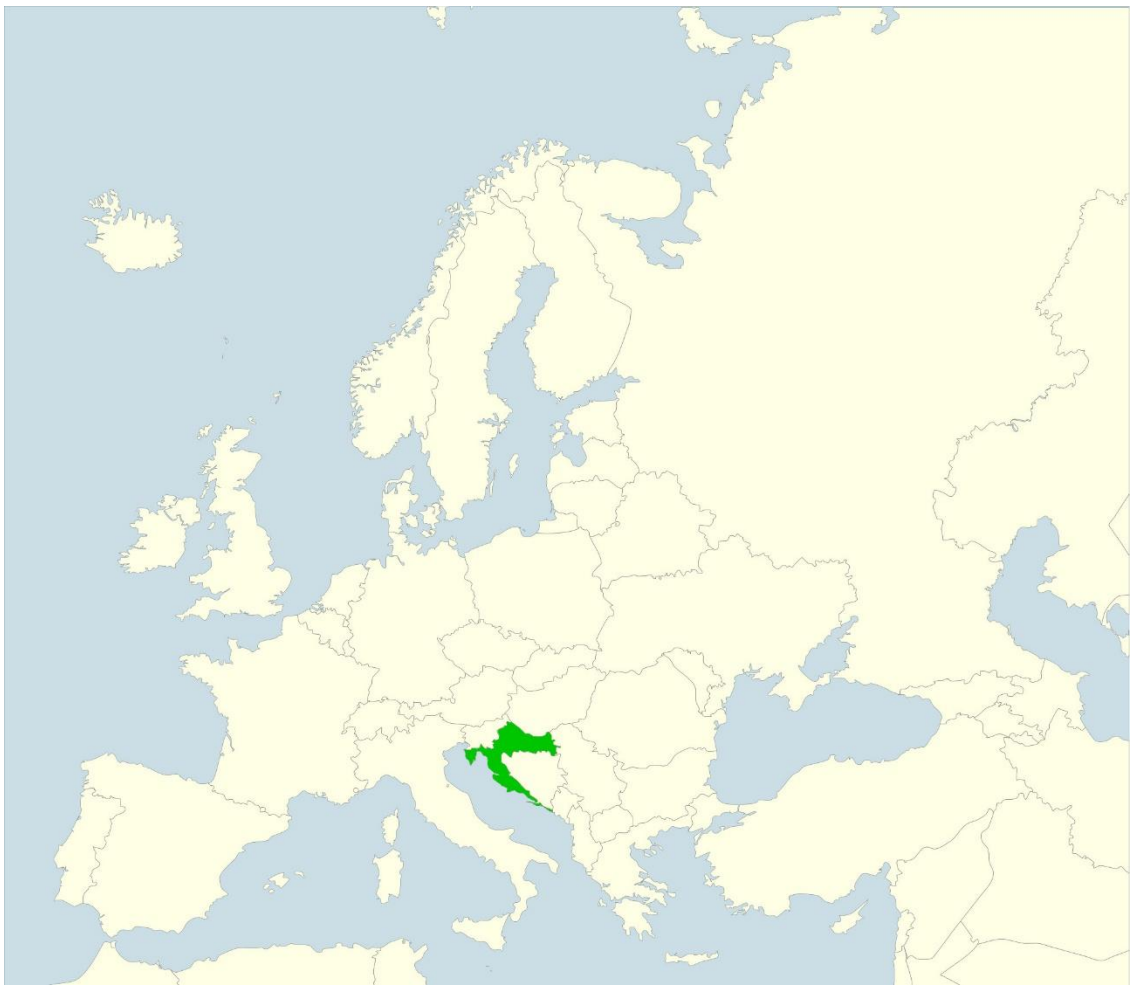
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I FEEL AT HOME: VISITORS' PERSPECTIVE OF ARTS FESTIVALS IN CROATIA

Ives Vodanović Lukić[1]





[1] Ives Vodanović Lukić, PhD candidate, research assistant, Institute of Tourism Zagreb, Croatia, ORCID: 0000-0001-7539-7872, e- mail: ives.vodanovic@iztzg.hr

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Abstract: Festivals are among the fastest growing types of tourist attractions. However, unlike large and international events, small festivals are scarcely researched despite their importance for local communities. The aim of this study is to explore the perspective of visitors to small arts festivals in rural areas in Croatia. This includes satisfaction with the services and experience of the event, interaction with locals, personal benefits and suggestions for further improvement of the festival offer. The research is based on 40 semi-structured interviews with visitors of 5 arts festivals in Croatia. The research results show that when it comes to experience satisfaction, visitors particularly value the opportunities for socializing and the creation of social intimacy, which is mainly due to the small size of the festival site. In addition, a pleasant atmosphere, a feeling of relaxation and freedom, a sense of belonging to the festival location, entertainment and the educational potential of the festival are decisive factors. In terms of service satisfaction, visitors are particularly satisfied with the program content. Most visitors had no significant interactions with the local community, but they consider it an important factor in the organization of the festival. In terms of possible improvements to the festival offer, increasing media exposure, improving the gastronomic offer and the need for more involvement and personal engagement during the festival are frequently mentioned.

