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SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES OF MUSIC FESTIVALS: CASE STUDY SERBIAN FESTIVALS

Marija Kostić¹; Sonja Veljović²; Tamara Gajić³

Abstract

Environmental challenges linked to tourism and mass events have heightened the importance of sustainable festival management worldwide. Tourism accounts for approximately 8% of global CO₂ emissions, underscoring the urgent need for environmentally responsible practices within the event industry. Music festivals provide significant economic and socio-cultural benefits but also exert considerable environmental pressures through waste generation, energy consumption, transport emissions, and excessive resource use. This paper examines the sustainable practice of music festivals in the Western Balkans, focusing on Serbia and its major regional festivals such as Exit, Lovefest, Beer Fest and Guča. Drawing on a review of scientific literature and analysis of current festival practices, the study identifies key environmental challenges and opportunities for sustainable transformation. The findings show that, although sustainability is increasingly prominent in festival discourse, the adoption of green practices remains limited and insufficiently institutionalised. The paper emphasises the importance of waste management, stakeholder cooperation, institutional support, and environmental awareness in advancing sustainable festival development in the Balkan region.

¹ Marija Kostić, PhD, Full Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvodanska 5A, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, +381365150024, marija.kostic@kg.ac.rs

² Sonja Veljović, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvodanska 5A, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, sonja.veljovic@kg.ac.rs

³ Tamara Gajić, PhD, Senior Research Associate, Geographical Institute „Jovan Cvijić” SASA, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia; RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation, tamara.gajic.1977@gmail.com

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Introduction

In recent decades, music festivals have become major tourism attractions and drivers of local economic development. Meanwhile, increasing environmental concerns and climate change have heightened the need for sustainable event management practices. Academic interest in festivals has expanded beyond economic impacts to include the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2019). Tourism contributes significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for approximately 8% of total CO₂ emissions worldwide (Lenzen et al., 2018). Music festivals, due to mass attendance and intensive resource use, represent a significant segment of tourism that requires sustainable transformation. Environmental impacts associated with festivals include waste generation, excessive energy and water consumption, transportation emissions, noise pollution, and pressure on local ecosystems (Collins & Cooper, 2017). The Western Balkans region hosts many internationally recognized music festivals, particularly in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Festivals such as Exit, Lovefest, Guča, Beer Fest, and OK Festival attract large numbers of international visitors and make significant contributions to tourism development. However, many of these events are held in environmentally sensitive locations, including cultural heritage sites, spa resorts, and protected natural areas, increasing the need for sustainable management approaches.

This paper aims to analyze the current state of sustainable practice among Serbian large scale music festivals and to identify key opportunities and barriers to implementing them. The study contributes to understanding the role of festivals in promoting environmental responsibility and sustainable tourism development in the region.

Literature review

Historically, festival research focused primarily on economic impacts, while environmental sustainability received much less attention (Getz, 2010; Gibson & Wong, 2011). More recent studies emphasize the importance of integrating sustainability principles into event management through the concept of the triple bottom line, which includes economic,

social, and environmental dimensions (Mair & Whitford, 2013). Music festivals generate significant economic and socio-cultural benefits for local communities through tourism spending, destination branding, and cultural promotion. However, they also cause substantial environmental impacts, including greenhouse gas emissions, waste generation, and resource depletion (Pernecky & Luck, 2013; Mair & Whitford, 2013). According to Collins and Flynn (2015), visitor transportation and temporary infrastructure are among the largest contributors to festival ecological footprints. The concept of green festivals has become increasingly important through the adoption of sustainable practices such as recycling systems, renewable energy use, plastic reduction, and environmentally responsible logistics (Buathong & Lai, 2019). International initiatives, including ISO 20121 and organizations such as “A Greener Festival,” have established frameworks for sustainable event management (Collins & Cooper, 2017).

Research shows that sustainable practices can positively influence visitor satisfaction, destination image, and competitive advantage (Walsh & Dodds, 2017). Younger generations, especially festival audiences, are increasingly environmentally aware and expect sustainable practices at events (Sisson et al., 2021). Despite these trends, sustainable festival management remains insufficiently explored in developing regions, including the Western Balkans, where the implementation of green practices is often limited by financial, organizational, and institutional barriers (Ramely et al., 2022).

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data sources, including scientific literature, official festival websites, institutional reports, and sustainability-related documents. The study focuses on major music festivals in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia. The festivals are selected based on attendance (i.e., large-scale festival) and the location's ecological sensitivity. The analysis aims to identify existing sustainability practices, environmental challenges, and opportunities for eco-transformation in festival management in the Balkan region.

Balkan Music Festivals and Environmental Challenges

The Western Balkans has a rich cultural and natural heritage that provides favorable conditions for the development of festival tourism. Serbia hosts

some of the region's most recognizable festivals, including Exit, Lovefest, Beer Fest and Guča, while Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia organize events such as Lake Festival, OK Festival, and Ohrid Summer Festival.

