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Research Question

Which is the role of winery atmosphere and staff, through wine tasting experience, in increasing the destination brand image of a region?

Methods

We administered a survey to 420 wineries' visitors. Regression analysis were performed to test the mediator and moderator.

Results

Components of the wine tasting experience confirm the existence of a virtuous cycle between the territory and its local products and the positive return of this relationship on tourism.

Abstract

The scope of this research is to investigate the importance of wine tasting experiences in increasing the destination brand image of a region.

Experiential marketing is made of four key characteristics (Schmitt 1999): it is focused on customer experiences, regards consumption as an holistic experience, considers customers as rational and emotional animals and the research methodologies are usually broad and eclectic. Experiential Marketing is always associated with the strategic experiential modules (SEMS), which can be used by managers to create different types of customer experiences (Williams 2006; Smilansky 2009). These items include sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (ACT), and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE). In the heritage industry, it is really common to adopt an experiential marketing approach. However, the heritage product results from the combination of many different elements (the anticipation of the visit, the journey there, the time spent at the site or attraction, the journey home and the memories of the visit) each of which plays a role in establishing the overall experience (Holloway and Robinson 1995).

There is a natural relationship between wine and territory: on one side, consumers' are more willing to use the wines' geographical origin as a tool to evaluate the quality of wine during the purchase process (Rocchi 2000; Orth 2010), thus they are consequently more willing to pay for a product from a specific region, as discussed and tested by different authors (Skuras and Vakrou 2002; Lockshin, Jarvis et al. 2006). The presence of a country-of-origin label can be a powerful tool in increasing the involvement of consumers while selecting wines (Rodriguez-Santos

and Grunert 2011), especially in the case of unfamiliar foreign brands (Vrontis, Thrassou et al. 2011). On the other side, wine provides a contribution to the value of a territory as a destination, by supporting the creation of a destination brand. Destination branding may be defined, from a management perspective, as every name, symbol, logo, word, mark or graphics that both identifies and differentiates the destination (Heath 2002; Ritchie and Crouch 2003). Furthermore, destination branding usually conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience, uniquely associated with the specific destination, through positive image building (Cai 2002). The brand would be the competitive factor, whereas the destination branding would be the process to develop a unique personality for a specific geographical area (Ritchie and Crouch 2000).

Our study focuses on testing how the combination of the visit and the wine tasting experience inside a winery may have an impact in creating a compelling value proposition for a specific region. More precisely, we predict a mediation role of the wine tasting experience items in the relationship between both the winery atmosphere elements and the winery staff attitude towards the propensity to buy regional products, to improve the territorial brand image and increase the tourist destination value. We also hypothesize a moderator role of gender in the relationship between both winery atmosphere elements and the winery staff attitude towards the different wine tasting experiential items.

The attached figure shows the adopted research model in which the following research hypotheses are formulated:
H1: Winery Atmosphere is positively related to Territorial Branding, Willingness to buy Regional Products and Tourists Destination Value.

H2: Interaction with Winery Staff is positively related to Territorial Branding, Willingness to buy Regional Products and Tourists Destination Value.

H3: Winery Atmosphere and Interaction with Winery Staff is positively related to Wine Tasting Experience.

H4: Wine Tasting Experience is positively related to Territorial Branding, Willingness to buy Regional Products and Tourists Destination Value.

H5: The positive relationship between Winery Atmosphere and Territorial Branding, Willingness to buy Regional Products, Tourists Destination Value is mediated by Wine Tasting Experience.

H6: The positive relationship between Interaction with Winery Staff and Territorial Branding, Willingness to buy Regional Products, Tourists Destination Value is mediated by Wine Tasting Experience.

H7: Gender moderates the relationship between Winery Atmosphere and Interaction with Winery Staff towards Wine Tasting Experience.

In order to address the above listed hypotheses, we submitted a survey based on a paper questionnaire to people who visited wineries in three wine regions: La Rioja - Spain (N=100), Mendoza - Argentina (N=100) and Franciacorta - Italy (N=220). The sampling was simple and not stratified. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Program (SPSS) version 21 was used for the statistical analysis. An early investigation of the sample composition was made through descriptive statistics. According to Baron & Kenny (1986) suggestions, in order to test the mediating role of Wine Tasting Experience variable, the "four steps" methodology was adopted, in which several regression analyses are conducted and significance of the coefficients is examined at each step. Regression analysis are also performed in the light of various socio-demographic variables tested as moderators (MacKinnon DP. and JH. 1993).

