

Wine tourism as a catalyst for sustainable competitive advantage: unraveling the role of winery image and reputation

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Abstract. This study examines the impact of wine tourism development on the sustainable competitive advantage of Spanish wineries, while also exploring the mediating roles of winery image and winery reputation in this relationship. A theoretical framework is proposed and empirically tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling, with data collected from 207 Spanish wineries between September 2023 and February 2024. The findings reveal a significant positive association between the development of wine tourism and the sustainable competitive advantage of wineries in Spain, highlighting the crucial mediating effects of winery image and winery reputation in this relationship. This study makes three key contributions. First, it deepens the understanding of the strategic benefits of wine tourism beyond economic performance, positioning it as a key driver of long-term competitive differentiation. Second, it is the first study to empirically analyze wine tourism as a determinant of sustainable competitive advantage in the Spanish wine industry, addressing a critical gap in the literature. Third, by integrating winery image and winery reputation as mediators, it provides a more comprehensive perspective on the mechanisms through which wine tourism strengthens the strategic positioning of wineries. These findings offer valuable insights for both academics and industry professionals seeking to leverage wine tourism as a tool for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Wine Tourism (WT) has consolidated its role as a strategic axis for wineries, facilitating direct engagement with visitors through curated experiences that communicate the cultural, spatial, and sensory dimensions of wine production [1], contributing to revenue diversification and competitive positioning in experience-driven markets [2]. This evolution has shifted WT from being a complementary activity to becoming a central element of the business model in many wineries, where the visitor experience is increasingly conceived as a vehicle for generating long-term competitive differentiation [3].

To advance the empirical analysis of these dynamics, the present research set out to examine the influence of WT development on the wineries' sustainable competitive advantage. The decision to focus on WT development, rather than using quantitative parameters such as visitors or WT revenues, responds to the need to capture the strategic intent behind tourism-related practices, thus allowing this approach to assess how

wineries implement actions aimed at creating long-term value. Based on the framework proposed by Lavandoski et al. [4], WT development is conceived as a set of interrelated practices that reflect an active engagement with tourism as a strategic dimension of the business, including the promotion of local resources, the design of attractive spaces in wineries, staff training in hospitality and tourism, and the organization of gastronomic and cultural activities. These practices together provide a global understanding of the winery's commitment to tourism beyond its economic contribution. In parallel, the notion of sustainable competitive advantage adopted in this study draws on the conceptualization proposed by Guimarães et al. [5], who define it as a firm's capacity to sustain superior performance over time by combining financial outcomes, with the integration of environmental and social responsibility into the development of new products and services. This conceptual approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the extent to which strategically implemented WT initiatives may contribute to the wineries' competitiveness, particularly when

superior financial performance is aligned with the integration of environmental and social responsibility into core business practices.

The mechanisms through which WT can improve the sustainable competitive advantage, i.e., it can improve the capacity to maintain a long-term leadership position by integrating economic, environmental and social criteria [6], can arise from various strategic initiatives, such as: the promotion of regional resources, the design of interior spaces that provide memorable experiences to enhance the local environment of wineries and project an image aligned with cultural sustainability, specialized training of staff in tourist attention, the extension of opening hours to ensure high quality service, the incorporation of local gastronomy in their offer, as well as the development of artistic activities and wine-related thematic events [7]. In this way, these practices to stimulate WT, conceived as WT development, can distinguish wineries in a competitive market while consolidating their reputation as entities committed to sustainability, capturing a segment of conscious consumers who value authentic experiences [8].

In addition, WT can serve as a catalyst for both winery image and winery reputation [9]. On the one hand, WI refers to the perceived image that the winery believes it projects to its key stakeholders, based on its internal interpretation of how it is viewed in terms of overall positioning and credibility within the competitive environment [10]. On the other hand, winery reputation refers to the long-term perception that the winery believes it holds among its stakeholders, particularly customers, in terms of trust, professionalism, success, and market recognition [11]. In this sense, WT can improve the image and reputation of wineries by offering educational experiences that highlight their commitment to quality, fostering emotional connections with visitors and reinforcing the projected image through the communication of innovative and responsible practices [12]. This strategy can facilitate the attraction of loyal consumers and the establishment of strategic alliances, thus strengthening their sustainable competitive advantage in the wine sector [13].

