

Savoring the vine: Exploring visitor experiences of wine harvest and tasting tours through qualitative inquiry

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Abstract

This study examines visitor experiences of wine harvest and tasting tours, emphasizing how sensory, cultural, educational, and identity-related aspects shape the meaning of wine tourism. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach with 23 participants, the research uncovers four interconnected themes: sensory and emotional engagement, cultural and social connections, learning and knowledge gain, and identity and meaning-making. The findings demonstrate that wine tourism serves as a multifaceted experiential activity, combining authenticity, heritage, and personal growth. Results expand authenticity theory and the experience economy framework by showing how visitors co-create hybrid experiences that combine education, aesthetics, and cultural immersion. Practical implications highlight the importance of multisensory design, storytelling, and sustainable practices for vineyard operators, destination marketers, and policymakers. The study advances both theoretical discussions and managerial strategies to enhance meaningful and memorable wine tourism experiences.

Keywords: Wine tourism, Authenticity, Experience economy, Visitor engagement, Cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Tourism has gradually shifted from traditional sightseeing to more immersive and participatory experiences, reflecting a growing global desire for experiential travel. Visitors are increasingly seeking meaningful, sensory, and memorable experiences that go beyond simply visiting places and consuming products (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Rachão et al., 2021). In this context, wine tourism has evolved into a distinct niche, combining cultural heritage, gastronomy, and leisure while offering opportunities for learning and authentic interactions with producers and their landscapes (Bruwer, 2003; Santos et al., 2019). This combination positions wine tourism not only as an economic force but also as a key element of the cultural and experiential aspects of tourism worldwide (López-Guzmán et al., 2011; Tafel & Szolnoki, 2020).

Among the various forms of wine tourism, harvest and tasting tours play a central role. These activities showcase a unique combination of tradition, terroir, and social gathering, allowing visitors to actively participate in grape-picking, cellar practices, and sensory wine exploration (Gómez-Carmona et al., 2023; Marlowe & Lee, 2018). Harvest festivals and tastings are often seen as genuine expressions of local culture, linking rural traditions with international

tourism flows (Jurincic & Bojnec, 2010; Simoes, 2008). In fact, research highlights that wine tasting and related activities provide more than just product sampling—they create symbolic meanings connected to emotions, identity, and social bonding (Haller et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022).

Despite its growing importance, research on wine tourism has often focused on economic impact, destination marketing, and consumer segmentation, with less attention paid to the actual experiences of visitors during harvest and tasting events. Studies have shown the tangible economic benefits of wine tourism, as seen in Germany, where it generates billions in regional income and jobs (Tafel & Szolnoki, 2020). Additionally, they emphasize its role in diversifying rural economies and promoting sustainability (Montella, 2017; Xu et al., 2016). Similarly, destination-focused research has examined strategies to boost wine routes and brand positioning (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010; Terziyska, 2017; Torres et al., 2021). While these perspectives are valuable, they do not fully explore the subjective, emotional, and cultural aspects of how visitors actually experience wine harvest and tasting tours.

Recent conceptual reviews advocate for a more in-depth examination of the wine tourism experience itself, highlighting that such experiences encompass multisensory,

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educational, and social aspects that impact visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Santos et al., 2019; Valeri et al., 2022). For example, storytelling has been shown to significantly enhance the wine tourism experience by strengthening cultural meanings and boosting sensory appreciation (Santos et al., 2022). Similarly, experiential co-creation, through interactions with winemakers, landscapes, and fellow visitors, emerges as a key factor in creating memorable experiences and encouraging repeat visits (Rachão et al., 2021). This suggests that focusing on the experiential core of wine tourism is crucial for both academic research and practical management.

In particular, the wine harvest provides a unique form of experiential engagement, where visitors participate in seasonal labor that is deeply rooted in local tradition. Harvest involvement places tourists within the flow of agricultural life, giving them privileged access to a cultural practice rarely open to outsiders (Alonso, 2009; Tomljenovic & Getz, 2009). Similarly, tasting tours offer an intimate connection with the product, where aesthetics, conviviality, and authenticity are central to shaping perceptions of quality and meaning (Fournier, 2021; Haller et al., 2021). Together, these experiences capture the intersection of emotional, sensory, and social aspects of tourism, yet their study in scholarly literature remains limited.