The sample is made of 420 respondents, 54.8% are males while 45.2% are females. If considering age, 27.6% of the sample is between 18 and 29 y.o., 32.4% between 30 and 41 y.o., 22.9% between 42 and 53 y.o., 15% between 54 and 65 while only 2% represents a population over 65 y.o. It is interesting to notice that 15.7% of the sample comes from the wine region where the survey was administered, 48.8% from the country while 35.5% are tourists coming from abroad.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were performed to test the reliability (Cronbach LJ 1951) of each variable of our model. Test scores exhibit a good internal consistency reliability with all Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.8. The study uses simple regression analysis to examine the relationship among Winery Atmosphere, Interaction with Winery Staff, Wine Tasting Experience and Territorial Brand Image, Willingness to Buy Regional Products, Tourists Destination Value by considering age, gender and education level as control variables.

Winery Atmosphere is positively and significantly related to Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.377 Sig. 0.000) Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.440 Sig. 0.000) and Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.522 Sig.

0.000). Also Interaction with Winery Staff is positively and significantly related to Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.380 Sig. 0.000) Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.457 Sig. 0.000) and Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.526 Sig. 0.000).

Winery Atmosphere (Beta 0.673 Sig. 0.000) and Interaction with Winery Staff (Beta 0.695 Sig. 0.000) are also positively and significantly related to Wine Tasting Experience. Furthermore Wine Tasting Experience is positively and significantly related to Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.429 Sig. 0.000) Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.563 Sig. 0.000) and Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.594 Sig. 0.000). This allows to state that H1, H2, H3 and H4 are all supported.

The impacts of Winery Atmosphere (H5) and Interaction with Winery Staff (H6) above Territorial Brand Image, Willingness to Buy Regional Products and Tourists Destination Value were further analyzed by testing a mediation effect for the variable Wine Tasting Experience. In the analysis we controlled for age, gender and education level.

H5: the study first lets Winery Atmosphere be the independent variable, and Wine Tasting Experience the dependent one. Results show that Winery Atmosphere significantly and positively affects Wine Tasting Experience (Beta 0.673 Sig. 0.000).

In H5a, we considered Winery Atmosphere as the independent variable, and Territorial Brand Image the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Winery Atmosphere significantly and positively affects Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.377 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.429 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Winery Atmosphere towards Territorial Brand Image by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Territorial Brand Image. H5a is confirmed.

In H5b, we considered Winery Atmosphere as the independent variable, and Willingness to Buy Regional Products the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Winery Atmosphere significantly and positively affects Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.440 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.563 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Winery Atmosphere towards Willingness to Buy Regional Products by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Willingness to Buy Regional Products. H5b is confirmed.

In H5c, we considered Winery Atmosphere as the independent variable, and Tourists Destination Value the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Winery Atmosphere significantly and positively affects Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.522 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.594 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Winery Atmosphere towards Tourists Destination Value by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Tourists Destination Value. H5c is confirmed.

H6: the study first lets Interaction with Winery Staff be the independent variable, and Wine Tasting Experience the dependent one. Results show that Interaction with Winery Staff significantly and positively affects Wine Tasting Experience (Beta 0.695 Sig. 0.000).

In H6a, we considered Interaction with Winery Staff as the independent variable, and Territorial Brand Image the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Interaction with Winery Staff significantly and positively affects Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.380 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Territorial Brand Image (Beta 0.563 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Interaction with Winery Staff towards Territorial Brand Image by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Territorial Brand Image. H6a is confirmed.

In H6b, we considered Interaction with Winery Staff as the independent variable, and Willingness to Buy Regional Products the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Interaction with Winery Staff significantly and positively affects Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.457 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Willingness to Buy Regional Products (Beta 0.563 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Interaction with Winery Staff towards Willingness to Buy Regional Products by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Willingness to Buy Regional Products. H6b is confirmed.

In H6c, we considered Interaction with Winery Staff as the independent variable, and Tourists Destination Value

the dependent one. In this scenario, results indicate that Interaction with Winery Staff significantly and positively affects Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.526 Sig. 0.000). Moreover, Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively accounts for Tourists Destination Value (Beta 0.594 Sig. 0.000). Once obtained the above-mentioned results, the study regresses Interaction with Winery Staff towards Tourists Destination Value by adding as mediating variable Wine Tasting Experience. Wine Tasting Experience significantly and positively affects Tourists Destination Value. H6c is confirmed.

H7: the moderator role of gender was considered in the relationship between Winery Atmosphere and Wine Tasting Experience for gender. In this case H7a is accepted (Sig. 0.029), then the moderator role was considered in the relationship between Interaction with Winery Staff and Wine Tasting Experience for gender. In this case, H7b is not accepted (Sig. 0.151).

Results fully confirm the existence of a virtuous cycle between the territory and its local products and the positive economic return of that relationship on tourism. Components of the wine experience were identified as main and recurrent value drivers which positively affect the perception of the territory. A mediation role of the wine tasting experience items is confirmed. The moderator role of gender is partially confirmed: the winery atmosphere elements appears to be more relevant in influencing the wine tasting experiential items for men, whereas in case of the winery staff attitude the moderating role of gender is refused.

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