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EXPLORING THE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF WINE TOURISM IN EMERGING AND DEVELOPED ECONOMIES

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Abstract. Over recent decades, wine tourism underwent accelerated development, evolving into a distinct segment of the tourism industry. As consumer preferences shifted towards authentic, sustainable, and culturally enriched experiences, wine tourism proved well-positioned for growth. Located at the crossroads of agriculture, the wine industry, heritage, and regional development, it reinforced its role as a strategic tool for enhancing the competitiveness of wine regions, particularly in transitioning economies. This study applied a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, including comparative analysis, content examination of theoretical models, documentary review, and linear regression. This framework enabled the exploration of correlations between wine tourism performance and macroeconomic indicators. The findings indicated that success in wine tourism was less dependent on GDP per capita and more strongly influenced by factors such as wine heritage, vineyard density, infrastructure quality, branding strategies, and communication effectiveness. Moldova illustrated this dynamic by ranking fifth globally in wine tourism, despite modest macroeconomic performance. The research contributed to consolidating wine tourism as a vector for inclusive and sustainable regional development. It also emphasized the potential of emerging economies to attain international visibility by leveraging cultural assets, innovating tourism offerings, and aligning with global sustainability trends.

Keywords: *vine tourism, sustainable development, regional economic growth, viticulture, tourism infrastructure, Wine Lovers Index.*

Rezumat. În ultimele decenii, turismul vitivinicol a cunoscut o dezvoltare accelerată, devenind un segment distinct al industriei turismului. Pe măsură ce preferințele consumatorilor s-au orientat către experiențe autentice, durabile și îmbogățite din punct de vedere cultural, turismul vitivinicol s-a dovedit bine poziționat pentru creștere. Situat la intersecția dintre agricultură, industria vinului, patrimoniu și dezvoltare regională, acesta și-a consolidat rolul de instrument strategic pentru creșterea competitivității regiunilor viticole, în special în economiile în tranziție. Acest studiu a aplicat o abordare mixtă a metodelor care

combină tehnici cantitative și calitative, inclusiv analiza comparativă, examinarea conținutului modelelor teoretice, revizuirea documentelor și regresia liniară. Acest cadru a permis explorarea corelațiilor dintre performanța turismului vitivinicol și indicatorii macroeconomici. Constatările au indicat că succesul în turismul vitivinicol depinde mai puțin de PIB-ul pe cap de locuitor și este mai puternic influențat de factori precum patrimoniul vitivinicol, densitatea podgoriilor, calitatea infrastructurii, strategiile de branding și eficiența comunicării. Moldova a ilustrat această dinamică prin clasarea pe locul cinci la nivel mondial în ceea ce privește turismul vitivinicol, în ciuda performanțelor macroeconomice modeste. Cercetarea a contribuit la consolidarea turismului vitivinicol ca vector al dezvoltării regionale incluzive și durabile. De asemenea, a subliniat potențialul economiilor emergente de a obține vizibilitate internațională prin valorificarea activelor culturale, inovarea ofertelor turistice și alinierea la tendințele globale de durabilitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *turism vitivinicol, dezvoltare durabilă, creștere economică regională, viticultură, infrastructură turistică, Indicele Wine Lovers*

1. Introduction

Wine tourism has emerged in recent decades as a dynamic and multifaceted area of the global tourism industry, with close links and intersections with agriculture, wine, gastronomy and regional economic development. Although rural tourism is not a separate niche activity, it has become a strategic vector for sustainable development, providing economic, social and environmental benefits in both developed and emerging economies [1]. As global interest in the sector continues to grow and the global interest in authentic and experiential travel continues to grow, wine producing regions have seized the opportunity to capitalize on their natural, cultural and viticultural assets [2].

Although wine tourism is expanding significantly and consolidating as an area with relevant economic and social potential, it remains under-investigated in terms of its integrated economic and environmental impacts. While many studies highlight its capacity to generate income, boost local entrepreneurship and foster cultural exchange, approaches that examine the interdependencies between economic performance and sustainability outcomes are still limited [3]. At the same time, the lack of comparative studies between economies at different stages of development substantially reduces the access of policy makers and stakeholders to relevant information to inform coherent policies and transfer best practices that can be adapted to different economic and territorial contexts.

In this context, in-depth research on the economic and environmental impact of wine tourism is of increasing strategic importance, particularly in terms of underpinning sustainable regional development policies, especially for developing economies [4]. Such an approach not only makes it possible to identify and make rational use of wine-growing and tourism resources, but also to design balanced development models capable of ensuring compatibility between economic progress, environmental protection and social cohesion.

Moreover, in the context of intensifying global competition to attract tourists and the growing emphasis on authentic and personalized experiences, in-depth knowledge of the determinants of performance in wine tourism provides solid premises for the formulation of effective public policies and coherent territorial branding strategies. From a scientific point of view, research on this issue contributes to strengthening the theoretical basis of sustainable tourism and to the development of integrated assessment tools relevant for monitoring and optimizing the performance of wine destinations [3].

