

## What will I share? - An evaluation of **electronic word-of-mouth** on **service quality** and **the tourist experience**: a case study in **Bento Gonçalves**, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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**Abstract** | A destination's competitiveness and sustainability depend mainly on its ability to provide enriching experiences for visitors while at the same time guaranteeing excellence in service provision (Zibarzani et al., 2022). This research sought to carry out a case study in the city of Bento Gonçalves, located in Rio Grande do Sul, with the Wine Train ride as the object of study, using content generated by users via the Tripadvisor website to analyse the experience of tourists and their perceptions of the quality of services during their train ride. To do this, we used a theoretical review of experience, quality of service, customer satisfaction, user-generated content, and evaluation of tourist services. The methodological approach included the characterisation of the research, the data collection and analysis procedures adopted. The results showed the complexity of analysing quality in tourism, which involves various facets, including the main attraction, secondary services and the parties involved.

**Keywords** | customer experience management, quality of services, electronic word-of-mouth, user generated content

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a global driving force that plays an increasingly significant role in the economy and culture of nations. Understanding the tourist experience and evaluating the quality of services provided at tourist destinations have become central themes in tourism studies (Wong & Chan, 2023). A destination's competitiveness and sustainability largely depend on its ability to provide enriching experiences for visitors while simultaneously ensuring excellence in service delivery (Zibarzani et al., 2022).

Research on the subject has already highlighted a profound relationship between the experience tourists have at a destination and their satisfaction with the services provided (Butnaru & Miller, 2012; Fernandes & Cruz, 2016; Pizam et al., 2016). The service experience is a consumer's internal and subjective response, including their perception, emotions, and overall reaction (Pizam et al., 2016). On the other hand, service quality refers to the objective performance of services and the extent to which a service meets or exceeds customer expectations. Thus, it can be defined as customers' judgment or general attitude towards service quality (Butnaru & Miller, 2012). It is widely acknowledged that experiences and service quality can directly impact a company's brand reputation (Agyeiwaah et al., 2016; Ardani et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2023).

Therefore, analysing tourists' experiences during their time at a tourist destination is essential to understanding their satisfaction with the tourism product they visit and, consequently, assessing the perceived quality of the service provided (Fernandes & Cruz, 2016; Meng & Han, 2018). This analysis offers two benefits to the field. First, it allows managers to understand their strengths and weaknesses, thus supporting decision-making regarding attractions (Albayrak & Caber, 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2020). Second, evaluating these aspects also helps to understand tourists' perceptions, identifying their expectations and real experiences during their tourism experience (Ali et al., 2016; Wong & Chan, 2023).

From this perspective, authors such as Baumber et al. (2021), Nilashi et al. (2022), and Zheng et al. (2022) argue that analysing user-generated content (UGC) on social media is an important tool for measuring experience, satisfaction, and the quality of service offered at tourist attractions. Consumers are often motivated to post their evaluations for various reasons, mainly to share a positive experience in search of personal fulfilment (Soldatenko & Backer, 2019) or to express dissatisfaction with a product or service due to a negative experience. These

consumers generally seek to "alert" new consumers and promote lower expectations of the attraction in question (Su & Teng, 2018).

In this context, Wong and Chan (2023) argue that case studies are essential for understanding tourists' experiences and satisfaction with tourist attractions. These studies highlight the characteristics of specific places and help to better understand the situational reality. In other words, case studies can provide more explicit managerial and theoretical insights, which would be difficult to obtain when evaluating a set of services or attractions (Prentice et al., 2021; Wong & Chan, 2023). Railway tourism has been growing and sparking the interest of those seeking this type of experience. As the number of railway lines declined and many of the structures were left idle, several countries began to invest in railway heritage as a strategy for developing tourism products, restoring railways, and using them for tourism purposes (Lee & Chen, 2017). This trend has been no different in Brazil. According to the Ministry of Tourism (MTUR, 2024), there are currently 17 tourist and cultural trains operating regularly across the country, located in the states of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul.

Similarly, according to the Ministry of Tourism (Brazil, 2024), over seventeen tourist and cultural trains operate regularly across the country, located in the states of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. Among these, the most noteworthy in terms of the number of visitors and representativeness are the Serra do Mar Train in Paraná, running between Curitiba and Morretes (with a 70-kilometre route that offers beautiful natural landscapes and significant works of art); the Maria Fumaça (which connects the cities of São João Del Rei and Tiradentes in Minas Gerais along a 12.7 kilometre route); and the Bento Gonçalves Wine Train (linking the 23 kilometres between the cities of Bento Gonçalves and Garibaldi). The latter is the focus of this study.

Despite the growth in the use of railways as heritage tourism products, as far as the authors are aware, little research has been conducted to identify the use of tourist trains by destinations, as the literature has mainly focused on understanding the use of express and high-speed trains in destination development (Patel, 2024). Nevertheless, authors such as Merciu, Păunescu, Dorobanțu, and Merciu (2022), Oliveira et al. (2022), and Peira, Lo Giudice, and Miraglia (2022) emphasise the importance of conducting studies to understand how this product influences the visitor's experience and the key aspects they expect during their journey on tourist trains.

Based on the above, this research aims to conduct a case study in the city of Bento Gonçalves, located in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, using the Wine Train tour as the object of study. The tourist trip on the Wine Train, also known as Maria Fumaça, covers 23 kilometres and lasts 1 hour and 30 minutes, running between the towns of Bento Gonçalves, Garibaldi, and Carlos Barbosa in the Serra Gaúcha region of Rio Grande do Sul. This area is renowned for the quality of its wines, a true legacy left by Italian immigrants. Along the way, the Wine Train's carriages become the stage for artistic performances of music, theatre, and dance, showcasing Italian and Gaúcho folklore, which are further enhanced after wine, sparkling wine, and grape juice tastings offered during the journey. The performances are conducted by regional artists who convey aspects of local culture to tourists through music, songs, and playful stories.

This tourist attraction has been in operation since 1993, when the current manager of the railway section identified the opportunity to repurpose the route for tourism, given that trains had previously been used for passenger and cargo transport until 1976 but had since been abandoned. The trains were then refurbished, preserving their original features. Tourists come from various regions of the country, as well as abroad, primarily through organised excursion groups purchasing package tours. Other tourists visit the attraction individually with their families, without a package deal, as the attraction is open to all. On average, the Wine Train received approximately 270,000 visitors annually (in 2002) before the pandemic. The Wine Train is significant for tourism in Bento Gonçalves and the surrounding region, as it not only boosts tourism but also drives the local economy, generating jobs and income for residents.

Therefore, this research aims to utilise UGC from the TripAdvisor review site to analyse tourists' experiences and their perceptions of the quality of services provided during their trip on the Wine Train in Bento Gonçalves, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. We believe this research is relevant due to the lack of studies on railway tourism, a growing form of tourism in the country that promotes destinations and preserves cultural and natural heritage. Increasing the number of studies on rail tourism could bring significant benefits, such as enhancing unique experiences, promoting and implementing sustainable travel, and revitalising historic routes. To achieve the research objectives, the study is structured into six sections. The first introduces the context and objectives of the research, followed by the theoretical framework, the methodological approach, the results obtained, their discussion, and finally, the conclusions and contributions of the study.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Customer satisfaction and its impact on the tourist experience

Tourism is recognised as one of the leading global activities, marked by the continuous emergence of new products and services designed to maintain local attractiveness and sustain tourist flows. According to Nilashi et al. (2022), the industry's competitiveness heavily relies on customer satisfaction, highlighting it as a critical determinant of market success. In this context, customer satisfaction is broadly understood as the difference between expectations and actual performance, as posited by Zibarzani et al. (2022) and Zeithaml et al. (1990). However, Pizam et al. (2016) deepen this definition by framing satisfaction as a psychological construct rooted in feelings of well-being and pleasure during consumption, shaped by pre-existing opinions and informational cues about the destination.

Customer satisfaction is not a universal phenomenon, and only some get the same satisfaction from the same hospitality experience. Customers have different needs, objectives and experiences that influence expectations. The same customer may also have different needs and expectations for different dining occasions or times of the day (Pizam et al., 2016). In this way, it can be said that customer satisfaction in tourism is directly related to the tourist services provided. This variability underscores the need for tailored approaches in quality management to address diverse expectations and mitigate potential dissatisfaction.

