

Sustainable Marketing Visions in Food and Wine Tourism: Stakeholder Profiles and Strategic Positioning

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Abstract

This study investigates sustainable marketing in food and wine tourism through a stakeholder segmentation approach, aiming to identify homogeneous profiles and interpret alternative strategic visions of territorial positioning. Using data on perceived impact, desirability, and plausibility of different development drivers, a Two-Step Cluster Analysis is applied to detect distinct strategic orientations among operators. The results reveal differentiated profiles reflecting diverse approaches to sustainable value creation, experiential design, and market positioning. Some stakeholders already adopt sustainability as a core element of their value proposition, others are in a transitional phase, while a further group remains anchored to more traditional and product-centered models. These profiles highlight different ways of interpreting sustainability not only as an ethical principle, but also as a marketing and competitive strategy in food and wine tourism. The findings provide insights into how sustainability, authenticity, experience design, and innovation are combined in stakeholders' marketing visions, offering useful guidance for policymakers and destination managers in designing place-based, evidence-driven strategies for the sustainable and competitive development of food and wine tourism sector.

Keywords

Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Marketing, Stakeholders, Two-Step Cluster Analysis, Food and Wine Tourism

1. Introduction

The evolution of the sustainability concept, together with the increasing availabil-

ity of data, requires continuous reflection on the indicators used to interpret well-being, development, and competitiveness in contemporary societies. In this framework, statistics plays a crucial role in supporting the transition toward sustainability by providing reliable and interpretable evidence to guide policy choices, strategic planning, and evaluation processes [1] [2].

Tourism represents one of the sectors in which this transition is most visible and most complex. Sustainable tourism is commonly defined as a form of tourism that preserves the resources on which its future depends, particularly the natural environment and the social fabric of host communities [3]. Beyond environmental protection, sustainability has been associated with the strengthening of cultural identity [4], the empowerment of local communities [5], and the protection of biodiversity and natural capital [6]. At the same time, numerous studies have shown that uncontrolled tourism growth often produces social and environmental costs borne mainly by residents, without adequate local benefits [7] [8].

In recent years, this debate has increasingly intersected with the evolution of tourism marketing. Traditional marketing models, oriented mainly toward volume growth and short-term competitiveness, have shown their limits in contexts affected by overtourism, environmental degradation, and loss of territorial identity. As a result, marketing itself is being redefined in a sustainability-oriented perspective, where destinations and firms are no longer promoted only through attractions and services, but through values, responsibility, authenticity, and long-term territorial well-being.

Within this framework, food and wine tourism represents a particularly strategic field. It combines economic development, cultural heritage, landscape, identity, and lifestyle, and offers strong potential for building sustainable and distinctive destination brands. Food and wine experiences are not only consumption moments, but narrative and symbolic tools through which territories communicate their values, traditions, and visions of the future. In this sense, sustainability becomes both an ethical horizon and a marketing resource, shaping destination positioning, experience design, and stakeholder strategies.

Understanding how stakeholders interpret sustainability and translate it into marketing visions is therefore crucial. This requires analytical frameworks capable of capturing both the heterogeneity of actors and the multidimensional nature of sustainability, moving beyond purely descriptive approaches. Data-driven methods allow the identification of homogeneous strategic profiles and the interpretation of how sustainability, innovation, and experience are combined in different models of territorial development.

In this study, a Two-Step Cluster Analysis is applied to analyze food and wine tourism stakeholders, using variables related to perceived impact, desirability, and plausibility of different development drivers. The objective is to identify homogeneous profiles and interpret them as alternative strategic and marketing visions of sustainable food and wine tourism. By focusing on how sustainability is understood, desired, and considered feasible, the study explores not only what stake-

holders value, but also how they imagine the future positioning of their territory.

The results offer insights into the multiple ways in which sustainability is translated into marketing strategies, experiential models, and territorial narratives. They provide useful guidance for policymakers and destination managers in designing differentiated, evidence-based strategies capable of aligning sustainability goals with competitiveness, authenticity, and long-term territorial value creation.

2. Food and Wine Tourism: Sustainability and Strategic Marketing

2.1. Food and Wine Tourism between Sustainability and Marketing

Food and wine tourism represents one of the most strategic segments for territorial development, particularly in regions, characterized by high agricultural biodiversity, strong gastronomic identity, and deeply rooted rural traditions. Apulia represents an illustrative example of such dynamics.

In recent years, this form of tourism has expanded rapidly, driven by increasing demand for experiences connected to local products, cultural authenticity, and territorial distinctiveness. Within this context, Apulia has emerged as a highly competitive destination; however, transforming potential into long-term value requires a shift from product-centered models toward sustainability-oriented and market-driven strategies.