The development of wine tourism should not be seen solely in terms of its immediate economic benefits, but rather as a strategic component of a sustainable regional development model with multiple cultural, social and environmental implications. This type of tourism has the potential to become an essential link in the revitalization of rural areas, offering a sustainable alternative to traditional economic models that are often vulnerable to global change [5]. By harnessing synergies between tourism activities and the wine sector, regions can build more resilient economic ecosystems that support local entrepreneurship, encourage the preservation and transmission of traditions and contribute to the shaping of an authentic and attractive territorial identity. Furthermore, this integrated approach creates opportunities for the implementation of environmentally friendly practices in agriculture and tourism, thus ensuring the long-term preservation of natural resources and wine landscapes, often of heritage value. Wine tourism thus becomes more than a recreational or economic activity - it becomes a vector for sustainable development, capable of generating positive impacts not only in financial terms, but also in social cohesion and the quality of life of local communities. For developing regions, this potential is all the more valuable as it can support a balanced transition towards an economy based on local resources, environmental responsibility and social inclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

For this research, a mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology was adopted, based on a coherent set of scientific methods - empirical, comparative and documentary analysis - oriented towards the complex investigation of wine tourism in the context of sustainable economic development. The research aimed to outline and highlight the potential of wine tourism to function as a strategic tool for regional development by analyzing its economic, social and environmental impact in diverse international contexts, with a special focus on transition and emerging economies.

The scientific work was primarily based on secondary analysis of data provided by highly credible scientific sources: academic articles published in internationally indexed journals, research reports produced by prestigious international organizations, as well as official statistics relevant to the topic. In order to ensure a rigorous and balanced comparative perspective, case studies were selected from five countries - Spain, Georgia, South Africa, Serbia and the Republic of Moldova - which show significant developments in the wine sector but also different levels of economic development, thus providing fertile ground for cross-national analysis.

In order to assess the performance of wine tourism in relation to macroeconomic indicators, a comparative method was used which involved analyzing the positioning of selected countries in the Wine Lovers Index 2024. The choice of this tool was based on its composite and multidimensional nature, as it integrates key variables such as: wine production per capita, domestic consumption, volume of exports, share of wine-growing areas, frequency of wine tours per area, average price of a bottle of wine and associated tourism infrastructure. By correlating these variables with the level of GDP per capita, the aim was to identify a possible direct relationship between the performance of wine tourism and the level of overall economic development.

In order to deepen the sustainable dimension of wine tourism, a content analysis was applied on the theoretical models identified in the specialized literature. This analysis made it possible to outline the main directions in which wine tourism contributes simultaneously

to the conservation of natural resources and to the generation of negative impacts such as landscape degradation or excessive pressure on local resources.

To test the relationship between the position in the Wine Lovers Index 2024 and the level of GDP per capita, a simple linear regression statistical analysis was applied. The results, presented graphically, showed the absence of a significant correlation between the two variables, confirming the hypothesis that cultural, historical and strategic factors exert a stronger influence on the development of wine tourism than the level of economic prosperity as a whole.

3. Results and discussions

The empirical analysis of wine tourism across various nations where it serves as a vital contributor to economic progress underscores its indispensable role in regional development. As observed by Vázquez Vicente, G., Martín Barroso, V., and Blanco Jiménez, F., wine tourism functions as a mechanism through which capital inflows are stimulated, attracting visitors and thereby augmenting the revenue streams of wine-producing regions [6]. Their examination of nine Spanish wine routes over the period 2008–2018 provides substantial evidence that the expansion of wine tourism exerts a favourable influence on economic development, aligning with the broader principles of capital allocation and resource optimization within competitive markets [6]. Wine tourism, by augmenting the visibility of regional wine production, serves as an essential instrument in stimulating ancillary industries such as hospitality, gastronomy, and artisanal enterprises. This interconnected economic activity not only enhances local commerce but also contributes to a broader framework of wealth generation, thereby advancing regional economic development [7]. Beyond its role in cultural preservation, the wine tourism sector functions as a critical engine of economic progress, facilitating capital circulation and employment creation. Georgia, endowed with distinctive viticultural resources and a rich historical tradition, possesses the capacity to harness wine tourism as a sustainable revenue stream. Through the effective utilization of these comparative advantages, the sector can contribute to increased labour demand in rural areas, leading to improved living standards and heightened economic productivity. Moreover, the capacity of wine tourism to adapt to evolving economic conditions, including global crises and technological innovations, further reinforces its viability as a resilient and competitive sector. By maintaining a dynamic and responsive structure, wine tourism can integrate into the broader mechanisms of international trade and investment, ensuring its sustained relevance within the global economic system [8].