Nevertheless, it is worth recognizing that the association between WT and business competitiveness is not inherently positive, with several studies having identified potential negative externalities associated with the expansion of WT that require further analysis. From a socio-environmental standpoint, Poitras and Donald [14] pointed out that rapid tourism development could generate tensions with land use, affect local agriculture, and place pressure on community infrastructure and ecosystems. In a related vein, Sun and Drakeman [15] emphasized that cellar door operations often led to significantly higher carbon emissions than other wine distribution models, making WT one of the most environmentally intensive activities in the wine value chain. Building on this, Sun and Drakeman [16] estimated that WT accounted for more than one-third of the total carbon footprint of the Australian wine industry, warning that growth-oriented models could accelerate climate-

related vulnerabilities if environmental costs were not adequately internalized. These findings underscore the importance of critically assessing the direction and nature of the relationship between WT and sustainable competitive advantage, as its impact may differ depending on how WT initiatives are designed and integrated into the winery's strategy.

The objective of the research is to holistically examine these relationships by analyzing the influence of WT development on the wineries' sustainable competitive advantage in Spain, as well as the mediating role of winery image and reputation in this main relationship. In fact, the present study is intended to answer the following research questions: (RQ1) does the WT development positively influence the sustainable competitive advantage? (RQ2) does winery image positively mediate the WT-sustainable competitive advantage relationship? (RQ3) does winery reputation positively mediate the WT-sustainable competitive advantage linkage? To this end, a theoretical model is formulated and subsequently empirically validated through structural equation analysis, using data collected from 207 wineries in Spain collected during the period from September 2023 to February 2024. In this sense, this study provides a novel perspective by addressing, for the first time, WT as a driver of sustainable competitive advantage in the Spanish context, while exploring the influence of winery image and reputation on the WT-sustainable competitive advantage relationship.

In Spain, WT is emerging as a key driver of gastronomic tourism, with more than 2,300 wineries offering WT activities along 37 official routes recognized by the Spanish Association of Wine Cities, including the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa Wine Routes, the Ribera del Duero Wine Route, the Penedès Wine Route, and the Jerez Wine Route [17]. These routes combine visits to wineries, wine tastings, harvest activities, gastronomic pairings and oenology workshops, attracting more than 3.2 million visitors in 2023, with Rioja Alta and Ribera del Duero leading in affluence [18]. In economic terms, WT generated more than 90 million euros in revenues in 2023, with an average expenditure per visitor of 175 euros, also contributing to rural development, job creation and sustainability in local communities [19].

This research makes several original contributions to the field of WT and winery competitiveness. First, it expands the understanding of the benefits associated with the development of WT, highlighting its role as a catalyst for winery competitiveness. Second, it is the first study to explore the dynamics between WT and sustainable competitive advantage in the Spanish context, an aspect so far not addressed in the academic literature, which represents an opportunity to advance scientific knowledge. Third, it introduces an innovative approach by jointly investigating the effects of winery image and reputation on the proposed main relationship, thus providing new perspectives in the WT research field. Fourth, the theoretical model developed can be applied in different winemaking contexts to identify similarities and differences in the relationships between these variables,

providing an additional window to further explore the WT-sustainable competitive advantage linkage in the global winemaking context.

To answer the research questions posed, after this introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical model to be evaluated, Section 3 describes the methodology used, Section 4 presents the results obtained, and Section 5 discusses the most relevant conclusions, along with the implications, limitations of the study and future lines of research.

