

Article

Environmental Sustainability and Tourism—The Importance of Organic Wine Production for Wine Tourism in Germany

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Abstract: Sustainable aspects of wine tourism have become very important in recent years. The environmental sustainability of wineries, in the form of organic certification, is not a direct component of wine tourism but can nevertheless play a significant role in visiting a winery. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 32 wineries from 10 different German wine growing regions were conducted to analyze the tourism appeal, the importance of organic certification, and the future development of organic wine tourism from the producers' points of view. The results show that there is certain evidence for using organic certification as a unique selling point, but it appears that wineries are not fully exploiting these possibilities. This study could help organic wineries to get a transparent picture of the current situation in terms of relevance and to break down communication barriers in order to establish contact with potential visitors to the winery.

Keywords: organic wine; tourism; in-depth interview; communication; consumer behavior; environmental sustainability

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1. Introduction

The area of organically cultivated vineyards in Germany is 9579 hectares (2020), which corresponds to 9.4% of German cultivated areas [1]. As part of the European agricultural sector, German wine producers are expected to increase the share of organically cultivated vineyards to 25% by 2030 [2]. While the share of organic vineyards has risen strongly over the past decades, the demand for organically produced wines could not keep up with the growth in supply [3]. There are consumer groups that show a higher interest in organic wines, such as highly involved wine drinkers. Despite being only a small share of the market, this group can be highly lucrative since they are willing to spend more money than the average wine consumer [4]. This group is also highly interested in wine tourism activities [5].

Over the past years, visitor streams to German wineries have strongly increased, and so has the number of German wineries employing touristic services [6]. Visitors showing a disproportionate interest in the wine product, as well as the experiences around it, are considered wine tourists [7]. Wine tourists are usually characterized by high incomes and a willingness to pay high prices to have the experience they are looking for [8]. This makes wine tourism a very attractive market. However, this growing trend has also led to increased competition within the wine tourism market. This has created the necessity for a winemaker to distinguish itself from its competitors. One example is combining wine tourism with a focus on organic production methods [9].

It can be concluded that consumers of organic wine, as well as wine tourists, have a higher willingness to pay to adequately satisfy their respective needs. Hence, it could be assumed that the combination of these two would be a promising match. Whereas in Italy,

it has been shown that the number of wine tourists interested in organic farming has been growing [10], there are no results on the German market, and to what extent organic wine growing can have an impact on the touristic performance of a winery. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of organic wine production on the attractiveness of a tourist winery. The results can shed light on a relatively unexplored research field and provide a decision aid for German wineries regarding whether to further expand organic wine production in Germany in order to meet the requirements of the European Commission by 2030.

2. Literature Review

The German wine tourism market has already been investigated in detail. Tafel and Szolnoki [11] calculated, e.g., the economic impact of wine tourism on German wine regions and stated the direct and indirect effect of 5 billion Euro in 2019. Dreyer [12] described the increasing wine tourism activities in the last decade, and he pointed out the versatility of tourism in Germany.

Organic viticulture provides several ecological benefits, which in turn can positively affect wine growth itself. The main aim is to create healthy soils but also healthy vines and more resilient vineyards. Higher biodiversity and balance in the agro-ecosystem can be positive outcomes. However, there are also negative effects, such as lower yields. Due to this, a larger surface of land is required to produce the same amount of wine [13]. From a producer's perspective, the loss of yields has to be compensated for through a higher price. On the question of whether wine consumers are willing to pay a higher price for organic wine, there are conflicting scientific findings from different countries [14–16]. Even more so, it is unclear whether organic certification influences purchase decisions in a crucial way. In Europe, uniform certification helps producers and consumers communicate the difference between organic and conventional wine. There are a number of sub-certifications in European countries, but one in particular is regarded as the standard: The EU organic label. This certificate shows the product packaging of all food products certified as organic in Europe, including wines. In addition, various associations, of which the most prominent are Ecovin, Demeter, Bioland, and Naturland, have developed their own guidelines and certifications. What they have in common is an effort to go beyond the minimum requirements of the EU certificate. The different association certificates show that there is quite a bit of competition to meet the demands of organic consumers, but can organic certification have a positive effect on the tourist attractiveness of a winery? While there is some research on organic viticulture and wine tourism, the question of the impact of organic certification on a winery's wine tourism performance remains unanswered.