This gap is especially significant given evidence that visitor experiences in wine tourism greatly influence loyalty, brand attachment, and destination image (Dias et al., 2024; Gómez-Carmona et al., 2023). Emotional responses, such as joy, belonging, and cultural pride, have been identified as mediators of satisfaction and post-consumption behavior (Demir, 2010), highlighting the importance of framing wine tourism within broader discussions of experiential and cultural tourism (Hindjou & Dixit, 2025; Sampaio, 2012).

Additionally, studies highlight generational differences in how visitors engage with wine, with younger tourists often focusing more on social and hedonic aspects than connoisseurship (Getz & Carlsen, 2008; Lapan et al., 2025). These highlight the importance of examining how visitors perceive and interpret harvest and tasting experiences, as well as the meanings they attribute to these encounters.

Building on these considerations, this study aims to explore visitor experiences of wine harvest and tasting tours through qualitative research, focusing on how these encounters contribute to value creation in the tourism sector. Specifically, it seeks to understand how visitors perceive, interpret, and emotionally connect with these experiences, and how such connections influence their cultural, social, and personal satisfaction. By adopting an experiential perspective, this research broadens existing literature beyond economic and promotional views, addressing a key gap in understanding the subjective value of wine tourism experiences.

Three guiding research questions form the foundation of this study:

How do visitors experience wine harvest and tasting tours?

What meanings do these experiences hold for visitors in terms of emotional, social, and cultural fulfillment?

How do experiential elements influence the creation of tourism value and destination loyalty?

Addressing these questions advances theory by deepening the understanding of wine tourism as an experiential practice rather than just an economic activity or marketing tool. It also provides practical insights for winery operators and destination managers looking to create more engaging, authentic, and memorable visitor experiences. Ultimately, this study positions wine harvest and tasting tours as valuable opportunities to explore how tourism can generate multidimensional value, strengthening ties between culture, community, and consumption.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wine tourism and experiential tourism

Wine tourism fosters a unique connection between food, rural development, and cultural heritage, thereby creating a multi-layered form of experiential tourism. Unlike traditional tourism, which involves passive sightseeing, wine tourism is naturally engaging, encouraging visitors to participate in immersive experiences that combine local food traditions, landscapes, and winemaking methods (Bruwer, 2003; López-Guzmán et al., 2011). The connection between wine tourism and gastronomy tourism is powerful, as wine tastings and pairings with local dishes offer a combined sensory experience that emphasizes a region's identity (Alonso & Kok, 2020). Similarly, its ties to rural tourism involve celebrating vineyard scenery, traditional farming practices, and countryside hospitality, which foster an appreciation for both tangible and intangible cultural assets (Santos et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2016).

Cultural tourism dimensions emerge from the symbolic importance of wine as an element of heritage, identity, and storytelling (Santos et al., 2022). In many regions, wine tourism is not only an economic activity but also a way to preserve and promote local culture (Tafel & Szolnoki, 2020; Torres et al., 2021). By offering visitors a mix of education, entertainment, and authentic cultural experiences, wine tourism aligns with the broader concept of experiential tourism, which emphasizes the creation of memorable, co-created experiences (Rachão et al., 2021). In fact, studies show that wine tourists often seek experiences that combine pleasure with cultural enrichment, making wine routes and cellar-door visits prime examples of experiential engagement (Getz & Carlsen, 2008; Marlowe & Lee, 2018).

2.2. Harvest festivals and authenticity

Harvest festivals are a vital expression of wine tourism, offering visitors opportunities to participate in grape harvesting, stomping, and celebration rituals. These festivals

embody authenticity by allowing tourists to engage directly in practices traditionally performed by local communities (Alonso, 2009; Jurincic & Bojnec, 2010). Authenticity here extends beyond just the act of harvesting to include cultural stories, music, and communal feasts, all of which strengthen a sense of belonging and cultural connection (Alonso et al., 2008; Gómez-Carmona et al., 2023).