2. Theoretical Underpinning: Resource Based-View

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides a propitious theoretical framework for understanding the relationships proposed in this research between WT development, winery image, winery reputation and sustainable competitive advantage. According to Barney [20], resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and non-substitutable allow companies to achieve and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage over time. In the case of wineries, WT can be considered a strategic resource that helps to generate intangible assets [21], such as image and reputation, thereby improving the wineries' sustainable competitive advantage [22].

From this perspective, WT acts as a valuable asset by providing revenue diversification opportunities and attracting a segment of consumers interested in wine-related cultural, gastronomic and educational experiences, allowing wineries to expand their customer base and mitigate their exposure to market fluctuations [23]. Creating innovative experiences that incorporate sustainability, authenticity and local cultural elements reinforces the winery image, transforming it into a resource that is difficult for competitors to replicate [24]. Thus, under the lens of RBV, the research explores how a winery image and reputation strengthened through WT can facilitate differentiation in a saturated market and contribute to competitive sustainability by improving the stakeholders' perception. Based on these intellectual precepts, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. WT development has a positive influence on wineries' sustainable competitive advantage
- H2. WT development has a positive influence on winery image
- H3. Winery image has a positive influence on sustainable competitive advantage
- H4. Winery image positively mediates the relationship between WT development and sustainable competitive advantage
- H5. WI has a positive influence on winery reputation
- H6. WT development has a positive influence on winery reputation
- H7. Winery reputation has a positive influence on wineries' sustainable competitive advantage
- H8. Winery reputation positively mediate the relationship between WT development and sustainable competitive advantage

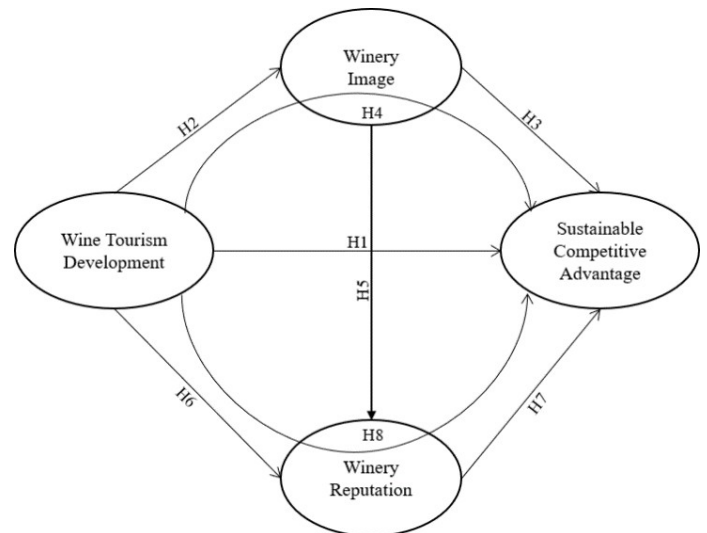


Figure 1. Theoretical model to be tested. Source: own elaboration.

3. Methodology

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the methodological components of this research, this section is structured into four key parts: (1) the research context, (2) details regarding the population and sampling methods, (3) methods for measuring variables, and (4) the analytical technique appliedX"

3.1. Research context

This research focuses on the Spanish wine industry for several important reasons. First, Spain holds a leading position in the global wine market, ranking first in vineyard surface area and in wine export volume, according to the latest data from the International Organization of Vine and Wine [25]. Second, the wine sector is a major contributor to Spain's quality of life, providing more than 400,000 jobs, and playing a crucial role in safeguarding the nation's cultural heritage and natural landscapes, which are integral to the operations of many wineries [26]. Third, since the launch of the "Wine Routes of Spain" initiative in 2008, more and more wineries have adopted this tourism model, with 37 wine routes throughout the country generating more than 90 million euros in 2023 [27]. Fifth, WT is key to the economic sustainability and viability of Spanish wineries, functioning as a direct sales channel while fostering the creation of brand ambassadors [28].