From a practical standpoint, assessing service quality in tourism is challenging due to the intangible and dynamic nature of services. Managers must balance operational efficiency with customer-focused measures, using insights into tourists' perceptions to guide strategic improvements benefiting both visitors and local communities. Cárdenas et al. (2017) argue that this process requires integrating customer feedback mechanisms into quality improvement initiatives, creating opportunities for continuous refinement of services.

Satisfaction is closely tied to tourists' experiences at attractions. Meng and Han (2018) emphasise that positive experiences exceeding expectations lead to satisfaction, while unmet expectations result in dissatisfaction. These dynamic underlines the multidimensional nature of satisfaction, which encompasses physical, social, and emotional aspects of tourism. Likewise, Su and Teng (2018) note that the quality of tourist services not only influences satisfaction but also shapes perceptions of loyalty and future behavioural intentions.

In management, companies increasingly use customer perception data to create value, recognising its potential impact on satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability (Wang et al., 2014).

Agyeiwaah et al. (2016) reinforce this by identifying factors like visitor expectations, perceived performance, and value assessment as key drivers of satisfaction. Moreover, the interplay between satisfaction and loyalty remains complex, as demonstrated by Ardani et al. (2019), who note that tourists may prioritise novelty over revisits, regardless of prior satisfaction.

Ryan et al. (2010) present in their study the five dimensions that measure customer satisfaction: the atmosphere of the attraction, the existence of exciting attractions, levels of crowding, the existence of places to rest, and the perceived price of admission. The study also emphasises the importance of researching why tourists visit a particular attraction, the number of repeat visits, and the degree to which tourists recommend the attraction to others. From a different perspective, Ardani et al. (2019) conducted a study aimed at relating customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions in tourism based on a systematic literature review. The results showed that service quality is the primary antecedent of tourism satisfaction. However, the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is not always linear, as some customers revisit a destination motivated by satisfaction and quality, while others prefer to visit new destinations despite their satisfaction with the products.

The research by Meng and Han (2018) achieved similar results to those of Ardani et al. (2019). The authors found that loyalty to a destination is influenced by satisfaction with the product and service when the visitor's experience is of higher quality while consuming a tourism product or service. The authors empirically tested Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four-dimensional experience model and found a significant relationship between tourist experience and satisfaction. Furthermore, satisfaction with the tourist experience proved to be a more significant driver of loyalty than satisfaction with the product itself.

It is worth noting that the research by Pine and Gilmore (1999) is considered a landmark for tourism experience studies and its relationship with satisfaction when visiting places. The authors identify four dimensions of tourist experiences — education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism—each contributing differently to satisfaction and loyalty. Aesthetic experiences can elicit strong emotional responses, while escapist experiences offer immersive and unique engagement.

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), tourists gain entertainment experiences when they passively absorb what is happening. The educational experience refers to active absorption when consumers learn something new and engage in interactive activities. Visiting a museum is a typical example of this category, as it allows travellers to learn from the past, thus enriching

their cultural knowledge. The aesthetic dimension refers to experiences in which consumers passively immerse their minds in the environment. For example, during a city tour, travellers can passively appreciate the aesthetic beauty of monuments and sights. Finally, escapist experiences refer to both active participation and immersion in activities. Tourists gain escapist experiences when they "immerse themselves in a new reality," for example, by relaxing in parks or public spaces, absorbing the multisensory elements of these attractions.

Existing tourism studies have confirmed the link between tourism experiences and satisfaction, stating that observed satisfaction is a psychological state triggered by tourism experiences. In this sense, Fernandes and Cruz (2016) assert that, in essence, tourists do not simply buy products and services; instead, they mainly seek and consume immersive experiences. Due to the relationship between satisfaction and experience, these authors argue that tourism is one of the pioneering fields of experience research, with tourist experiences becoming one of the most popular academic topics in the literature from the 1970s onwards.

The experience at a tourist attraction promotes customer enchantment, which goes beyond satisfaction with the service provided or the purchase of a product, as it involves a set of positive emotions such as joy and enthusiasm. These emotions arise from the surprise of receiving something highly valuable that exceeds expectations. The emotional bond created through customer enchantment increases their purchase and recommendation intentions, as they develop vivid and lasting memories that establish emotional connections, thus fostering customer loyalty (Wang et al., 2014).

Positive tourist experiences, in addition to enhancing the perceived quality of tourism products and services, can stimulate people to share them (Su & Teng, 2018). From a similar perspective, Liang et al. (2023) argue that tourists who have a quality tourism experience tend to create and disseminate stories about their local experiences. Through storytelling, tourists recall and share key aspects of a destination and gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. Sharing this information helps align the experiences of different visitors and contributes to shaping the overall image of a destination.

Thus, there are various theories that study the influence of user satisfaction on the tourist experience. These theories seek to adapt to different contexts and fields within the tourism experience. However, some key points addressed across different theoretical perspectives are consistently emphasised as important in all sectors. Theories on consumer satisfaction in tourism reveal a complex interaction between expectations, experiences, and perceived quality,

highlighting the fundamental role of the customer experience in shaping the perception of the value of tourism services (Ardani et al., 2019). Nilashi, Fallahpour, Wong, and Ghabban (2022) describe tourism as one of the most competitive industries, with a strong dependence on customer satisfaction to maintain competitiveness.

In this context, the concept of satisfaction, according to Pizam, Shapoval, and Ellis (2016), transcends the simple fulfilment of expectations and becomes a psychological experience of well-being and pleasure, where service quality plays a crucial role in achieving satisfaction (Zibarzani et al., 2022). This understanding broadens the perspective on the role of experience in tourism, which, according to Pine and Gilmore (1999), can be analysed through aesthetic, educational, entertainment, and escapism dimensions, each impacting satisfaction in a unique way by allowing different levels of connection and immersion.

This multifaceted view of tourism emphasises that customer satisfaction is not uniform and depends on multiple factors, such as cultural background and tourists' personal motivations (Su & Teng, 2018). While some studies, such as Ryan's (2010), have emphasised the atmosphere and physical comfort of attractions, others, such as Ardani et al. (2019), highlight that service quality is a strong antecedent of satisfaction. However, the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is not always linear, since some tourists seek new experiences regardless of previous satisfaction. Pine and Gilmore's (1999) perspective of categorising the tourist experience into four dimensions—*aesthetic, educational, entertainment, and escapism*—complements this analysis by offering insights into how different aspects of the experience shape the perception of value and the propensity to revisit the destination. Thus, the literature emphasises that success in tourism is not just about delivering products and services, but rather about crafting memorable experiences that, by generating an emotional bond, enhance loyalty and encourage positive recommendations (Wang et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2023).

## **2.2. User-generated content and the evaluation of tourist services**

The use of Web 2.0 technology in various disciplines has led to the generation of big data through various tools and platforms. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of network theory and social exchange theory, the evolution of big data, particularly through the spread of Artificial Intelligence (AI), has revolutionised consumer decision-making and organisational strategy. The advancement of big data, mainly through the spread of AI, has brought various benefits to consumers and decision-makers. As far as customers are concerned, user-generated



content (UGC) has led to the impact of the ‘wisdom of crowds’ on consumers (Su & Teng, 2018). From the perspective of social exchange theory, this phenomenon reflects the reciprocal sharing of experiences and evaluations within a digital network, where consumers and service providers mutually benefit. The ability to share experiences and reviews has significantly shaped consumer behaviour, with individuals increasingly relying on collective opinions as a key factor in their decision-making and destination selection.

User-generated content is considered big data because it has a high volume of information, diversity, and value (Fernandes & Cruz, 2016). Online reviews have played a significant role in the tourism and hospitality sector in recent years (Liang et al., 2023). Tourists resort to various forms of UGC, involving blogs, review sites, Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), social networks and online communities to select a particular place to visit (Meng & Han, 2018; Morales Pérez & Pacheco Bernal, 2018; Nilashi et al., 2022). The application of the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) highlights how the attitudes formed through these digital exchanges influence tourists' behavioural intentions, particularly in terms of destination selection and purchase decisions. Recent studies (Zhu et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023) corroborate these findings, emphasising the growing reliance on UGC for informed decision-making in tourism.

The results of the ratings, information and reviews of tourist sites provided by the UGC generate a considerable density of big data that both customers and product and service managers can use. Customers can use communication channels for two purposes: to share information and experiences during their stay and engagement at the destination and also to use the content generated in their decision-making process about whether or not to visit a particular place (Li et al., 2020; Pizam et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2019). This aligns with the concept of information asymmetry in economics, where UGC acts as a tool to reduce uncertainty by providing reliable and diverse insights about a service or destination.