The number of scientific papers published on organic wine tourism is limited. However, these few studies have shown that organic wine tourism exists and has much potential in the future [17].

Barber et al. [18] conducted a study with 300 consumers from the USA. The results showed that wine tourists, depending on their demographic profile and personality traits, were willing to pay more for organically produced wine and to pay a fee to taste wine or visit a wine region—all to protect the natural and cultural environment.

The authors of [16] studied wine tourists' search and credibility attributes related to organic certification in southern Italy. They found that in Italy, organic certification was more important for young consumers, both when choosing tourist destinations and when deciding to buy wine. On the other hand, wine consumption, and thus interest in wine, increased with age, at least in Germany [19]. This already reveals a research gap between the potential target group for organic products and the structure of German wine drinkers, which should be investigated more precisely.

Mihailescu [20] measured the willingness to buy and pay for organic wine in South Africa and, by implication, the willingness to visit an organic winery. The findings were two-fold, with the willingness to pay for organic wines was higher if the wines had been

awarded or recommended, for example. These wineries were perceived as sustainable, and this acted as a driver for consumers to visit these wineries and discover the origin of the organic wines for themselves. However, the author concluded that further research was needed to determine whether a higher WTP actually translates into demand.

In Beaujolais, France, [21] investigated whether the reputation of the region can be positively influenced by organic wine tourism. The author found that there are several potential visitor groups that would show interest in and visit organic wineries in the region. On the one hand, these were open-minded consumers who generally had an average wine consumption but showed great interest in ecological and sustainable products, as well as enjoyed tourism activities. On the other hand, producers saw experts with above-average expertise and wine consumption as the second-most important target group for organic wine tourism.

Marlowe et al. [17] investigated the importance of terroir tourism in eco-wineries. The study used the 4E model (education, entertainment, escapism, and esthetics) to establish the relationships. The results showed that terroir tourism has the potential to be further developed by integrating elements of terroirs into eco-wine tourism. In this way, eco-wine tourism can ensure that all four elements of the 4E model are perceived as sustainable by visitors.

In their study, [22] described organic viticulture as an essential component of sustainable tourism. According to them, many consumers base their visits to a winery on its certification. This confirms the findings of [16].

In general, it can be summarized that little research has been done in the field of organic wine tourism. Apart from a few studies from other countries that have analyzed the tourism of certified wineries, the basis of knowledge and experience is rather thin. For example, it is still unclear who the guests of organic wineries are, what motivates producers to actively pursue wine tourism offers, and whether there is a difference between the perception of organic and conventional wineries in terms of tourism. Based on the publication by Szolnoki [23], three research questions (RQ) have been developed for this study.

As [20] concluded, more research into the field of wine tourism and organic certified wineries was needed to “identify whether the WTP is indeed transformed into actual demand”. Despite already published studies, it remains unclear whether organic wine production influences the touristic appeal of a winery. Therefore, the first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1: How does organic certification affect the tourist appeal of a winery?

As environmental concerns are becoming increasingly important from the consumer side, wineries have increasingly started to adapt their product portfolios and marketing strategies [21]. Wine is generally perceived as a natural product. This might be one of the reasons why wine is often promoted in combination with environmental attributes [9]. In terms of promotion, organic wine can be complex. While organically produced food is more important to young consumers [16], most wine is consumed by older age groups [24]. It appears that there is a discrepancy between the potential target group for organic products on one side and wine on the other.