Keywords: event experience, festival satisfaction, arts festival, festival benefit, Croatia

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Sažetak: Festivali su jedna od najbrže rastućih vrsta turističkih atrakcija. Međutim, za razliku od velikih događanja međunarodnog karaktera, mali festivali su rijetko istraživani unatoč njihovoj važnosti za lokalne zajednice. Cilj ovog istraživanja jest istražiti perspektivu posjetitelja malih umjetničkih festivala u ruralnim područjima Hrvatske. To uključuje zadovoljstvo uslugama I iskustvom događaja, interakciju s lokalnim stanovništvom, osobne koristi i prijedloge za daljnje poboljšanje festivalske ponude. Istraživanje se temelji na 40 polustrukturiranih intervjua s posjetiteljima 5 umjetničkih festivala u Hrvatskoj. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da, kada je riječ o zadovoljstvu iskustvom, posjetitelji posebno cijene mogućnosti za druženje i stvaranje socijalne intime, što velikim dijelom proizlazi iz veličine i kvalitete festivalskog prostora. Osim toga, ugodna atmosfera, osjećaj opuštenosti i slobode, osjećaj pripadnosti festivalskoj lokaciji, zabava i obrazovni potencijal festivala pokazuju se kao najvažniji čimbenici zadovljstva iskustvom. Kada je riječ o zadovoljstvu uslugama, posjetitelji su posebno zadovoljni programskim sadržajem. Većina posjetitelja nije imala značajne interakcije s lokalnom zajednicom, ali njihov angažman smatraju važnim čimbenikom u organizaciji festivala. Što se tiče mogućih poboljšanja festivalske ponude, često se spominje povećanje medijske vidljivosti, poboljšanje gastronomske ponude i potreba za većim angažmanom i osobnim sudjelovanjem tijekom festivala.

Ključne Riječi: festivalsko iskustvo, zadovoljstvo festivalom, umjetnički festivali, dobrobiti festivala, Hrvatska

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Highlights

- The paper deals with arts festival experience satisfaction and service satisfaction in Croatia.
- Socialization with others who share similar interests is crucial for festival satisfaction.
- Locating festivals in rural areas plays an important role in developing social intimacy.
- There should be more visitors' co-creation opportunities during the festival.

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1. Introduction

The challenges of economic restructuring in recent decades have led many cities, especially small and medium-sized ones, to reposition themselves in the global market by creating a distinctive element through physical transformation or rebranding (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011; Kwiatkowski et al., 2020; Richards & Duif, 2019). In this context, cultural and artistic festivals and events have proven to be effective tools that can lead to the desired changes, which are evident through the creation of high-quality connections between people and places. Festivals and events are among the fastest growing types of tourist attractions (Anil, 2012), making them serious competition to build heritage. Festivals are more flexible than built heritage, they can stimulate positive changes in space and local community in a shorter time, while also helping to differentiate sometimes very similar urban and rural environments (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017). Their growth in number, scale and variety (also in the context of rural areas) (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018) made festivals a dominant platform for culture and art production, distribution and consumption (Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019). Therefore, arts festivals have become an important means by which audiences and various stakeholders enjoy and engage with arts in general (Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019). The phenomenon of the significant increase in the number of festivals is seen by some authors as a way of commercializing culture, while others see it as a result of its democratization (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). The main trends influencing the increasing demand for festivals relate to people's need to celebrate and break out of everyday routines, as well as the desire for active engagement and participation (Morgan, 2008; Sol et al., 2017), which becomes particularly important in the context of small towns (Munjal, 2015).

Festivals have also become an important asset of rural areas, as research of rural festivals in Denmark (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018), Finland (Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019) and Australia (Gibson & Stewart, 2009) show. Rural areas are being transformed by tourism through processes of commodification and consumption as tourism becomes increasingly important in the rural economy (Crouch, 2006). Attractiveness of the rural, long time associated primarily with agriculture and its associated economic activities, lies in its ability to serve as an alternative to the city (Cloke, 2006), or in other words, as a counterpart to „the chaotic nature of urbanization“ and as „the repository of the good things we have lost as a result of urbanisation“ (Perkins, 2006:244). Therefore, the rural is often perceived in the context of „rural idyll“, i.e., as symbolising all the nostalgic things such as harmony, permanence, community cohesion, security, family values, etc. (Short, 2006). Although all of this is a product of the urban imagery (Bell, 2006), these are also important features of rural festival consumption as confirmed by research from Kwiatkowski et al. (2020) on the impact of festivals on rural areas. They categorised the impacts in several spinoffs (externalities that result from the festival and affect the host area and the community): the conservation spinoff, the consolidation spinoff, the transformation spinoff, the reinvention spinoff, the manifestation spinoff and attraction spinoff (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Interestingly, three research findings have shown that the manifestation spinoff (the festival creates awareness of local assets and performs a promotional function), followed by the consolidation (the cohesive power of rural festivals for the local community) and the reinvention spinoff (the festival’s ability to transform old traditions into a new format to meet today’s consumption needs) are of most importance for rural festival assemblers, which refers to festival organizers, locals and visitors (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020).

This paper focuses on small arts festivals in rural areas and small town. According to the festival size pyramid developed by Andersson et al. (2013), small festivals are those with fewer than 3000 visitors. In the literature, large international festivals and cultural events are the most researched, while small festivals and events are scarcely researched despite their importance for local communities and places (Anil, 2012; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019; Giaccone & Galvagno, 2021; Tkaczynski et al., 2022a). Small festivals are often community-driven, co-creative and co-produced (Duignan et al., 2018) and are characterized by active engagement of the local community and visitors (Giaccone & Galvagno, 2021). They operate with limited financial resources and media exposure (Tkaczynski et al., 2022b), they usually involve local crafts, food and traditions (Giaccone & Galvagno, 2021) and their bottom-up approach contrasts with the conventional production practices of mass cultural festivals (Duignan et al., 2018). Literature shows the multitude of positive effects and importance small-scale and arts festivals may have on local community well-being, especially in rural areas: economic and cultural revitalization (Van Aalst

& van Melik, 2011; Anil, 2012); improving the quality of life of the local community, especially in smaller settlements (Anil, 2012; Rossetti & Quinn, 2021); strengthening sense of community no matter the size of the event (Balfour et al., 2018); contributing to attractiveness and liveability of rural areas for residents and visitors alike (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018); increasing social capital and opportunities for personal development (Giaccone & Galvagno, 2021; Rossetti & Quinn, 2021); providing opportunities to meet creative people and exchange knowledge (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011; Rossetti & Quinn, 2021); supporting slower lifestyles and cultural production (Duignan et al., 2018).