Many previous studies have pointed out that word-of-mouth is an essential component of big data for evaluating the quality of tourism products and services (Meng & Han, 2018). The concept of word-of-mouth began in marketing research in the 1960s and can be positive or negative (Wong et al., 2019). The underpinning framework of signalling theory suggests that positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) acts as a credible signal of service quality, whereas negative eWOM serves as a warning mechanism for potential consumers. This UGC has been widely used in academic research, mainly due to its profound theoretical implications,

improving knowledge about consumer behaviour, and its managerial implications, which help in the decision-making process for destinations.

For example, Bressan et al. (2022) highlighted the relationship between the perceived quality of a destination with visitor satisfaction and eWOM. The results of the research carried out in Vietnam showed that the perceived quality of a tourist site increases visitor satisfaction and their intention to share information and experiences about the trip. It was also found that visitors who were going to share information had a greater intention to return than those who did not plan to share information about their trip. These findings support the theoretical premise of customer satisfaction theory, which posits that satisfied customers are more likely to exhibit loyalty behaviours, such as repeat visits and positive eWOM. This is further supported by Lee and Park (2023), who identify a direct correlation between eWOM intensity and long-term destination branding success.

From a different perspective, Sánchez-García and Currás-Pérez (2011) showed in their research that eWOM does not always provide positive information about tourism products and services. The authors stated that tourists with a negative experience were more likely to divulge detailed information than those with a good experience. The results of the authors' research showed that customers travel expecting quality from products and services, so when they find a place with quality, they are not surprised. On the other hand, negative experiences are not expected. In this way, customers use social media to share their frustration and 'protect' other consumers from experiencing such a situation. This aligns with prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), which suggests that individuals are more sensitive to losses than gains, leading to heightened reactions to negative experiences. Further evidence by Smith et al. (2022) indicates that negative UGC has a longer-lasting impact on consumer perceptions than positive feedback.

Su and Teng (2018) corroborated this by stating that negative word-of-mouth and complaints are the two most common post-satisfaction behaviours. Word-of-mouth or negative reviews have proven more influential than positive reviews because they are generally considered more trustworthy and have attracted more customer attention. Furthermore, Sparks and Browning (2010) suggest that customer complaints are critical for tourism service managers to understand why and how to improve service quality. Exploring and identifying the dimensions of service failure based on visitor complaints will complement the understanding of visitor experiences for service recovery, improving future service design and ultimately recovering from service failure. These insights align with the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy, which emphasises the importance of leveraging customer feedback as a resource to achieve competitive

advantage. Johnson et al. (2023) provide practical frameworks for integrating negative UGC into proactive service improvement strategies.

Due to the importance of user evaluations in the perceived quality of tourism products and services, this topic has emerged considerably in scientific research in a wide variety of fields. However, in some fields, such as railway tourism, this growth process is still considered slow (Pinheiro, Gonçalves, & Mendonça, 2022). One of the few studies carried out with the aim of evaluating UGC to explore key aspects of the customer experience was written by Patel (2024), who found that the luxury train experience is measured, evaluated and shared on review sites through eight key aspects: memory, services, food and drink, cabin, excursions, reservations, on-board amenities and the safety of the journey. These findings emphasise the multi-dimensionality of customer experience theory, highlighting how diverse factors collectively influence overall satisfaction and destination loyalty. Complementing this, Chang and Liu (2023) stress the pivotal role of emotional attachment in shaping tourists' memorable experiences, particularly in luxury contexts. The author also emphasises that memory is the main influence in creating unforgettable experiences and that services are the main factors responsible for user satisfaction.

### **2.3. Railway tourism**

Railway tourism has emerged as a new attraction in certain industrial areas of Europe, bringing notable economic benefits to local communities. Theoretical perspectives, such as heritage tourism theory and cultural memory, help explain its unique appeal in these regions. It should be noted that the use of railways for tourism development is characterised by the use of trains as tourist attraction tools (Merciu, Păunescu, Dorobanțu, & Merciu, 2022). For Sang, Fontana and Piovan (2022), this type of tourism is characterised in two ways. First, nostalgia tourism theory highlights how the emotional connection with the past drives the demand for authentic and historical experiences, where themed journeys create a sense of time travel. In general, these routes are specific for tourist use and the destination is not an essential factor, but rather the experience on board (Oliveira et al., 2022). Second, scenic tourism emphasises the visual and cultural value of landscapes viewed during the journey, offering tourists unique experiences that connect them to regional culture and the environment (Sang, Fontana & Piovan, 2022).

Peira, Bonadonna and Beltramo (2024) add that nostalgic railway tourism is a type of slow tourism strongly linked to nostalgia for past memories, but it is also associated with the

travelling experience and related hospitality and luxury services that can improve perception and enhance the journey. In this way, it can be said that the use of historic railways and trains for tourist use has a strong link with tourists' emotions, where their presence in the carriages brings back nostalgia for the past. Zhang, Dai and Xia (2020) argue that the relationship between motivation and a memorable tourist experience in railway tourism is mediated by emotion, experience and the creation of a cultural memory promoted by the experience. This underscores the broader theoretical context of emotional geography; wherein spatial and temporal aspects of the journey evoke feelings that strengthen tourists' attachment to the experience.

The importance of authenticity for railway tourism is widely discussed and defended in the scarce existing literature. Several countries have used railway tourism as a local product, such as Romania and Brazil. When analysing the value of railway heritage for sustainable development on the Oravița-Anina railway (Romania), the authors Merciu, Păunescu, Dorobanțu and Merciu (2022) found that railway tourism was an important sustainable solution for the development of the destination, strengthening the role of the railway for the local community. Furthermore, according to the authors, by promoting an authentic experience, tourism would not only benefit tourists but also provide a window into the dynamics of the community's social life by valorising the place. However, critiques from sustainable tourism scholars argue that over-commercialisation may compromise authenticity, creating a tension between preserving historical integrity and economic imperatives.

From this same perspective, Oliveira et al. (2022) analysed the value of a railway line located between the Brazilian cities of Campinas and Jundiaí. As a result, they realised that although it was considered by the local community to be an important heritage for the development of tourism, it was not perceived that past, present and future are, in a way, related to each other. In other words, the community does not realise its historical and social value, which can lead to various social problems. This disconnection between community perception and heritage value aligns with the challenges outlined in stakeholder theory, which stresses the importance of engaging local communities as active participants in tourism development.

This underscores the critical role of authenticity and satisfaction in developing these products, as authenticity significantly shapes tourists' perceptions and overall experience satisfaction. This was demonstrated by Lee and Chen (2017), who analysed the attractiveness of rail tourism in Taiwan. They highlighted the importance of historical authenticity in Taiwanese railway tourism, especially in relation to cultural and industrial heritage. Railway routes and old stations

are seen as authentic testimonies of the past, attracting tourists interested in reliving historical experiences. The preservation and reuse of old railway infrastructure, such as abandoned stations, also play a vital role, promoting authenticity throughout journeys (Lee & Chen, 2017).

Fraga, Borges and Almeida (2019) identified challenges, strategies and trends for gastronomic railway tourism in Brazil and Portugal, and they proposed determining a guiding thread for the development of what could make up a gastronomic and creative railway tourism. The authors listed nine railway tourism routes in Brazil that relate experience, gastronomy and history: Trem das Águas, Trem da Serra da Mantiqueira, Trem da Serra do Mar Paranaense, Trem do Corcovado, Trem da Estrada de Ferro Santa Catarina, Trem de Guararema, Maria Fumaça Campinas Jaguariúna, Trem das Termas and the Trem do Vinho, the subject of this study. The integration of gastronomy and heritage tourism suggests an intersection between experiential consumption and local identity, emphasising the need for multidimensional strategies in railway tourism.

While limited research has been conducted on the potential of railway tourism as a tourism product and its impact on satisfaction, existing literature provides some insights. Overall, user satisfaction with railway tourism as a tourist attraction tool, especially nostalgic tourism, differs from the satisfaction and expectations of users' experiences with “traditional” railway tours such as those undertaken for commuting or landscape contemplation (Peira, Bonadonna, & Beltramo, 2024). For example, research such as that by Virkar and Mallya (2018), has shown that, in the context of luxury and scenic trains, the availability and quality of transport are the main influencers of the experience and promoters of satisfaction. However, accessibility, quality of service, perceived value and destination image also influence tourists' satisfaction with experiences while travelling by such means of transport (Ho, Chung, Lin, & Chen, 2010; Lee & Chen, 2017; Krohn & Backman, 2016). This variety of factors reflects the complexity highlighted by service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), where value creation depends on interactions among resources, stakeholders, and service systems.