The concept of authenticity, a topic long explored in tourism research, is particularly significant in wine tourism, where the distinction between staged experiences and genuine cultural practices can significantly impact visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Haller et al., 2021). For instance, interactions with winemakers, participation in harvest rituals, and sensory immersion in vineyard settings are often viewed as authentic experiences that build emotional bonds between visitors and destinations (Dias et al., 2024; Eusébio et al., 2023). These authenticity-focused experiences foster a sense of attachment to place and brand loyalty, ultimately leading to long-term customer commitment (Dias et al., 2024). Moreover, the ceremonial aspects of harvest festivals serve as collective cultural performances, strengthening ideas of heritage and community identity while also increasing the market appeal of wine destinations (Rebelo et al., 2015; Tomljenovic & Getz, 2009).

2.3. Experience economy framework in wine tourism

The experience economy framework introduced by Pine and Gilmore (1999) offers a valuable perspective for understanding wine tourism experiences. Their model—encompassing entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism—has been widely applied in tourism contexts, and in wine tourism, it offers a clear understanding of how various elements combine to generate value (Haller et al., 2021; Hernández et al., 2022). Entertainment is showcased through lively events, tastings, and storytelling sessions that animate the visitor experience. Education is conveyed through guided tours, enological workshops, and vineyard lectures, where tourists learn about wine production processes and terroir (Alonso & Kok, 2020; Santos et al., 2019).

The visual appeal is essential in wine tourism, as vineyard scenery, cellar design, and atmospheric tasting rooms provide visual and symbolic satisfaction (Haller et al., 2021; Pinheiro & Santos, 2025). Meanwhile, escapism occurs when visitors participate in activities such as harvesting, grape stomping, or virtual wine experiences, which help them escape their daily routines (Gastaldello et al., 2022). Evidence emphasizes the need to balance these four areas: while providers often concentrate on education, visitors typically prioritize aesthetic and social elements, including authenticity and direct interactions with winemakers (Haller et al., 2021).

Furthermore, segmentation studies reveal that wine tourists can be categorized based on their main experiential preferences. For example, Mexican wine tourists align with different parts of Pine and Gilmore's model depending on their

regional backgrounds—some emphasize education, others entertainment or aesthetics (Hernández et al., 2022). These findings support the value of the experience economy framework as both an analytical and management tool for designing diverse wine tourism experiences that cater to different visitor expectations.

2.4. Tourist experience and memory formation

Tourist experiences in wine tourism are deeply rooted in sensory engagement. The act of wine tasting—focused on taste, smell, and visual appeal—provides multisensory stimuli that are strongly linked to memory formation and destination image (Santos et al., 2019; Shor & Mansfeld, 2010). Studies suggest that sensory cues significantly enhance the memorability of experiences, influencing post-visit behaviors such as word-of-mouth promotion, repeat visits, and brand loyalty (Hindjou & Dixit, 2025; Sampaio, 2012).

Memory creation in wine tourism extends beyond just taste; it encompasses the broader experiential environment, including scenic vineyard views, storytelling, and social interactions (Santos et al., 2022). Storytelling, in particular, is identified as a key factor that drives emotional engagement, enhancing excitement and cultural appreciation while embedding the experience into personal memory (Santos et al., 2022). Additionally, research indicates that visitor satisfaction and the likelihood of returning are strongly affected by the overall experience, which encompasses hospitality, ambiance, service quality, and socialization opportunities (Hindjou & Dixit, 2025).

From a cognitive psychology perspective, sensory-rich experiences improve the encoding and retrieval of memories, which explains why wine tourism destinations often invest heavily in creating atmospheric tasting rooms, immersive storytelling, and sensory branding (Dias et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2022). These experiences strengthen emotional bonds to the place and shape the destination's image, thus influencing long-term tourist behavior (Barber et al., 2010; Sampaio, 2012).

3. Methodology

The study received approval from Osmania University's Ethics Committee for SS&R under protocol number OS-1000-4/221-3-9 for AA, dated 5 February 2025. It adhered to the guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects.