From a marketing perspective, food and wine tourism is no longer based primarily on the sale of products, but on the design of meaningful experiences. Contemporary approaches emphasize immersive and narrative-based experiences capable of engaging visitors emotionally and cognitively. Food and wine thus become symbolic and communicative devices through which territories express identity, values, and future visions. Agricultural landscapes, particularly olive groves and vineyards, acquire cultural and strategic relevance, connecting sustainability, well-being, and place branding. Products such as extra virgin olive oil are increasingly positioned not only as commodities, but as elements of cultural capital and sustainable territorial value propositions.

Another central element concerns network-based governance and cooperative marketing structures. The coordination among producers, restaurateurs, wineries, agritourism facilities, artisans, and local administrations is essential for building integrated destination systems and coherent market positioning. Collective initiatives such as product clubs, rural networks, and thematic routes function as strategic tools to enhance accessibility, authenticity, and brand coherence, while generating economic and social spillovers at the local level. In marketing terms, these networks support the construction of a shared destination identity and a recognizable sustainable brand narrative.

Technological innovation also plays a strategic role in sustainable tourism marketing. Digital tools, ranging from immersive technologies to traceability systems, act as enablers of transparency, storytelling, and customer engagement [9]. How-

ever, both academic debate and professional practice emphasize that technology should reinforce, rather than replace, the experiential and relational core of food and wine tourism. From a marketing viewpoint, digital innovation supports personalization, interaction, and trust-building, but remains complementary to human interaction and direct experience, which are central to perceived value creation.

Despite these opportunities, structural weaknesses continue to limit the sustainable and competitive development of food and wine tourism in many food and wine tourism destinations. Infrastructural gaps, fragmented strategic coordination, and shortages of specialized skills reduce the effectiveness of marketing and sustainability strategies. Limited accessibility to rural areas, insufficient destination management integration, and a lack of professionals trained in experiential design, storytelling, and sustainable marketing remain critical constraints. Addressing these issues requires investments in human capital, institutional cooperation, and strategic planning to align sustainability objectives with market positioning and long-term territorial competitiveness.

2.2. Empirical Background and Stakeholder Perceptions

The empirical analysis is based on a survey addressed to stakeholders operating in the Italian food and wine tourism sector. The initial sample included 177 actors involved at the national level across Italy, of whom 94 provided complete and usable responses. Therefore, respondents do not refer to a specific region but express perceptions regarding food and wine tourism development in a broader national context. Data were collected between 22 September and 31 October 2025 using mixed-mode assisted interviewing techniques (CATI and CAWI), a methodology widely adopted in tourism and sustainability research to enhance coverage and data reliability [8].

For the purposes of this study, a stakeholder was defined as an operator professionally involved in the Italian food and wine tourism system, including producers, hospitality providers, restaurateurs, tourism intermediaries, and other actors engaged in the promotion, management, or commercialization of food and wine-related tourism experiences. Participation was limited to respondents with direct professional experience in the sector.

From a structural perspective, the sample is largely composed of micro and small enterprises, a feature typical of the tourism and agri-food sectors in Italy and Southern Europe [10] [11]. Most respondents report between 1 and 5 employees (39 cases) or between 6 and 10 employees (30 cases), while medium and large firms are underrepresented. Turnover data show a similar pattern, with most firms reporting annual revenues below €499,000 (64 cases), followed by the €500,000 - €999,999 range (15 cases) and the €1,000,000 - €4,999,999 range (11 cases). This structure reflects the fragmented and territorially embedded nature of food and wine tourism, where small entrepreneurial initiatives are closely linked to local resources and identity [7].

Respondents display a high level of professional seniority: most report more

than 20 years of experience, followed by those with 16 - 20 years of activity. This indicates a strong accumulation of sectoral knowledge, reinforcing the analytical relevance of their perceptions regarding future development paths [3].

A key part of the survey focused on the evaluation of tourism development drivers along three dimensions: desirability, plausibility and impact. These variables are interpreted as indicators of strategic aspiration, perceived feasibility, and expected directional effect, and they constitute the basis for subsequent segmentation and modeling procedures. Desirability and plausibility were measured using a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the minimum level and 100 the maximum level. These variables were treated as continuous metric variables in the cluster analysis. Impact was measured using a four-level ordinal categorical scale (very negative, negative, positive, very positive) and was treated as an ordinal variable.

The development drivers included environmental sustainability, community involvement, overtourism regulation, accessibility for people with disabilities, cultural and sport events, training of tourism operators, climate change adaptation, safety, sustainable transport innovation, transport integration, artificial intelligence and digital platforms, virtual tourism, growth in demand for authentic experiences, and the role of cultural heritage.