On the other hand, when it comes to rides as a tourist attraction, research by van Hagen and Sauren (2014) found that the main factors influencing tourist satisfaction in train experiences are atmosphere, comfort, functionality, safety and cleanliness. From another perspective, the findings of Bayraktar and Selçuk (2022) highlighted emotional experience, gastronomic experience, hedonism, innovative experience, authenticity, popular culture, symbolism and social interaction as the main aspects that promote the experience of train rides. Such findings

raise critical questions regarding the scalability of railway tourism offerings without diluting experiential quality, a challenge well-documented in tourism operations management.

The results achieved by van Hagen and Sauren (2014) and Lee and Chen (2017) also argued that experiential aspects are capable of significantly impacting overall evaluations of the trip and visitors' interest in spreading positive and negative information about the experience through word-of-mouth and/or eWOM. The interplay between technological advancements and traditional experiences in railway tourism remains an underexplored area, demanding further research to balance innovation with historical preservation in enhancing tourist satisfaction.

### **3. Methodology**

Based on the context presented in the theoretical framework outlined above, the research problem of this study centres on identifying the main aspects of the tourist experience and the tourists' perceptions of the services provided during their trip on a tourist railway tour. To this end, an exploratory study was conducted to describe and evaluate the tourist experience and the quality of the services provided by a railway tourist attraction. Due to its significance for the development of tourism in two cities located in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), the Trem do Vinho (Wine Train), located in the city of Bento Gonçalves, was used as the object of study. In terms of data collection, it is believed that the use of TripAdvisor evaluations is an effective method for obtaining information in a more diversified way over an extended longitudinal period, thereby increasing the reliability of the data collected in terms of sample heterogeneity and more even spatial distribution. The approach taken is qualitative, using information extracted from one of the most widely used social media platforms in tourism for sharing travel information: TripAdvisor.

The research employed a simple random sample for data collection, with data sourced from the TripAdvisor website between November 2017 and November 2022. The data were manually analysed from November to December 2022, resulting in the analysis of 880 valid comments. These 880 comments were subjected to a tabulation process to provide pertinent information for further analysis. Firstly, the Google Forms tool was used to extract information on the individuals who completed the evaluations, identifying their follow-up forms and states of origin.

Regarding data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) was employed as the analysis technique. TA is a qualitative data analysis method for identifying, analysing,

interpreting, and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As an initial theoretical categorisation strategy for the results achieved in the research, the categories of experience proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) were used as a basis: aesthetics, education, entertainment, and escapism. The comments were also categorised according to user experience as positive, negative, or neutral. Microsoft Excel was used to tabulate the results, and IRAMUTEQ was employed to rationalise the data and better understand the customer experience during the tour. IRAMUTEQ enables researchers to identify meaningful classes in qualitative data and name them based on the most significant words in the text, thereby representing the dominant ideas and themes in the data (Da Silva et al., 2020).

The comments extracted from TripAdvisor were categorised as positive, negative, or neutral experiences, according to the relationship between the experience dimensions proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) and the content of the comments. The data were then subjected to the Reinert method, applied using IRAMUTEQ software. The Reinert method allows for the classification of terms in qualitative data, performing a factor correspondence analysis that deconstructs the original text and reorganises it based on the repetition and sequence of words (Reinert, 1990).

Thus, the method's Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) technique was applied to represent the various words and variables associated with each text class identified in the comments on a Cartesian plane. It should be noted that 886 comments were extracted from TripAdvisor, evaluating the service provided by the Maria Fumaça tour in Bento Gonçalves, Rio Grande do Sul. However, when analysing the results, it was decided to exclude six comments that did not meet the research criteria. Of these, five evaluated the tour without the individuals having actually participated, which would have compromised the accuracy of the information. One was excluded as it only contained information about a local travel agency, rather than the tour itself.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1.Characterisation of the attraction and its users**

The Wine Train Tour, held in Bento Gonçalves and Carlos Barbosa (southern Brazil), is an important example of cultural and historical tourism in Brazil, particularly in the context of Italian immigration and viticulture. The attraction uses a 19<sup>th</sup> century steam locomotive for a journey covering approximately 23 kilometres between Bento Gonçalves, Garibaldi, and Carlos

Barbosa, and includes cultural presentations referring to the Italian heritage and traditions of southern Brazil. Recent studies on heritage tourism indicate that initiatives such as the Wine Train reinforce local cultural identity and allow for the preservation of historical memory through sensory elements such as music, theatre, and tastings of typical products like wines and cheeses (Fonseca et al., 2020; Seabra et al., 2021). In fact, such an experience reinforces authenticity as a fundamental characteristic of cultural tourism, providing a genuine immersion in the region's traditions and adding value to both the tangible and intangible heritage of Bento Gonçalves and its surroundings (Silva et al., 2019; Barbosa & Campos, 2022).

In addition to its role in cultural preservation, the Wine Train Tour serves an important economic function, boosting the tourism sector and stimulating socio-economic development in the region. According to recent analyses, railway tourism – a growing segment in Brazil – strengthens local economies by generating jobs, increasing demand for tourist services, and enhancing the value of regional products, especially those associated with the wine sector (Almeida et al., 2021; Souza & Morais, 2019). Additionally, tourism associated with historical and cultural heritage is effective in revitalising rural areas and strengthening regional identities, which contributes to a more diversified and sustainable economy (Seabra et al., 2021). Thus, the Wine Train is consolidated not only as a tourist attraction but also as a transforming agent for the local economy and culture, promoting integration between heritage preservation and economic development in the Vale dos Vinhedos.

#### **4.2. Customer Evaluation of the Experience and Quality of the Tour**

Of the 880 comments evaluated, 386 expressed positive aspects of their experience during the tour, representing 43.8%. These were subjected to Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) analysis in IRAMUTEQ software, where 740 text segments (TS) were identified, corresponding to 83% retention, achieving the ideal value of over 75% proposed by Reinert. The author states that the retention value should exceed 75% to indicate that the text has satisfactory representativeness and fewer word variations (Reinert, 1990).

The positive comments regarding the service provided by Maria Fumaça can be grouped into four stable classes, i.e., the processed content generated four classes (Figure 1): Class 1 with 249 TSs (33.65%), Class 2 with 210 TSs (28.38%), Class 3 with 107 TSs (14.46%), and Class 4 with 174 TSs (23.51%). Class 1 was labelled ‘adding value’ due to the most representative words in its category (Figure 1), presenting aspects related to the characteristics of the tour that



add value to it, such as its name, the intention to recommend it, and other positive verbs expressing the intention to return and recommend it, motivated by a good experience.

The second class accounted for 14.5% of the text segments found. It was related to the activities available on the tour – that is, the entertainment options experienced during the journey, which led to the class being called ‘entertainment’. These were identified as positive points in the tourist's experience. This relationship corroborates and aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) dimensions of experience, which highlight entertainment and the visitor's ability to absorb it as a positive part of their tourist experience, capable of promoting a sense of satisfaction with the place.

Class 3 was composed of information relating to the tourist product offering and the routes taken, showing points related to important information on aspects such as travel, access to the site, means of transport, and complementary destinations that are often offered together with the Maria Fumaça. These are called ‘route recommendations’. These towns are often marketed in packages by local tour operators who sell the tour alongside other tourist experiences at wineries and attractions in these two towns. This dimension is linked to the education dimension previously proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999), as it offers insights capable of generating learning expectations in future visitors. This finding also corroborates Bressan et al. (2022), who argue that visitor satisfaction is influenced by the visitor's intention to share information and experiences about the trip, generating expectations and demonstrating aspects new visitors will find at the destination.

