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EVENTS AS A CATALYST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN OSIJEK-BARANJA COUNTY

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to present the state of tourism in Osijek-Baranja County based on tourist arrivals and overnight stays collected from 2016 to 2021. It analyzes the events held throughout the year in Osijek-Baranja County and, through primary research, aims to determine whether these events can serve as motivators and catalysts for tourism development.

Methodology: Primary research was conducted on event attendance in Osijek-Baranja County using a random sample in September to gather opinions on whether these events can indeed serve as catalysts for tourism development. Additionally, internal statistical data from the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board covering the period from 2016 to 2021 were analyzed. These data were collected via the e-Visitor system and internal Tourist Board records.

Results: The results show that Osijek-Baranja County hosts numerous cultural and tourist events that significantly contribute to the development of rural tourism. The majority of respondents confirmed that these events are strong motivators and catalysts for tourism development. Spearman's correlation coefficient indicated no significant relationship between age and event attendance. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in the number of events attended by men and women, with men attending significantly more events than women, contrary to initial expectations.

Conclusion: The research concludes that the events analyzed have a significant impact on the development of rural tourism in Osijek-Baranja County. These events greatly enhance the visibility, promotion, and popularity of the county, positioning them as important catalysts for tourism development.

Keywords: Catalyst for tourism development, cultural and tourist events, overnight stays, rural tourism, tourist arrivals

1. Introduction

As one of the selective forms of tourism, rural tourism is a collective term used for various types of tourism (such as rural, hunting, wine, gastronomic,

etc.) that take place in rural areas. Today's tourists are increasingly seeking to "purchase" experiences, meaning they want to experience something new and different. Along these lines, various civil society organizations, often associations, have emerged

to take on the role of organizers of “experiences” or public events that either are or have the potential to become tourism products and the reason why tourists visit a destination.

The aim of this paper is to present the most significant tourist events in Osijek-Baranja County and how important these events are for attracting tourists. Additionally, the research was focused on the attendance of specific events, which were selected based on their popularity, as outlined in the 2023 Annual Report on the Work Program Implementation of the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board.

Three hypotheses were formulated for the purposes of the research:

H1: The majority of respondents believe that events are significant catalysts for attracting tourists and developing tourism.

H2: There is a correlation between the age of tourists and event attendance.

H3: On average, women attend more events in Osijek-Baranja County.

2. Literature review

Rural tourism has a history, but in the Republic of Croatia, it remains relatively new, with less attention and fewer investments directed toward this branch of tourism compared to its primary forms. Rural tourism has the potential to become, and in certain micro-regions it already is, a primary driver of economic development, which is a prerequisite for the growth of gross domestic product and employment.

“Rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle” (Belošević et al., 2018, p. 9). Velimir Srića argues that “Croatia needs rural development projects that would integrate tourism and food production” (Srića, 2010, p. 238), thus potentially attracting a larger number of visitors.

Ballesteros and Hernández (2021) also discuss the promotion of rural tourism that is constrained by limited financial resources and marketing inefficiencies. They argue that rural areas often lack sufficient promotional strategies to highlight their unique offerings, which hinders their ability to attract a broader range of tourists. Addressing these limitations

through more effective marketing and collaboration among stakeholders could significantly enhance the visibility and appeal of rural tourism destinations.

“Rural tourism takes place in rural areas, so space is the dominant element that characterizes it. The term ‘rural’ is not clearly defined, and the theoretical definition of rural areas and rural tourism depends on the country and the author of the work dealing with it” (Nejašmić & Barišić, 2020, p. 5). The term ‘rural tourism’ is the broadest concept that encompasses all activities and forms of tourism taking place in rural areas. The concept of rural tourism is not identical to the concept of countryside tourism, nor to the concept of agrotourism. Both countryside tourism and agrotourism are subtypes of rural tourism. Countryside tourism encompasses only those tourist activities related to the village and rural environment, while agrotourism refers to the tourist offer of family-owned agricultural farms that provide them with additional income. According to Baćac (2011), the concept of countryside tourism is narrower than rural tourism and at the same time broader than farm tourism (a tourist rural family farm). It is related to the village environment and its immediate surroundings, as well as all its activities (agriculture, events, gastronomy, folklore, ethnology, and other economic activities).