Communication plays an important role in wine tourism [25], and wine is often promoted in combination with environmental attributes [9]. In Germany, [26] found that 40% of consumers are unaware that organic wine exists. Later, [3] found that wineries often did not communicate the production of organic wine. The reason for producing organic wines is related more to their own values and attitudes than to promotional outcomes. For them, this seems to be a natural thing, which is why they put this aspect in the background when communicating their wines. The authors concluded that there is a clear gap in how winemakers communicate the benefits of organic wine to consumers. There appear to be discrepancies between environmental practices and wineries’ promotional strategies. Translated into the touristic perspective, this contrast in target groups could have led to the conclusion that supply “does not currently live up to the

expectations of the customer segment wishing to experience organic wine tourism” [20]. To date, it is unclear whether organic wineries in Germany include their certification in promotional strategies to attract potential winery visitors. Hence, the second research question is as follows:

RQ2: How important is organic certification in the marketing strategy of wineries to tourists?

As mentioned, environmental considerations are now an increasingly important factor in both production and purchasing behaviors. This has led to increased competition for the growing market, which has resulted, *inter alia*, in a variety of different certifications. This variety can be quite confusing for the consumer, resulting in a “lack of clarity about what consumers think about the wines” [15]. Jones [27] commented: “While sound sustainability developments have occurred within the wine industry, it is becoming increasingly critical to begin orienting the industry’s innovation, communication, and experiences towards consumer definitions, not solely industry definitions, of sustainability to ensure these efforts are relevant and promote economic vitality”. Santos et al. [28] (p. 720) argued that “wine tourism [...] has to provide for the creation of unique and genuine tourism experiences, which must be more personalized and differentiated”.

This leads to a two-fold problem: On the one hand, consumer orientation towards increasing demand for organic products has been developed and is still growing. On the other hand, it seems that the organic product market is so confusing that it is of little help in terms of purchasing decisions. In addition, wineries that carry these different kinds of certifications need to somehow distinguish themselves within the organic wine market. Last, producers do not communicate the certification enough, which makes it even harder for consumers to know what to choose. This all goes beyond the classic complexity inherent in wine knowledge, which is already quite confusing. Adding the touristic aspect can be challenging for both the consumer and the producer. There is a need for clarity about the direction in which the wine market is developing. It could be argued that the producer side is easier to evaluate since they do not suffer from the choice of consumption. However, there is a research gap in what direction the organic wine tourism market will develop. This leads to our final research question:

RQ3: What do German winemakers expect for the future development of organic wine tourism?

3. Materials and Methods

This study follows the strict rule of data collection and analysis described and applied by Tafel and Szolnoki [6]. In the form of expert interviews, a primary qualitative research method was chosen to gather information for this study. By collecting data directly from experts and key decision-makers, a deeper understanding was acquired of the role of organic certification and wine tourism activities [29]. The interviews were conducted online or by telephone, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software platform. The authors used an inductive research approach to analyze the data, in which categories were determined during and not before the analysis. This approach offers flexibility and is often used for topics that have not been extensively analyzed in the past [30].

A semi-structured catalog with open-ended questions allowed for a new and unexpected phenomenon to be revealed, which required creativity and flexibility for analyzing the content [31] while adhering to criteria of validity, reliability, and replicable inferences from the content gathered [32].

Interviews were held from August to October 2020, capturing the wineries’ responses after the first and before the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees were asked about three themes that would pertain to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3: First, the importance of organic certification for the attractivity of the winery, second, organic certification in the communication of wine tourism, and third, the expectation of how wine tourism of organic wineries will change in the future.

The criteria of choice for the interview partners were organic certification and wine tourism activities. The ten most frequent German wine-growing regions were selected for the survey. In these regions, we collected all organic certified wineries that offer wine touristic activities and chose wineries randomly, considering geographical differences and size in order to operate with a heterogeneous sample. To preserve anonymity, the wineries were coded. Table 1 shows the number, the region, and the size of the wineries interviewed, as well as the total wine grape areas in the region.

Table 1. Wine-growing region, number, and size of interviewed wineries.

Wine-Growing Region	Number of Interviewed Wineries	Size of the Interviewed Wineries (Hectare)	Size of the Wine-Growing Region (Hectare) [33]
Ahr	2	5, 7	552
Baden	4	6, 8, 15, 23	15,509
Franken	3	4, 9, 25	6144
Mosel	3	4, 12, 15	8744
Mittelrhein	2	5, 12	468
Nahe	3	10, 14, 18	4239
Pfalz	4	15, 18, 22, 32	23,684
Rheinhessen	4	11, 17, 30, 35	26,860
Rheingau	3	10, 14, 20	3185
Württemberg	4	3, 10, 16, 21	11,394
Total	32	466	100,779

The interviews were analyzed by means of content analysis. Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing a large amount of text into fewer content categories based on the explicit rules of coding [32]. We quantified and analyzed the presence, meanings, and relationships of the words and concepts in the interviews, and then, we made inferences about the messages within the texts [34,35]. Deductive and inductive schemes were used to code the open-ended questions. Similar to other studies, external validity was enhanced by drawing analytical conclusions based on the literature review [36,37].

4. Results and Discussion

When analyzing the wine tourism activities offered by the interviewees, it became evident that these organic-certified wineries did not differ significantly from non-certified wineries. In principle, all the interviewed wineries offer a mix of different wine tourism activities [38]. Tastings on request or individually arranged are the most frequently mentioned activities. Almost all wineries have vineyards hiking or walking in their portfolios, too. Furthermore, wine events and wine parties were also frequently mentioned. These include traditional wineries and street festivals. About half of the wineries offer their overnight accommodation directly at or not far from the winery, but only a few of them have caravan parking facilities.

In the following part of the chapter, the research questions RQ1–RQ3 will be analyzed separately.

4.1. Organic Certification and the Attractiveness of the Winery

The first question focused on the evaluation of the interviewees, what they think consumers value about their winery, and what the reason might be that they visit this winery (RQ1). For this purpose, the number of mentions per category and the correlation between the value and reasons were taken into account. Almost all wineries pointed out

four main values of the winery from the consumers' point of view: Personal connection, authenticity, high quality, and organic certification.

The wineries attach great importance to the personal relationship between the customer and the winery, as well as to friendliness or politeness. They assume that customers value proximity to the winemaker and the trusting relationship. Several wineries emphasized, therefore, personal contact and the associated relationship that develops between the customer and the winery. Interviewees also mentioned the quality of the wine as one of the most important aspects. They emphasized here the high quality of their wines and, at this point, brought up the differences between organic and conventional wines by mentioning the abandonment of chemical and systemic fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and insecticides, as well as various additives. According to the wineries, value authenticity also contributes to customer satisfaction. In this context, the winery representatives highlighted not only the importance of building, architecture, and nature, but also the fact that the winemakers and owners of the wineries showed up in the tasting room and personally took care of the customers. Some interviewees expressed that "...this is what customers appreciate". The certification of the winery was also rated as a significant factor in satisfying consumers. As Figure 1 shows, the aforementioned factors not only influence the value of the winery assessed by the tourists but also affect each other. Organic certification, for example, has a significant impact on personal connection, authenticity, and highly perceived wine quality and vice versa. This result demonstrates that certification is not only one of the main factors. At the same time, it influences the overall image in an indirect way.

The interview partners also listed other aspects, such as atmosphere, location, origin, product range, or environmental awareness. However, these primarily support the already described main factors. Comparing the results with the previous literature, it becomes obvious that visiting organic wineries provides an experience with a strong hedonic nature. It contains the dimensions entertainment, education, and aesthetics [39]. Our findings are in line with this model. A personal connection and superior wine quality belong to entertainment, organic certification to education and location, and atmosphere to aesthetics.