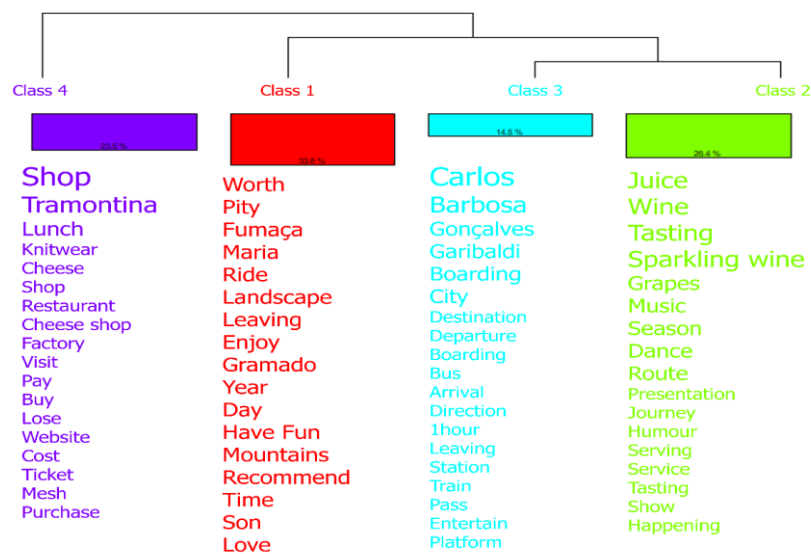


Figure 1: Organisational chart of the classes found in the positive comments

Source: Survey data (2022)

The last class identified was present in 23.5% of the text segments identified and contained terms linked to the ‘description of travel packages’ purchased by tourists, thus motivating its denomination. At this point, it is worth noting that, of the 880 comments analysed, 150 contained information related to describing the attractions of tourist packages purchased and not exclusively the Maria Fumaça ride. It was decided not to exclude these from the analysis because they contained information related to the service provided on the tour. However, as can be seen in Class 4 identified in the CDH, in many cases, the Maria Fumaça is analysed as part of a regional tourist package and not as an isolated attraction.

In this class, the most frequent words found were ‘buy’ (65), ‘epic’ - referring to the tourist attraction Epopeia Italiana - (64), ‘Gramado’ (52), ‘shop’ (48), ‘Tramontina’ (47) and ‘bus’ (45). Moreover, in general, they sought to describe the itinerary and the attractions belonging to local routes, as can be seen in the following extracts from the comments:

We took the tour with the company that left Gramado for Carlos Barbosa, where we initially visited the Tramontina factory and a fine cheese shop, then we were taken to the train that took us ‘on’ an incredible route with shows and wine and grape juice tasting.

Sensational attraction, one of the best tours, from the train to the Italian Epic, cheese shop, Tramontina, lunch and visit to the winery. When I searched for the Maria Fumaça tour, all the photos available on the website selling the packages showed images of beautiful places and landscapes.

It can be seen from this that the positive comments found are mainly aimed at providing information in a positive way to future customers, trying to inform them about the main aspects of the tour and also the local tourist products, which is referred to as the ‘importance of the tour’. Surprisingly, the content presented in the positive points does not fundamentally seek to characterise and share good sensations and experiences encountered on the tour.

The fact that the comments generally describe the customer's satisfaction with the tour's attractions and with the tour, in general, may be linked to the fact that, in many cases, satisfaction is a consequence of the experience. This corroborates what Pizam et al. (2016) have said, arguing that satisfaction involves the feeling of well-being and pleasure during consumption, which is the result of obtaining what is expected from an appealing product and/or service, i.e. it is the result of a tourist experience, being the sum of satisfaction with all the experiences had during the trip.

Another point worth highlighting is that the aspects related to the commercialisation of packages that include a visit to Maria Fumaça can be considered dichotomous, but several comments point to the tourist packages as an opposing point of the tour. In other words, the tour cannot please all customers, but there is agreement about the lack of ‘characterisation’ and cultural segmentation provided by package tours marketed by travel agencies. This is in line with what has been said by authors such as Ardani et al. (2019), Albayrak et al. (2018) and Liang et al. (2023), who argue that tourists have different needs and expectations. These can directly influence their perception of satisfaction with the tourist experience.

Of the 880 comments, 88 presented negative points about the Maria Fumaça tour. When the CDH was applied, it was realised that 452 text segments were found in these comments, corresponding to 81% retention, which was classified into six classes. This shows that they meet the criteria advocated by Reinert (1990). However, as shown in figure 2, the data obtained can be separated into two main clusters subdivided into three classes. The first cluster covers classes 2, 3 and 4, totalling 48.9% of the TSs. It presents comments on the attractiveness aspects of the Maria Fumaça, such as the attractiveness of the content offered by the service, the experience of the tour, the absorption of the service, and its products. These aspects align with the escapism category that Pine and Gilmore (1999) defended, so this cluster was called ‘escapism’.

The second cluster concerns complementary tourism carried out along with the tour, such as the tourist services used (tourist agencies, hotels and transport), the other tourist attractions visited, and the quality offered by tourism during the tour. This cluster accounts for 51.1% of the text segments in the negative comments published about Maria Fumaça on TripAdvisor. Concerning the six classes identified in the text corpus, the Descending Hierarchical Classification showed that the first class has 93 of the 452 text segments, totalling 20.6%. The second class has 56 TSs (12.4%), and class 3 represents 17.9% of the total, with 81 TSs. Class 4 has 84 STs (18.6 per cent), class 5 has 68 STs (15 per cent), and class 6 represents 15.5 per cent of the total with 70 text segments.

In order to better organise the content analysed, it was decided not to present the classes in the order in which they were presented in IRAMUTEQ but rather according to the clusters to which they belong. Initially, the first cluster was called ‘escapism’ as it presents the components offered in the Maria Fumaça experience and comprised classes 2, 3 and 4. Class two was called ‘aesthetics’ because it presents the attractions and activities carried out during the tour. In this

class, the terms ‘attraction’, ‘wagon’, ‘view’, ‘train’, ‘occur’, ‘bush’, and ‘wish’ were those that best expressed the content generated by comments with these characteristics.

In general, the comments related to this class sought to describe aspects related to the attraction itself and the poor performance of Maria Fumaça about customer expectations. It is worth noting that the results achieved here align with the aesthetic dimension advocated by Pine and Gilmore (1999), thus signalling a low performance of the Maria Fumaça Train Ride to the aesthetic experiences provided to customers.

Class 3 refers to aspects related to the cultural experience promoted by the tour, which is why it was labelled with this term (Figure 2). The evaluations in this class refer mainly to the high cost/benefit offered by the service, the amount charged, and the process of touristification suffered by the service, which is offered with overcrowding and does not offer quality that justifies the amount charged. These aspects are highlighted in the following extract:

I found it very boring; the Maria Fumaça goes at a maximum of 10km/h through unattractive places; in other words, you cannot see anything out of the windows except bushes, roads and houses in the countryside. Some attractions did not really appeal during the journey, such as tarantella, gaúcho music, and a little band, which my grandfather might have liked. There are ‘tastings’ at the stations, which I do not recommend. The city has many beautiful places to visit, and at a much fairer price than the exorbitant 110 reais per person they charge for this tour—very obvious exploitation of tourists.

The excerpt shows that, in many cases, the negative evaluation of the experience refers not only to the tour itself but also to the experience of buying a package tour, which, in some cases, prioritises the pursuit of profit and ‘mass tourism’ over a memorable experience for the tourist. We also realise that tourism exploitation by travel agencies can negatively influence tourists' experience of specific attractions, such as the Maria Fumaça.

Finally, the fourth class of the escapism cluster refers to the products offered during the tour (Figure 2). The class called ‘activities’ was made up of comments related to the quality of the products offered during the tour and the lack of organisation during the distribution of the drinks offered during the tasting on the tour.

The second cluster identified in the CDH refers to the complementary tourist services purchased by tourists, i.e. the vast majority do not refer directly to the Maria Fumaça tour but rather to the experience of marketing a tourist product. Authors such as Wu et al. (2021) justify this assessment by stating that the experience of tourism products and their perceived quality is, in

fact, the sum of all the tourism services used by the individual during their stay at the destination. In other words, it is difficult for tourists to separate their perceptions of the quality of tourism products, such as the attraction and the services needed to get to the location (Butnaru & Miller, 2012).

Comments with evaluations of other attributes were not excluded from the survey when they also contained information about the Maria Fumaça ride. This is justified by the understanding that, from the tourist's point of view, the services were interconnected and formed part of the quality assessment. In other words, it was understood that the attraction was part of a set of experiences that should be evaluated collectively. Based on the components of the classes as well as the statements made here, this cluster was called 'tourist services' and was made up of classes 1, 5 and 6 identified in the CDH.