3.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design guided by a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of visitors participating in wine harvest and tasting tours. Phenomenology provides a means to explore how individuals interpret and understand their personal experiences, emphasizing subjective meaning over objective measurement (Alase, 2017; Fuster Guillen, 2019). A

hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective enables researchers to delve deeper than surface-level narratives, focusing on the richness and depth of participants' accounts of embodied, sensory, and cultural experiences (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Palmer et al., 2010). This approach is especially suitable for tourism studies that examine authenticity, memory creation, and experiential aspects.

3.2. Data collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a method that balances guided inquiry with openness to emerging themes (Adams, 2015; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). A total of 23 participants were recruited, including both domestic and international tourists who had recently taken part in wine harvest and tasting tours. The interview protocol included questions about motivations, sensory impressions, perceived authenticity, and memorable moments. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

3.3. Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to include participants with direct and relevant experience in wine harvest and tasting tours (Suri, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). This method was chosen because the research aimed to gather rich, detailed accounts rather than broad generalizations. By focusing on individuals who had participated in harvest rituals and tasting activities, the study prioritized depth of understanding over representativeness, aligning with the epistemological assumptions of qualitative research.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2014). Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017). The analytical process involved six iterative steps: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes across coded data, (4) reviewing themes for coherence and distinctiveness, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final narrative. NVivo software supported coding and theme development. This approach enabled the identification of recurring experiential dimensions, including authenticity, aesthetics, sensory engagement, and memory formation.

3.5. Trustworthiness

To increase the credibility and reliability of the findings, multiple strategies were used. Triangulation was achieved through various data sources and the researcher's reflections (Decrop, 1999). Member checking involved sharing initial interpretations with selected participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Additionally,

reflexive researcher notes were kept throughout the research process to record analytic decisions and reduce bias (Amankwaa, 2016). These steps collectively enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring transparency, rigor, and alignment with participants' lived experiences.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants (N=23)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	11	47,83
	Female	12	52,17
Age	20–29	5	21,74
	30–39	7	30,43
	40–49	6	26,09
	50+	5	21,74
Nationality	India	4	17,39
	China	4	17,39
	France	2	8,70
	Kazakhstan	3	13,04
	Russia	2	8,70
	Japan	2	8,70
	South Korea	2	8,70
	Italy	2	8,70
	USA	2	8,70
Previous wine tour experiences	First-time visitor	10	43,48
	Repeat visitor	13	56,52

4. Findings

4.1. Theme 1: Sensory and emotional engagement

Participants consistently emphasized the multisensory and emotional aspects of their experiences. For example, P1 recalled how the “inviting and deeply memorable aroma” of freshly pressed grapes set the mood for the visit, while P2 highlighted the “immersion in the vineyard’s colors and natural scenery.” These sensory cues went beyond taste and smell: P6 described the tactile pleasure of touching grape clusters, emphasizing a direct physical connection with the harvest.

Emotional connection was equally prominent. P9 linked wine tasting to nostalgic memories of family gatherings, while P11 appreciated the “calming effect” of the peaceful vineyard atmosphere. Others described the experience as joyful and festive (P13) or as a mindful practice (P18), where slowing down to enjoy flavors became a way to be fully present. Seasonal and environmental factors also enhanced sensory engagement, as P20 noted how autumn colors deepened the “richness of the experience.” For many, authenticity influenced these emotions, with P21 stating that the vineyard’s genuine character created a sense of upliftment. Overall, these perspectives demonstrate that wine tourism is not just about taste, but also a deeply emotional and immersive experience deeply connected to place and memory.

4.2. Theme 2: Cultural and social connection

Wine harvest and tasting tours serve as gateways to cultural immersion and social bonding. P3 highlighted the

importance of direct conversations with local winemakers, which fostered closeness and knowledge sharing. Similarly, P4 described feeling part of a “temporary community” during the harvest ritual, while P8 saw wine tours as a way to access “regional traditions and cultural narratives.”

Personal encounters with heritage added depth to these experiences. P12 valued the family stories behind wineries, viewing wine as an intergenerational legacy. Hospitality was considered central to cultural identity, with P15 noting how hosts’ warmth reflected broader societal values. P16 went

further, suggesting that participating in harvest activities created “a sense of pride” in contributing to cultural continuity. Others (P19, P20) emphasized the embodied elements of culture, such as tasting regional food pairings and singing traditional songs during harvest time. For P22, the vineyard represented a “living heritage site,” while P23 emphasized the intercultural dialogue fostered by interactions among international visitors. These demonstrate that wine tourism fosters reciprocal cultural exchange, connecting visitors with local traditions while also promoting a sense of global unity.