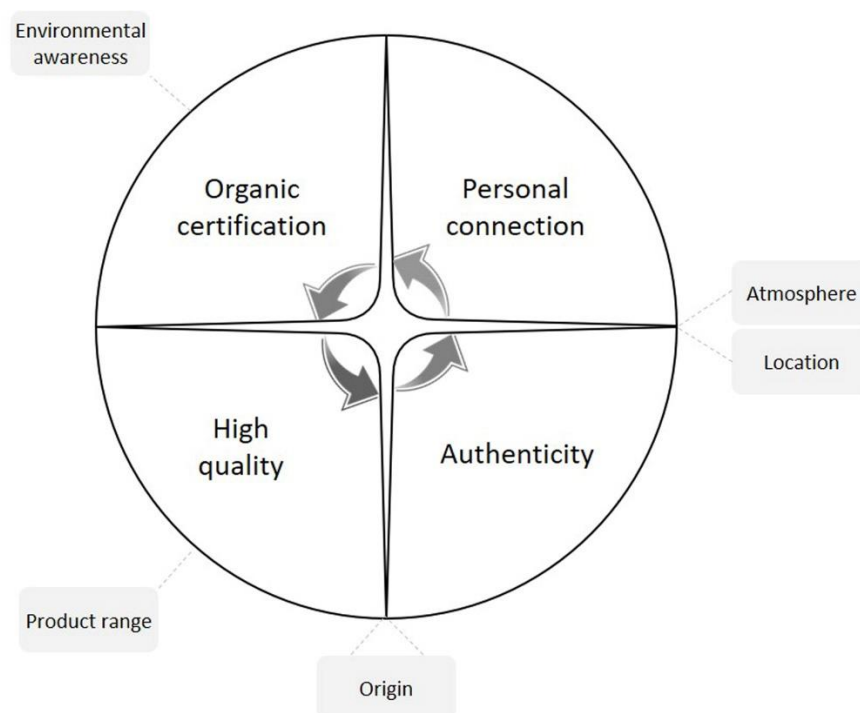


Figure 1. How organic wineries assess their value from a consumer's point of view.

As part of RQ1, we wanted to know how consumers react when they learn that the winery is organic-certified. The results showed that even consumers who did not know the winery before reacted very positively to organic certification. This is what all interviewees—without any exceptions—stated. When analyzing their answers, it was apparent that tourists were positively surprised and, at the same time, their curiosity increased, so several of them wanted to learn more about organic winemaking. This confirms the importance of the educational characteristics of wine tourism, as described by [40].

4.2. The Importance of Organic Certification in Communication

As indicated by [22], communication in wine tourism plays a significant role. The main objective of a winery communicating tourism-related activities is not only to increase awareness but also to motivate people to visit the winery. Organic wine production has increased significantly in recent years, and the number of wine tourists interested in ecological farming is also growing [10]. However, reaching the circle of potential wine tourists requires communication. In addition, [9] stated that wine is often promoted in terms of its environmental attributes. For this reason, we investigated the importance of organic certification in the communication process of the selected wineries (RQ2).

The results indicate that all wineries use a mix of different communication channels (Figure 2). Online communication—including the maintenance of webpage content and feeding social media channels with information—clearly dominates among the communication measures, followed by print media, primarily newsletters. Despite the high level of online communication, some wineries still apply direct contact, using telephone conversations or sending letters to end customers. Participating in events, fairs, and public relations appears last on the list.

The communication focuses on the wines and the family of the winery. The interviewees said, “The first impression of the winery should communicate authenticity... and wine and family are the best tools for this”. The main motive, apart from creating an authentic picture from the very beginning, is to convey the image of the winery, show the depth of the portfolio and communicate the quality of the wines. Organic certification is also part of communication. However, the certification does not get the leading position in communication compared to the other communication elements mentioned before. This can be traced back to the reason found by [3] that organic winemakers produce organic wines due to their personal convictions and that there is a clear gap in how they communicate these benefits to consumers.