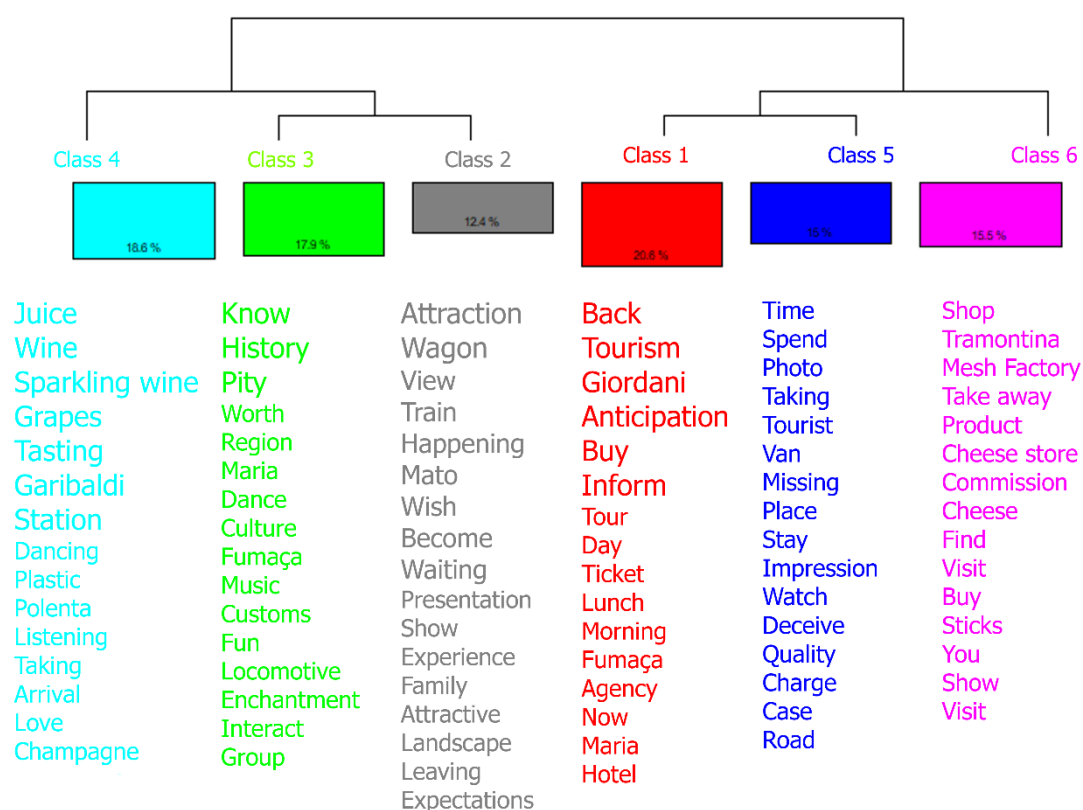


Figure 2: Organisational chart of the classes found in the negative comments

Source: Survey data (2022)

Class 1 contained the largest number of text segments in the analysis, totalling 20.6%. It featured terms such as "return," "tourism," "Giordani" (the tourism company responsible for

commercialising the attraction), and "advance notice," among others. In general, as seen in the excerpt below, the comments in this class aimed to inform other tourists about negative consumer experiences related to the planning and execution of their trip, such as purchasing a package tour. Therefore, this class was labelled "inconsistencies".

We bought the ticket (and paid a lot of money) at the ticket office the day before, and at no point were we informed that our ticket would be for a seat in the back of the carriage. Terrible! We paid the same amount as everyone else and did not have the option of choosing anything. You should have informed us of this detail when we bought the ticket (...). In addition, the guide [name omitted] preferred a couple who sat in the front of the van, and during the journey (which was also terrible), she just chatted with them and gave them local tips. Those of us in the back did not hear a thing. Terrible service, terrible guide. I hated it.

In general, the criticisms tend not to focus on the attraction itself but rather on the experience of interacting with the service provided, either through the company that mediated the purchase and commercialisation of the package, or the service provided by the company responsible for the attraction. The comments aim to "warn" future tourists about points of attention, which are generally not disclosed by the attraction itself. However, it is clear from passages such as "The train ride is very frustrating" that the negative experience with the package directly influences the perception of the quality of the Maria Fumaça attraction. This is a point of concern for managers, as it can lead to negative word-of-mouth, as has been observed on TripAdvisor, and a decline in demand from tourists who avoid purchasing through travel agencies.

These findings align with research by Sánchez-García and Currás-Pérez (2011) and Su and Teng (2018), who argue that customers generally travel expecting satisfactory quality from products and services. Therefore, when dissatisfied with a product or service, they are more motivated to comment on other sites, making negative word-of-mouth and complaints the two most common post-satisfaction behaviours. In the same vein, Sánchez-García and Currás-Pérez (2011) add that customers use social networks to share their frustration and "protect" other consumers from experiencing it.

The second class in the tourist services cluster was Class 5, identified in the CDH. In this class, terms related to tourists' attitudes and feelings towards the product stood out (Figure 2). Terms such as "impression," "observe," "deceive," "quality," and "charge," among others, also appeared frequently. These terms led to the class being called "negative education," as it relates to the dimension proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999). In general, the comments were linked

to conflicts generated by the "touristification" of the tour, such as overcrowding, excessive commercialisation, and a lack of timeliness in service, where the tourist is perceived as just another individual. These aspects are evident in the following comments:

The tour is not worth the price. It is a scam. No time to take photos, 10-minute stops... Tourist scam. Quick tour: They served bad wine once. They said they would give you the option of buying wine in the carriage, but they did not. The worst thing is that they did not let you take photos. There is no time because there are so many people wanting to take photos, and there is no room for everyone, there is no time (...).

Simply awful! The tour did not match what was contracted, and the service could have been better and more punctual. The lack of communication caused several problems.

The service provided and the quality of the information given to tourists is a necessary point of attention for the enterprise, as the comments generally indicate the existence of a process of tourist overcrowding, where the attraction can no longer accommodate the public (in terms of structure and service), and the experience is compromised as a result of this process. In this way, the added value and perception of good value for money are also diminished, as seen in the passage: 'We returned home exhausted, with more than three hours on the road, a day wasted, and money wasted'.

Finally, Class 6, identified in the analysis, was directly related to tourist packages offered by local companies. In general, the comments criticised the excessive number of attractions included in the package, which made the tour tiring. They also criticised the lack of coherence in the visits, as the tour was not characterised as a cultural experience but as something overwhelmingly commercial. On this basis, the class was labelled 'package tours'. The comments above reveal that, in general, the evaluation of the Trem e Vinho tour is a positive experience for customers who acknowledge that the tour's experience was compromised by the perception of low quality and lack of coherence in the purchased package. In their comments, customers expressed a desire to return to the attraction and experience it individually, without the interference of other companies and other tourist attractions. This suggests that external factors can negatively impact a customer's experience and assessment of a particular product or service.

The results are similar to other research and findings in the field. They corroborate the research by Ardani et al. (2019), who argue that service quality is the primary antecedent of tourism

satisfaction and that the inverse relationship is also proportional. In other words, when tourists do not perceive quality in all the products offered during their journey, there tends to be dissatisfaction with the trip's outcome, as their expectations are not met. The results also corroborate the research by Ryan, Shih Shuo, and Huan (2010). For these authors, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the tourist experience is measured in five aspects: the atmosphere of the attraction, the existence of exciting attractions, levels of crowding, the availability of places to rest, and the perceived price of admission. All these factors were perceived in the results to varying degrees of intensity.

Finally, to identify the content of the comments characterised as neutral and written on the TripAdvisor website, these were also subjected to a Hierarchical Descending Classification. The CHD resulted in six classes, which again can be divided into two clusters. The classes generated 906 text segments, corresponding to 91.6% retention of the information generated. Thus, Class 1 accounted for 20% with 181 TSs, Class 2 with 136 TSs (15%), Class 3 with 125 TSs (13.8%), Class 4 with 119 TSs (13.1%), Class 5 with 190 TSs (21%), and Class 6 with 155 TSs, representing 17.1% of the total.

