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Assessing the Impact of Social Media on Family Business Performance: The Case of Small Wineries in Split-Dalmatia County

Marina Lovrinčević *, Vlatka Škokić and Ivana Bilić

Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, University of Split, Cvite Fiskovića 5, 21000 Split, Croatia; vskokic@efst.hr (V.Š.); ibilic@efst.hr (I.B.)
* Correspondence: mlovrinc@efst.hr

Abstract: This study explores how small family wineries in the Croatian Split-Dalmatia County integrate social media into their marketing and business strategies, focusing on the interplay between tradition, family identity, and digital innovation. Utilising a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with winery owners to explore their use of social media platforms, their sales and distribution strategies, and their perceptions of Croatia's EU membership. The results show that social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, serve as highly personalised, low-cost marketing tools, predominantly managed by younger family members and used to convey authenticity, family heritage, and local identity. Despite limited resources and professional marketing expertise, these wineries take an intuitive, do-it-yourself approach and rely on direct customer relationships, storytelling, and experiential offerings to drive loyalty. While EU membership is generally seen as beneficial for tourism and funding opportunities, bureaucratic complexity remains a significant obstacle. This study highlights the importance of leveraging cultural heritage for digital content and emphasises the need for targeted policy support to improve digital competencies and reduce administrative barriers. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how family-run SMEs can gain and sustain competitive advantage by blending tradition with digital marketing practices in a rapidly evolving business environment.

Keywords: social media; small family wineries; business performance; Split-Dalmatia County

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1. Introduction

In the modern business world, often referred to as the digital age, social media is seen as a new marketing tool for advertising, serving as a new communication channel to shape the relationship between the brand and its customers (Hsu, 2012). The quality of communication and brand advertising is gaining attention as it is crucial for business success and allows companies to present their value proposition (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Paul (2020) emphasises that markets are becoming increasingly competitive, forcing family businesses to invest in marketing activities in order to compete and succeed in a dynamic environment. According to Gherghina et al. (2020), innovation plays a crucial role in new marketing and management models, especially in family businesses. Regarding the new marketing models, Pentina et al. (2012) emphasise that social media has proven to be effective in overcoming problems related to limited resources for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The budget constraints on marketing investments and the flexibility of small businesses allow them to utilise social media for marketing purposes and new product

development. However, the decision to incorporate social media into small business marketing is not an automatic one. Challenges include the lack of sound empirical results and the difficulty of establishing objective metrics to evaluate their effectiveness (Lavrakas, 2010). During the pandemic, small businesses proved to be vulnerable, mainly due to the lack of e-commerce services and the lag in the adoption of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) (Grande et al., 2023). As digital media drastically changes the way businesses interact with their customers, small businesses can gain a competitive advantage over their larger rivals by expanding their operations on the platform of AI-driven opportunities. However, limited budgets and resources, as well as a lack of skilled personnel and the complexity of integration, may limit the potential benefits of digital transformation and technology adoption in small and medium-sized enterprises (Faruque et al., 2024). To this end, this study looks at the adoption of innovation in small family wineries and examines the importance of social media in the business and marketing strategies of small family wineries. It also analyses the distribution channels and marketing efforts related to the promotion of these wineries.

2. Theoretical Framework

Family businesses are unique organisational forms (Xi et al., 2015) that play a crucial role in economic development (Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). SMEs play a dominant role in the European economy. In total, 99% of all registered businesses are family-owned and create about 85% of new jobs (European Commission, 2019). The most commonly used conceptualisation of family business encompasses a system of overlapping circles categorised as family, business and ownership (Gersick et al., 1997), where the distinctive characteristics and uniqueness of this business model are said to result from a clear intention for intergenerational sustainability and from the hard-to-duplicate capabilities or "familiness" (Chrisman et al., 2005, p. 557). Family businesses are therefore characterised by the overlap between the family and business subsystems, emphasising the emotional bond between the two (Brinkerink et al., 2020). Family businesses are defined as companies that are owned by one or more families, which leads to a high degree of family control, a high degree of family involvement in the management of the company, and a corporate culture that is significantly characterised by the owner family (Chrisman & Patel, 2012).