In terms of desirability, the highest scores are attributed to cultural heritage protection and authentic tourism experiences, followed by training, transport integration, mobility innovation, and safety. These preferences reflect a strong orientation toward sustainability and experiential quality as central elements of territorial marketing strategies [5] [12]. Conversely, virtual tourism and artificial intelligence receive lower desirability scores, suggesting a cautious attitude toward technology-driven transformations when they are perceived as detached from experiential and relational value.

The plausibility assessment reveals a more constrained vision. Although cultural heritage and authenticity remain perceived as realistic development directions, overall scores are lower than for desirability. Technological innovation, climate change mitigation, overtourism management, and environmental sustainability, despite being recognized as important, are viewed as difficult to implement in the short and medium term. This gap between what is desired and what is perceived as feasible highlights a structural tension between strategic vision and operational capacity, consistent with previous studies on barriers to sustainable tourism implementation [13]-[15].

Overall, the descriptive evidence portrays a sector dominated by experienced and small-scale operators, strongly oriented toward the valorisation of cultural and territorial resources, yet fully aware of the challenges involved in shifting toward more innovative and sustainability-driven marketing models. These characteristics provide a coherent empirical basis for the subsequent cluster analysis and for interpreting stakeholder profiles as alternative strategic and marketing visions of sustainable food and wine tourism.

A preliminary comparison between CATI and CAWI respondents did not reveal meaningful differences in the distribution of key variables (desirability, plausibility, and impact). Therefore, data from the two collection modes were pooled for subsequent analyses without introducing systematic bias.

3. Sustainable Tourism Marketing in Food and Wine Tourism

3.1. The Strategic Approach of Sustainable Tourism Marketing

Tourism marketing has historically played a central role in economic development, mainly focusing on the promotion of destinations with the objective of maximizing tourist flows and short-term profitability. Although effective in expanding demand, this growth-oriented approach has often underestimated its long-term impacts on ecosystems and host communities, contributing to critical phenomena such as overtourism, environmental degradation, and loss of territorial identity. The structural unsustainability of a model based on unlimited growth has therefore required a profound paradigm shift, placing sustainable tourism at the core of a more ethical and resilient development perspective. As a result, marketing itself has evolved toward a more complex and holistic framework, known as sustainable tourism marketing.

Sustainable tourism marketing represents a substantial transformation of traditional practices. It is not limited to promotional strategies or reputational operations aimed at improving environmental image. Rather, it is a strategic and systemic approach that permeates the entire management of destinations and tourism enterprises. Its primary objective is the redefinition of the value proposition: tourism products are no longer presented merely as services or attractions, but as integrated experiences based on verifiable commitments to environmental protection, cultural heritage conservation, community well-being, and long-term positive impact.

The effectiveness of this approach is linked to the emergence of a new type of consumer, often defined as the “sustainable tourist”. This segment, steadily expanding, is characterized by higher levels of information, awareness, and ethical sensitivity. Recent international surveys indicate that a large share of travellers express a willingness to adopt more sustainable travel behaviours and, in many cases, to pay a premium for responsible tourism options [8]. Sustainable tourists seek authenticity, meaning, and coherence between declared values and actual practices. Their choices are guided not only by price and convenience, but by trust, transparency, and perceived social and environmental responsibility of tourism operators.

In this context, marketing acts as a catalyst of virtuous dynamics. Transparent and credible communication of sustainability commitments attracts visitors whose values are aligned with those of the destination or firm. The economic support of these tourists reinforces responsible practices, generating incentives for further investments in sustainability. This self-reinforcing mechanism strengthens brand

reputation, builds customer loyalty based on shared values, and produces durable competitive advantages in increasingly saturated and competitive tourism markets.

3.2. Strategic Evolution and the Paradigm Shift in Sustainable Tourism Marketing

Building on the previous discussion, traditional tourism marketing has long been grounded in a growth-oriented logic whose negative externalities on natural and social systems have become increasingly evident. The intrinsic unsustainability of a model based on the commodification of resources has necessitated an ontological paradigm shift: from marketing destinations as “products to be consumed” to managing them as “living ecosystems to be preserved.”

From this perspective, sustainable tourism marketing emerges not as a simple market niche, but as a strategic and systemic framework that redefines the governance of businesses and territories. This is not a mere rebranding or cosmetic operation (often associated with the risk of greenwashing), but rather a holistic approach that permeates the entire value chain. The core of the transformation lies in the redefinition of the value proposition: the tourism offering is reconceptualized through the lens of the Triple Bottom Line (a balance between economic prosperity, environmental integrity, and social equity). Tourism experiences are no longer mere atomized services, but rather paths of ethical interaction based on verifiable commitments: from the decarbonization of transportation to the active protection of biodiversity, to direct support for the local circular economy and the well-being of resident populations. In this context, sustainability ceases to be a regulatory constraint and becomes the primary driver of innovation and competitive differentiation [16].