In 1986, the Council of Europe defined the concept of rural tourism as tourism encompassing all activities in rural areas, not only those that can be classified as farm or agrotourism. Demonja and Ružić (2010) argue that rural tourism is tourism in rural areas with all the activities carried out in these places, and the most important features of such tourism are a peaceful environment, absence of noise, a preserved environment, interaction with hosts, local food, and acquaintance with rural activities.

Martínez et al. (2019) analyze the stability of rural tourism as a key factor for ensuring sustainable tourism development. They emphasize that maintaining stability in rural tourism operations is crucial for long-term success, as it allows destinations to balance environmental conservation with economic growth.

Yu et al. (2018) examine resident support for tourism development in rural communities in the Midwestern United States, focusing on the perceived impacts of tourism on community quality of life. Their findings indicate that positive perceptions of tourism-related economic benefits often lead to greater support among residents.

Today, clear criteria exist for defining the framework of rural tourism, but there is still a significant problem in practice related to determining the

boundary between tourism in general and rural tourism. More precisely, when discussing the development of rural tourism in continental Croatia, all previous research by most authors emphasize that it is an area with an exceptional natural and social potential but insufficiently valorized in Croatian tourism (Petrić, 2006; Ružić, 2009; Bartoluci, 2013; Bartoluci et al., 2014; Bartoluci & Petračić, 2015).

Bartoluci, Hendija & Petračić (2015) believe that rural tourism in Croatia may have a significantly more important role than the present one if the size of this area be taken into account. Furthermore, their research study shows that rural tourism in Croatia lags behind sun-and-beach holiday tourism in coastal Croatia and that numerous and diverse natural and social resources in continental Croatia are insufficiently employed.

Page & Connell (2006) argue that there cannot and does not exist a universal definition of rural areas due to the multidimensional, dynamic and complex nature of this type of tourism. According to Johnston et al. (2000, p. 718), as cited in Lukić (2010), rural areas encompass: areas dominated by agriculture and forestry or extensive land use; areas with small settlements and less centralization but with a pronounced connectedness to landscapes perceived as rural by most; and areas that promote a lifestyle that respects the environment and one's own life.

"Tourism in rural areas has today become a reality, a need and a wish of tourists, but also a carrying force and an instrument of rural areas development. In the new rural economy, the co-modification of rural landscape, culture and lifestyle is more important than the physical exploitation of rural land" (Todorović & Bjeljac, 2009, p. 455).

Rural tourism is based on an image or a set of images, shaped by the history, geography, and culture of the territory. These images must be communicated to 'sell' these places, this territory. But the images are coconstructed by both the tourist and the 'sellers' (Canoves et al., 2004, p. 756).

"Rural areas motivate tourist visits with their characteristics" (Ružić, 2009, p. 220).

The motives that make rural tourism interesting and acceptable (Duk-Byeong, & Yoo-Shik, 2008) are classified according to typology (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003) as:

- physical, such as relaxation
- cultural, such as discovering new spaces

- interpersonal, such as socialization and meeting new people
- prestige, such as self-awareness and self-actualization.

Various works and research studies offer different approaches to understanding motivation in rural tourism, such as by nationality (Cha et al., 1995), destination (Jang & Cai, 2002), satisfaction and location (Yoon & Uysal, 2005), seniors (Jang & Wu, 2006), and events (Lee et al., 2004).

According to research by Bolfek et al. (2012), key starting points for the promotion and branding of Slavonia can be: rural tourism, events (various festivals, cultural and entertainment events), special interests, health tourism, and nautical tourism.

"Rural tourism's future lies in its ability to adapt to changing visitor expectations, particularly in offering authentic, personalized, and sustainable experiences that resonate with modern travelers seeking connection with nature and local cultures" (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015, p. 1148).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) methodology, utilized for determining and distinguishing urban from rural areas, is based on population density. According to this methodology, the Republic of Croatia is categorized into predominantly rural regions, covering "more than 50% of the total area of Croatia" (Demonja & Ružić, 2010, p. 46), significantly rural regions, and predominantly urban regions. The Rural Development Program for the period 2014-2020 states that 99.24% of the total area of the Republic of Croatia, which belongs to predominantly rural or mixed regions, is inhabited by 3,217,117 residents, constituting 75.08% of the total population of Croatia.

According to the Croatian Tourism Development Strategy until 2020 (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2013), seven rural regions are distinguished, one of which is the 'Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem' region, encompassing the entire Osijek-Baranja County. "It is estimated that rural tourism, including mountainous areas, accounts for approximately 3% of total international travel, with an annual growth rate of about 6%. Faced with underdeveloped domestic demand and an uninspiring environment, the Croatian rural tourism offer is developing extremely slowly. The exception is only Istria, and to some extent Osijek-Baranja County" (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2013, p. 9).

2.1 The connection between tourism and events

Tourism is closely connected to events, as they often form an important part of the tourist offer that a destination can provide to its visitors. Likewise, events that are held at the international level can also be the main reason why tourists choose to visit a particular destination. In this way, tourism influences events, but events also influence tourism and can significantly increase the demand for a certain destination.

The relationship between events and tourism is a dynamic one, as events can significantly enhance the attractiveness of a destination, driving both visitor numbers and economic impact. Events, ranging from festivals and cultural celebrations to sports competitions and conferences, serve as focal points that draw tourists and foster community engagement.

Events can generate substantial economic benefits for local communities. They attract visitors who spend on accommodation, food, transportation, and souvenirs, contributing in that way to the local economy (Getz, 2012). For instance, sports events often lead to increased hotel bookings and restaurant patronage, significantly boosting local businesses (Duran & Pérez, 2020).

Patterson and Pan (2019) argue that events play a crucial role in promoting local culture and heritage, allowing communities to showcase their traditions and identity. Cultural festivals, such as music or art events, often attract tourists interested in authentic experiences and cultural immersion. This not only enhances community pride but also helps preserve local traditions. Patterson and Pan (2019) conclude that cultural events significantly enhance tourist interest and visitation, providing authentic experiences that attract diverse audiences to various destinations.

Overall, the connection between tourism and events is dynamic and can have a significant impact on the development of regions. In summary, the interplay between events and tourism is multifaceted, encompassing economic, cultural, and sustainable dimensions. Events serve as catalysts for tourism growth, fostering community development and enhancing the overall appeal of destinations.

According to Getz (2008), from a consumer perspective, it is necessary to understand who travels specifically for events and why, as well as who attends events while traveling. It is also important to explore the activities and spending patterns of 'event tourists' during and after events. Any demand-side approach should include an assessment of the value of events in promoting a positive destination image, place marketing in general, and

co-branding with destinations. On the supply side, destinations develop, facilitate and promote events of all kinds to meet multiple goals: to attract tourists (including reducing seasonality), to serve as a catalyst for urban renewal and increase the infrastructure and tourism capacity of destinations, to foster a positive destination image and contribute to general place marketing (including contributions to fostering a better place in which to live, work and invest), and to animate specific attractions or areas.

"Events offer a unique form of tourist attraction, ranging in scale from small community festivals, through to international trade fairs, and on to the largest of global sporting events. Events (sporting, cultural, business etc.) are an increasingly important motivator for tourism, figuring prominently in the development and marketing of most destinations and playing a growing role in destination competitiveness. When considering the scale and impact of events, they fall into four broad categories: i) local, ii) regional, iii) major, and iv) mega-events." (OECD, 2017, p. 11).

All kinds of events can act as a really important motivator for tourism and also "have the potential to act as catalysts for local development, and to deliver a range of economic, socio-cultural, environmental and other benefits associated with image, branding, and expansion of the visitor economy" (OECD, 2017, p. 11).

Apostolakis and Viskadouraki (2017) analyze the economic impact of cultural festivals on the local economy and the contribution of festivals to the local area in economic terms.

Bowdin et al. (2011) provide an overview of events management and its significance within the tourism sector. They highlight the strategic importance of events in enhancing destination appeal and fostering visitor engagement, underscoring the essential role of effective event planning.

According to Faizieva and Ruziev (2023), successful events place a high priority on creating a unique brand and achieving accurate market positioning. Research on marketing strategies has confirmed that defining a clear image and target audience has a significant impact on the ability to attract and retain tourists.

Eshuis et al. (2020) note that all kinds of events carry not only short-term impacts but also form long-term consequences in the spheres of tourism, culture, and economy. They also examine the role of festivals as key elements in shaping the image of regions and increasing their attractiveness.