The advantages of family businesses compared to other ownership structures include several factors that contribute to their superior performance: higher motivation of family members, better opportunities for personal development, and the endeavour to build a legacy and heritage that will be passed on to the next generation (long-term orientation) are important differentiators of family businesses. The most common obstacles faced by family businesses are limited financing options, tax issues and balancing family, ownership and business commitments. Recruiting and retaining qualified employees and the need for education and specific training to effectively manage the family business are among the challenges faced by these businesses (Strazovska & Jancikova, 2016). López-Nicolás et al. (2021) argue that companies today are also forced to innovate their business models to create sustainable value in all economic, social and environmental dimensions to ensure their survival and growth.

The openness and approach of family businesses to business improvement and innovation processes differ from those of non-family businesses (Classen et al., 2014; De Massis, 2015; De Massis et al., 2016; Kotlar et al., 2013). Family businesses are often considered hesitant when it comes to investing in R&D activities, but at the same time, they show above-average growth precisely because of their innovative practices (Duran et al., 2016). Innovation in marketing has become an important factor in the success of family businesses (Binz Astrachan et al., 2019). Promoting the company as a family business has a positive

impact on its performance, particularly in areas such as employee satisfaction, customer loyalty and financial results (Gallucci et al., 2015). As part of their efforts to innovate their business and marketing activities, family businesses are increasingly utilising social media, reflecting a growing trend in family businesses (Raman & Menon, 2018). Despite facing budget constraints and having smaller teams, family businesses are utilising social media to encourage open innovation (Hitchen et al., 2017). This strategy not only allows them to reduce spending on innovation activities, but also to harness the power of extensive customer involvement in innovation processes (Raman & Menon, 2018).

The relationship between social media use and family business performance can be analysed through the lens of the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT). The RBV assumes that organisations can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging unique, valuable and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991). In the context of family businesses, these resources often include deep-rooted local knowledge, family identity and authenticity. DCT extends this perspective by emphasising an organisation's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to respond to a rapidly changing environment (Teece, 2007). Social media platforms serve as dynamic capabilities that enable organisations to identify market opportunities, exploit them through digital engagement, and change their communication and marketing practices in line with evolving consumer expectations (Durkin et al., 2013). Family businesses represent a special case for analysing digital transformation, due to the central role of "familiness", defined as a bundle of unique resources rooted in family involvement and interaction (Habberson et al., 2003; Zellweger et al., 2010). Chrisman et al. (2005) emphasised the need for future research to explore what makes family businesses unique, in particular, how family involvement serves as a core source of this uniqueness. They presented two ways of understanding this involvement: one focuses on the structural aspects, such as family ownership and control, while the other emphasises the actual behaviours, shared resources and capabilities that the family brings to the business. Building on this, recent theories examining the interaction between family and business systems suggest that the organisational identity of a family business could be a key competitive advantage, (Sundaramurthy & Kreiner, 2008). Familiness is frequently regarded as a distinctive factor that sets family firms apart from non-family firms and helps distinguish high-performing family businesses from those that underperform (Pearson et al., 2008). Recent research shows how social media reinforces familiness by enabling emotional storytelling, intergenerational narratives, and conveying authenticity through user-generated content (Obermayer et al., 2022). This aligns with the micro-foundations of Teece's's (2020) dynamic capabilities, where familiness enables small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to sense opportunities through social listening, seize them through rapid content creation and transform them by aligning digital practices to legacy values.

In addition, promotion of the identity of a family business through marketing can improve perceived authenticity, emotional engagement and customer loyalty (Beck & Kenning, 2015; Carrigan & Buckley, 2008). These companies often rely on informal communication, emotional labour and long-term relationship strategies that fit well with the ethos of social media platforms. In the agri-food and wine sectors, the importance of family brands is particularly pronounced. Wine products often have a symbolic and experiential value and therefore lend themselves well to narrative-led marketing (Sigala, 2018). Visual storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and family history play a crucial role in differentiating brands and fostering customer loyalty. Studies of wineries in the United States, Italy, and other European countries have shown that strategic use of platforms such as Instagram and Facebook can increase brand visibility, strengthen authenticity, and increase sales through emotional resonance and direct engagement (Capitello et al., 2014; Thach et al., 2016). On