Most research on festivals focuses on measuring their economic impact (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021), and only recently has the focus shifted to the visitor perspective, i.e., the benefits that visitors derive from attending the festival. The aim of this article is to investigate satisfaction with festival experiences and services as well as personal benefits of visitors to arts festivals in Croatia, primarily using interview methods. In addition, interactions with the local community and suggestions for improving the festival offer are also examined. The selected case studies are examples of smaller arts festivals in Croatia, mostly located in rural areas (with the exception of the festival in Ogulin, which with 7341 inhabitants (2021) is a typical example of a small town in the Croatian context). Although there is no precise data on the number of visitors to observed festivals which are mostly free entrance, author's direct participation in several festival editions throughout the years ensured the conclusion that they can be considered small festivals.

Beyond this introduction, the article is divided into several sections. Section 2 presents the theoretical background on various aspects of the festival-goers' perspective, including satisfaction with the festival service and experience, the sources of meaning and benefits that festival-goers take home. The next section describes the methodology by which the research was conducted and provides information about the small arts festivals in Croatia that were used as case studies in this research. Section 4 presents the research findings together with a discussion. The final section provides concluding remarks on the issues presented.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Festival service and festival experience satisfaction

To ensure visitor loyalty, which is particularly important in the context of smaller festivals (as well as smaller towns and settlements), it is important to ensure the quality of the elements that have the greatest impact on visitor satisfaction (Anil, 2012). It is crucial to distinguish what satisfaction refers to. In numerous studies, satisfaction and experience are considered synonymous (Nguyen et al., 2019). Only Pine & Gilmore (1999) have separated these two concepts, defining services as anything tangible that is provided to visitors and can be largely controlled, and experiences, which consist of controllable and uncontrollable elements (Song et al., 2012), as a personal reaction to the services provided. For example, even if a visitor is dissatisfied with certain aspects of the services at a festival, their festival experience may still be positive due to other factors unrelated to the services (e.g., the company the visitor was in, their feelings, etc.) and is actually independent of overall satisfaction (Nguyen et al., 2019). Pettersson and Getz (2009) also emphasized that positive experiences are more important for overall satisfaction than negative experiences. Therefore, for a thorough investigation of visitor satisfaction at festivals, it is suggested to divide satisfaction into two dimensions: satisfaction with festival services and satisfaction with the festival experience (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Satisfaction with festival services includes several main categories: Staff (friendliness, responsiveness, helpfulness, etc.), food (quality, variety, prices), information (signage, signboards, brochures, etc.), convenience (restrooms, rest areas, parking), festival program (content, program schedule, line-up), festival site (size, cleanliness, atmosphere), souvenirs, and accessibility (Park et al., 2011; Anil, 2012; Özdemir & Çulha, 2009; Tan et al., 2020). The attributes that have the greatest influence on satisfaction include the festival program (Park et al., 2011; Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019; Tan et al., 2020), the festival site (Özdemir & Çulha, 2009; Anil, 2012) and the food (Pettersson & Getz, 2009; Anil, 2012; Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019).

According to Packer and Ballantyne (2016), a visitor's festival experience is defined as "an individual's immediate or ongoing, subjective and personal response to an activity, setting, or event outside of their usual environment" (2016:133), and its fundamental characteristics relate precisely to the fact that it is inherently personal and subjective, something that "can be shaped but not controlled by event designers, bounded in time and space, and significant to the visitor" (2016:133). Based on previous research, these authors have made a kind of systematization of the different types or facets of experiences to allow for an easier comparison of different leisure activities. They have identified physical, sensory, restorative, introspective, transformative, hedonic, emotional, relational, spiritual and cognitive experiences.

Based on research findings, De Geus, Richards and Toepoel (2016) developed a measurement instrument (Event Experience Scale) that can be used to measure and compare the experiences of visitors to events. The scale consists of four main dimensions of experience: affective (primarily related to emotions and hedonic attachment), cognitive (cognitive perception of the event, learning), conative (related to physical engagement in terms of concrete physical activities and behaviours at the event), and novelty (related to the assessment of the uniqueness of the event and its significance in departing from everyday life). Numerous studies on different types of events have used this scale (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017; Coetzee & Pourfakhimi, 2019; Richards, 2019; Biaett & Richards, 2020) to confirm the positive correlation between these dimensions of experience and overall satisfaction with the event. Some authors have focused on a specific dimension of the event experience and either developed their own scale or supplemented the EES. Marques et al. (2021), for example, were primarily interested in the social dimension of the event experience and therefore developed the Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS), which allowed them to examine concepts such as belonging and communing. Other authors have also looked at the social aspect of the event experience: Rust (2019) looked specifically at the sense of belonging, the community spirit of the event and the local feel of the event; Coetzee & Pourfakhimi (2019) focused on social intimacy; Luonila & Kinnunen examined the importance of socializing for the festival atmosphere; Molina-Gómez et al. (2021) looked at self-evaluation of social identity; Akyildiz et al. (2013) and Armbrecht (2020) examined socialization opportunities during the event. In addition to the social aspect of the event experience, previous research placed great emphasis on the educational aspect and the associated personal development (Akyildiz et al., 2013; Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015; Molina-Gómez et al., 2021) and the acquisition of cultural capital (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). The individual elements of the event experience that the authors have particularly focused on include the atmosphere of the event (Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015; Rust, 2019), the feeling of freedom that prevails while participating in the event (Akyildiz et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Campo et al., 2018), immersion and fun (Armbrecht, 2020).

Local community involvement has a major impact on the event experience, i.e., the quality of interaction between visitors and locals, which largely determines the success of a given tourism product (Russo & Richards, 2016), including festivals (Armenski et al., 2011; Fun et al., 2014; Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017). In addition, involving the local community in tourism development has long been considered one of the criteria for sustainable development (Li & Hunter, 2015), especially when it comes to events in smaller, rural areas (Qu & Cheer, 2020).

