding wine tourism.

The realms of experience (education, entertainment, esthetics and escapism) as displayed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) have instinctive theoretical and

reasonable significance to the tourism and specifically wine tourism sector, in regards to treating experiences (instead of products or services) as the core offerings of wineries. With a couple of exceptions (Hosany& Witham, 2010; Oh et al., 2007), there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the reliability and validity of these realms in different types of tourism and especially wine tourism.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research aimed to measure the perceived experience quality of cellar doors services in Croatian wineries. To define experience quality dimensions, we have considered both functional and emotional components of the wine cellar experience(Sandstrom et al., 2008).

Therefore, research instrument measured six experience quality constructs: environment, education, entertainment, service providers, functional benefits and trust with a total of 21 measures and three experience outcome constructs namely satisfaction, loyalty and advocacy with a total of 8 measures (Table 1).The measures in the instrument were derived from previous research regarding consumer experience and adapted to fit the study setting (Chang and Horng, 2010; Klaus and Maklan, 2012; Kim et al., 2011).All items, except the questions regarding visitor demographics or motivations, employed a 7-point Likert scale with values: 1 – strongly agree, 7 – strongly disagree.

Table 1: Experience quality dimensions

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Researchers</b>
Environment	Chang and Horng 2010, Kim et al 2011
Service Providers	Chang and Horng 2010, Klaus and Maklan 2012
Learning	Chang and Horng 2010, Fernandes 2016
Entertainment	Fernandes 2016
Functional Benefits	Kim et al 2011
Loyalty	Kim et al 2010
Advocacy	Kim et al 2010
Satisfaction	Kim et al 2010

Source: Authors

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire handed out to tour groups in four wineries across the Dalmatian wine region (Croatia) during May, June and July 2017. Visitors were surveyed after the vineyard and cellar tours, before the final wine tasting, with the assistance of the cellar staff that had been given detailed instructions on how to brief the respondents.

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the collected data using SPSS 23.0 software.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Out of a total of 294 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 45.2% were male and 54.8% were female, approximately 33 years of age. Most of the respondents have a college degree (32%), post-graduate (MSc, PhD) (22.8%) or university degree (20.4%). Regarding nationality, the respondents came from 36 different countries, mainly the UK (20.7%) or the USA (20.4%). The study also provided some additional information on the travel behavior of respondents. The type of accommodation in which the respondents stayed during their trip was mostly private accommodation (58%). For most of the respondents this trip represents their first visit to the winery (97.6%). Respondents were mostly motivated to visit the wineries to learn about wine (21.1%), experience the atmosphere at a winery (19.4%), taste wine (16%) or to socialize (10.5%). The main information source about this experience was TripAdvisor (44.6%), followed by a winery's website (12.9%) and word-of-mouth (10.5%).

Table 2 shows the results of descriptive statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to determine visitors' perceptions regarding wine experience quality attributes, ranging from 1 (very low perception) to 7 (very high perception). The results indicate that the mean scores of visitors' perceptions range from 5.20 to 6.21.

The item with the lowest perception score is "I am surprised with the wine cellar environment" (5.14) while the item with the highest perception score is "I have obtained more knowledge about winery brands" (6.21). The overall mean scores were 5.82, indicating a relatively high perception of cellar door experience quality. Environment was the lowest rated dimension of experience quality with mean score 5.61 while highest rated dimension of experience quality was learning (education) with mean score 6.05 which can support the notion that wine tourism activities can serve as a tool for promotion and education of future

wine buyers from different corners of the world and encompasses more than just leisure travelers enjoying environmental attributes of the region.

The highest rated item of experience outcome dimensions was “Overall, I’m satisfied with the wine cellar and the service they provide” with a mean score 6.05 while lowest rated item was “I consider this wine cellar my first choice among wineries” with the mean score of 5.14.

Overall experience outcome mean score was 5.74 which points to relatively high level of satisfaction and intention to return and recommend the wine cellar with advocacy being the highest rated outcome which offers further insight into the value of providing memorable experience to visitors who may, based on their wine cellar experience become strong advocates for the winery brand.