Table 2. Summary of participant perspectives across themes

Theme	Participants	Key perspective
Sensory and Emotional Engagement	P1	Described the wine’s aroma as “inviting and deeply memorable.”
	P2	Felt immersed in the vineyard’s colors and natural scenery.
	P6	Emphasized the tactile pleasure of handling grape clusters.
	P9	Found the tasting to evoke nostalgic emotions linked to family traditions.
	P11	Highlighted the calming effect of the vineyard’s quiet ambiance.
	P13	Recalled the harvest’s “festive and joyful” atmosphere.
	P17	Mentioned the multisensory harmony of taste, smell, and sight.
	P18	Saw wine tasting as a form of mindfulness, savoring the moment.
	P20	Noted that seasonal changes intensified the sensory richness.
	P21	Felt emotionally uplifted by the vineyard’s authenticity.
Cultural and Social Connection	P3	Enjoyed conversations with local winemakers.
	P4	Felt part of a community through the harvest ritual.
	P8	Saw wine tours as a gateway to regional traditions.
	P12	Appreciated stories about family-owned wineries.
	P15	Felt hospitality reflected cultural identity.
	P16	Experienced pride in contributing to local culture.
	P19	Connected the wine with regional cuisine and customs.
	P20	Enjoyed learning local songs sung during harvest.
	P22	Saw the vineyard as a living heritage site.
	P23	Felt wine tourism fostered intercultural dialogue.
Learning and Knowledge Acquisition	P5	Valued explanations of grape varieties.
	P7	Learned about soil and climate impacts on wine.
	P10	Observed traditional pressing techniques.
	P14	Engaged in guided tastings with expert commentary.
	P15	Appreciated educational tours led by sommeliers.
	P16	Gained awareness of sustainability in viticulture.
	P19	Learned food pairing principles.
	P20	Saw winemaking as blending science and art.
	P22	Acquired knowledge transferable to daily wine choices.
	P23	Understood historical evolution of local wine culture.
Identity and Meaning-Making	P1	Saw the experience as authentic and exclusive.
	P5	Felt personal pride in learning refined tastes.
	P8	Used wine tourism to reinforce social distinction.
	P10	Found joy in sharing experiences on social media.
	P12	Saw harvesting as reconnecting with rural roots.
	P14	Experienced self-fulfillment through active participation.
	P18	Identified wine tourism as part of lifestyle identity.
	P19	Considered wine tasting as cultural capital.
	P21	Saw the vineyard visit as an escape from routine.
	P22	Perceived the tour as both leisure and self-discovery.

4.3. Theme 3: Learning and knowledge acquisition

The findings also underscore the importance of educational enrichment within the wine tourism sector. P5 and P7 valued technical knowledge about grape varieties, soil composition, and the effects of climate, while P10 found observing traditional pressing techniques particularly enlightening. Guided tastings enhanced learning, as P14 noted the benefit of expert commentary that translated subtle flavor differences into understandable knowledge.

Participants also emphasized the role of structured educational activities. P15 appreciated tours led by sommeliers, while P16 stressed the importance of sustainability awareness in viticulture. Beyond production, wine education extended into gastronomy: P19 described learning about food and wine pairing as a highlight, while P20 saw winemaking as a “fusion of science and art.” This knowledge was not just theoretical; P22 mentioned that it influenced “daily wine choices,” indicating a practical transfer of expertise. Finally, P23 valued the historical aspect, recognizing wine culture as part of the region’s evolving heritage. Overall, these insights suggest that wine tourism offers both intellectual enrichment and practical literacy, positioning visitors as active learners rather than passive consumers.

4.4. Theme 4: Identity and meaning-making

For many participants, wine tourism was not only experiential but also connected to personal identity and self-formation. P1 described the experience as “authentic and exclusive,” while P5 expressed pride in developing refined tastes. Several participants associated wine tourism with social status: P8 saw participation as reinforcing social distinction, and P10 highlighted the symbolic importance of sharing vineyard images on social media.