Wine tourism is a valuable tool for the active promotion and sustainable conservation of cultural heritage, while contributing to strengthening territorial identity and regional cohesion. An eloquent example of this is the Douro region in Portugal, where the culture of port wine is a fundamental pillar of tourism development, generating multiple economic, social and emotional benefits for the communities involved in wine-growing and related tourism activities [9].

Wine tourism occupies a central role in the development of sustainable tourism by integrating ecological, sociocultural, and economic dimensions into a cohesive model. In areas like Vojvodina, wine routes serve not only as a distinctive tourism product that reflects local heritage but also as a crucial driver of regional economic growth, fostering investment, employment, and cultural preservation. By fostering collaboration among local communities,

visitors, and public institutions, wine tourism not only enhances cultural engagement but also contributes to the comprehensive development of the destination [10].

Although there is no firm model that accurately indicates the number of jobs that can be created due to the development of the tourism sector, several studies show that tourism has been able to contribute substantially to job creation in different countries. A notable example is wine tourism in South Africa, which supported almost 300000 direct and indirect jobs in 2015, highlighting the economic potential of wine tourism, where the expansion of viticulture and related services stimulates labor demand in several sectors, enhancing employment and regional economic vitality. The geographical analysis conducted by Ferreira and Hunter further substantiates the role of wine tourism as a mechanism for economic expansion, particularly in rural regions, where it facilitates both capital accumulation and social progress [11]. Attracting new visitors to wine tourism simultaneously boosts the activity of multiple local businesses, such as accommodation establishments, restaurants and craft shops, thus promoting overall economic development.

The researchers Q. Li, X. Wang and M. Arif have advanced a conceptual model that delineates the effects of tourism development upon the sustainability of the natural environment [12]. Their framework, founded upon systematic reasoning, discerns with precision the dual nature of tourism's influence. On the one hand, it engenders adverse externalities, manifest in the depletion of finite resources, the contamination of air and water, and the erosion of biodiversity. On the other, it yields beneficial consequences, fostering conservation initiatives, incentivizing sustainable practices, and affording economic sustenance to local communities. Thus, their model elucidates the intricate interplay between economic activity and environmental preservation, a subject of paramount significance in the political economy of nations.

Figure 1 presents a comprehensive model that illustrates the interdependent relationship between tourism development and environmental sustainability, highlighting both its negative and beneficial effects. On the one hand, depleting natural resources, degrading landscapes and diminishing biodiversity, tourism expansion imposes environmental burdens as an absolute necessity. If neglected, these disruptions bring about broader systemic challenges such as climate disruption, soil depletion and water scarcity, thus jeopardizing the long-term stability of the natural environment. On the contrary, this model reveals the latent potential of tourism, delineating the prospects that may be realized when its expansion is directed by the tenets of sustainability. Under such prudent guidance, tourism ceases to be a mere consumer of natural resources and instead assumes the role of an instrument for environmental preservation and economic reinforcement. By channeling capital towards conservation endeavours, instituting sustainable modes of operation, and employing scientific inquiry to inform ecological governance, tourism may be transformed into a force of environmental rejuvenation. Indeed, the alignment of tourism with sustainable development is not only conceivable but practicable through a variety of mechanisms.

The establishment of protected areas, the rehabilitation of biodiversity, and the systematic promotion of ecotourism stand as tangible measures by which this alignment may be achieved. In this manner, the industry may cease to be a source of depletion and, instead, become an integral component of a broader economic and ecological equilibrium. The conceptual framework emphasizes the imperative of a holistic approach to governance, synthesizing policy interventions, cooperative stakeholder engagement and empirical research to reconcile tourism's economic contributions with its environmental branches.

It argues for a structural transformation towards regenerative tourism models in which environmental conservation and the pursuit of economic progress are not antagonistic goals, but rather mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable and equitable development.

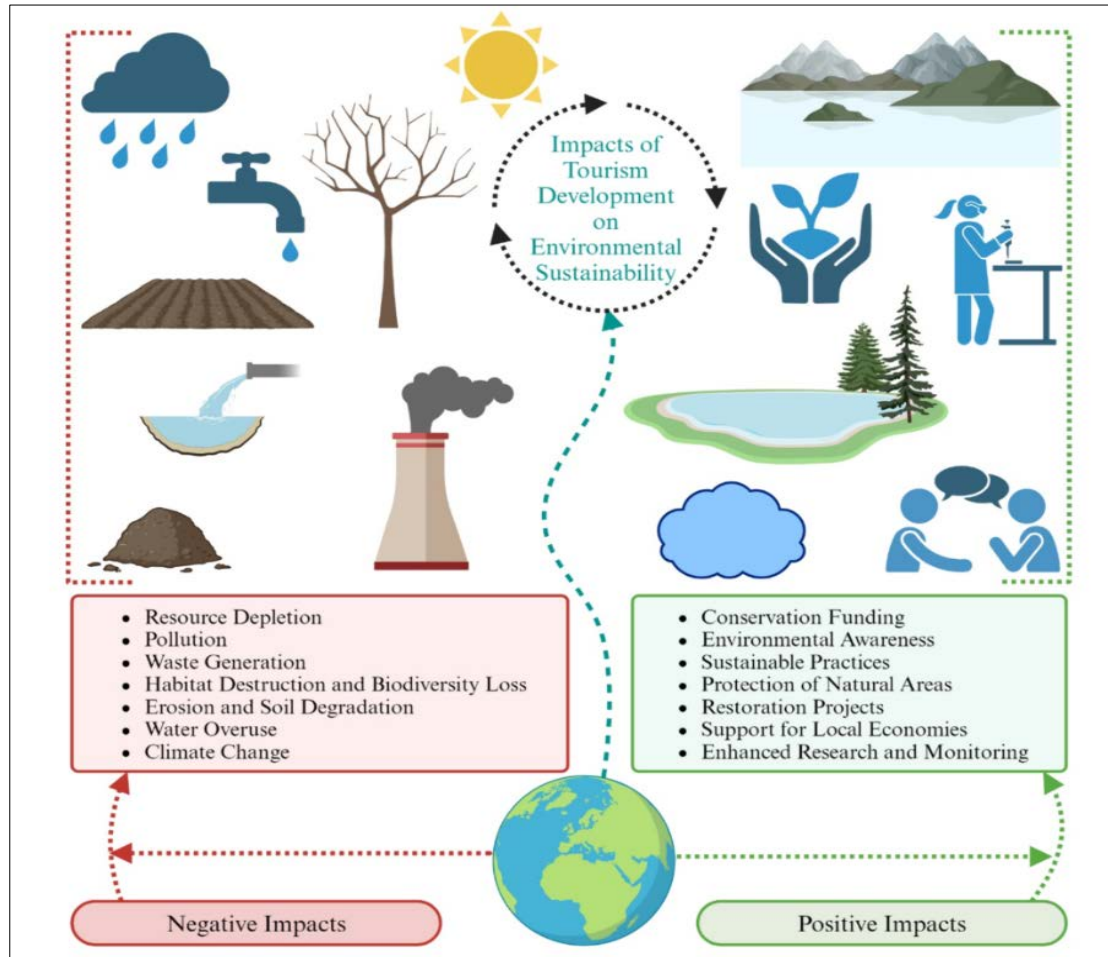


Figure 1. A conceptual model shows the impacts of tourism development [12].

Vine and wine tourism represents a distinct branch of commerce, arising naturally from individuals' inherent desire to engage deeply with the traditions and practices surrounding wine production. It involves journeys to regions notable for viticulture, embracing experiences such as visiting vineyards and wineries, participating in local wine festivals, and attending exhibitions dedicated to the art and craft of winemaking [13]. The primary inducement driving tourists towards such pursuits lies in the gratification derived from tasting and discerning wines produced in distinct localities. This preference stems not merely from sensory pleasure, but also from curiosity to explore variations in soil, climate, production methods, and the broader cultural customs unique to each region. Economically, vine and wine tourism generates considerable advantages: it enhances demand for local goods, encourages the prosperity of rural communities, and directly supports small-scale winegrowers. Thus, guided by the natural propensity of consumers to seek novel and authentic experiences, this form of tourism effectively channels individual interests toward collective regional prosperity.

Wine tourism is situated at the crossroads of the tourism, viticulture and wine industry, offering visitors a rich, multi-sensory experience that goes far beyond traditional sightseeing. At the same time, wine tourism is often seen tangentially with rural tourism, visiting vineyards

often involves and stimulates the development of rural tourism [14]. This branch of tourism offers the opportunity to taste and appreciate different varieties of wine, explore complex aromas and tastes through guided tastings and gain insights into the winemaking process. In addition to tasting wine, this form of tourism allows tourists to immerse themselves in the local culture, history and traditions of the wine-producing regions. Visitors have the opportunity to communicate directly with winemakers, participate in vineyard tours, and enjoy regional gastronomy, creating a holistic experience that combines education, leisure and cultural enrichment [15,16]. As a result, wine tourism fosters a deeper appreciation of viticulture while supporting local economies and sustainable rural development.

Wine tourism encompasses several key dimensions that contribute to its attractiveness and economic importance. These aspects define the unique character of wine tourism and its role in regional development and are systematized in Figure 2.

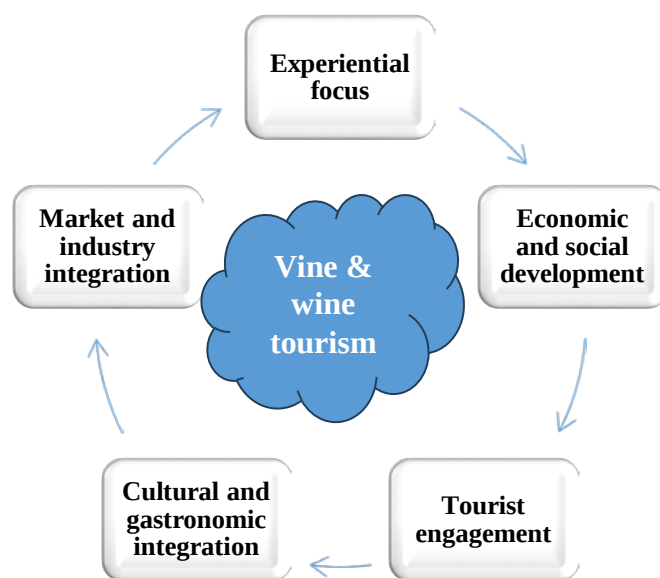


Figure 2. Specific aspects of vine and wine tourism and its role in regional development.

Source: Systematized by the author based on [15-19].

The main specific aspects of wine and wine tourism are the following:

- **Experiential Focus** – Wine tourism fundamentally arises from the innate human desire for pleasure derived from sensory and intellectual engagement. Visitors are drawn into a rich sensory encounter, involving taste, scent, and visual perception, through wine tastings, vineyard explorations, and culturally enriching activities. This blend of sensory experience and traditional local practices significantly enhances the intrinsic pleasure and educational value of the tourist's journey [16,17].
- **Economic and Social Development** – Beyond mere leisure, wine tourism significantly contributes to the wealth and improvement of society by stimulating regional economies. It enhances competitiveness among wine-producing regions, fosters vineyard growth, encourages refinement in wine quality, and generates employment opportunities, thereby benefiting both rural and urban areas alike [15-17].
- **Tourist Engagement** – A distinctive characteristic of wine tourism is the mutually beneficial relationship formed between the visitor, the wine producer, and the natural environment. Personalized hospitality, exceptional service, and compelling narratives provided by winemakers substantially increase visitor satisfaction, ensuring continued patronage and enduring interest in the region [15,18].

- Cultural and Gastronomic Integration – Wine tourism is deeply interwoven with the broader cultural traditions and gastronomic heritage of the locality. Participation in regional cuisine, traditional festivities, and historical vineyard tours enhances visitors' authentic experiences, promoting a deeper and more meaningful connection with the destination [16,17].
- Market and Industry Integration – Wine tourism effectively links the wine and tourism sectors, creating reciprocal benefits and facilitating mutual economic expansion. It ensures consistent visitor traffic, thus elevating winery income through direct sales, promotional events, and branding opportunities. Strategic alliances, such as those between wineries and travel enterprises, are particularly effective in amplifying these benefits [18,19].

Collectively, these elements demonstrate wine tourism's role as a distinctive and dynamic segment of commerce. By providing enriching experiences that engage travelers culturally and sensorially, it simultaneously promotes sustainable economic prosperity in wine-producing regions.

According to the investigations conducted by M.R.G. Revilla and O.M. Moure, wine tourism distinctly enhances both economic prosperity and social advancement. It accomplishes this by fostering employment, augmenting local incomes, and encouraging beneficial collaboration among enterprises within rural communities [15]. Beyond these economic advantages, wine tourism notably enriches visitors through profound sensory experiences and meaningful cultural engagements, thereby increasing the attractiveness and appeal of regions such as Malaga and encouraging sustainable economic diversification [15]. Moreover, wine tourism effectively serves as an instrument for achieving sustainable rural development, stimulating economic activity, safeguarding cultural traditions, and promoting responsible environmental practices. By generating employment and supplementary income, particularly within rural localities, it directly bolsters the prosperity of these communities. Furthermore, wine tourism reinforces regional cultural identities, harmonizing historical viticultural methods with contemporary sustainability measures, thus delivering benefits that extend from local communities to broader global tourism markets.

Although wine tourism at first glance has a long history, being linked to a traditional branch with rich experience, at first glance it seems to be quite recent, young and innovative [20]. It is obvious that the development of wine tourism is inextricably linked to the growth of vines and the presence of a well-developed wine industry. At the same time, of particular interest is what determines the interest of tourists and how they choose wine tourism destinations.

In the following table, a comparative analysis of various countries is presented, highlighting key indicators related to wine production, consumption, export volumes, vineyard coverage, wine tasting tour availability, and wine affordability. These data are based on the Wine Lovers Index 2024, which integrates these factors into an overall score, offering insights into the role and significance of each country in the global wine tourism industry.

The Wine Lovers Index 2024 ranks countries that have wine industry in the structure of their economy in rating, taking into account multiple indicators such as: wine production per person, wine consumption per person, export volume, share of wine vineyards in total land area, average price of a bottle of wine, wine tourism infrastructure and accessibility. This world ranking provides valuable information for people who have a wine-drinking culture and consciously choose wine tourism destinations.

Leading positions in this ranking hold such countries as Portugal, Italy and France stand out as the main wine destinations. Portugal has the highest score of 8.96 due to the volume of wine produced at 71.5 L/person, a high level of domestic consumption (52.3 L/person) and a well-developed wine tourism infrastructure providing 61.2 wine tasting tours per 10000 km². Italy and France follow closely behind, benefiting from their historical prominence in wine production and extensive viticultural landscapes. Although the top positions are held by world leaders, these being the developed countries of Europe that historically manage to maintain their strong image and position on the world wine markets, the rating demonstrates the importance of the more mature countries specialized in wine production for which this industry is a traditional one in intense development [21].

Table 1

Wine Lovers Index leading indicators in 2024 for the top 10 rating positions

No	Country	Rating	Wine production per Person, L	Wine consumptions per Person, L	Wine export volume, 1000 hL	Vineyard size as % of Surface Area	Average price of a Wine bottle, EUR	Wine tasting tours per 10 ³ m ²	Overall score/10
1.	Portugal	1	71.5	52.3	3.195	1.98	4.67	61.2	8.96
2.	Italy	2	65.2	37.1	21.366	2.38	6.00	40.8	8.68
3.	France	3	70.5	35.8	12.667	1.44	7.00	13.5	7.92
4.	Spain	3	58.6	20.3	20.815	1.87	5.00	13.4	7.92
5.	Moldova	5	71.5	12.5	1.041	3.44	4.65	21.3	7.36
6.	Chile	6	56.2	8.8	6.791	0.23	4.87	11.9	6.25
7.	Hungary	7	25.4	17.1	1.266	0.65	4.57	8.6	6.25
8.	Georgia	8	49.6	26.4	895	0.70	6.06	6.1	6.18
9.	New Zealand	9	69.1	16.6	3.371	0.16	8.73	41.4	5.97
10.	Australia	10	36.2	20.3	6.209	0.02	12.04	19.7	5.42
11.	Greece	10	13.2	18.0	284	0.71	8.00	57.3	5.42
12.	South Africa	10	15.4	7.4	3.492	0.10	4.01	6.1	5.42

Source: elaborated by authors based on data [21]

A favourable position in this ranking is occupied by the Republic of Moldova, which ranks fifth with a score of 7.36. This high position demonstrates the wine tourism sector's growing and developing reputation, supported by a substantial volume of wine production, a favourable price-quality ratio and world leadership in terms of the rate of extensive vineyard coverage. Thus, in terms of wine produced per capita, Moldova has a level similar to Portugal (71.5 L/person), demonstrating the country's strong wine-growing tradition. Despite this high level of production, domestic wine consumption remains comparatively lower, at 12.5 L/person, indicating that a significant proportion of Moldovan wine is destined for export rather than local markets.

The volume of wine exports from the Republic of Moldova, amounting to 1041000 hectolitres per year, appears to be quite modest in comparison with major exporters such as Italy (21366000 hL/year) and Spain (20815000 hL/year). However, when these figures are analysed relative to the country's surface area or population size, they reveal a high intensity of export-related indicators, highlighting Moldova's dependence on international markets.

A particularly distinctive indicator for Moldova within the Wine Lovers Index 2024 is the percentage of land dedicated to viticulture, which stands at 3.44%, the highest among all

countries included in this ranking. This metric once again underscores Moldova's historical tradition of viticulture and the crucial role of the wine industry in the national economy, providing a solid foundation for the expansion of wine exports and the development of vine and wine tourism.

As statistical data show, wine tourism in Moldova achieves about 21.3 wine tasting tours per 10000 km², with this indicator Moldova holds a strong position in the intense and active promotion of wine and wine tourism. Although the level of this indicator is lower than in Portugal (61.2 tours/10000 km) or Greece (57.3 tours/10000 km), it signifies a developing sector with growth potential. Regarding the accessibility of Moldovan wine, depending on the average price (approx. 4.65 EUR/bottle), it increases the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for international visitors, especially for that category of visitors who are looking for competitive production in terms of price/quality ratio.

It is worth noting that in the Wine Lovers Index 2024 ranking among developed European countries, the Republic of Moldova holds the fifth position, which highlights the strategic importance of the wine industry and wine tourism for the national economy and an active development dynamic of this sector. To further strengthen its position, Moldova still has solid reserves for the development and expansion of the wine tourism infrastructure, with an emphasis on increasing the number of organized wine tours and intensifying promotional efforts to attract international visitors. By properly capitalizing on its wine heritage and accessibility, Moldova has great potential to become a top centre for wine tourism in Eastern Europe.

The following figure presents the relationship between a country's ranking in the Wine Lovers Index 2024 and its GDP per capita (USD), illustrating the degree of correlation between wine tourism performance and overall economic development.