In the case of communication about wine tourism-related topics, organic certification appears even more infrequently. The interviewed winery operators explained that the organic logo appears on every website, printed documents, and the product (label). Therefore, it is part of the communication strategy. However, a logo is a visual sign that does not directly explain organic winemaking. That is why wineries emphasized the importance of organic certification, mainly in face-to-face conversations with consumers during meetings and seminars in the winery or at an event. This is not an “in advance” communication, but education in the winery when tourists are there or at events and fairs when consumers visit the stand. According to their communication styles, the wineries can be classified into four different types: (1) Storytellers combining organic winemaking with other information and spreading the stories mainly through word-of-mouth, (2) self-evident communicators purposely deciding not to communicate organic certification directly because they are convinced that the logo already tells visitors the difference from conventional wineries, (3) modern communicators, particularly using web pages and social media channels, to spread information about the organic certification of the winery, and (4) newcomers that have been certified recently and are carefully starting to communicate the organic character of the winery.

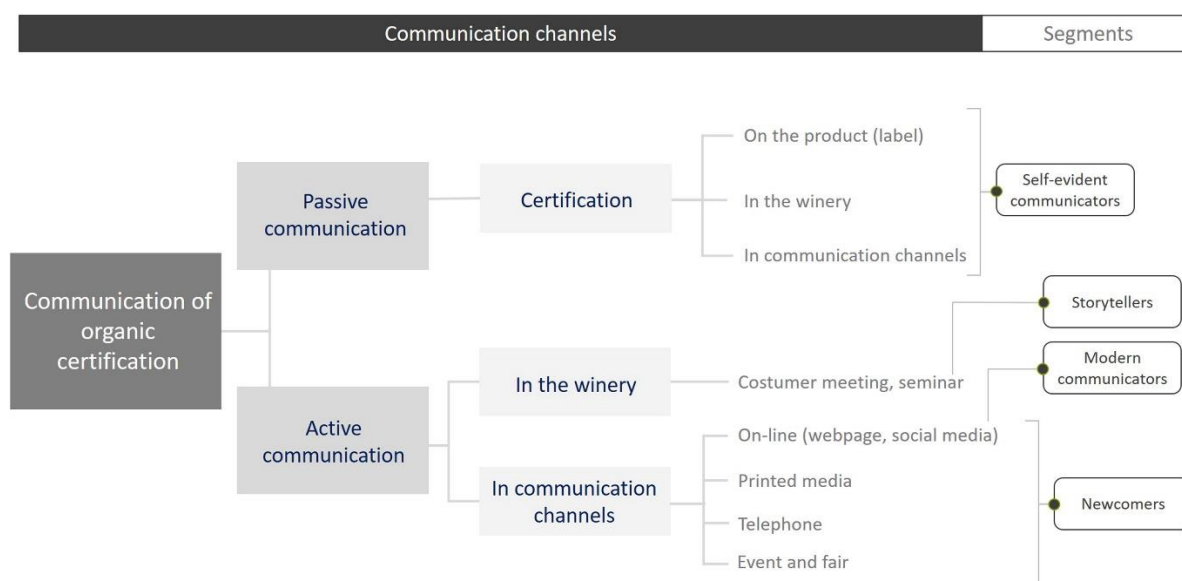


Figure 2. Methods and segments of communication about organic certification.

4.3. Expectations Regarding Future Development in the Field of Organic Wineries and Wine Tourism

As Figure 3 indicates, almost all interview partners predicted the positive development of organic wineries in the future. They mainly argued that “in some years, organic will be the standard and not an exception anymore”. Due to the predicted expansion of organic winemaking, interviewees assumed that there would be less competition between organic and conventional wineries in terms of wine tourism. However, it remains unclear to what extent this prediction is accurate and how quickly wineries in Germany will convert to organic wine production, especially after 2021 vintage, when organic wineries experienced significant problems with diseases due to the above-average rainfall in the first half of the year [41].