At the same time, others viewed the experience as deeply personal. P12 described the harvest as reconnecting with rural roots, while P14 saw active participation as a means of fulfilling oneself. For P18, wine tourism became part of a larger lifestyle identity, and P19 saw it as a form of “cultural capital” that boosted social recognition. P21 called the vineyard visit an “escape from routine,” while P22 considered the tour both relaxing and a journey of self-discovery. These stories demonstrate that wine tourism serves as a platform for identity-building, where visitors strike a balance between authenticity, social recognition, and personal meaning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study examined visitor experiences during wine harvest and tasting tours, emphasizing how these interactions influence sensory-emotional engagement, cultural and social connections, learning, and the formation of identity and meaning. The findings show that wine tourism experiences are multifaceted, aligning with the experience economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) while emphasizing the importance of authenticity in tourism research (MacCannell,

1973; Wang, 1999). Overall, the results suggest that wine harvest and tasting tours are not merely recreational activities, but meaningful, co-created experiences that blend culture, education, and the expression of identity.

The results also highlight the importance of sensory and emotional engagement as key to memory formation and visitor satisfaction, aligning with previous research on gastronomy and wine tourism (Santos et al., 2019; Shor & Mansfeld, 2009). Participants described the multisensory aspects of tastings and harvests—encompassing touch, aroma, and landscape aesthetics—as central to their enjoyment. This reinforces earlier findings that connected sensory cues to memorability and destination image (Hindjou & Dixit, 2025; Sampaio, 2012), while also adding nuance by demonstrating how these cues encourage existential authenticity and mindfulness.

Cultural and social connections emerged as another strong theme. Visitors felt part of a temporary community through rituals, storytelling, and shared meals, echoing studies that portray wine festivals as authentic cultural performances (Alonso, 2009; Jurincic & Bojnec, 2010). These findings align with research on co-creation (Rachão et al., 2021), where authenticity is understood as a collective enactment rather than a staged one. The focus on hospitality and intergenerational continuity of winemaking families further highlights wine tourism as a form of living heritage (Tafel & Szolnoki, 2020).

Learning and knowledge acquisition were equally important. Visitors valued enological education, sustainability practices, and gastronomic literacy, supporting previous arguments that wine tourism combines entertainment with educational value (Alonso & Kok, 2020; Santos et al., 2019). However, unlike much earlier literature that considers education secondary to leisure, our findings suggest that learning is essential to satisfaction and repeat visits. Knowledge transfer—such as wine pairing techniques or insights into terroir—was seen as practical cultural capital, enriching both tourism experiences and everyday consumption (López-Guzmán et al., 2011).

The theme of identity and meaning-making reveals that wine tourism encompasses not only consumption but also performance and sharing. Participants use wine-related experiences to signal distinction, build cultural capital, or reconnect with rural roots, reflecting Bourdieu’s (1984) framework of taste and status. This aligns with research emphasizing how tourism shapes lifestyle identity (Mkono, 2012) and with findings on digital self-presentation, where visitors share vineyard images to reinforce social identity (Lapan et al., 2025). These insights expand previous studies by illustrating that wine tourism is both an inward journey of self-discovery and an outward display of social belonging.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study advances tourism and hospitality theory by filling a notable gap: while earlier research has examined wine

tourism through the lens of destination attractiveness (Bruwer & Alant, 2009; Sparks, 2007), less focus has been given to the qualitative details of visitor engagement across sensory, cultural, cognitive, and identity-related aspects. By adopting an experience-centered approach, this research enhances the understanding of how wine tourism operates as a comprehensive form of experiential consumption (Carlsen, 2004; Getz & Brown, 2006).

First, the findings expand authenticity theory. Visitors' focus on sensory immersion and cultural embeddedness shows that authenticity is not only object-based (e.g., traditional winemaking practices) but also processual, developing through emotional connections and identity formation (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Unlike earlier work that emphasized staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), this study demonstrates that participants see authenticity as co-created, aligning with contemporary views on existential authenticity (Wang, 1999).