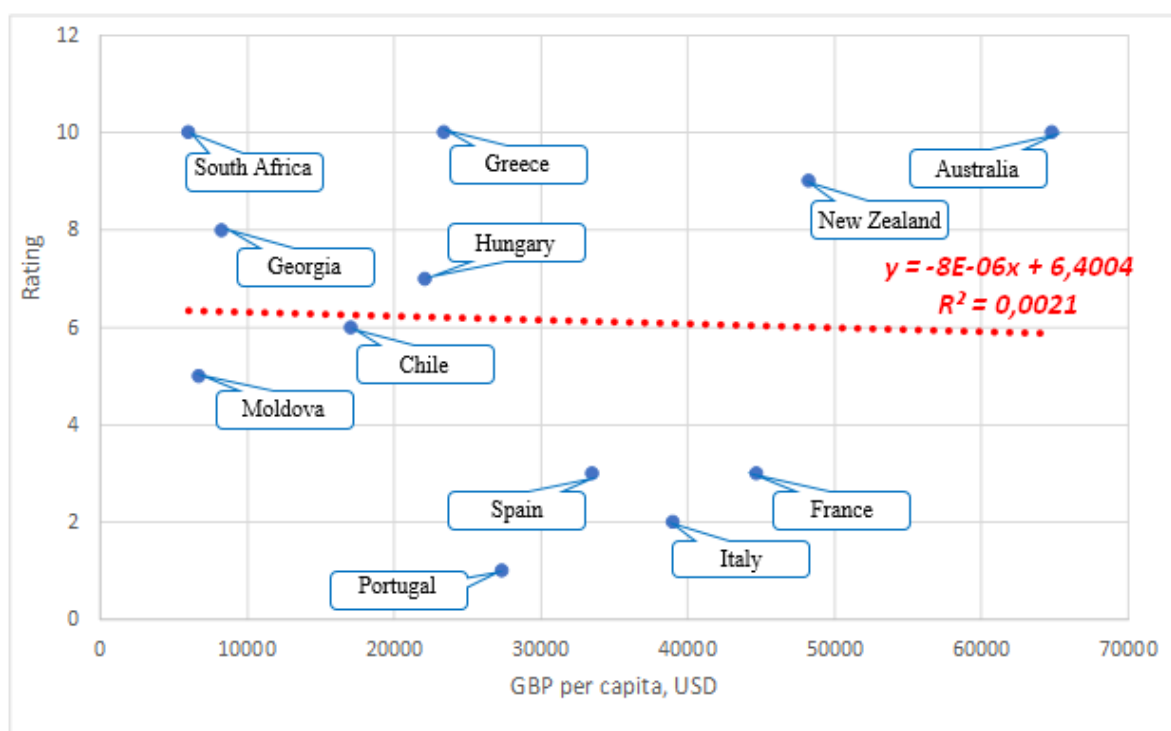


Figure 3. Dependence between rating in Wine Lovers Index leading indicators in 2024 for the top 10 rating positions and GDP per capita in these countries.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from the [21,22]

The dependence between the Wine Lovers Index leading indicator ratings in 2024 for the top 10 rating positions and the GDP per capita in these countries reflects a very interesting situation. At first sight it can be assumed that as the economic level of development increases, i.e. as the GDP per capita increases, the country's rating in the Wine Lovers Index also increases.

In the current ranking of the countries most appreciated by wine lovers, Portugal occupies the first place. This pre-eminence is not achieved by the size of its GDP per capita, because its per capita income is \$27331, but rather by the excellence and reputation of its wine-related enterprise. Italy and France, with ancient traditions in the field of viticulture and the wine industry, follow in close succession, each holding a high level of GDP per capita of \$39003 and \$44690, respectively. Spain, in fourth place, with a per capita income of \$33509, further confirms the maxim according to which countries that have historically enjoyed mastery in the arts of viticulture and also continue to attract the favor of tourists in this field. However, it is worth noting the case of Moldova, which, although it is fifth in this ranking, differs considerably in terms of GDP per capita from other countries in this ranking. Its per capita income, being only \$6729, places it among other well-developed countries in Europe. However, through a judicious application of its natural advantages such as an abundance of vineyards, a vigorous trade in wine exports and a pronounced emphasis on the development of the wine sector and wine tourism, has determined Moldova as a competitor worthy of note. Moldova's ranking clearly demonstrates that having a significantly lower GDP per capita in relation to developed European countries, you can occupy the top positions, having favourable positions in terms of wine production per person, wine consumption per person, export volume, share of wine vineyards in total land area, average price of a bottle of wine, wine tourism infrastructure and accessibility.