Sustainable tourism marketing can therefore be interpreted not merely as a managerial function, but as a broader governance paradigm shaping the interaction between markets, territories, and socio-ecological systems.

The effectiveness of this model is linked to the emergence of the sustainable tourist, whose decision-making is guided by axiological rationality, trust, and perceived responsibility rather than purely utilitarian variables.

The sustainable tourist acts as a “value investor” who seeks consistency, transparency, and authenticity. Their choices are not dictated solely by utilitarian variables such as price and convenience, but by an axiological rationality based on trust and the perceived responsibility of operators [8] [12]. They are willing to pay a premium price not only for the intrinsic quality of the service, but also for the guarantee that their consumption actively contributes to the regeneration of the destination visited, fostering processes of value co-creation between visitor, operator, and host community.

Within this dynamic, marketing generates a positive feedback loop in which ethical targeting attracts value-oriented tourists whose economic support reinforces sustainable practices. Transparent communication, based on scientific data and credible impact indicators, acts as a signal of quality that attracts tourists

whose values are intrinsically aligned with the destination's vision. This ethical targeting process reduces conflict between tourists and residents and generates economic support that is reinvested in further responsible practices. The result is a lasting and irreplaceable competitive advantage: a reputation based on ethical solidity and territorial resilience. In increasingly saturated and volatile markets, sustainable tourism marketing thus becomes the primary tool for ensuring the long-term survival of the tourism industry, protecting the very resource, the beauty and integrity of the world, that underpins it [16].

These dynamics become particularly evident in territorially embedded sectors such as food and wine tourism, where sustainability, identity, and experience are deeply interconnected.

3.3. Sustainable Marketing in the Food and Wine Tourism Sector

In the food and wine tourism sector, marketing plays a particularly strategic role because products, places, people, and traditions are deeply interconnected. Unlike mass tourism, food and wine tourism is inherently relational and experiential: it is based on encounters with producers, landscapes, culinary practices, and local cultures. For this reason, sustainable marketing in this field cannot be reduced to promotional activities but must be understood as the process through which value is co-created between destinations, firms, communities, and visitors [12] [16].

Sustainable marketing in food and wine tourism starts from the recognition that food is not only a commodity, but also a cultural, social, and symbolic resource. Typical products, recipes, and food rituals communicate identity and belonging, and therefore become powerful branding tools. Sustainability, in this context, is expressed through the protection of local knowledge, short supply chains, respect for seasonality, and the preservation of traditional practices. Marketing strategies that emphasize these elements respond to a growing demand for authenticity and responsibility and allow destinations to differentiate themselves in increasingly competitive markets.

At the same time, sustainable food and wine tourism marketing must integrate experiential design. Visitors do not seek only to taste products, but to understand their origins, to meet producers, and to participate in meaningful activities such as harvesting, cooking, or walking through agricultural landscapes. Designing these experiences requires coordination among multiple actors and a coherent narrative that connects products, places, and people. In this sense, marketing becomes a tool of territorial governance, helping to align private initiatives with collective identity and sustainability goals.

Digital technologies further expand the possibilities of sustainable marketing. Online platforms, storytelling tools, social media, and traceability systems allow destinations and firms to communicate transparency, quality, and ethical commitment. However, technology should remain an enabling factor rather than a substitute for direct experience. The value of food and wine tourism lies primarily in human relationships, emotions, and sensory engagement, and sustainable mar-

keting must preserve this relational core while using digital tools to amplify visibility and trust.

Overall, sustainable marketing in food and wine tourism can be defined as a strategic process that integrates economic competitiveness with cultural integrity, social inclusion, and environmental responsibility. It is not only about attracting tourists, but about selecting, educating, and engaging visitors who share values of respect, authenticity, and sustainability. In this way, marketing becomes a key lever for guiding the long-term sustainable development of food and wine tourism destinations.

4. Stakeholder Segmentation and Strategic Positioning

4.1. Segmentation Framework and Analytical Strategy

To identify homogeneous stakeholder profiles and interpret alternative strategic and marketing visions of sustainable food and wine tourism, a Two-Step Cluster Analysis was applied [17]. This method is particularly suitable in contexts characterized by mixed-type variables and moderate sample sizes, as is typical in tourism and territorial studies.