3.2. Population and sample collection

The study focuses on all wineries registered in the National Code of Economic Activities 1102, which total 4,373 wineries, according to data from the Iberian Balance Sheet Analysis System, constituting the target population. To obtain the sample, primary data was collected via an online survey, developed after a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. The survey underwent a pilot test for content validity, involving environmental and quality managers, winemakers, and other executives from Spanish wine companies to ensure that the questions were clear and

relevant to the constructs under investigation. Data collection took place from September 2023 to February 2024 using the Qualtrics platform, beginning with an initial email and followed by three reminders. A total of 229 responses were initially gathered, but after a careful evaluation, 207 were deemed valid. Responses were excluded due to incompleteness or repetitive patterns that suggested a lack of thoughtful engagement, potentially compromising the study's results. Additionally, the survey was specifically directed at winery CEOs, who have strategic understanding of their operations, thereby providing the necessary insights for the research.

3.3. Variable Measurement

The study ensured construct reliability and validity by using validated scales. Specifically, an 8-item scale from Lavandoski *et al.* [4] was employed to measure WT development, a 5-item scale by Guimarães *et al.* [5] for sustainable competitive advantage, a 4-item scale from Gürlek *et al.* [10] to assess winery image, and a 5-item scale from Bahta *et al.* [11] for winery reputation. All scales were based on a 7-point Likert-type format. The variables were treated as reflective constructs, with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), winery size, and age included as control variables. PDO was a binary variable, coded as 1 for wineries with at least one PDO and 0 for those without. Winery size was defined according to OECD [29] guidelines, and winery age was determined by the number of years from the establishment to 2024.

3.4. Analytical approach

The proposed theoretical model was evaluated using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method with SmartPLS software, version 4.1.0.2. This approach is widely recognized for its ability to analyze relationships among variables, including those that are latent, making it especially suitable for research in Social Science and Management, where many concepts cannot be directly observed [30]. The choice of PLS-SEM was justified by several factors: first, it allows for a comprehensive analysis of both direct and mediated relationships within a single model [31]; second, the study's sample size met the minimum requirement of 100 participants needed for PLS-SEM applications [32]; and third, the method's effectiveness has been demonstrated in previous studies in the wine industry, examining topics such as WT, environmental management and competitive advantage, further supporting its suitability for this research [33, 24].

4. Results

The results demonstrated that all direct and indirect relationships were positive and statistically significant, underscoring the substantial impact of WT development on sustainable competitive advantage, as well as the positive mediating roles of winery image and reputation. The empirical findings confirmed all eight proposed hypotheses, revealing significant positive relationships:

WT development was shown to affect sustainable competitive advantage (H1: $\beta=0.395$, $t=5.048$, $p<0.001$), WT development influenced winery image (H2: $\beta=0.250$, $t=3.147$, $p<0.001$), winery image impacted sustainable competitive advantage (H3: $\beta=0.362$, $t=4.856$, $p<0.001$), winery image influenced winery reputation (H5: $\beta=0.417$, $t=6.425$, $p<0.001$), WT impacted winery reputation (H6: $\beta=0.348$, $t=4.479$, $p<0.001$), and winery reputation affected sustainable competitive advantage (H7: $\beta=0.245$, $t=3.018$, $p<0.001$). Partial mediations were also identified: winery image positively mediated the relationship between WT and sustainable competitive advantage (H4: $\beta=0.091$, $t=1.715$, $p=0.036$), and winery reputation positively mediated the effect of WT on sustainable competitive advantage (H8: $\beta=0.086$, $t=1.698$, $p=0.048$), resulting in a total effect of WT on sustainable competitive advantage of 0.470.