As for the division by clusters, the first comprises Class 6 in isolation and Classes 1, 2, and 3 grouped together. In general, this cluster relates to the tourism product as a whole, referring to transport, service, culture, and the activities carried out during the Maria Fumaça ride. The second cluster of neutral information comprises Classes 4 and 5, which can also be referred to as a tourist package, as it provides information about the attractions visited, the characteristics of the Maria Fumaça, and the package marketed as a whole.

Class 1 was called Maria Fumaça activities, representing 20% of the text segments. In this class, the terms related to the activity options provided during the Maria Fumaça journey stood out (Figure 3). In general, the comments mentioned the existence of these features during the ride but without providing information about the quality of the service, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

The tour is well organised and fun. There are sparkling wine and grape juice tastings at the stations, and during the tour, we can enjoy performances typical of the region.

The tour lasts 1.5 hours and is accompanied by actors in character who sing and tell a little about the history of the colonisation of the region, and there is a stop between the departure and arrival stations with a great tasting of red wine, sparkling wine, and grape juice at all of them.



It can be seen that this class is purely informative about the tourist product, with individuals not expressing their opinions or value judgements about the quality of the product provided. Therefore, based on the terms identified in this grouping, it was decided to label it ‘entertainment activities’, as its purpose is to inform future tourists about what to expect during the Maria Fumaça experience. It is worth noting that Classes 2 and 3 were also related to the entertainment activities dimension, with the terms grouped reflecting the experience of the attraction itself, without information about external factors.

Class 2 was labelled ‘experience of culture’ because the comments generally sought to highlight the cultural appeal of the tourist attraction, focusing on two main points: the rescue and appreciation of Italian culture, an essential settler in southern Brazil, and also one of the few opportunities in Brazil to experience steam locomotives. Thus, tourists saw the tour as a chance to ‘go back in time’. In general, the comments described the attraction's relationship with Italian culture, highlighting the characteristics of immigration and the possibility of experiencing the process of colonisation in southern Brazil through the tour.

Complementing Class 2, which provides information on the cultural valorisation offered by Maria Fumaça, Class 3 is grouped with it, as it provides general information about the tourist experience. As seen in figure 3, these were linked to visitors' ‘personal experiences’. As shown in the excerpts below, this class provides information on the quality of service, the age groups participating in the tour, and the care and punctuality of the customer service, among others. It is also evident that some comments simply aim to report on the participants' experience, highlighting the aspects that most caught their attention, but without judging the value or quality of the tourist product.

We took the Bento to Carlos Barbosa trip. It is much fun on the train, with typical songs and dances completing the trip. We could sample juices and sparkling wines from the region at the Garibaldi stop. I was with my 4-year-old daughter, and she had a great time with us.

It is an exciting tour in terms of the landscape, but the price is quite steep for a tour. The attractions on the tour are nice, too, and the children really enjoyed it.

Finally, the last class in the cluster of information about the tourist product, Class 6, obtained 17.1% of the text segments. It was labelled ‘displacement’ because the comments aimed to inform future customers about matters related to transport and travel between the cities that provide the Maria Fumaça tourist product: Bento Gonçalves (141 mentions), Garibaldi (110 mentions), and Carlos Barbosa (115 mentions). Figure 3 illustrates the most prominent terms in this class. In general, users sought information about the train journey, the options for getting to the station, and, most importantly, that the route taken by the attraction is one-way and not a round trip to the station of origin, as many tourists had expected. As with the other classes in this analysis, the comments aimed to inform others without passing judgement.

In conclusion, the neutral comments in this cluster aim to inform tourists about aspects related to the services perceived during the tour without external interference. The cultural and historical experience provided by the Maria Fumaça ride stood out, as did the leisure and recreational activities available during the journey, with attractions and tastings significantly highlighted as essential parts of the tourism product. Relevant information about the route description and the means of transport used also stood out in this cluster, accounting for 17.1% of the text segments identified.

On the other hand, the second cluster largely presented aspects related to the commercialisation of tourist packages by local agencies. These agencies market additional attractions besides the Maria Fumaça ride and sell packages that combine various tourist attractions. As shown in previous analyses, these packages are perceived as both positive and negative – some tourists appreciate the added leisure and entertainment, while others see them as an excess of tourism marketing, which detracts from the destination’s cultural appeal.

When analysing the cluster of neutral comments, it becomes evident that it is subdivided into two classes. The first, Class 4, refers to the region’s tourism service providers, motivating the term ‘local tourism services’, based on the words shown in figure 3. The comments generally describe the agencies, and the services contracted through local tourist agencies, including arrival and departure times, prices, itineraries, marketing, and some issues encountered in executing the service.

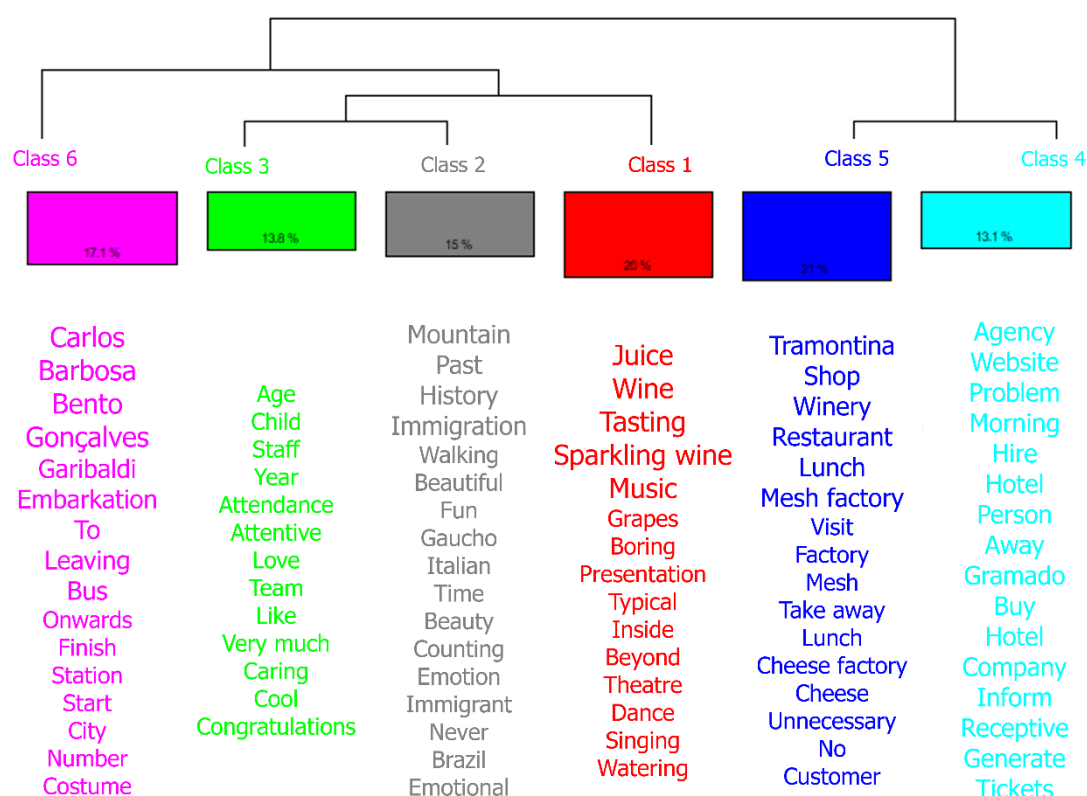


Figure 3: Organisational chart of the classes found in neutral comments.

Source: Survey data (2022)

While the comments classified in Class 4 sought to provide information on aspects related to purchasing packages and tickets for the tourist attractions, as well as users' experiences with different travel agencies available in the region, Class 5 was also part of the cluster related to tourist packages. This class provides specific information on the itineraries offered by travel agencies, mainly describing the tourist attractions and points of interest on offer and sharing the customers' experiences.

This finding led to the classification of 'Description of Tourist Packages'. In general, the comments indicate that some points are unnecessary during the visit and affect the quality of the other attractions, as they make the tour too long and tiring. The comments show that tourists are satisfied with the service provided by Maria Fumaça and the experience that the attraction offers its visitors. However, secondary attractions do not always give tourists a positive perception of quality. Thus, it is clear that the destination and, above all, the tourist companies must find ways to reframe their service offerings, segmenting the attractions and tourist packages with a greater diversity of structuring itineraries according to the characteristics of the attractions—such as cultural attractions, commercial attractions, and so on. This reframing is

necessary to promote a greater perception of service quality and to meet tourists' specific needs and expectations regarding their experience at the destination.

