

Measuring the Sales Impact of Cognitive vs Emotional Priming in Wine Tourism: Evidence from a Field Experiment

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Extended Abstract

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1. Introduction and Economic Context

The European wine sector is currently navigating a polycrisis characterized by structural market contraction, climate-induced volatility, and shifting consumer preferences away from traditional consumption patterns (Gaeta & Perali, 2025; Dubois et al., 2021). In this deflationary landscape, Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) channels have ceased to be merely a branding exercise, evolving into a vital liquidity lifeline for wineries. However, despite the proliferation of wine tourism, a significant "conversion gap" persists: the discrepancy between the high hedonic utility derived from the tasting experience and the actual transactional behavior.

Recent literature highlights that while wineries excel at staging "memorable experiences" (Sigala, 2020), they often fail to address the informational friction that inhibits spending (Dogru et al., 2022). The economic problem is fundamentally one of justification: in a period of inflationary pressure, consumers face higher opportunity costs for discretionary spending. To address this inefficiency, this study investigates how informational framing can reduce the guilt-sensation associated with hedonic consumption. We propose what we call the "Cognitive Alibi" hypothesis: the provision of rational, attribute-based information acts as a validation mechanism that authorizes the consumer to convert emotional engagement into economic demand.

2. Theoretical Framework

Moving beyond classical utility theory, this research integrates recent advances in Digital Nudging and Information Economics. While early behavioral models posited a dichotomy between emotion and reason, recent studies in food economics suggest a more complex interaction where extrinsic cues such as labels, awards, and scores serve as critical quality signals that modulate sensory perception and willingness to pay (Sáenz-Navajas et al., 2013; Asioli et al., 2021). Specifically, the literature on attribute framing indicates that consumers in hedonic

settings often suffer from a so-called decision paralysis when faced with purely emotional stimuli (Septianto et al., 2021). Recent applications of nudging in the wine sector demonstrate that informational nudges delivered via digital tools can effectively reduce information asymmetry without relying on outdated choice architecture models. We posit that the storytelling-only approach, that has been dominant in the last decade, has reached a point of diminishing marginal returns. Drawing on the framework of hedonic justification (Okada, 2005; Kivetz & Simonson, 2020), we argue that consumers require functional alibis such as hard data and technical specifications to resolve the cognitive dissonance between the desire to buy and the pain of paying.

3. Methodology

The empirical analysis was conducted at a premium winery in the Valpolicella region (Italy), a setting chosen to ensure high ecological validity. The research design adopted a sequential mixed-method approach to control for environmental variables and isolate the effect of informational framing. To ensure internal validity, a preliminary diagnostic phase (58 participants) was undertaken using Gestalt-based observation (Gaeta et al., 2025). This calibration step allowed for the identification and removal of experiential interruptions (service frictions), establishing a baseline of high narrative continuity for the subsequent experiment. Subsequently, a randomized field experiment was implemented with a new sample of international wine tourists (62 participants). Participants were randomly assigned to two experimental conditions, accessed via QR code immediately prior to the tasting. The Emotional Priming group (31 participants) received content focused on soft attributes such as sensory imagery, heritage storytelling, and landscape aesthetics. While the Cognitive Priming group (31 participants) received content focused on hard attributes including technical vinification data and distinctiveness metrics. Both groups then underwent the identical physical tasting protocol. The primary dependent variable, Purchase Intention (PI), was measured on a 7-point Likert scale adapted from recent DTC literature. To complete the analysis and to rigorously contextualize the stimuli, a lexical content analysis was performed on the live tasting speech delivered by the winery owner. The speech was recorded, transcribed, and coded to categorize semantic content into Emotional/Narrative versus Cognitive/Technical clusters, verifying the baseline nature of the verbal experience delivered to both groups.

4. Results

Data were analyzed using Jamovi (Version 2.6) following confirmation of normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions. Regarding the experimental results, descriptive statistics revealed a marked divergence between conditions. The Emotional Priming group recorded a mean Purchase Intention of $M=4.65$ ($SD=1.018$) reflecting a moderate engagement. In contrast, the Cognitive Priming group exhibited a significantly higher mean of $M=5.94$ ($SD=0.914$) (see

Table 1).

Descrittive Gruppo					
	GROUP	N	Media	SD	SE
PURCHASE INTENTION	EMOTIONAL	31	4.65	1.018	0.183
	COGNITIVE	31	5.94	0.814	0.146

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by group

To contextualize the experimental results, a lexical frequency analysis was performed on the transcription of the tasting speech. A total of 54 semantic units were coded and categorized. The analysis revealed a specific distribution: 57.4% of the keywords were Emotional/Narrative, while 42.6% were Cognitive/Technical (see Table 2).

Category	Top Keywords (Translated)	Freq.
COGNITIVE/TECHNICAL	(Total Count: 23)	42,6%
Process	Fermentation, Temperature, Oxygenation	7
Tools	Barrique, Tonneau, Wood, Software	6
Sensory Science	Proteins, Hypothalamus, Synapses	4
Chemistry/Geo	Rotundone, Acidity, Soil, Stone	4
Analysis	Visual analysis, Olfactory sensitivity	2
EMOTIONAL/NARRATIVE	(Total Count: 31)	57,4%
Social Framing	Friends, Dinner	8
Metaphors	"Panda" (car), Cathedral, Sacred	5
Cultural/Irony	"Snobs", "Madness"	6
Anthropomorphism	Suffering (vines), Resting (wine)	4
Evocative	God-kissed, Romance, Candlelight	4
Memory	Nostalgia, Emotion, "Film"	4

Table 2. Thematic Analysis

Qualitative coding highlights a specific rhetorical pattern: while the speaker introduces technical concepts (fermentation, proteins), he systematically frames them within social or narrative contexts (dating scenarios, cultural rivalry). This confirms that the baseline experience was heavily skewed towards narrative engagement and results that the Cognitive Priming group

benefited from a complementary effect: the pre-tasting data provided the necessary technical scaffolding to decode the speech's complexity, whereas the Emotional Priming group likely experienced information redundancy. After that and to test the main hypothesis, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The effect size is substantial, confirming that the type of information received significantly predicts the intention to buy. This difference represents a 27.7% increase in purchase propensity attributable solely to the informational framing. The substantial F-value (30.4) and the effect size confirm the robustness of the finding, indicating that rational antecedents significantly outperform purely emotional ones in driving transactional behavior." (see Table 3).

ANOVA a una via (Welch)				
	F	gdl1	gdl2	p
PURCHASE INTENTION	30.4	1	57.2	<.001

Table 3. One-way ANOVA results

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

The findings provide empirical support for what we call the "Cognitive Alibi" hypothesis, challenging the prevailing industry dogma that prioritizes emotional immersion above all else. The lexical analysis confirmed that the standard tasting speech is intrinsically affective; thus participants in the Emotional Priming group likely experienced a redundancy effect, where the digital priming merely reinforced the already dominant narrative without adding marginal utility. The Cognitive Priming provided a complementary effect that allowed them to process the emotional speech with a pre-established validation framework, creating a balanced psychological state conducive to purchasing. This implies that information is not neutral but acts as a transaction-enabling asset. By providing technical alibi (scores, data), wineries effectively lower the psychological transaction cost for the consumer. For managers, this suggests a strategic pivot from emotional storytelling to data-based storytelling (Olsen et al., 2016). The use of low-cost digital tools to deliver high-density cognitive information represents a scalable efficiency gain, allowing wineries to increase revenue per visitor without requiring structural investments.

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