Organic wineries expect a change in consumer behavior in the coming years. They expect an increasing interest in wine production and, at the same time, a kind of curiosity and a critical attitude towards wine production. In addition, a higher share of younger consumers and a more conscious way of choosing organic wines are positive indicators that wineries mentioned during their interviews. Age has already been mentioned as an influencing factor, e.g., by [14], who stated that organic certification has become more and more important among young adults.

All these factors should improve the image of organic wineries as a touristic destination and provide more awareness among consumers of wine touristic attractions.

In addition, a change in wine-related touristic opportunities that might influence the orientation of wine tourists’ orientation is assumed for the future. The expected changes concern the different dimensions of activities. A general increase in healthier activities by wine-growing regions is anticipated, covering hiking, cycling, or different water-related sports. This could attract lifestyle- and health-oriented tourists who may also be interested in organic foods and beverages.

Moreover, exclusive offerings will be expected from wineries and as part of individual tourism, which has been predicted to be one of the main trends after the COVID-19 crisis. Here, organic wineries can benefit because they are special compared to conventional wineries. This finding ties well with the results by [25]: “wine tourism [...] has to provide for the creation of unique and genuine tourism experiences, which must be more personalized and differentiated”.

Furthermore, sustainable wine tourism offerings have a better chance of attracting tourists in the future. This refers not only to wine but also to food and accommodation.

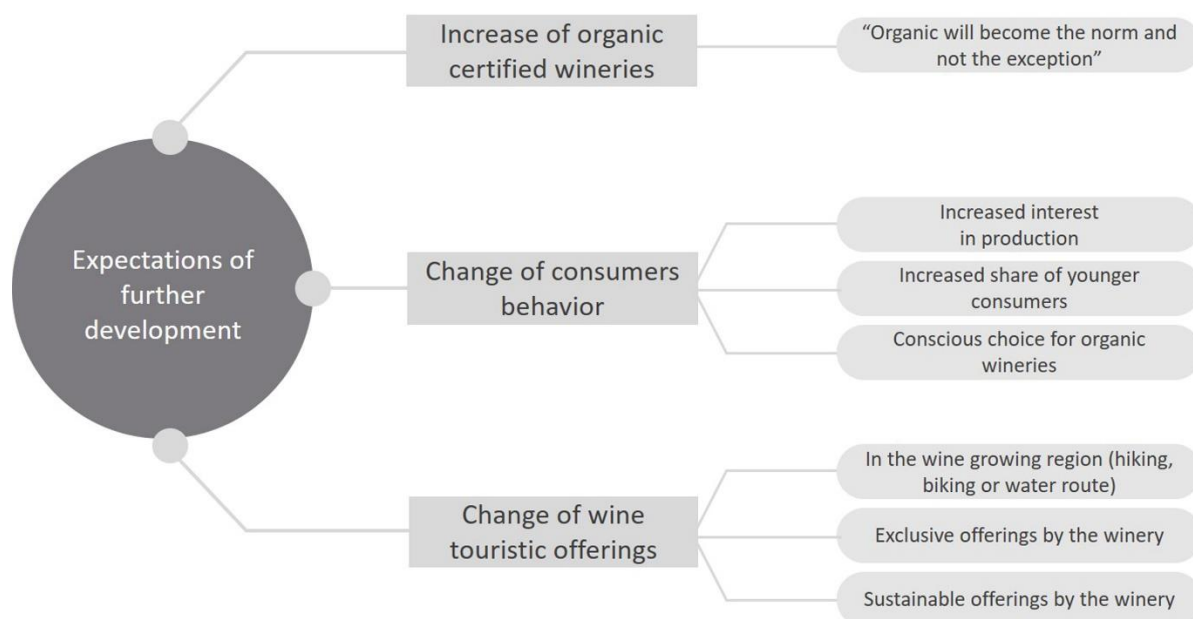


Figure 3. Expectation for the future.