These festivals contribute significantly to local economies and destination promotion. Exit Festival alone attracts more than 100,000 visitors annually and generates substantial tourism revenue (Lazarević & Buršić, 2014). Guča and Lovefest also play important roles in strengthening regional tourism identity and promoting culture. Among music festivals, Belgrade Beer Fest is considered one of the most important segments of Serbia's tourist offer (Gajić et al., 2021).

However, the growing popularity of festivals increases environmental pressures. Large numbers of visitors generate significant waste, increase energy and water consumption, and contribute to transportation-related emissions. Environmental sensitivity is heightened by the fact that many festivals are held in protected natural areas, spa destinations, or cultural heritage sites.

Research by Wilmink-Thomas (2021) identifies waste production, abandoned camping equipment, noise pollution, and air pollution as common environmental impacts associated with open-air festivals. These challenges highlight the need for sustainable management systems and green practices in festival organization.

Sustainable Practice of Serbian Music Festivals

Exit Festival

Exit Festival is one of the largest and most internationally recognized music festivals in Southeast Europe. Originally established as a youth movement in the 1990s, it has evolved into a significant cultural and tourism brand for Serbia (Wise et al., 2015). The festival is held at Petrovaradin Fortress in Novi Sad, a site of exceptional cultural significance. Previous studies have highlighted the festival's contribution to destination branding and the international visibility of Novi Sad and Serbia (Zakić et al., 2009). Sustainability issues have increasingly become part of the festival discourse, including discussions of smart technologies and environmental responsibility (Cimbaljević et al., 2021). However, the implementation of systematic green practices remains limited. EXIT

Festival demonstrates the highest level of international visibility and strategic potential for implementing sustainable practices due to its strong global positioning and increasing focus on smart technologies and environmental responsibility.

Belgrade Beer Festival

Compared to other Serbian festivals, the Belgrade Beer Festival had more than 500,000 people over five days and it is one of the most visited music festivals. Interestingly, this festival offers free tickets and an interesting music program. This festival has the award "Best of Serbia", which the 2014 edition of the festival received in the category "Best Event Promoting Serbia" (Gajić et al., 2021). For many years, Beer Festival has implemented a sustainable practice primarily to reduce waste and implement circular practices. The popular one is a campaign "I choose to recycle" to collect and recycle waste. Furthermore, Festival organized educative workshops in order to raise ecological awareness.

Lovefest

Lovefest, held annually in Vrnjačka Banja, has become one of Serbia's most recognizable electronic music festivals. In addition to its entertainment role, the festival engages in humanitarian and socially responsible initiatives. However, environmental sustainability practices remain underdeveloped and are mostly limited to promotional activities rather than comprehensive ecological management. Love fest shows growing awareness of social responsibility and community engagement; however, its environmental initiatives remain mostly promotional and insufficiently integrated into a comprehensive sustainability strategy.

Guča Festival

The Guča Trumpet Festival is one of the most important traditional music festivals in Serbia and the Balkans. Over the decades, it has become a globally recognized event, attracting several hundred thousand visitors (Gligorijević, 2014). Although the festival plays a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting local gastronomy and tourism, mass visitation creates substantial environmental challenges, particularly related to waste production and infrastructure overload. In contrast, the Guča Festival faces the greatest environmental pressure because of mass

visitation, infrastructure overload, and waste generation, particularly given its strong connection to cultural heritage and traditional tourism.

Generally, the analysis shows that the implementation of sustainable practice of Serbia large scale music festivals is still in its early stages. Sustainability is increasingly recognized as an important strategic issue, but implementation remains fragmented and not sufficiently institutionalized. Key barriers include limited financial resources, inadequate institutional support, lack of environmental education, and weak cooperation among stakeholders. Although the large-scale festivals analyzed have been slow to adopt ecological practices, with the exception of the Beer Festival, several smaller music festivals (e.g., the Supernatural Festival in Belgrade, the Pyramid Festival on Mount Rtanj) have focused on ecological workshops, lectures on medicinal plants, and musical performances (<https://www.supernatural.eco/supernatural-festival/>). The Pyramid Festival is a transformative festival and is further focused on spiritual connection in an ecological settlement (Pyramid Festival, 2025).

Conclusion

Serbian Music festivals as important part of Western Balkans are important tourism and cultural assets with significant economic and promotional potential. However, their environmental sustainability remains underdeveloped despite growing global emphasis on green event management. Current sustainable practices are mostly limited and unsystematic, requiring stronger institutional, scientific, and organizational support. Sustainable festival management should become a strategic priority to reduce environmental impacts while maintaining visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

The future of large-scale Serbian music festivals depends on their ability to integrate environmental responsibility into all aspects of event organization and to become active contributors to sustainable tourism development in the region.

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