Table 2: Results of descriptive statistical analysis (N=294)

<b>Dimension/Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b><i>Environment</i></b>	<b>5.61</b>	<b>0.879</b>
The environment of the wine cellar is enjoyable.	5.89	0.941
The environment of the wine cellar is stimulating to the senses.	5.77	1.003
I am surprised with the wine cellar environment.	5.20	1.458
The atmosphere of the wine cellar has an impact on my state-of-mind.	5.60	1.237
<b><i>Service providers</i></b>	<b>6.03</b>	<b>0.949</b>
Service employees of the wine cellar serve me friendly and kindly.	6.05	1.121
The people at the wine cellar have good interpersonal skills.	5.97	1.138
Interacting with service providers makes me feel that I’m treated with respect.	6.09	1.003
<b><i>Learning</i></b>	<b>6.05</b>	<b>0.99</b>
The guides and brochures help me to learn and understand the topics.	6.09	1.159
I have obtained more knowledge about winery brands.	6.21	2.990
I’ve learned something new about winery brands after visiting this wine cellar.	6.01	1.101
<b><i>Entertainment</i></b>	<b>5.91</b>	<b>1.048</b>
This is a wine cellar where people can enjoy themselves.	5.89	1.150
It is happy time when I visit this wine cellar.	5.94	1.137
<b><i>Functional benefits</i></b>	<b>5.66</b>	<b>0.954</b>

The wine cellar service is tailored to the visitors.	5.64	1.192
The wine cellar service level is of value to me.	5.68	1.206
Consistency in the wine cellar service assures me a benefit.	5.50	1.123
The visit to the wine cellar is well organized.	5.83	1.138
<b>Trust</b>	<b>5.65</b>	<b>0.977</b>
The wine cellar belongs to a safe and reputable brand.	5.68	1.217
My satisfaction with the wine cellar products/services is the management's most important concern.	5.56	1.206
I'm confident in the cellar expertise.	5.87	1.049
My satisfaction with the wine cellar brands is the management's most important concern.	5.49	1.202
<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>5.86</b>	<b>0.943</b>
I feel good about coming to the wine cellar for the offerings I'm looking for.	5.62	1.191
My feelings towards the wine cellar are very positive.	5.94	1.137
The extent to which the wine cellar has produced the best possible outcome for me is satisfying.	5.82	1.078
Overall, I'm satisfied with the wine cellar and the service they provide.	6.05	1.016
<b>Loyalty</b>	<b>5.34</b>	<b>1.135</b>
I consider this wine cellar my first choice among wineries.	5.14	1.282
I would consider visiting the wine cellar again in the next few years.	5.54	1.318
<b>Advocacy</b>	<b>6.03</b>	<b>0.962</b>
I would recommend the wine cellar to someone who seeks my advice.	6.03	1.064
I would recommend the wine cellar to family members and close personal friends.	6.01	1.061
I would speak positively of the wine cellar to others.	6.04	1.033

Source: Research results

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to analyze the perceived level of experience quality of cellar door services in Croatian wine cellars. The wine tourism setting remains relatively under-studied and calls for further research in understanding visitors' experiences and post-consumption evaluations. Overall, the perception of experience quality of cellar door service in Croatian wineries was relatively

high, with learning and service providers being the highest rated experience quality constructs while functional benefits and trust had the lowest means in our study.

Results also show that experience quality could have a significant impact on visitors' loyalty, advocacy and satisfaction. Thus, wineries should create pleasant and memorable experiences in order to generate higher satisfaction levels and positively influence visitors' behavioral intentions. Memorable experiences may not only impact the intention to revisit, but also bring new customers to the wineries.

Theoretically, our results offer a multi-dimensional view of experience quality and validate the network of the constructs. In managerial terms, our findings allow winery managers to improve the overall experience quality through a better understanding of its dimensions and to determine which experience dimensions are most strongly associated with customer-related outcomes and improve the effectiveness of marketing investments.

A limitation of this study is that it focuses on a particular setting, point of time, country and customer sample. Further research should cross-validate our research to increase the study's generalizability and could be extended to include other dimensions and outcomes and also employ bivariate and multivariate statistical analysis to determine the exact nature of the relationships and effects that experience quality dimensions have on relevant marketing outcomes.

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