the other hand, the study of wineries in Greece showed that while the majority of wineries support their digital presence mainly through Facebook and Instagram, interactions on the wineries' social media profiles remain minimal, with low consumer engagement and total reactions on both platforms (Bitakou et al., 2024). This finding suggests that a more comprehensive approach to brand engagement should be applied to capture audience attention and encourage participation that could be beneficial from a performance perspective. Hu et al. (2024) investigated the role of social media marketing in green product repurchasing intention and found that companies should incorporate green values, environmental concerns, and brand image into their social media marketing strategies to enhance consumer engagement and repurchase intentions. This finding suggests that integrating family values into social media marketing strategies could be instrumental in leveraging social media presence for business growth.

Social media adoption in small family wineries is influenced by both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, the platforms offer low-cost tools with high reach that allow companies to communicate directly with niche markets (Michaelidou et al., 2011). On the other hand, such firms often lack the professional expertise, financial resources or strategic focus to fully utilise these tools (Durkin et al., 2013). This leads to intuitive do-it-yourself marketing approaches that reflect both the ingenuity and limitations of small family businesses. Recent studies (Haller et al., 2021) show that family wineries overcome resource constraints by repurposing family labour (e.g., younger family members taking care of social media), sharing digital skills with local influencers, and using available EU rural development grants for digital upskilling. In the wine sector, social media not only supports marketing, but also promotes wine tourism. Sigala (2023) notes that geotags on Instagram increase the number of tasting-room visits and additional sales, while Del Vecchio et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of digital generational change, with younger followers favouring platforms such as TikTok to fill skill gaps. The impact of social media on family business performance includes both financial and non-financial dimensions. Social networks contribute to financial performance by increasing market reach and improving customer loyalty. At the same time, non-financial performance is boosted by strengthening the family's reputation, engagement and social capital (Ogunnaike & Kehinde, 2013; Surin & Ab Wahab, 2013). However, measuring these contributions remains a challenge due to the embeddedness of family businesses in their communities and the qualitative nature of non-financial indicators (Salvato & Moores, 2010; Zellweger & Nason, 2008). A number of studies advocate for the integration of hybrid metrics, such as social media engagement, network analysis, and digital storytelling, with traditional financial indicators. For family wineries, this approach provides a comprehensive framework to assess and enhance their reputation, social capital, and legacy in the contemporary digital era (Fernandez-Olmos et al., 2021; Tiwasing et al., 2022; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2024).

In order to investigate the usage of social media tools among small family wineries, we adopt Obermayer et al.'s (2022) categorisation of social media tools, which classifies them into five categories, depending on the purpose of use and the aim (Figure 1).

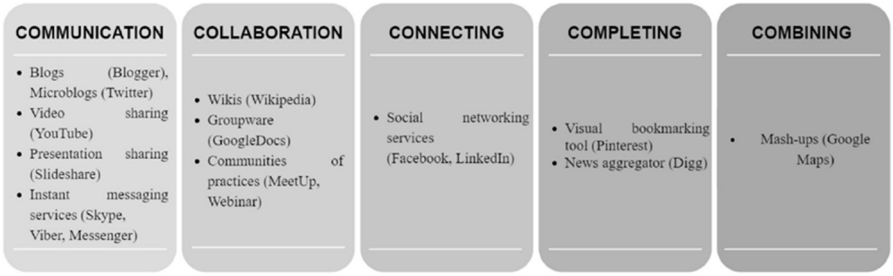

Figure 1. Categories of social media tools; source: Obermayer et al. (2022).

The communication category includes sharing, storing and publishing content, as well as exchanging opinions and influencing others (e.g., blogs, video sharing). Collaboration tools support the joint creation and editing of content, regardless of time and place (e.g., Wikipedia or GoogleDocs). The connecting category includes technologies that connect people with common interests and promote the formation of interest-based communities (social networks). Completing refers to the enhancement in content through descriptions, adding or selecting information, tagging and visualising relationships between different forms of content (e.g., Pinterest). Finally, combining tools allows users to merge, remix or reorganise content in different ways (e.g., Google Maps).

Dědková and Blažková (2014) argue that social media can be used to gain and maintain a competitive advantage; it can effectively reach the target market at a relatively low cost (Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). According to Pekkala and van Zoonen (2021), social media is increasingly being used as a primary communication channel, radically changing the way organisations interact with their customers and suppliers. Customers rely on content created via social media to form an opinion and ultimately make a purchasing decision. In addition, social media enables companies to recognise the needs and preferences of their customers more quickly, to find out what customers really value about the company, and to identify important complaints (Janouch, 2010). At the same time, they serve as an excellent networking platform and management tool by enabling an effective exchange of information and knowledge between management and employees (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Hootsuite (2020) reports that organisations primarily use social media to share news and information, communicate directly with customers and deliver marketing messages. Unlike traditional marketing communication, social media enables two-way interaction through creating, sharing, liking and commenting on content created by the organisation or its customers (Chu & Kim, 2015; Verhagen et al., 2010). This enables a quick response in crisis situations, where social media has proven to be very effective (Raman & Menon, 2018). Furthermore, social media facilitates "user- and brand-generated" content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and thus contributes to the development of strong customer relationships (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The relatively low costs associated with using social media for marketing purposes make it an ideal communication medium for small family businesses. However, this group of businesses faces significant obstacles, including a lack of financial capital, problems with external funding, difficulties in attracting qualified employees (including marketing communication experts), and underdeveloped network relationships (Abraham & Schmukler, 2017). Like other businesses, wineries use social media extensively. Duarte Alonso et al. (2013) studied wineries in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, South Africa, and the USA and found that 35% use social media. Wine is an excellent product for marketing on social media because there is a wide choice of brands and customers are often indecisive and ill-informed. Wilson and Quinton (2012) also emphasise that the "social" aspect of social media fits well with its function of enabling customers to share information and encourage them to try and discover different products.

3. Research Setting

Family businesses are particularly widespread in the wine sector. Georgiou and Vrontis (2013) state that the wine industry provides an ideal context for the development of family businesses due to its strong cultural heritage, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and deep-rooted traditions. Family wineries often preserve not only the continuity of production, but also family values and symbolism, creating an emotional connection between the product and the family legacy (Parmentier, 2011). This fusion of corporate and family identity leads to the creation of a "family brand"—a set of meanings, narratives

and associations that link the wine to the family's history, values and traditions (Bresciani et al., 2016). The symbolic and emotional value plays a crucial role in the commercialisation of the products of family wineries. Gallucci et al. (2015) emphasise how such businesses differentiate themselves by embedding symbolic meanings into their offerings, which can increase perceived authenticity and enhance consumer preference. In addition, family wineries often promote trust, authenticity, and heritage—attributes that are increasingly valued by consumers, particularly in the context of agri-food products (Craig et al., 2014; Zellweger et al., 2010).

This study focuses on family wineries in the Split-Dalmatia County, Republic of Croatia, as the research setting. The reason for this choice lies in the high prevalence of family ownership in the wine industry and in the cultural and economic importance of viticulture in Croatia. Croatia provides a particularly rich context for the study of family wineries. Viticulture is deeply rooted in the country historically and culturally, and there is evidence of wine production dating back to ancient times (Preiner et al., 2021). Today, Croatia ranks 11th among European wine-producing countries, with an annual production of around 765,000 hectolitres. The selection of Split-Dalmatia County as the focal point for this case study is well founded, given the region's significant role in Croatia's wine industry. According to the Grape and Wine Producers Register, in 2023, Split-Dalmatia County had 3749 registered grape and wine producers, the highest number among all Croatian counties. Historically, the region boasts a rich viticultural heritage. The island of Hvar, part of Split-Dalmatia County, is home to the Stari Grad Plain, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where vineyards have been cultivated since the 4th century BC. This long-standing tradition contributes to the region's unique wine culture. This concentration underscores the region's prominence in the national wine sector. These characteristics—strong family involvement, rich symbolic potential and the socio-cultural importance of wine in Croatia—make family wineries a relevant and valuable unit of analysis for the study of marketing and social media strategies. The intimate scale of these businesses often leads to more personalised, story-based branding approaches that are particularly well suited to social media marketing (Colleoni, 2013).

4. Research Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with owners of small family farms in Split-Dalmatia County. The interviews took place in March and April 2023 and aimed to gain deeper insights into the way these wineries conduct their daily business activities, especially in terms of marketing and promotion via social media, their strategies for selling and distributing wine, and their views on Croatia's membership in the European Union. Qualitative research is particularly well suited to exploring such complex, context-specific phenomena that are best understood through the meanings and interpretations of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach favours depth over breadth and allows researchers to capture rich, detailed accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). In addition, qualitative research promotes contextual understanding and theory development, both of which are essential when dealing with phenomena embedded in a particular social, cultural or organisational setting (Miles et al., 2014).

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. The participants were identified in a systematic process based on data from the Association of Winemakers of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, which keeps a register of wineries operating in Split-Dalmatia County. As Croatia does not have a specific register for family-owned wineries, eligibility was determined based on the European Union's definition of small enterprises (European Commission, 2003), which indicates companies with fewer than 50 employees.

To ensure that the wineries were family-owned, an initial telephone check determined that at least two family members were actively involved in day-to-day operations. This corresponds to the common definitions of family businesses in the scientific literature (Chrisman et al., 2005). In order to maximise diversity, purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2015) to capture as much diversity as possible in terms of business size, years of operation and engagement in digital marketing. These dimensions were considered crucial to capture the different perspectives on social media use, as digital practices may differ between long-established and newer wineries or between larger producers and smaller boutique wineries. This approach increases the credibility and transferability of the qualitative results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address concerns about selection bias, an attempt was made to include wineries with different production volumes and varying levels of social media use to obtain a more comprehensive view of the landscape of small family wineries in the region. The participants were also selected to represent a geographical spread within the county, taking into account possible differences in market access and tourism use (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between 50 and 90 min and were conducted in person. Interviewing stopped when theoretical saturation was reached (Eisenhardt, 1989). Data saturation was reached when successive interviews yielded no new codes or themes, suggesting that additional interviews would not significantly improve the depth or breadth of findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). This point was confirmed during the thematic analysis, where recurring patterns emerged among participants with different winery sizes, digital practices, and market strategies. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and anonymity was guaranteed. All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis was chosen as it allows for the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns of meaning (themes) across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is particularly suitable for exploring how small family winery owners perceive and make sense of their experiences, challenges, and strategies within the broader socio-economic and cultural context of wine production. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Coding was conducted manually and iteratively, allowing for both inductive theme development and sensitivity to patterns related to existing concepts from the literature. Throughout the process, reflexive notes were taken to ensure transparency and to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and influence on the interpretation of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Data saturation was reached when no new significant themes emerged from the interviews, suggesting that the sample size was adequate for the scope and purpose of this qualitative inquiry. The findings are organised by the main themes or meta codes that emerged during the data analysis.

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Social Media as a Personalised Marketing Tool

One of the predominant themes in all interviews was the prominent role of social media in the day-to-day business of wineries. While direct contact with customers remains at the centre of their sales approach, digital presence has become an indispensable element with which these wineries present themselves to the public. Facebook and Instagram were the most frequently used platforms, although the extent and style of use varied.

> "For me, Facebook is like a billboard in front of my house [laugh]. I don't post much, but I make sure people know when the new vintage is ready or when we are open for tastings." (Participant 5)

> "We post something almost every day—photos of the vineyard, stories during harvest, even behind-the-scenes clips from the cellar. People love seeing the process, and they often message us directly through Instagram to order wine or book a tasting." (Participant 6)

Most participants manage their social media accounts themselves. In family businesses, younger family members often take on these tasks. Communication is very personal and posts often include pictures from the vineyards, harvest preparations or family life, which emphasises the authentic and local identity of the winery.

> "People like to see who is behind the wine. When they see me carrying crates or filling barrels, the wine seems more real to them." (Participant 2)

None of the wineries surveyed used TikTok or Twitter, while LinkedIn was only occasionally used for networking. The role of websites is rather secondary, as few had functioning websites and even fewer maintained active online shops (2). Most viewed the website as something to invest in "when time allows"

> "We have a website, but we rarely update it. Instagram is enough at the moment, as guests usually check there when they want to visit us." (Participant 6)

4.1.2. Sales and Distribution Strategies

Although digital tools support advertising, all participants emphasised that the core of their business lies in direct sales. Most of them rely on personal interaction with customers, be it during visits to the winery, tastings, or wine tours.

> "Guests come here to experience the place. You can buy wine anywhere, but picking grapes or hearing my father's stories at a tasting—is what brings them back." (Participant 6)

Direct sales were supplemented by partnerships with local restaurants, cafés and specialised wine shops. A smaller number of wineries exported their products, usually to EU countries such as Germany or Austria, where Croatian communities are already familiar with their wines. Some experimented with online sales during the COVID-19 pandemic, but logistical and administrative challenges limited their long-term engagement in e-commerce.

> "We've received calls from Germany, but it's difficult to sort out all the paperwork and shipping. So we focus on local sales and tourists." (Participant 3)

Many of the wineries enrich their offer with additional experiences such as wine tastings, vineyard tours, participation in the grape harvest, and traditional culinary experiences. Visitors are welcomed as part of the story, and the family character of the wineries plays a central role in shaping this experience.

4.1.3. A Do-It-Yourself Approach to Marketing

Marketing is considered important by participants, although their strategies are mostly intuitive and practical. The use of professional marketing services is rare; instead, family members and owners take responsibility for promotion, creating a distinct "do-it-yourself" culture.

> "We don't have a strategy, but we know when the season starts, when the tourists will come—then we post more photos, show the vineyards and the people." (Participant 1)

Social media, food and wine fairs, and word-of-mouth are still the most common methods of advertising. Printed materials such as flyers and posters are occasionally

used, and no participant reported advertising on radio or television. Advertising tasks are usually undertaken by a family member or the owner, with responsibility shared informally depending on the situation.

> "My son designed the logo, my daughter manages our Instagram and my wife takes care of the orders. Everything is done internally." (Participant 8)

Although the importance of marketing is recognised, participants generally believe that the quality of their products and direct relationships with customers are the real success factors. While the participants are aware of marketing's role, they place greater value on product quality and personal interaction as the core drivers of their business success, demonstrated by the following quotes:

> "Marketing is fine, but in the end, it's the taste of the wine and the experience people have when they visit us that brings them back. Word of mouth still works best for us." (Participant 3)

> "We don't have a big budget for advertising. We focus on making good wine and treating every guest like family—that's what people remember, and that's why they return." (Participant 7)

4.1.4. The European Union: Opportunities and Challenges

The participants were generally positive or neutral about Croatia's membership in the European Union. Many felt that it had contributed to the growth of their businesses through increased tourist numbers, easier access to new markets, and the availability of EU funding. For instance, one winemaker noted:

> "Since joining the EU, we have more tourists and better visibility. And if you are patient with the paperwork, you can get good equipment or support through the funds." (Participant 4)

However, several participants expressed caution, highlighting that bureaucratic complexity often limits access to real support. The administrative burden was frequently mentioned as a significant obstacle, especially when applying for EU funds or managing export-related documents. One participant remarked:

> "Everything looks good on paper, but when you try to actually do something, you get stuck in rules and forms." (Participant 6)

4.2. Discussion

The results of this qualitative study provide a valuable insight into the business realities of small family wineries in the Split-Dalmatia region. These wineries operate at the intersection of tradition and innovation, relying on family labour, personal customer relationships and the adaptable use of digital tools. Despite limited financial and administrative resources, the owners of the wineries show creativity, flexibility and a strong commitment to authenticity. Marketing activities remain informal and personal, with social media serving as the most accessible and effective tool for engaging with consumers.

Membership of the European Union is seen as a positive influence, particularly in terms of tourism and funding opportunities, although systemic barriers continue to limit the full realisation of these benefits. The respondents' opinion is in line with more general observations about the challenges Croatia faces in fully realising the benefits of EU membership. Despite the potential benefits, the country has only utilised EU funds to a limited extent, with inefficiencies in state administration, insufficient cooperation between the public and private sectors, and irregularities in public procurement cited as contributing factors. In addition, the business environment in Croatia continues to face problems such

as bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, which can hinder the effective utilisation of EU funds (Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2023). These systemic challenges are reflected in the experiences of the small family wineries and emphasise the need to streamline administrative processes in order to fully exploit the opportunities of EU membership. Overall, these wineries are resilient and resourceful businesses that are rooted in family and local identity, and that face the changing demands of the market with ingenuity and dedication.