The Two-Step procedure is based on a scalable algorithm articulated in two sequential phases. In the first phase (pre-clustering), observations are grouped into a large number of small preliminary sub-clusters. This step reduces data complexity while preserving the underlying structure of the dataset. The pre-clustering process generates a hierarchical tree representation, known as the Cluster Features Tree, in which observations are progressively assigned from the root through intermediate nodes until they reach terminal nodes that group highly similar cases within a predefined distance threshold.

When an observation does not fit into existing terminal nodes, a new node is created. If a terminal node exceeds the distance threshold, it is split by identifying the farthest pair of observations according to the selected dissimilarity criterion and redistributing the remaining observations based on proximity. If the recursive growth of the tree exceeds memory constraints, the structure is rebuilt by increasing the distance threshold, allowing the inclusion of additional observations. The process continues until all observations have been processed.

In the second phase (clustering), the sub-clusters obtained in the pre-clustering stage are aggregated into a smaller number of final clusters. At this stage, given the reduced dimensionality of the problem, traditional hierarchical procedures may also be applied. The optimal number of clusters is selected by minimizing the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) [18] [19], which balances model fit and parsimony.

Formally, for a solution with k clusters, the BIC is defined as:

$$BIC_K = -2l_k + r_k \log n$$

where r_k is the number of independent parameters, l_k is the log-likelihood associated with the solution with k clusters, and n is the sample size. This meas-

ure can be interpreted as an index of within-cluster dispersion and, in the case of purely categorical variables, as within-cluster entropy.

The automatic determination of the optimal number of clusters is carried out through a two-stage procedure. First, an initial estimate of the maximum number of clusters is obtained using the BIC criterion. This upper bound is identified as the largest number of clusters for which the ratio BIC_k/BIC_1 is smaller than a predefined constant c_1 . Second, this estimate is refined using the ratio

$$R(k) = d_{k-1}/d_k$$

where d_{k-1} represents the distance obtained by merging k clusters into $k-1$ clusters. The optimal number of clusters is selected as the solution for which a consistent change is observed in the ratio $R(k_1)/R(k_2)$ for the two largest values of $R(k)$ with $k = 1, 2, \dots, k_{\max}$. If this ratio exceeds a threshold value c_2 (with $c_2 > c_1$), the number of clusters is set equal to k_1 ; otherwise, it is set equal to the solution associated with the maximum value of $R(k)$.

Unlike traditional hierarchical agglomerative techniques, the Two-Step algorithm relies on an explicit statistical modeling framework and iteratively merges clusters until all observations are included in a single cluster. This property, together with its ability to handle mixed-type variables and to determine the number of clusters automatically, makes it particularly appropriate for identifying strategic and marketing-oriented stakeholder profiles in sustainable food and wine tourism.

The clustering procedure was performed using the log-likelihood distance measure, which is appropriate for datasets containing mixed types of variables. Continuous variables (desirability and plausibility) and ordinal variables (impact) were handled simultaneously within a unified probabilistic framework. No variable standardization was required, as the log-likelihood measure internally accounts for differences in scale and distribution. Only complete observations were included in the analysis ($n = 94$), and no missing values were present. Potential outliers were automatically handled during the pre-clustering phase, where atypical observations are isolated in separate preliminary clusters. The optimal number of clusters was automatically determined using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), ensuring a balance between model fit and parsimony and improving the statistical robustness of the clustering solution.

The quality of the clustering solution was assessed using the cohesion and separation measure provided by the Two-Step procedure. The resulting value indicated an acceptable level of cluster structure, suggesting a meaningful differentiation among groups. In addition, the automatic selection of the number of clusters based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) contributes to the stability and robustness of the solution by reducing subjectivity in model specification. The consistency between statistical indicators and the interpretability of the resulting profiles supports the validity of the identified stakeholder segmentation.

4.2. Stakeholder Profiles and Strategic Orientations

The segmentation results reveal the presence of distinct stakeholder profiles op-

erating in the food and wine tourism sector, differentiated according to how they evaluate development drivers in terms of desirability and plausibility, and according to their orientation toward sustainability, innovation, and organizational capacity. Rather than being interpreted as purely statistical groupings, these clusters are read as strategic archetypes that represent alternative ways of designing sustainable value propositions and market positioning in food and wine tourism.

The clustering procedure produced four distinct groups of stakeholders for both desirability-based and plausibility-based segmentations. In the desirability-based solution, Cluster 1 accounted for 27% of respondents, Cluster 2 for 13%, Cluster 3 for 42%, and Cluster 4 for 18%. In the plausibility-based solution, Cluster 1 represented 31% of the sample, Cluster 2 24%, Cluster 3 23%, and Cluster 4 22%.