2.2 Festival benefits and sources of meaning

In addition to the concept of event experience and satisfaction, the literature on festival consumption outcomes also mentions the concept of benefits (Morgan, 2008), which is defined as 'the ultimate value that people place on what they believe they have gained from observation or participation in activities and interaction with settings provided by festivals' (Lee et al., 2012: 184). Although both benefits and motivation refer to the needs of visitors, they are not synonymous, as motivation is defined more as a driving force, while benefits are associated with the outcome of attending the festival (Meretse et al., 2015). Although many studies focus on motivation, Meretse et al. (2015) pointed to the importance of benefits, which relates directly to what visitors take home, pass on verbally and which forms the basis of their decision to revisit the festival, making their research crucial for event organizers. Pettersson and Getz (2009) refered to the most important benefits that visitors take home as "superior experiences" and emphasized that thanks to such experiences, visitors can overlook some shortcomings in the event

organization, especially in the realm of service. In the context of heritage tourism research, McIntosh (1999) distinguishes between affective, reflective and cognitive benefits as well as non-thoughtful benefits (e.g., having fun, being entertained, spending time in a pleasant environment). In his study of folk festivals, Morgan (2007) identified several personal benefits, most notably enjoyment, personal achievement, socialization, spending time with family, novelty and escape.

In the context of the visitor experience, it is important to mention the evolution towards the need for meaningful experiences. Steger et al. (2013) investigated the sources of meaning, i.e., "specific aspects and domains of life that people say they find meaningful" (Steger et al., 2013: 530). Through the study using the auto-photography method, 16 categories of meaning were identified: Nature, hobby/leisure, relationships, pets, possessions, everyday necessities, religion, values, education, technology, organization/activities, physical environment, future aspirations, occupation/work, self, miscellaneous. Looking at the frequency of occurrence of each source of meaning in respondents' answers, relationships, hobbies/leisure, nature and education are among the most important. Using Steger et al.'s (2013) categories of sources of meaning, Packer and Gill (2016) conducted their own research aimed at discovering sources of meaning that enrich the experience of tourist travel and considering tourist travel itself as a source of meaning. The research confirmed that relationships are the most important source of meaning (even half of the responses), while nature, everyday possessions, education, physical environment (other than nature), values, hobbies and the self, appear with moderate frequency. Sources of meaning that are important in the context of tourist travel but are not covered by Steger et al.'s (2013) categories include novel or unique experiences, escape from everyday life, idealized locations, and favourite places (Packer & Gill, 2016).

3. Research Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research of visitor experiences through semi-structured interviews in the context of five different arts festivals and events in smaller settlements in Croatia. These include the music festival *Jazz is back! BP* in Grožnjan, the *Motovun Film Festival* in Motovun, the literary and children's festival *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* in Ogulin, the theater festival *Actors in Zagvozd* (Zagvozd), and the *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony Ernestinovo* in Ernestinovo.

In these five case studies, a total of 40 interviews were conducted with visitors, lasting up to 60 minutes during the events in summer 2021 and 2023 (part of the interviews in Ernestinovo, as there were almost no visitors at the 2021 edition due to pandemic restrictions). The interviewees were selected at the entry points of the individual events and workshops within the festivals. Most interviews were conducted in between performances (Ogulin, Motovun, Ernestinovo) or at the end in case where there is only one performance per day (Grožnjan, Zagvozd). Locals were excluded from this part of the research, although due to the predominantly local visitor structure, residents from neighbouring villages who visited *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* Ernestinovo were also interviewed. Festival performers were also excluded from research, except for the two foreign sculptors in Ernestinovo who were chosen because of the lack of non-local public, due to pandemic restrictions.

The interview questions were derived from previous research mentioned in the theoretical framework and focused primarily on satisfaction with the festival experience, personal benefits derived from attending the festival, the quality of interaction with local residents and possible improvements. The interviews were transcribed, and codes were developed using the inductive coding approach.

The respondents (23 women, 17 men), ranging in age from 18 to 71, were mostly college educated or students, with a slightly small number having only completed high school and the two of them had completed elementary school. Most of the interviewees are employed or still studying. In Ogulin, Grožnjan and Motovun, visitors from Zagreb and Rijeka and foreigners (United Kingdom, Poland, Denmark, Serbia, Germany) predominate among the respondents, while the visitors to the *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* in Ernestinovo and the *Actors in Zagvozd* come mainly from the immediate vicinity.

Tab 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees. Source: Author

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	17	42.5
Female	23	57.5
Age Group		
18 – 30	15	37.5
31 – 40	7	17.5
41 – 50	13	32.5
51 – 60	1	2.5
61 – 70	3	7.5
71+	1	2.5
Education Level		
Elementary school	2	5
High School	22 (11 students)	55
Bachelor's Degree	6	15
Master's Degree	10	25
Doctorate	0	0
Employment Status		
Employed	22	55
Unemployed	2	5
Student	13	32.5
Retired	3	7.5

What unites the events selected for this research is the fact that they all take place in smaller, picturesque, rural settlements (except of Ogulin, which is a small town closely connected to its rural surroundings) and that all events are based on some form of art (film, theatre, literature, music, sculpture) with varying degrees of audience engagement. The selected festivals are located in differently developed tourist regions of Croatia. Zagvozd, Grožnjan and Motovun are situated in the hinterland of the Croatian Adriatic (Grožnjan and Motovun in the northern part of Istria, the most developed tourist region of Croatia, and Zagvozd in the southern part of Dalmatia). Ogulin is located in Mountainous Croatia and Ernestinovo in the Pannonian lowlands of Slavonia. Both Mountainous and the Pannonian region are much less developed in terms of tourism than the Adriatic region, even though tourism is on the increase here.

The Motovun Film Festival was held in the small, medieval town of Motovun from 1999 to 2023, before being moved to another location. The festival, born from the collaboration of professionals from the Croatian film industry, is dedicated to small and independent productions, with outdoor screenings during the summer months and close interaction between the audience and professionals from the film industry.

Actors in Zagvozd is a theatre event founded in 1998 in the hometown of a well-known Croatian actor, providing access to cultural content in this part of Croatia. The program includes performances by popular theatre troupes and productions of well-known Croatian theatre, as well as concerts, literary evenings and similar events. The performances are open to the public and take place outdoors during the summer months.

The Jazz is Back! BP Festival is the oldest jazz festival in Croatia and takes place in the small town of Grožnjan, which is often referred to as the smallest jazz metropolis in the world. It is organized by the municipality of Grožnjan and the International Cultural Center of Jeunesses Musicales Croatia, based in Grožnjan. It was initiated in 1999 by the well-known Croatian musician Boško Petrović. Parallel to the festival, which takes place in the open air during the summer months, the Summer Jazz School organized by Jeunesses Musicales Croatia begins its activities, which brings together young musicians from all over the world and an international team of mentors. In 2008, the festival was awarded the European Jazz Federation prize for the best boutique festival.



Fig 1. Audience of open-air theatre festival Actors in Zagvozd. Source: Author

The Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival is a cultural and tourist event that has been held in Ogulin since 2006. Inspired by the work of one of the most famous Croatian children's book authors, Ivana Brlić Mažuranić, who was born in Ogulin and was inspired by its surroundings, the festival focuses on artistic and cultural productions, especially for children and young people, including theatre and music performances, storytelling and numerous educational and creative workshops inspired by fairy tales. The festival is organized by the Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival Association and the Ogulin Tourist Board.

Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony Ernestinovo in Ernestinovo has been taking place since 1973 and is considered the longest-running naïve sculpture colony in Europe. Every year in the summer months, sculptors (and painters) gather in Ernestinovo Park to carve sculptures from local wood, which are kept in the local gallery or exhibited in the park and along the streets of the settlement. In addition to the opportunity to watch the artists at work, there is also a cultural and artistic program for the public.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter is divided into three main sections concerning most important topics that arouse during data analysis. The first section elaborates on arts festival visitors' experience satisfaction, which refers to four main aspects: social, affective, cognitive and the one concerning the festival atmosphere. The following section reflects on arts festival visitors' perception of local community involvement in festival organization. The final section examines arts festival visitors' service satisfactions, which alludes primarily to festivals' program content as well as their suggestions for improvements in festival organization, such as gastronomic offer, media presence and co-creation desires, just to mention a few.

4.1 Arts festival visitors' experience satisfaction

The analysis of the interviews with the visitors revealed several predominant aspects of the experience: the social aspect, affective and cognitive aspects, the festival atmosphere.

As confirmed by Packer and Gill's (2016) study on sources of meaning, the main satisfaction factor and the most important aspect that visitors derive from attending the festival is socialization. The importance of the need to share the festival experience with family was confirmed in studies by Meretse et al. (2015), Sol et al. (2017) and Rust (2019). Meeting new people was found to be important in the studies by Akyildiz et al. (2013), Meretse et al. (2015) and Marques et al. (2021), while attending and participating in the festival with old friends was important in the studies by Meretse et al. (2015) and Rust (2019). In Ogulin, due to the nature of the festival, the focus is on getting together with family; in Zagvozd and Ernestinovo, the focus is on getting together with old friends, while in Motovun and Grožnjan (where younger audience predominates) the focus is on making new acquaintances. Sharing similar interests with festival participants has also been found to be important, as mentioned in previous research (Akyildiz et al, 2013; Marques et al, 2021):

It is different when you are surrounded by people who do similar things, make music and with whom you can play. You can also meet up with them in Grožnjan because it's a small town and you feel at home here. Compared to other places I have been to, here you can be a part of everything and know everyone. It's nice, it's like having a little home here. (G5)

I meet colleagues from other academies who are involved in similar things. But I would not even say that's my primary goal or focus. Basically, it does not matter who you are, what you are, what you do, just a certain exchange of energy, as long as it's new people, new perspectives on the world. I think that is what absolutely enriches a person, whether it's specifically related to their profession or not. (M4)

The atmosphere is also one of the elements that have a significant impact on the overall satisfaction of visitors, as confirmed by the studies by Pettersson and Getz (2009) and Rust (2020). Rust's (2019) study showed that the term "atmosphere" is most often associated with positive attributes, which was also confirmed by this research: *pleasant and beautiful atmosphere* (Z8); *relaxed atmosphere* (M8); *different atmosphere* (M8); *paradise on earth* (M4); *genuine, homely atmosphere* (E4). In all case studies, the uniqueness of the event itself or some aspect of it was emphasized: In Zagvozd, visitors consider the fact that it is located in a rural setting to be unique; in Ernestinovo, visitors highlighted the uniqueness of the tradition of naïve sculpture that has existed for 50 years; in Ogulin, the fact that was emphasized is that it is one of the few festivals in Croatia that is primarily tailored to children; in Motovun and Grožnjan, the ease of communication with the directors or performers is particularly unique.

In all case studies, visitors emphasized the friendliness and hospitality they felt during their stay. The relaxed demeanour of the people (both locals and other participants) conveyed an impression of warmth and homeliness. This is also reflected in the comments about the differences and advantages of festivals in small towns compared to those in big cities. In Ogulin, for example, one visitor emphasized that despite a similar offer (content and theatre performances for children) in Zagreb, it is much nicer in Ogulin (O2), and another visitor's comment explained why this is so:

Ogulin is beautiful in itself, with lots of green spaces. For example, when you are in Rijeka (Croatia's third largest city) *at events like this, it's always on asphalt. Here, we can let the children run around freely.* (O4)

The advantage of a small festival, i.e., a festival in a small town, is also evident in the easier achievement of social intimacy, which is linked to a sense of community and solidarity among participants (Garcia, 2011 cited in Coetzee & Pourfakhimi, 2019), which in these festival examples manifested itself, among other things, in easier communication between performers/authors/artists and the audience:

There is a certain atmosphere that is not pretentious, you can easily meet film directors, you can talk to them, there is a relaxed atmosphere, maybe also because the festival is not very big. And you can see a lot of films that you would not otherwise be able to see. (...) Because it's a small festival, the atmosphere is very different. At Animafest (festival in Zagreb) *where everything is not so close together, it's not so easy to meet directors.* (M8)

Of course, it's very different from larger festivals in big cities, like Zagreb. There, the audience comes primarily for the movies, there are many more movies, but there is not so much contact between authors and audience. Here the aim is exactly that, to bring the directors into contact with the audience, to go to the same parties, to talk to them, to have coffee next to each other. (M6)



Fig 2. Storytelling event during Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival. Source: Author

In the case of Motovun, Grožnjan (although partially) and Ernestinovo, the direct encounter between the visitors and the performers is actually made possible. In Motovun, the encounter is enabled directly through the festival program by organising so-called *Garden Talks* – open discussions with film directors in a relaxed atmosphere where the audience sits on the grass, sips their drink and asks questions about various aspects of film production and content. In Ernestinovo, the encounter between the sculptors and the audience is made possible by the fact that the *Colony* is located in a public park where the sculptors work from morning to evening and everyone is invited to approach them and ask questions or just take a closer look – a privilege that not many of us often have. In Grožnjan, the encounter is partial, as it mainly relates to students attending the *Summer Jazz School* (which takes place during the festival), which allows them to get close to their mentors, some of whom perform at the festival. Considering that most of the students also participate in the closing night program and are involved in the festival production in one way or another, their extended stay in Grožnjan and the connection between the festival organisers and the school give them the opportunity to meet some of the performing musicians in person. Although direct contact with the performers in Zagvozd and Ogulin is not as possible as in Motovun, Ernestinovo and Grožnjan, due to the small size of the two festivals and the intimate and relaxed atmosphere emphasised by the interviewees (and experienced by the author herself on various occasions), it is not hard to imagine that it is also not so difficult to get in touch with the performers at the end of the program.

One visitor in Motovun summed up the described atmosphere of closeness, community, intimacy and unpretentiousness, which can be missing at larger festivals, i.e., those in big cities, very nicely with the words: *Nothing is gala, but that's exactly what makes it so charming.* (M6)

This is related to the fact that in all case studies, more visitors express their sense of belonging to the place where the festival takes place with the expression *I feel at home*. Some of them do not consider their presence at the festival as a tourist visit, nor do they see themselves as tourists, which is in line with the thesis that creative tourists mainly strive to eliminate the differences between themselves and the locals (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017):

I do not feel like a tourist. I rather have the feeling of being part of another project, another universe. I did not come here to see the town or the region, but to get in touch with people, watch a few films and learn something. (M1)

In the results relating to the affective aspect of the experience, in addition to expressions of excitement, joy, positivity and happiness, the feeling of relaxation and the associated slowness stands out the most, partly due to the environment, which is smaller and more intimate, and partly due to an experience that differs from what visitors describe as a typical tourist travel experience.

I am relaxed because time is slow here. (G4)

Grožnjan is slow. You can just walk into the gallery and talk to the person who makes the jewellery. (G5)

This is a quiet place where I can relax and unwind. I feel like I am in a different place. There is no big city, just a small, quiet place where everyone is happy. You can do what you want without feeling pressured. Otherwise, you would be urged to go sightseeing or to a museum and here you can just sit on the grass and read a book. (G6)

One visitor to Motovun contrasted the sightseeing terror typical of package tours with the feeling of freedom that characterized his stay at the festival:

There you run, and you are very restricted in what you can and cannot do. Here, it is freedom. Food, content, everything you will consume. (M2)

The emphasis on freedom as the predominant feeling during participation in the festival, defined as an escape from the established social and cultural norms of everyday life, is also found in the studies of Akyildiz et al. (2013) and Rodríguez-Campo et al. (2018).

An important part of the affective aspect of the experience is also the entertainment mentioned by the majority of visitors. The influence of entertainment on the overall satisfaction with the festival experience is sometimes more significant than the educational aspect of the experience, as shown in the study by Molina-Gómez et al. (2021), or even than the program content of the festival itself, as confirmed by the study by Bowen and Daniels (2005). According to the study by Sol et al. (2017), conducted at a cultural festival in Portugal, entertainment is the second most important motivator for attending a festival, after the desire to spend time with family and friends, diminishing to some extent the importance of the culturally focused festival program. A visitor in Motovun highlighted the entertainment, which is not directly related to the program content, and stated that during the evening concert, when there is a party atmosphere, it feels more like being at a music festival than a film festival (M7). One visitor in Ernestinovo even believes that for the Colony's audience, the evening entertainment program is perhaps even more important than the artistic part that takes place during the day (E9).

As part of the cognitive aspect of the festival experience, the research findings pointed to the importance of the educational potential of attending the festival, also explored by Kinnunen and Haahti (2015) and Meretse et al. (2015), as well as the increase in cultural capital, particularly in the area of embodied cultural capital, which refers to the "personal assimilation of knowledge, abilities, tastes and values" (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021:47). Attendees emphasized that participating in the festival *enriched them* (M4), *contributed to their spiritual and intellectual development* (O2), *taught them how to navigate different musical genres* (G2), *provided a learning experience* (Z5), and that the program content was *spiritual nourishment* for them (Z1). Although it may seem strange due to the nature of the festivals analysed, the interviewees didn’t dwell on this experience dimension as long as expected in comparison to the other dimensions already mentioned. The reason for this is unclear, but we can surmise that the educational potential and cultural capital of attending arts festivals is taken for granted, especially when there are organised workshops or summer schools, as in the case of Motovun and Grožnjan. Therefore, it seems that other dimensions of experience are more important than the cognitive aspect of the festival experience.

4.2 Arts festival visitors' perception of local community involvement in festival organization

Despite the literature pointing to the great importance of active local community involvement in festival organization to create a unique atmosphere and sense of belonging for visitors (Fun et al., 2014; Sol et al., 2017), and the fact that small arts festivals are often community-driven (Giaccone & Galvagno, 2021), this research did not confirm a significant link between locals and visitors. Indeed, the majority of interviewees in all case studies confirmed that they do not have encounters with the local population, which is confirmed by some direct quotes:

We do not have encounters. We come, see the performance and leave. (Z5)

They (the locals) *seem to be a different world. We only see them when they park in front of their houses.* (M1)

In fact, in two out of five festival examples, the locals are directly involved in the festival program: in *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* and *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony Ernestinovo*. In Ogulin, various local associations (for children, young people and women, but also the local fire-department, the bird protection association, etc.) offer creative workshops for children (and adults) together with members of their associations. In addition, some local family businesses offer their products at the festival stands. In Ernestinovo, the pensioners' association sells homemade sweets during the festivals and various local folk ensembles create a large part of the evening program. Although the locals are involved in the festival production behind the scenes in various capacities, they are not directly involved in the festival program in other case studies.

The contacts with locals mentioned in all the case studies were mostly interactions with restaurant and accommodation staff, where advice and suggestions for visiting nearby tourist attractions were occasionally exchanged or brief impressions of the current festival program were shared. In the case of Grožnjan and Motovun, where a younger audience predominates, there is also a noticeable focus on mutual communication based on shared interests in music or film and interaction with musicians and filmmakers who are part of the festival program. The interviewees in Grožnjan, who also attend the Summer Jazz School, are extremely satisfied with the open and warm relationship they have with their teachers, many of whom are from Croatia (although not from Grožnjan) and whom they also consider to be locals.

However, the prevailing opinion among the interviewees is that the local population is involved in the organization of the festival, which gives the impression that it is a local festival. One respondent in Ogulin replied:

It's great, wonderfully organized, the local people certainly organized it, but we haven't had much to do with them. (O5)

Furthermore, some interviewees in Ogulin, Motovun and Zagvozd believe that the whole town is involved in the organization of the festival, as confirmed by the quote from an interviewee from Zagvozd:

I have the impression that everyone, I mean the locals, are united, everyone is involved, they are active. (Z5)

Some of the interviewees in Motovun, Zagvozd (as already mentioned in the previous quotes) and Ernestinovo particularly appreciate the enthusiasm of the local community, i.e., the organizers, thanks to whose efforts and passion the festival exists:

It's all enthusiasm. It's done by two or three people who keep the whole thing going. They work by energy and muscle. (E9)

I think culture should be a driving factor, but I don't think it really is. I really appreciate it when something is organized and aimed at attracting a larger number of people and it's not just about the beach, the sea and the sun and all the things that are already there and nothing had to be done. (Z4)

4.3 Arts festival visitors' service satisfaction and suggestions for festivals' improvement

Two elements of the festival organization in need of improvement, which were identified by the respondents of most of the festivals surveyed, concern the gastronomic offer and the media presence. Namely, respondents, especially in Ogulin and Ernestinovo, mention that the gastronomic offer is modest and unsatisfactory or even non-existent (Zagvozd). This is in line with other studies on the service satisfaction of visitors to cultural/art festivals, in which expensive food, mostly low-quality fast food, was the most common complaint (Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015; Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019) and visitors emphasized the need for a greater gastronomic diversity (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018), including local specialties and food made of local ingredients (Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019). At the *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival*, the gastronomic offer has indeed improved in recent years, as restaurants have adapted their menus to the audience and thematically linked them to the festival (e.g., more diverse children's menus, fairy tale food names, etc.), which was perceived as important in Danish rural festivals as well (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018). The offer at the outdoor stalls has also been expanded to include food from local family farms, but apparently still not enough for some visitors, who yearn, perhaps, to fulfil their urban gastro-idyllic expectations consisting of locally grown, organic food and local flavours (Bell, 2006; Perkins, 2006). In Zagvozd, respondents would even be satisfied with fast food or bakery products, which corresponds to the general need expressed for expanding the offer after the end of the theatre performance, when the opportunities for socializing are very limited, but the desire of the audience is definitely there. One way of explaining the food problem is offered by Hjalager & Kwiatkowski in their study of Danish rural festivals, in which they discovered the link between poor food supply and a low prioritisation of commercially oriented goals by festival organisers, who "see festivals as a kind of 'public' good with a strongly and most explicitly expressed non-commercial and community focus" (2018:222).

In addition, respondents in Ogulin, Ernestinovo and Zagvozd believe that the media presence of the festival and marketing in general do not match its importance and do not reach the target audience sufficiently.

One interviewee from Zagvozd, who spent her summer vacation nearby, highlighted the lack of information as a result of inadequate marketing:

We do not know anything about it. We asked in the store when, where, what. The woman in the store told me, I don't know, I don't know if there are even any performances today. (Z6)

Several interviewees in Ernestinovo believe that the *Colony* is not recognized in the wider area and is not integrated into the broader tourism offer of the region, i.e., visitors who visit the neighbouring macro-regional centre Osijek or the nearby Kopački Rit Nature Park, are unlikely to know about the *Colony* or the artistic offer of Ernestinovo. Considering its tradition, one interviewee believes that the *Colony* deserves much more media coverage:

I think the Colony should be much more publicized, it should have more media coverage. (...) Because when you can look back on a 50-year tradition and have a person who is number one in naïve sculpture, I think there is a lack of representation and visibility. I think people do not perceive it as they should. (...) And when tourists come to Osijek, there is no reason why they should not come to Ernestinovo. But they do not know. Nobody knows about it. (E9)

In all case studies, visitors expressed high satisfaction with the program content of the festival, which has been shown to be one of the most important elements of satisfaction in the domain of festival services in previous research (Özdemir & Çulha, 2009; Park et al., 2011; Meretse et al., 2015; Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019; Tan et al., 2020). In Ogulin, visitors were most satisfied with the open-air storytelling alongside the theater performances; in Zagvozd, visitors were extremely satisfied with the theater performances by the national most popular theater groups and actors; in Motovun, visitors were satisfied with the selection of films that are otherwise difficult to see in other cinemas; in Grožnjan, visitors were satisfied with the quality of the music program and, in the case of participants in the Summer Jazz School, with the quality of the mentors; in Ernestinovo, visitors were satisfied with the opportunity to see artists create sculptures and also with the evening entertainment program.



Fig 3. A sculptor working in the public park during Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony Ernestinovo. Source: Author

In all case studies, however, it is clear that even greater participation, co-creation and personal engagement are required during the festival. In Ogulin and Ernestinovo, some visitors emphasized that they would welcome workshops for adults in addition to those for children. In Motovun, visitors are extremely satisfied with already mentioned *Garden Talks*, where they have relaxed conversations with directors of current films from the repertoire. Several of them emphasized that they would be even more satisfied if there were more such talks and discussions, which is in line with the need for social intimacy with well-known authors at literary festivals identified in the research conducted by Rossetti and Quinn (2021). In Zagvozd, visitors also emphasized the need for further socializing after the performance, especially with the actors of the current play, and in Grožnjan, respondents suggested more jam sessions, i.e., more opportunities for improvisation and free music-making on the street by the audience and visitors who are not actively involved in the festival or Summer Jazz School program. The findings are consistent with the results of interviews with visitors to Finnish cultural festivals, who expressed the need for more space for socializing among festival participants, as socializing is just as important as the main artistic/cultural focus of the festival (Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015). According to managers of Finnish arts festivals, it is their job to facilitate co-creation of the festival experience together with the festival audience (Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019).

In Motovun and Ogulin, where the festival program runs almost all day for several consecutive days, visitors emphasized the need for a less crowded program schedule so that they can easily attend the desired workshops and performances (Ogulin) and have time to rest or visit the surroundings in the meantime (Motovun), which was also noted among visitors to cultural festivals in Finland (Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015).

The visitors in Motovun staying at the festival camp and the visitors in Grožnjan staying at the Summer Jazz School' premises highlighted the need for better accommodation conditions as well as better transportation links to the settlements, which was also noted in the research by Barrera-Fernández and Hernández-Escampa (2017).

Interestingly, many visitors responded that they do not believe that anything needs to be changed, such as visitors from Grožnjan:

I don't think there is much that could be done better than what they are doing now. It was the time of my life. (G3)

Several visitors, especially in Ogulin and Zagvozd, even emphasized that they do not want the offer to be further expanded or anything significant to be changed because they fear commercialization, which could tarnish the overall impression:

I do not want it to become too commercialized and turn into some trash. I really like the fact that there are a few activities only, that the whole concept is very connected to nature. (...) More content would distract me from these important things. (O2)

This is in line with previous research on visitors to small festivals, which has shown that visitors do not want small festivals to be professionally managed or too sophisticated because of the risk of losing the human dimension, creating a distance between visitors and the local community and negatively affecting the atmosphere and image of the festival (Kinnunen & Haahti, 2015; Luonila & Kinnunen, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Culture and art have become effective means of revitalization in recent decades, especially for small and medium-sized cities. In this context, festivals and various events play an important role, as they bring about positive changes in the place and local community in a shorter time due to their greater flexibility compared to build heritage, while also fulfilling the contemporary individual's need for escape from everyday life, festive atmosphere and active participation.

Large and international festivals are most represented in the literature, while smaller festivals are much less frequently written about, despite their importance to the local community and place. Small (cultural) festivals, through their functioning, organization and focus on the local, represent a kind of counterpoint to the usual mass practices of festival production (Duignan et al., 2018). Most research on festivals focuses on measuring economic impact, and only recently has the focus shifted to examining the visitor's perspective. Often the motivation of visitors is explored, while the outcomes of festival attendance take a back seat. Given the growing interest of cultural and creative tourists in experiences that not only entertain but also contribute directly to personal and collective well-being, it is important to explore the satisfaction and well-being that visitors to small, in this case, arts festivals achieve through their participation.

The qualitative study of visitors to arts festivals in Croatia has revealed numerous advantages of such festivals. Recognizing that experience and satisfaction are not synonymous, visitor responses were analysed, taking into account the difference between satisfaction with the services and satisfaction with the experience, with an additional focus on interaction with the local community and suggestions for further improvement of the festival offer. Analysis of visitor responses has shown that one of the most important factors in satisfaction with the festival experience is the opportunity to socialize, both with family and friends and with other festival attendees who share similar interests, particularly with the festival's performers, i.e., musicians, filmmakers, actors and artists. The pleasant and informal atmosphere, which promotes relaxation, influences the slowness of the tourist experience and develops a sense of freedom, contrasts with the typical tourist experience associated with classic package tours. For the visitors interviewed, the uniqueness of the festival stems largely from its location in smaller, predominantly rural areas, which guarantees a greater degree of immediacy and intimacy, all things that are difficult, or at least not as easy, to achieve at festivals in large cities. Thanks to this, many visitors have clearly expressed their sense of belonging with the expression *I feel at home*, and one visitor aptly described the festival's unpretentious atmosphere with the comment: *Nothing is gala, but that's exactly what makes it so charming*. (M6).

Although they claim that interaction with the local community was sporadic, most respondents believe that the local community is responsible for the organization of the festival. In terms of satisfaction with the services, visitors mainly emphasized the quality of the program content, while the gastronomic offer and media presence, in their opinion, require more attention in the future. In addition, it emerges that more opportunities for personal involvement of visitors during the festival program need to be created, which aligns with the current trend towards co-creation of tourist experiences.

This research, although exploratory in nature, confirms the potential of small arts festivals in terms of creating valuable and high-quality experiences and personal benefits from the festival visitors' perspective.

Although all five case studies fall into the category of arts festivals, there are obviously many differences between them, such as the geographical context, the destination's tourism appeal, the program content, which differs in the degree of visitors' co-creation possibilities as well as the opportunities to get in touch with the locals. All of these factors also have an impact on the overall visitor experience and should be considered in future research. Further studies could also include the perspectives of the other two important groups involved in festival production – the festival organisers and the local community. This would provide even a more comprehensive overview of the key characteristics of the overall satisfaction of arts festival visitors.

The research results can serve as a kind of guide for organizers in the planning and implementation phase of similar festivals to ensure a higher level of satisfaction and personal well-being of festival visitors. Furthermore, the research aims to close the gap in the literature on small arts festivals (especially in Croatian context), on the one hand and the benefits and satisfaction of arts festival visitors on the other.

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