5. Conclusions

This study advances the understanding of how Croatian family wineries can effectively integrate their cultural heritage into digital marketing strategies, drawing on both a theoretical framework and empirical evidence. The symbolic and emotional values of family wineries, such as intergenerational knowledge, authenticity and rootedness in local tradition, are not only contextual features but are also at the centre of the design of digital marketing practices (Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023; Canziani et al., 2019).

The theoretical understanding of family businesses, which is based on the system perspective of family businesses, is reflected in the marketing strategies observed. The overlap between the family, business and ownership subsystems (Gersick et al., 1997) is evident in the way Croatian wineries utilise digital channels. Younger generations often lead the adoption of digital channels, combining traditional values with innovative approaches, supporting the findings that intergenerational collaboration is critical to sustaining innovation in family businesses (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2024). This dynamic enables the authentic sharing of family stories and heritage through digital storytelling, a practice that has been shown to strengthen brand identity and consumer trust (Canziani et al., 2019; Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023).

Cultural heritage serves as both a differentiator and a driver of consumer engagement. Research shows that wineries that leverage their cultural heritage in digital content through stories about terroir, family traditions, and the local environment build a stronger emotional connection with consumers and drive brand loyalty (Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023; Canziani et al., 2019). This is particularly important for Millennial and Gen Z consumers, who value authenticity and are more willing to engage with brands that convey genuine stories and values (Rowan, 2011).

However, this study also points to systemic barriers such as bureaucratic complexity and underutilisation of EU funds, which reflect the general challenges faced by family businesses and SMEs in Croatia (Connecting Companies, 2021). These barriers limit access to the resources needed for digital transformation and marketing innovation. To address these challenges, policy recommendations need to be specific and actionable. Policy makers should prioritise the digitalisation of administrative procedures, facilitate access to EU funding and offer targeted support, e.g., digital marketing training and grants for digital infrastructure (Connecting Companies, 2021; Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023). Public–private partnerships and regional clusters could further facilitate knowledge sharing and collective branding to improve the competitiveness of small wineries (Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023; Connecting Companies, 2021).

For practitioners, the findings suggest that it is important to build digital skills within the family, particularly by involving younger members and utilising their technological expertise. Collaborative approaches to content creation and online sales, as well as the use of analytics tools to optimise customer engagement, are recommended strategies.

Optimising the use of social media without compromising authenticity remains a key challenge. Future research should utilise qualitative ethnographic methods such as digital ethnography or participant observation to capture the nuanced interplay between tradition and digital innovation (Canziani et al., 2019; Cerquetti & Romagnoli, 2023; Bous-

quet, 2025). Longitudinal studies that track digital behaviour and consumer responses would further illuminate how authenticity is maintained or changed in digital contexts (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
RBV	Resource-Based View
DCT	Dynamic Capabilities Theory
AI	Artificial Intelligence
VR	Virtual Reality

Appendix A

Table A1. Participants in the qualitative study.

Respondent	Year Established	Production Volume (Approx.)	Permanent Employees	Family Members Involved	Digital Presence
R1	2008	15,000–20,000 L	3	4 (2 formally employed)	Facebook, Instagram
R2	2010	25,000–30,000 L	5	5 (3 formally employed)	Website, Facebook
R3	2004	20,000–25,000 L	4	3 (1 formally employed)	Facebook
R4	1983	30,000–35,000 L	6	6 (5 formally employed)	Website (no webshop), Instagram
R5	2007	10,000–15,000 L	2	3 (non-formally)	Facebook
R6	2003	25,000–30,000 L	4	4 (3 formally employed)	Website with webshop, Facebook, Instagram
R7	2012	10,000–12,000 L	1	2 (non-formally)	Facebook
R8	2008	35,000–40,000 L	6	5 (2 formally employed)	Website with webshop, Facebook, LinkedIn

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