Cluster differentiation is primarily driven by the evaluation of key development drivers. The highest desirability scores were observed for training and skills development (86.1), authentic tourism experiences (85.2), and cultural heritage valorisation (85.2), while lower values emerged for virtual tourism and artificial intelligence. In terms of plausibility, the highest scores were associated with authentic tourism experiences (75.6), cultural heritage valorisation (75.8), and training (73.1), whereas environmental sustainability implementation and accessibility improvements showed comparatively lower feasibility values.

Structural characteristics also vary across clusters. Some groups are composed mainly of small firms with limited turnover but long sector experience, while others include larger and more resource-intensive organizations. However, advanced sustainability-oriented positioning is not strictly associated with firm size, confirming that strategic vision rather than structural scale plays a key role in differentiating stakeholder profiles.

The distribution of respondents across the clusters shows that no single strategic vision is dominant. Instead, different orientations coexist, reflecting a heterogeneous system in which traditional, transitional, and more advanced sustainability-driven approaches are simultaneously present. Some profiles concentrate mainly on the protection of territorial identity and heritage, others focus on experiential design and gastronomic quality, while more advanced profiles integrate sustainability, innovation, and experience as core elements of their competitive strategy.

Differences among clusters also emerge in relation to structural characteristics. Forward-looking profiles are not necessarily associated with larger organizational size or higher economic capacity. In many cases, innovative and sustainability-oriented strategies are pursued by small and medium-sized enterprises with long-standing experience in the sector, indicating that strategic vision is not mechanically linked to scale, but rather to cultural orientation, learning processes, and accumulated knowledge.

The clusters further differ in how they combine sustainability and marketing. Some profiles interpret sustainability mainly as heritage protection and continuity

of tradition, using it as a narrative of identity and authenticity. Others see sustainability as a driver of experiential innovation, integrating food, landscape, and activity-based tourism into immersive proposals. More advanced profiles adopt sustainability as a core branding element, embedding it into products, communication, and organizational practices.

Overall, the segmentation highlights that sustainable food and wine tourism cannot be described through a single development model. Instead, it is shaped by multiple coexisting strategic visions, each combining sustainability and marketing in different ways. This plurality represents both a challenge, in terms of coordination and coherence, and an opportunity, as it allows the destination to address diverse market segments and to experiment with differentiated sustainable positioning strategies.

4.2.1. Desirability-Based Clusters (Desired Marketing and Sustainability Visions)

Cluster 1—Territorial Storytellers

This profile includes operators who build their desired tourism offer around territorial identity and cultural narration. The core of their marketing vision is storytelling based on traditions, local events, landscapes, and community life. Sustainability is interpreted mainly as cultural continuity and heritage protection, and is communicated through narratives of roots, memory, and belonging. Their ideal positioning is based on authenticity as a symbolic and emotional value rather than as a technical or environmental standard.

Cluster 2—Gastronomic Experience Designers

Operators in this cluster envision tourism primarily through food-centered experiences. Their desired offer focuses on tastings, local cuisine, cooking classes, and food-related rituals. Marketing is strongly product-driven: gastronomy becomes the main brand asset and the primary experiential promise. Sustainability is implicitly linked to local sourcing, traditional recipes, and product quality, but remains secondary to the central role of taste and sensory pleasure.

Cluster 3—Experiential Integrators

This cluster imagines tourism as an integrated experience combining food, landscape, and physical activity. The desired positioning is based on movement, exploration, and multisensory engagement: walking among vineyards, cycling through olive groves, tasting on the road. Sustainability is associated with slow tourism, contact with nature, and low-impact practices, and is used as a value that enriches experience rather than as a purely ethical claim.

Cluster 4—Sustainability-Centered Brands

In this group, sustainability is the core of the desired market identity. Operators aim to build tourism brands explicitly based on environmental responsibility, healthy lifestyles, and quality-oriented production. Experiences are conceived as immersive, innovative, and value driven. Sustainability is not an accessory message but the main element of differentiation and positioning, shaping products, communication, and organizational choices.

4.2.2. Plausibility-Based Clusters (Perceived Realistic Marketing and Sustainability Strategies)

Cluster 1—Heritage-Based Marketers

This profile considers tradition itself as the most realistic tourism product. Operators focus on history, cultural heritage, and community life, privileging conservation over innovation. Sustainability is understood as safeguarding identity and continuity, and marketing is based on stability, familiarity, and cultural legitimacy rather than on experimentation.

Cluster 2—Experience-Oriented Marketers

These operators view tourism as the intentional design of memorable experiences. They invest in service quality, hospitality, and emotional engagement. Food is a key competitive level but always embedded in broader experiential design. Sustainability is not always central but is increasingly used as a quality signal that strengthens trust and brand credibility.