Second, the results expand on the experience economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Wine tourism appears to encompass all four realms: entertainment (festive atmosphere), aesthetic (vineyard landscapes), educational (learning about viticulture), and escapist (active participation in the harvest). This multidimensional view supports findings from Quadri-Felitti & Fiore (2013), but our study adds depth by illustrating how these realms overlap in practice, creating hybrid experiences rather than distinct categories.

Third, the findings add to theories of cultural tourism and gastronomy. While previous studies often viewed wine as a supplement to culinary tourism (Hall et al., 2000; López-Guzmán & Sánchez, 2008), this research demonstrates that wine harvests and tastings can serve as a primary cultural practice that conveys heritage, social identity, and personal meaning. This conceptual shift places wine tourism at the crossroads of food studies, cultural heritage research, and experiential marketing. Overall, this study presents a layered conceptualization of wine tourism that combines sensory, social, cognitive, and identity-based perspectives, thereby advancing debates on authenticity, experiential consumption, and cultural tourism.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings also have significant managerial and policy implications. For vineyard operators and tour managers, the study suggests that enhancing multisensory experiences—such as aroma-focused tastings, vineyard walks, and hands-on harvesting—can improve visitor satisfaction and loyalty. By creating environments that blend natural beauty with sensory stimulation, managers can better meet visitors' emotional and mindful engagement needs.

For destination marketers, the cultural and social aspects underscore the importance of shaping wine tourism not only as leisure but also as a cultural immersion experience. Stories that focus on family traditions, regional heritage, and participatory rituals can set destinations apart in a

competitive market (Mitchell & Hall, 2006). Including local cuisine, music, and storytelling in wine tourism packages can boost authenticity and help visitors form a deeper connection.

For educators and sommeliers, findings highlight the importance of providing structured yet engaging knowledge transfer. Interactive tastings, educational workshops on viticulture sustainability, and pairing seminars can enhance visitors' learning while emphasizing the value of the experience. Notably, practical knowledge—such as guidance on food pairing—was shown to be applicable in everyday life, demonstrating a strong way to encourage destination loyalty.

For policymakers and regional tourism boards, the aspects of identity and cultural capital indicate that wine tourism can serve a strategic role in branding regions. Investments in heritage conservation, local storytelling, and the digital marketing of genuine harvest practices can attract not only wine lovers but also a broader range of cultural travelers. Additionally, supporting small, family-owned wineries through tourism promotion can help maintain rural economies and protect intangible heritage (Getz, 2000; Fernández-Ferrín & Bande, 2013).

Ultimately, digital marketing strategies can effectively leverage the symbolic and status-related aspects of wine tourism. Since visitors increasingly share experiences on social media as symbols of identity, vineyards and tour operators should create photogenic, narratively engaging touchpoints—such as vineyard rituals, scenic tastings, and personalized souvenirs—that promote organic online storytelling. Together, these implications show that wine tourism management should shift from product-focused strategies to experience-focused and meaning-driven approaches that cater to visitors' sensory, cognitive, and cultural needs.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

Like all qualitative studies, certain limitations offer opportunities for future research. First, the sample was specific to a single geographic and cultural setting. While this provided depth, comparative studies across different wine regions could reveal cultural differences in sensory, cultural, and identity-related experiences. Second, the study depended on self-reported visitor narratives, which may be affected by recall bias or socially desirable responses. Future research could incorporate observational methods or longitudinal designs to gain a deeper understanding of experiential changes over time.

Additionally, this study mainly examined the visitor perspective. Future research could include the perspectives of winemakers, tour operators, and local communities to explore how experiences are collaboratively created and managed. Interdisciplinary approaches that connect tourism research with cultural anthropology, gastronomy, and sustainability science could further deepen both theoretical understanding and practical applications. Lastly, expanding the

focus to digital and hybrid experiences—such as virtual wine tastings—would reflect emerging post-pandemic trends in experiential tourism.

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Data statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author contribution

The authors conducted the research design and implementation, analysis, and article writing equally without using AI applications.

Disclosure statement

The authors reported no potential competing interests.

Ethics committee approval

The study received approval from Osmania University's Ethics Committee for SS&R under protocol number OS-1000-4/221-3-9 for AA, dated 5 February 2025. It adhered to the guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects.