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RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE FESTIVAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE JABLANICA DISTRICT

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Abstract

The impact assessment of tourism development on local community attitudes is very important because of the direct link between residents' support and sustainable tourism development, as well as due to the fact that the community is the basis of authenticity, sustainability and long-term success. It is difficult to achieve a balance between economic benefits and preservation of the environment without considering the residents' attitudes and their active involvement in the festival tourism development. The aim of this paper is an examination of residents' attitudes towards the positive and negative effects of the festival tourism development in the Jablanica District based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The residents' attitudes were analyzed based on the conducted research. Authors' conclusions indicate the need to create a system that will enable resident participation in tourism, while respecting the principles of sustainability, in order to improve the competitiveness of the Jablanica District as a tourist destination.

Key Words: *festivals, tourism, residents, Jablanica District*

JEL Classification: *Z32, R11*

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Introduction

Jablanica district, as a rural area, is an interesting tourist destination. This district includes the city of Leskovac and five municipalities (Vlasotince, Lebane, Medveđa, Bojnik, Crna Trava). Each of these municipalities is recognizable, among other things, by the festivals they organize. These festivals are primarily local in character. However, there are festivals which have a regional, national and international character. It is clear that the interest in rural destinations is increasing, which gives these areas social and economic potential. Festivals taking place in rural areas, as a form of tourist activity, contribute to the economic, cultural and social environment. They play an important role in the rural communities and are often a part of strategies for economic development of rural areas (Güneş, 2022). Their integration into tourism development would greatly contribute to the enhancement of tourist offer (Ilić, 2019) thus making it more attractive and flexible (Borović et al., 2022). The perception of the local population is very important, especially when it comes to the development of festival tourism in rural areas. Success in the tourism development in a certain area depends to a significant extent on the local population attitudes and their willingness to actively participate in tourist activities. There is often a local community concern that the tourism development does not damage the natural environment (Gunawijaya & Pratiwi, 2018). The local community attitude towards tourism development is very complex and depends on numerous factors that influence the opinion and attitudes of the population towards tourism.

Considering the aim defined at the beginning of the paper, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1: There is a significant difference in the local population attitudes towards the positive effects of festival tourism development in relation to the gender of the respondents.

H2: There is a significant difference in the local population attitudes towards the negative effects of festival tourism development in relation to the gender of the respondents.

The impact of festivals, the role and importance of festival tourism in strengthening the competitiveness of tourist destinations are highlighted in the Literature review section of the paper, based on the results of previous research. The Materials and methods section includes information about the research and the methods used for data collection and analysis. In the section Results and discussion the sample will be

described, the results of the descriptive statistical analysis will be presented, as well as the results of the t-test. In the Conclusion the authors highlight the main findings and contribution to this field.

Literature review

Tourism is both a consequence and an important factor of local development. Tourism is an economic activity which has a significant direct and indirect effect on the development of a particular area (López-Sanz et al., 2021). The growth in the number of tourism participants and the qualitative changes in tourist behavior throughout time represent a basis for the development of a destination's festival offer (Mihajlović & Vidak, 2017). Events related to tourism represent an important motive and they occupy an important place in the development and marketing plans of numerous destinations (Getz, 2008). The connection between events and tourism was first discussed in the scientific literature in the 1980s (Mihajlović & Vidak, 2017). Previous studies on the effect of festivals on the regional tourism development have focused on the motivation and aims of tourist visits to an event, the participation of local population in these events, economic impact of the events and the assessment of the efficiency of the methods used in the analysis of the economic impact (Panfiluk, 2015). Previous research has perceived festivals as one of the dimensions of a destination's attractiveness, but have failed to consider the attractiveness of the very festivals (Li et al., 2020). The scientific literature that deals with this topic particularly stresses the socio-cultural effects of festivals. In doing so, it particularly analyses the quality of life of local population, employability opportunities, the changes in the system of values, the development of individual, family and social relations, the expression of creativity, preservation of tradition (Asványi & Jászberényi, 2017). In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to the evaluation of the tourism impact on the perception and residents' attitudes, due to the fact that there is a direct link between the support of local communities and the tourism development (Chiciudean et al., 2021). The diversity and attractiveness of festivals makes them one of the fastest growing segments of tourism industry which makes it even more important to pay special attention to it (Li et al., 2020). Festivals are a reflection of modern tourism (Mihajlović & Vidak, 2017) and they represent a combination of entertainment, trade, education, closeness and promotion of different topics through different programs and activities (Choo et al., 2022). Festivals promote local tradition and heritage, create a sense of belonging and lead to cooperation

and mutual action (Mahalakshmi et al., 2025). Festivals offer an opportunity to promote tourism, obtain income and prolong the tourist season (Stankova & Vassenska, 2015). Festivals affect almost all aspects of human life (social, economic, environmental and political) and have both negative and positive effects on business entities, local population and the destination itself. It is thus important to maximize the positive and minimize the negative effects that festivals might have. A strategy for the sustainable development of festival tourism combined with environmental care can greatly reduce or even fully eliminate the aforementioned negative effects. After considering all the advantages of events, it is quite evident that festivals are extremely valuable for destinations (Mihajlović & Vidak, 2017). It is undeniable that festivals have an effect on the development opportunities of an area. This influence is evaluated positively and in most cases, it is believed to be the primary driving force, especially when talking about peripheral parts of rural areas (Ossowska et al., 2023). Tourism development management in rural areas without spatial degradation deserves special attention (Gavrila-Paven et al., 2015). A well-planned festivals can bring about numerous advantages to the area in which it is being organized. Positive effects are reflected in those aspects which seem to add value to the long-term sustainability of a destination and tourism (Kabote, 2020). However, besides the numerous advantages, festivals can have negative socio-cultural and economic consequences to the host community (Güneş, 2022), such as pollution, potential conflicts among local residents and visitors, exclusion of locals from the festival-allocated area, etc. In order to reduce the negative effects that festivals might have, it is important to effectively manage such events, cooperate with the local authorities, representatives of local businesses and residents (Cudny, 2013). The local population support is necessary for the development of tourism, competitiveness and sustainability (Milićević et al., 2020). In fact, this support is essential for the sustainable development of tourist destinations (Qin et al., 2021), more specifically for the sustainable development of specific types of tourism. The reason for this is the fact that residents are the main actors in the tourism development in a certain area, and their attitudes towards the development of tourism are directly related to the social, cultural, economic and ecological consequences of development. There are many factors that influence the local population's support for tourism development, such as their perception of negative and positive impacts of tourism development, economic dependence on tourism, connection with the local community, etc. (Kim et al., 2021). Understanding the views of the local population, as one of the key stakeholders in tourism

development, is essential for the successful and sustainable development of tourism. Residents' perceptions of the impact of tourism development can often serve as a good basis for further tourism development (Vodeb et al., 2021).

Materials and methods

The aim of the research was to examine the residents' attitudes towards the festival tourism development in the Jablanica district and their perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of this type of tourism development. A survey questionnaire was used to examine the residents' attitudes. The first part of the questionnaire consists of sociodemographic data (gender, age, level of education, work status and place of residence). The second part of the questionnaire consists of three items related to the connection between the respondent's profession and tourism, while the third part of the questionnaire consists of fifteen dependent variables related to the positive and negative impacts of the festival tourism development in the Jablanica district. The items are based on previously conducted studies (Milićević et al., 2020; Milošević et al., 2020; Tepavčević et al., 2019) and have been adapted to the objectives of this paper. The degree of agreement with the items listed in the questionnaire was expressed using a five-point Likert scale. The survey was conducted during July and August 2025. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms questionnaire, and it was distributed electronically (via social networks and e-mail) and personally. The sample consisted of 273 respondents, of which 222 respondents filled out the questionnaire electronically, and 51 questionnaires were delivered to the respondents through the interviewer. None of the questionnaires were rejected due to incomplete answers. After data collection, data were entered into the statistical software IBM SPSS 23.0. The following statistical analyses were performed: reliability analysis of the research instrument, descriptive statistical analysis and t-test.

Results and discussion

The reliability of the measuring instrument is tested using Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient (α), the most commonly used indicator of the internal consistency of the scale. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient is 0.821 which shows acceptable reliability and internal consistency of the scale.

Table 1: *Reliability statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.821	.841	18

Source: *Authors, based on research*

As mentioned, 273 respondents participated in the research, of which 121 are male respondents (44.3%) and 152 female respondents (55.7%). When it comes to gender of the respondents, we can see that the sample is dominated by women. The largest share of respondents belongs to the age category from 36 to 55 years old (36.6%), while the smallest number of respondents aged under 25 (11.7%). According to the level of education, respondents with a faculty degree (30.0%) are the most active, while there are slightly fewer respondents with a college degree (28.9%) and secondary school (26.0%). The majority of respondents are in permanent employment (71.4%). Considering the city of residence, the largest part of the respondents live in the city of Leskovac (34.4%) and the municipality of Vlasotince (28.6), while the participation of respondents in the territory of the municipality of Bojnik (3.3%) is very small. The main limitation of this study lies in the uneven territorial distribution of respondents within the district.

Table 2: *Descriptive statistics and t-test results for positive impacts*

Positive impacts of the festival tourism development	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Festivals in the Jablanica district represent an excellent opportunity to promote local identity and improve the image of the district as a tourist destination	Male	121	4.55	.974	1.131	.259
	Female	152	4.41	1.039		
The festival tourism development would affect the increase in the standard of living	Male	121	4.37	.959	.140	.889
	Female	152	4.36	.993		
The festival tourism development would provide more employment opportunities for the residents	Male	121	4.49	.877	.870	.385
	Female	152	4.39	.984		
Festivals are an opportunity for the exchange of information and ideas, for acquaintances and friendships between visitors and residents	Male	121	4.80	.627	.572	.568
	Female	152	4.76	.661		

The benefits of festival tourism development outweigh the negative impacts	Male	121	4.50	.848	2.696	.007
	Female	152	4.18	1.151		

Source: *Authors, based on research*

The t-test was applied to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers related to the positive and negative effects of the festival tourism development in relation to gender. Based on the results of the t-test analysis, we conclude that there is no significant gender difference in the residents' attitudes towards the positive effects of the festival tourism development, thus refuting the first hypothesis. This can be interpreted as the fact that respondents of both genders have a relatively uniform attitude toward the positive effects of the festival tourism development. Also, by analyzing the obtained results, it is concluded that there are slight statistically significant differences between the mean values in the respondents attitudes of both genders on whether the benefits of festival tourism outweigh the negative impacts.

Table 3: *Descriptive statistics and t-test results for negative impacts*

Negative impacts of the festival tourism development	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
The festival tourism development would reduce the possibility for outdoor recreation	Male	121	3.16	1.592	5.090	.000
	Female	152	2.24	1.336		
The noise level during the festival would cause problems for the residents	Male	121	3.38	1.507	3.940	.000
	Female	152	2.69	1.377		
The festival tourism development would have a negative impact on the environment	Male	121	2.79	1.533	3.789	.000
	Female	152	2.13	1.334		
The festival tourism development would increase the crime rate	Male	121	2.61	1.508	4.895	.000
	Female	152	1.81	1.108		
The festival tourism development would lead to an increase waste generation	Male	121	3.85	1.352	3.408	.001
	Female	152	3.28	1.424		

Source: *Authors, based on research*

By analyzing the results obtained using the T-test, it is concluded that there are statistically significant differences between the mean values in the attitudes of respondents of both genders for all factors, except for the factor related to the question of whether the level of noise during the festival would cause problems for the residents, where the variances are equal. We conclude that there is a statistically significant gender difference in the residents' attitudes towards the negative effects of the festival tourism development, thus confirming the second hypothesis.

This study contributes to the theoretical framework of sustainable development of festival tourism in the Jablanica District. It also provides practical guidelines for representatives of tourism organizations and other stakeholders to enhance the development and promotion of festival tourism in the district.

Conclusion

The conducted research provided an insight into the perception of the local population regarding the development of festival tourism, focusing on the analysis of differences in attitudes according to the gender of the respondents. The results show that the first hypothesis was not confirmed, because the T-test did not indicate a statistically significant difference between men and women regarding the positive effects of the festival tourism development. This indicates that the local community recognizes the benefits that festival tourism brings to the destination. The second hypothesis was confirmed, considering a clear difference was identified in the respondents' attitudes towards the negative effects of the festival tourism development, considering the gender of the respondents. Both genders share a similar concern about the noise level, but statistically significant differences in other factors indicate that men and women value other negative effects of the festival tourism development differently. This indicates that there is agreement when it comes to the positive effects of the festival tourism development, while the negative effects are perceived differently depending on the gender of the respondents. The authors believe that the local population should become an active actor in development, which, among other things, can be achieved through continuous education of the population about the sustainable festival tourism development. Achieving a balance between economic benefits and quality of life of the local population would improve the district's competitiveness as a tourist destination. Further research will examine the differences in respondents' attitudes towards the positive and negative

effects of the festival tourism development, considering the age and level of education of the respondents, which will be discussed in future papers.

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