Cluster 3—Green Experience Innovators

This cluster considers it realistic to combine sustainability with experiential innovation. Operators integrate food, nature, and activity into coherent experiential formats and use sustainability as a functional and narrative driver of product innovation. Their marketing is based on immersion, engagement, and visible responsible practices.

Cluster 4—Sustainability-Driven Brand Builders

This group represents the most advanced and forward-looking strategic vision. Operators embed sustainability into branding, production, and communication. Environmental certifications, clean energy, healthy products, and regenerative practices are used as strong market signals. Tourism is positioned as a tool for well-being, responsibility, and long-term value creation.

4.3. Sustainable Marketing Models Emerging from the Clusters

Instead of being interpreted simply as behavioral or statistical groups, the clusters can be read as different ways of imagining and constructing sustainable marketing in food and wine tourism. Each profile represents a specific vision of how value should be created, communicated, and experienced by visitors.

Some profiles place identity and heritage at the center of their strategy. In these cases, sustainability is closely associated with the protection of traditions, local culture, and community life, and marketing is built around storytelling, memory, and authenticity. Other profiles focus primarily on gastronomy as the main driver of attraction. Here, food becomes the core brand asset: taste, quality, and culinary rituals define the experience, while sustainability is mainly linked to local origin and product authenticity.

A third group imagines tourism as an integrated and dynamic experience that combines food, landscape, and movement. In this vision, sustainability is associated with slow rhythms, contact with nature, and low-impact practices, and marketing emphasizes immersion, exploration, and multisensory engagement. Finally, the most advanced profiles place sustainability at the heart of their market iden-

tity. For these actors, being sustainable is not just an ethical choice but a strategic positioning: environmental responsibility, healthy lifestyles, and regenerative practices become key elements of branding, communication, and product design.

Taken together, these profiles show that sustainable food and wine tourism does not follow a single model. Rather, it is shaped by multiple coexisting strategies that combine sustainability and marketing in different ways. This diversity reflects the complexity of the sector, but also represents a potential strength, allowing destinations to speak to different types of travelers and to experiment with varied forms of sustainable positioning.

4.4. Cluster Positioning Maps and Strategic Implications

The cluster positioning maps (Figure 1) provide a synthetic representation of how the identified stakeholder profiles are located along two key strategic dimensions: orientation toward innovation and sustainability, and firm size and economic-organizational capacity. These maps allow a direct comparison among clusters and help to interpret their strategic positioning in terms of marketing and sustainability.

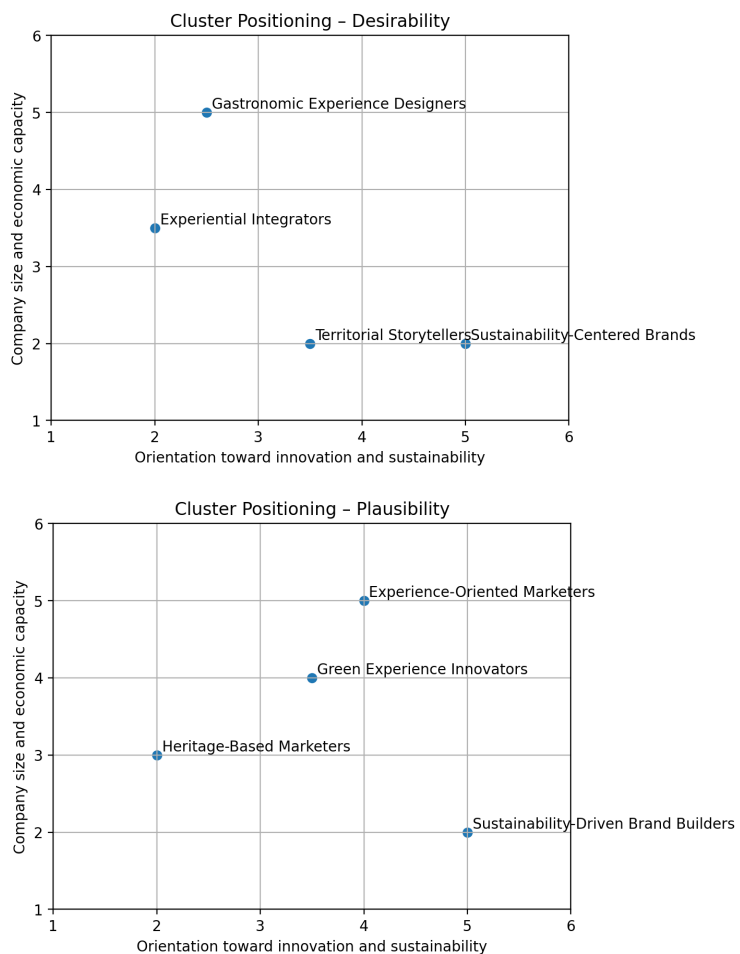


Figure 1. Cluster positioning map based on desirability and plausibility.