The ranking continues with countries such as Chile, Hungary and Georgia, which, while not having very high incomes, have a long tradition of growing grapes and have cautiously adopted policies that encourage wine tourism. Hungary, with a per capita income of \$22114, is in an intermediate position between the rich states of Europe and those still rising economies. Meanwhile, Georgia, with a per capita income of just \$8283, draws its strength not from material opulence but from the age and distinction of its winemaking heritage, which continues to lure visitors from near and far. In stark contrast, we find that nations like New Zealand and Australia - despite enjoying the highest levels of wealth among the countries considered here, with per capita incomes of \$48280 and \$64820 respectively - rank lower on the index. This observation reveals a sobering truth: that mere economic prosperity, however enviable, is insufficient in itself to ensure pre-eminence in the realm of wine tourism. Analysis of the regression coefficient yields an R^2 value of just 0.0021 - a result so insignificant that it practically indicates a complete lack of connection between GDP per capita and Wine Lovers Index rating. From this, it must be deduced that other factors, of a more specific and perhaps cultural nature, are of greater consequence: the density and extent of vineyards, the depth of historical and cultural attachment to winemaking, the prevailing patterns of wine consumption, and the effectiveness of national policies designed to promote and support such tourism. Of these examples, the case of Moldova is the most illustrative. Although deficient in broad economic means, it has managed, by virtue of a concentrated and deliberate emphasis on viticulture and wine tourism, to raise its stature on the international stage. Thus, we see that, in the quest for national distinction in certain arts or industries, it is not always the richest, but rather the most purposeful and industrious, who achieve success.

At the same time, in the development of all types of tourism, in order for the country to be attractive for tourists, it must have well-developed accommodation facilities [23]. In an indirect way there is a connection between the level of development of the country and the development of accommodation facilities for tourists, including those tourists practicing wine tourism.

From an economic perspective, it is clear that countries wishing to advance their position in the field of wine tourism would do well to direct their efforts towards cultivating vineyards, producing quality wines, promoting wine tourism services, and ensuring a healthy economic and political climate at the country level. Prudently expanding vineyards, deliberately building a renowned identity for their wines, and providing infrastructure that fosters the enjoyment and exploration of wine regions are all far more effective measures than relying solely on general economic prosperity. Thus, the prosperity of a particular industry depends less on the affluence of the nation as a whole and more on the judicious allocation of resources and the cultivation of those institutions and customs that support it.

5. Conclusions

The empirical analysis presented in the article outlines, with solid and rigorous arguments, the considerable potential of wine tourism to become a catalyst for sustainable regional economic development. The case studies from countries such as Spain, Georgia, South Africa or Serbia, together with the comparative analysis provided by the Wine Lovers Index 2024, convincingly demonstrate that this type of tourism generates multiple beneficial effects: attracting capital, creating jobs, stimulating entrepreneurial initiatives and enhancing collaboration between related sectors - hospitality, gastronomy, crafts and cultural heritage. In this context, wine tourism is going beyond its traditional status, asserting itself as a complex and synergetic tool for economic, social and environmental development.

The strategic value of this sector is amplified by its deeply experiential dimension, which responds to the contemporary tourist's needs for authenticity, cultural diversity and direct interaction with the local specificity. Wine tasting, exploring wine traditions and participating in rural life offer not only sensory satisfaction, but also a sense of identity between the visitor and the host community. Thus, wine tourism is a vector for preserving local values, strengthening rural economies and revitalizing areas with latent economic potential, becoming a priority direction in smart regional development strategies.

The results of the analysis of the Wine Lovers Index 2024 in relation to GDP per capita show that wine tourism is a fairly independent economic sector, with its own specific factors that determine its attractiveness and success. While high-income, highly developed countries have the financial capacity to support the industry, it is the long-term investment in viticulture, wine traditions and tourism infrastructure that ultimately determine a country's position in the wine tourism market. Countries such as the Republic of Moldova and Georgia are eloquent examples of how emerging economies, through the intelligent valorisation of their wine heritage and traditional agro-economic resources, can build sustainable competitive advantages, effectively positioning themselves on the international market and transforming wine tourism into a strategic direction for economic growth and global affirmation.

Essentially, wine tourism is emerging as a real lever for economic and social development, contributing not only to the dynamization of wine-producing regions, but also to the strengthening of territorial cohesion, the revitalization of rural areas and the

foundation of a sustainability-oriented economy. Its multidimensional nature, situated at the intersection between agriculture, industry, tourism and culture, gives it a particular potential for generating intersectoral synergies. The success of this type of tourism depends directly on the convergence and complementarity of the efforts of public authorities, local producers and academia in an intelligent and strategically oriented partnership.

At the same time, international experience shows that wine tourism is not the exclusive preserve of developed countries, but is emerging as a valuable and feasible opportunity for economies in transition with deep-rooted wine traditions, such as Moldova or Georgia. In these contexts, a strategic approach and an intelligent use of the wine heritage can transform a comparative advantage into a sustainable competitive advantage with a direct impact on the international positioning of these countries.

Based on the results of the present research, future directions of scientific investigation will aim to deepen the behaviour of wine tourism consumers through a detailed analysis of their motivations, preferences and loyalty to the destinations visited. In parallel, particular emphasis will be placed on exploring how wine tourism can become a catalyst for the development of the circular economy in rural areas by promoting sustainable practices, reducing waste and stimulating local innovation. These research directions are intended to strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations needed to transform wine tourism into a sustainable development vector with economic, social and environmental benefits.

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