To deepen the interpretation of the model's dynamics, the mediating roles of winery image and winery reputation were examined by comparing the effect of WT development on sustainable competitive advantage with and without the inclusion of these constructs in the structural equation. When both mediators were included, the direct effect of WT development on sustainable competitive advantage decreased from $\beta = 0.395$ ($t = 5.048$, $p < 0.001$) to $\beta = 0.218$ ($t = 2.716$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a partial mediation effect. The indirect effect through winery image was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.091$, $t = 1.715$, $p = 0.036$), as was the indirect effect through winery reputation ($\beta = 0.086$, $t = 1.698$, $p = 0.048$). These findings suggest that a substantial portion of the influence exerted by WT development on competitive outcomes is transmitted through the internal perceptions that the organization holds regarding its image and reputation. Moreover, the significant relationship between winery image and winery reputation ($\beta = 0.417$, $t = 6.425$, $p < 0.001$) supports the presence of a sequential mediation structure, whereby WT enhances winery image, which in turn strengthens winery reputation, ultimately contributing to the development of a sustainable competitive advantage.

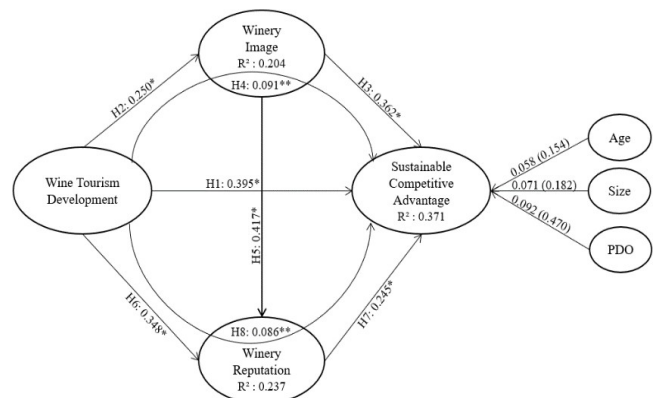


Figure 2. Results of the conceptual framework

Notes: ** $p<0.001$ * $p<0.05$ Source: own elaboration

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study are in line with recent contributions such as those of Gómez-Rico *et al.* [34], Sorcaru *et al.* [24] and Shi *et al.* [12], which highlight the strategic importance of WT in enhancing winery competitiveness through improvements in image and reputation, a view that is reinforced in the present research through the identification of statistically significant associations between WT development and the internal perception of both image and reputation, as well as their relationship with sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, in contrast to earlier studies that addressed these constructs in isolation, this work adopts an integrated perspective that enables a detailed analysis of their interaction within the strategic framework of the winery. The results point to a sequential mechanism in which WT contributes to an enhanced perception of image, which then strengthens the organization's understanding of its own reputation and, in turn, its assessment of competitive positioning.

The presence of divergent perspectives in the existing literature merits careful attention, as prior studies such as those conducted by Carmichael and Senese [35] and Castro and Giraldo [36] have identified potential tensions between the expansion of WT and the pursuit of broader sustainability objectives, particularly in cases where the growth of tourism activities lacks strategic coordination or disregards environmental considerations, which complicates the interpretation of WT as a consistent source of long-term competitive advantage, especially in the absence of direct evidence on environmental outcomes in the present study. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous research has empirically tested a model that incorporates the combined mediating role of winery image and reputation in the relationship between WT development and sustainable competitive advantage. Drawing on the conceptual foundations of the RBV, this study proposes a theoretical structure that contributes to a better understanding of how wineries interpret and manage intangible resources within their strategic configuration, although further empirical work is needed to evaluate the generalizability of this model across different wine contexts.

A series of theoretical and practical implications are derived from the research findings. From a theoretical point of view, first, the study reinforces the theoretical applicability of the RBV in the context of WT, evidencing that the strategic development of WT activities can foster the generation of intangible assets with competitive relevance. In this regard, winery image and winery reputation emerge as perception-based resources shaped within the organization and directed toward key stakeholders, with the results indicating that both constructs function as strategic enablers aligned with the conditions established in the RBV framework, particularly in terms of value creation and differentiation. Second, the study clarifies the role of winery image and winery reputation as partial mediators in the relationship between WT development and sustainable competitive advantage. The findings support a sequential process in which WT