The neutral results corroborate the literature related to UGC, as, in many cases, there is a feeling among users to report their experiences in an informative way for new visitors. A similar result was supported by Li et al. (2020), Pizam et al. (2016), and Wong et al. (2019), who argue that users do not use networks like TripAdvisor solely to influence the purchasing process and behaviour of new consumers, but also to share information and experiences during their stay and activities in the destination.

## 5. Discussion of the results

The study found that customer satisfaction is significantly influenced by the overall experience provided during the railway ride. Positive experiences were associated with high levels of satisfaction, which aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Pizam et al. (2016), who argue that satisfaction transcends the mere fulfilment of expectations and is a psychological experience of well-being and pleasure. This is further supported by Meng and Han (2018), who state that tourists are satisfied when their experiences exceed their expectations, and dissatisfaction arises when experiences fall short. These findings underscore the importance of managing tourist expectations and delivering experiences that not only meet but surpass them, particularly in niche tourism segments like railway tourism.

With regard to user experience, four main categories of positive comments were identified: 'adding value', 'entertainment', 'route recommendations', and 'description of travel packages'. These align with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four-dimensional experience model, which includes aesthetics, education, entertainment, and escapism. The comments related to 'adding value' and 'entertainment' particularly highlight how tourists appreciate immersive experiences that increase their enjoyment and satisfaction. For instance, the cultural presentations and tastings offered during the Wine Train tour resonate with the 'entertainment' and 'education' dimensions of Pine and Gilmore's model, suggesting that these elements are critical for creating memorable experiences. This has practical implications for tourism managers, who should focus on enhancing these dimensions to improve overall satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

However, the study also revealed that the integration of the Wine Train into broader tourist packages can dilute the perceived quality of the experience. While some tourists appreciated

the convenience and variety offered by these packages, others criticised the lack of coherence and the overwhelming commercialisation of the tour. This finding aligns with the theoretical perspective of Ardani et al. (2019), who argue that service quality is a primary antecedent of tourist satisfaction. When tourists perceive that the quality does not meet their expectations, this can lead to dissatisfaction, as observed in the negative comments about the pace of the tour and the perceived lack of engaging content. From a practical standpoint, this suggests that tour operators should carefully design packages to ensure that each component adds value to the overall experience, rather than detracting from it.

The role of UGC was also highlighted, with holidaymakers using platforms such as TripAdvisor to share their experiences, both positive and negative. This reflects the concept of the ‘wisdom of crowds’ discussed by Su and Teng (2018), which indicates that consumer behaviour is increasingly influenced by online reviews and shared experiences. Negative word-of-mouth was particularly observed as a powerful influence on potential visitors' decisions, corroborating the conclusions of Sparks and Browning (2010), who state that complaints are essential to understanding service quality failures. This has significant practical implications for tourism managers, who should actively monitor and respond to UGC to address issues promptly and improve service quality. Additionally, the study highlights the need for tourism operators to leverage positive UGC as a marketing tool, as satisfied customers often share their experiences to inform and attract future visitors.

The findings also reveal a gap between expectations and reality, particularly in relation to the quality of the service and the experiences offered during the tour. For example, some tourists expressed disappointment with the lack of scenic views and the slow pace of the train, which did not align with their expectations of a nostalgic and immersive railway experience. This discrepancy can be explained through the lens of expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), which posits that satisfaction is determined by the gap between expectations and actual performance. From a managerial perspective, this underscores the importance of setting realistic expectations through accurate marketing and communication, while also striving to enhance the actual experience to bridge this gap.

Furthermore, the study highlights the emotional and cultural significance of railway tourism, particularly in the context of heritage and nostalgia. The Wine Train's use of a 19th-century steam locomotive and its focus on Italian immigration and viticulture create a unique emotional connection with the region's history and culture. This aligns with the theoretical framework of heritage tourism, which emphasises the role of authenticity and cultural memory in shaping

tourist experiences (McGregor, 2008; Vogt, 2007). Practically, this suggests that tourism operators should emphasise the cultural and historical aspects of their offerings to create deeper emotional connections with visitors, thereby enhancing satisfaction and loyalty.

## 6. Final considerations

The relationship between tourism and the railway differs significantly between Brazil and countries like Portugal, primarily due to the varying extent of railway usage. While passenger rail transportation is scarce in Brazil, in Portugal, it is deeply integrated into everyday life (Fraga & Almeida, 2019). This distinction underscores the importance of understanding the unique dynamics of railway tourism in Brazil, particularly in the context of cultural and historical attractions like the Wine Train in Bento Gonçalves. This research, which analysed tourist experiences and perceptions of service quality through UGC on TripAdvisor, offers valuable insights into the factors that shape satisfaction in railway tourism.

The study revealed that customer satisfaction is closely tied to the overall experience provided during the Wine Train tour. Positive feedback highlighted the added value of the train ride, the entertainment and cultural activities offered, and the convenience of route recommendations and travel packages. These findings align with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four-dimensional experience model, which emphasises the importance of aesthetics, education, entertainment, and escapism in creating memorable tourist experiences. However, negative feedback often focused on the commercialisation of the tour, overcrowding, and the perceived lack of engaging content, which detracted from the overall experience. Neutral comments, on the other hand, primarily provided informational content for future tourists, describing itineraries, prices, and logistics without expressing strong opinions.

The analysis also highlighted the emotional and cultural significance of railway tourism, particularly in the context of heritage and nostalgia. The Wine Train's use of a 19th-century steam locomotive and its focus on Italian immigration and viticulture create a unique emotional connection with the region's history and culture. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on heritage tourism, which emphasise the role of authenticity and cultural memory in shaping tourist experiences (McGregor, 2008; Vogt, 2007). The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of railway tourism by integrating insights from UGC analysis with established frameworks such as Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience model and expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980). The findings underscore the importance of managing

tourist expectations and delivering experiences that not only meet but surpass them. Additionally, the study highlights the role of UGC in shaping consumer behavior, as discussed by Su and Teng (2018), and its potential as a tool for understanding service quality and tourist satisfaction.

The research also advances the theoretical discourse on sustainable tourism by demonstrating how railway tourism can contribute to the revitalisation of historic routes, cultural preservation, and local economic development. This aligns with the broader theoretical framework of sustainable tourism, which emphasises the need to balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 1993).

The findings have significant practical implications for tourism managers and policymakers. Firstly, the study highlights the need for better coordination among stakeholders, including tour operators, agencies, and local businesses, to improve service quality and align tourist expectations with the actual experience. For example, managers should focus on enhancing the multisensory aspects of the tourist experience, as suggested by Agapito (2020), to create more memorable and satisfying visits. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of utilising UGC to enhance service quality and marketing efforts. By actively monitoring and responding to online reviews, tourism operators can address issues promptly and enhance the overall visitor experience. Additionally, positive UGC can be used as a marketing tool to attract future visitors and build a positive destination image. Thirdly, the study suggests that tourism operators should carefully design packages to ensure that each component adds value to the overall experience, rather than detracting from it. This includes offering more coherent and culturally immersive itineraries that align with the expectations of heritage and nostalgia-seeking tourists.

One of the limitations of this study is that it did not explore the profile and motivations of visitors, such as whether they are wine tourists or railway enthusiasts. Future research could include surveys and interviews with tourists during the train ride to gain deeper insights into their demographics, preferences, and motivations. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive satisfaction and loyalty in railway tourism. Another limitation is the reliance on UGC from a single platform (TripAdvisor), which may not fully capture the diversity of tourist experiences. Future studies could expand the data sources to include other platforms, such as social media and blogs, to provide a more holistic view of tourist perceptions and experiences.

Additionally, the study focused on a single case (the Wine Train in Bento Gonçalves), which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could explore other railway tourism destinations in Brazil and abroad to identify common trends and unique characteristics. Comparative studies between different regions or countries could provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success of railway tourism in diverse contexts. Finally, the study highlights the potential of railway tourism as a tool for sustainable development and cultural preservation, but further research is needed to explore its long-term impacts on local communities and economies. This could include studies on the economic benefits of railway tourism, its role in promoting cultural heritage, and its potential to support sustainable tourism practices.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that influence tourist satisfaction in railway tourism, offering practical recommendations for tourism operators and policymakers. By addressing the limitations and building on the findings, future research can further advance our understanding of railway tourism and its potential to contribute to sustainable and culturally rich tourism experiences.

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