5. Conclusions

According to official statistics [33], the share of wine purchased directly from wineries is 12%. In addition, 4% of the total off-trade volume is sold on wineries' websites. With 14 million hectolitres of still wines in the retail market [19], it can be stated that German wineries sell more than two million hectolitres of wine directly to consumers every year. This volume illustrates the importance of wine tourism and direct sales in Germany. Organic vineyards cover approximately 10% of the total German grapevine surface [1], and the trend is growing.

Of course, for organic wineries, certification plays an important role, and it determines production methods. In terms of wine tourism operations, however, organic certification is only one of the factors affecting the attractiveness of the winery. Managers and owners of organic wineries emphasized the importance of the wine quality, authentic location, personal contact, and connecting with visitors and, as an environmental aspect, organic farming. These four factors and the interaction between them shape the value of an organic winery from the consumer's perspective. Wine tourists are interested in organic farming. Nevertheless, certification does not appear to be the main reason why people visit a winery (RQ1).

This also has an effect on wineries' communication strategies. The wines and the families are in the spotlight of communication. For many organic wineries, the certification logo is the only communication about organic production with the argument "...consumers know the meaning of the certification and they are aware of it..." This, however, contradicts the finding by [26] that 40% of consumers do not even know about the existence of organic wines and that organic wine logos are less known (RQ2).

In regard to future expectations and development, the interview partners indirectly predicted the increase of certification as part of the changing behavior of consumers, the interest in wine production and the number of consumers with higher engagement towards organic increase. Certification will play a more significant role, both in the communication and in the assessment of wineries (RQ3). As the results indicate, there is certain evidence to use organic certification as a unique selling proposition, but it seems that wineries do not fully exploit all of these opportunities. This study could help organic wineries create a transparent picture of the current situation in terms of importance and communication and reduce communication barriers to build up contact with potential visitors to the winery.

Wine tourism linked to organic farming could play a magnetic role and provide a robust tool for sustainable development not only in Germany but also in other wine-producing countries [42]. In line with previous research findings, communicating about organic certification was critical for organic wineries to better inform consumers. In addition, there is clear evidence that the main challenge of organic wineries is the lack of information from the perspective of consumers [19,43,44]. However, this requires a higher level of communication with consumers [3]. According to [3], the visibility of organic certification should be increased, and at the same time, there should be an active and clear exchange of information. A combination of communication ways, such as classical print media, web page, Social Media channels, and direct communication with visitors at the winery, should increase the awareness of consumers. Especially emphasizing the environmental dimension of sustainability may increase the willingness of special target groups to visit an organic certified winery. In the following years, the wine industry expects an increase in more sustainability-conscious consumers who are interested in environmentally friendly products and producers. This change offers the opportunity for increased communication to reach a large number of consumers who are willing to purchase organic wine and, if they are in the region, visit the winery itself. This combination—the increased interest of consumers and greater communication from wineries—will provide a unique opportunity to benefit from highly motivated visitors. This can be supported by the German organic certification associations or with the help of retailers and the gastronomy sector.

Summarizing the results of the study, we can conclude that organic certification has the potential to convince wine tourists to visit an organic certified winery. As mentioned above, a new generation of potential winery visitors with special attention to environmental aspects could be an incubator for organic wine tourism in the future. The authors share the view of the surveyed wineries and do not see any disadvantages from the consumer's side when visiting a certified winery.

Because this study operated with a limited number of expert interviews using a qualitative approach, the results cannot be generalized to the total population. However, due to adequate sampling—a heterogeneous sample in terms of the geography and size of the wineries—the findings of this study provide a general overview of the current situation of organic wineries that are involved in wine tourism. Based on this limitation, we recommend conducting a quantitative study, (1) with organic wine producers in order to validate these findings and (2) with consumers directly at the winery to analyze their attitude toward the value and communication of organic wineries.

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