initiatives enhance the projected image of the winery, which in turn strengthens its perceived reputation. This interaction contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital and provides a theoretical basis for understanding how WT practices are translated into sustained competitive positioning. Third, the empirical validation of the proposed model allows to respond to the RQs posed. In particular, the results confirm that WT development has a positive effect on sustainable competitive advantage (RQ1), that winery image functions as a partial mediator in this relationship (RQ2), and that winery reputation also plays a mediating role (RQ3). Furthermore, these findings lead to the confirmation of the eight proposed hypotheses and reinforce the theoretical coherence of the model, offering a contribution to the understanding of how the WT development can generate competitive value in the wine sector.

From a practical standpoint, a series of practical recommendations can be formulated for winery managers aiming to reinforce their strategic positioning through WT. First, given the positive and significant effect of WT development on sustainable competitive advantage, winery managers are encouraged to formally incorporate WT into the strategic planning of the firm. This involves allocating dedicated resources, defining clear objectives linked to competitiveness, and ensuring that tourism-related activities are consistently developed across areas such as experience design, visitor services and regional promotion, in order to enhance their contribution to the winery's long-term positioning. Second, given that winery image and winery reputation partially mediate the relationship between WT development and sustainable competitive advantage, managers should ensure that all tourism activities, such as guided visits, tastings, cultural events or communication materials, are aligned with the winery's identity and values. This alignment can help the organization strengthen its internal understanding of how it is perceived, reinforcing a strategic narrative that contributes to a credible market positioning. Third, as the analysis shows a sequential effect in which WT enhances winery image and, in turn, strengthens reputation, managers should ensure long-term consistency between the experiences offered and the winery's identity, maintaining coherence across messages, services and interactions with visitors. In this context, sustaining this alignment over time can reinforce symbolic value and foster stakeholder trust, two key elements for achieving lasting competitive differentiation in the wine sector. Fourth, given the consistency of the results across wineries of different sizes, levels of experience and PDO affiliation, the strategic relevance of WT appears applicable to a broad spectrum of organizations within the sector. Under these conditions, managers of both emerging and established wineries are encouraged to design tourism strategies that reflect their specific capabilities, ensuring that such initiatives are embedded within the firm's strategic vision and contribute to long-term competitive value through meaningful experiential offerings.

Despite the contributions derived from the present research, it should be recognized that the study also suffers from certain limitations. First, it is suggested that the

geographical scope be expanded to include other wine regions, which would allow for comparative analyses between different wine production contexts, both Old and New World, providing a more complete understanding of the dynamics examined. Second, it is recommended that future studies delve deeper into the influences of winery characteristics, such as size, age and PDO affiliation, given that in this study these factors were only included as control variables. In this sense, a multi-group analysis examining their impact could provide more detailed data. Third, the present research focused mainly on two mediating variables in the relationship between WT and sustainable competitive advantage, so future studies should consider investigating other mediating or moderating variables that may significantly influence this association, thus broadening the understanding of the strategic factors that influence wineries' competitiveness. Fourth, although efforts were made to control for nonresponse bias, through comparisons between early and late respondents, no data were available from actual non-respondents. Therefore, the existence of unobserved differences between participants and non-participants cannot be completely ruled out, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Fifth, the model did not include contextual variables related to the competitive or regional environment, such as differences in institutional, touristic or market conditions across wine-producing areas, for which reason, as a future line of research, it is proposed to incorporate these contextual factors in order to capture territorial heterogeneity more precisely and strengthen the generalizability of the results.

In summary, the findings of this study offer empirical evidence on the strategic potential of WT development to enhance the sustainable competitive advantage of wineries, as winery image and reputation emerge as relevant mediating variables. In particular, the results contribute to a broader understanding of how WT can be positioned as a strategic function within the winery, moving beyond its traditional role as a complementary activity to become a source of long-term value. These contributions enrich the academic debate on tourism-led competitiveness in the wine industry and serve as a foundation for improving strategic decision-making within the sector.

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