In the desirability-based map, the profiles are distributed along a continuum that ranges from identity- and tradition-oriented visions to strongly sustainability-centered ones. Territorial Storytellers and Experiential Integrators occupy intermediate positions, combining moderate innovation with limited or medium economic capacity. Gastronomic Experience Designers are characterized by relatively higher economic capacity but a more product-centered rather than sustainability-driven orientation. Sustainability-Centered Brands are positioned at the highest level of orientation toward innovation and sustainability, although they are often associated with smaller organizational structures. This confirms that, in the ideal vision of stakeholders, advanced sustainability and innovation do not necessarily require large firm size but are more closely linked to strategic orientation and cultural mindset.

The plausibility-based map shows a more structured distribution. Heritage-Based Marketers appear close to the lower end of innovation, confirming that tradition-based strategies are perceived as realistic but only weakly innovative. Experience-Oriented Marketers combine relatively high economic capacity with a medium-high orientation toward innovation, suggesting that experience design is viewed as a feasible development path for firms with stronger organizational resources. Green Experience Innovators occupy an intermediate but clearly forward-looking position, integrating sustainability and experiential innovation within realistic strategic expectations. Sustainability-Driven Brand Builders are located at the highest level of innovation and sustainability, but with relatively limited economic capacity, indicating that the most advanced sustainability strategies are often perceived as achievable by small but highly committed and visionary operators.

Taken together, the two maps show that orientation toward sustainability and innovation is not mechanically associated with firm size or economic power. On the contrary, some of the most advanced strategic positions are occupied by small and medium-sized firms, while larger operators are not necessarily the most innovative or sustainability-oriented. This highlights the central role of strategic vision, learning processes, and cultural orientation in shaping sustainable marketing strategies in food and wine tourism.

From a policy and managerial perspective, these results suggest the need for differentiated support strategies. Less innovative but structurally stronger firms may require incentives to adopt sustainability-oriented practices, while smaller but more visionary operators should be supported through training, networking, and institutional backing in order to scale up their impact. In this way, positioning analysis becomes a useful tool not only for interpreting stakeholder diversity, but also for designing targeted and evidence-based interventions for sustainable tourism marketing development.

5. Conclusions

This study explored sustainable marketing visions in food and wine tourism by identifying homogeneous stakeholder profiles through a Two-Step Cluster Analysis. The findings show that sustainability and marketing are interpreted and com-

bined in multiple ways, reflecting different levels of strategic maturity, cultural orientation, and organizational capacity. Rather than following a single development model, sustainable food and wine tourism emerges as a plurality of coexisting strategic visions.

The analysis highlights a clear distinction between what stakeholders consider desirable and what they perceive as plausible in the future development of the sector. While authenticity, sustainability, and experiential value are widely recognized as key drivers, their implementation is often constrained by infrastructural, organizational, and human capital limitations. This gap between aspiration and feasibility confirms the complexity of translating sustainability principles into operational marketing and management practices.

The results further show that orientation toward sustainability and innovation is not mechanically associated with firm size or economic capacity. Some of the most advanced sustainability-oriented strategies are pursued by small and medium-sized enterprises with strong cultural commitment and sectoral experience, suggesting that strategic vision and learning processes are more decisive than scale in shaping sustainable marketing pathways.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes by linking sustainability and marketing through a segmentation approach, interpreting clusters as alternative sustainable marketing models rather than simple behavioural groups. This perspective helps move beyond normative definitions of sustainability and highlights its multiple operational interpretations in real tourism systems.

From a managerial and policy perspective, the findings suggest the need for differentiated and flexible strategies. Structurally stronger but less innovative actors may require incentives to adopt sustainability-oriented practices, while smaller but more visionary operators should be supported through training, networking, and institutional backing to strengthen their impact. Sustainable marketing should therefore be understood not merely as a communication tool, but as a systemic lever capable of aligning identity, experience design, technological support, and sustainability objectives.

Overall, sustainable food and wine tourism depends on the ability to integrate culture, experience, innovation, and responsibility within coherent marketing strategies. Future research may extend this framework through longitudinal or comparative studies to better understand how sustainable marketing visions evolve across different contexts and over time.

Authors' Contributions

The contribution is the result of joint reflections by the authors, with the following contributions attributed to Perchinunno P. (paragraph 2), L'Abbate S. (paragraphs 4 and 5), and to Passaro P. (paragraphs 1 and 3).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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