Nordvall and Brown (2020) emphasize the economic aspects associated with festivals. It is important to note that festivals have a significant impact on the economy of the region in which they are held. One of the key points that the authors emphasize is the ability of festivals to attract a large number of tourists.

Duffy and Mair (2021) introduce dynamics into the discussion of the relationship between festivals and local traditions. They provide an analysis that raises doubts about whether festivals are always inextricably linked to unique local customs and practices. Instead, the authors identify that globalization and commercialization can influence festivals, changing their character and impact on culture and tourism.

All in all, understanding and comprehensively analyzing all the aspects highlighted by different researchers greatly enriches the understanding of the key role that events play in helping to stimulate the development of tourism. All kinds of events play an important role as an instrument of socio-cultural dynamics, contributing to economic development, shaping the image of the territory, and stimulating innovation processes in the region or town where they are held.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of this paper, empirical research was conducted in Osijek-Baranja County during September 2024. The questionnaire was compiled in Croatian and domestic visitors completed the questionnaire in Croatian. In addition to demographic questions about gender and age, the questionnaire included questions about the number of previous visits to 15 events held throughout the year in Osijek-Baranja County, as well as respondents' familiarity with each of these events. The research was conducted using online questionnaires distributed through various channels such as e-mails, social networks, instant messaging, and others. Respondents had to express their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The research was conducted through random selection of respondents, and the only condition was that they had heard of or visited one of the events in Osijek-Baranja County. A total of 150 valid questionnaires were collected during September 2024. The descriptive and inferential statistics were used in data analysis using a software package R Studios v. 4.3.

For the purpose of this work, the following methods were used: inductive and deductive methods, analy-

sis and synthesis, comparative method, and content analysis method. Secondary data collected from the e-Visitor system of the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board were used and analyzed for the period from 2016 to 2021.

4. Tourist profile of Osijek-Baranja County

Located in eastern Croatia, Osijek-Baranja County is a region rich in cultural heritage, natural beauty, and diverse tourism offerings. The area is known for its historical sites, wine routes, and unique gastronomy, making it an appealing destination for both domestic and foreign tourists. The region is home to numerous historical landmarks, such as the city of Osijek, which features a well-preserved fortress and vibrant Baroque architecture. Cultural events, such as the Osijek Summer Festival, highlight local traditions and attract visitors interested in experiencing the region's rich cultural tapestry (Klemenčić, 2021).

Osijek-Baranja County is part of the Slavonia wine region, known for its high-quality wines, particularly whites like Graševina. Wine tours and tastings are popular activities that allow tourists to engage with local winemakers and learn about traditional viticulture practices (Škvorc, 2019). The region's cuisine is characterized by hearty dishes that reflect its agricultural roots, featuring local ingredients such as fish from the Drava River and seasonal vegetables (Berglund & Mandeville, 2020).

The natural landscapes of Osijek-Baranja County provide opportunities for various outdoor activities, including hiking, birdwatching, and cycling. The Kopački Rit Nature Park, one of Europe's largest wetlands, is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and offers a unique ecosystem that attracts nature enthusiasts and eco-tourists (Petrović & Pavić, 2021).

Osijek-Baranja County abounds in a multitude of natural and cultural attractions. These are the most significant cultural and tourist potentials that contribute to the recognition, visibility and promotion of the county:

- Osijek and Tvrdá
- State Stud Farm Đakovo
- Bizovačke Toplice (Bizovac Spa)
- Kopački Rit Nature Park
- Pejačević Castle in Našice
- Cathedral of St. Peter in Đakovo, Đakovo Embroidery and Đakovo Horsemen's Procession. "UNESCO has included the 'Spring

Procession of Queens or Ljelje from Gorjani' on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." (Osijek-Baranja County, 2017, p. 20)

- Prandau-Mailath Castle in Donji Miholjac with a protected landscape
- Prandau-Normann Castle in Valpovo with a protected park and Valpovo Summer, one of the most famous tourist events in the town of Valpovo.

According to the Tourism Master Plan of Osijek-Baranja County, rural tourism in the county appears in two forms:

- Rural lifestyle - experiencing authentic village life

- Active rural tourism - using rural areas for various (contemporary) activities" (Osijek-Baranja County, 2017, p. 12).

The following section of the paper analyzes the e-Visitor system data for the period from 2016 to 2021 for Osijek-Baranja County.

4.1 e-Visitor data analysis

For the purposes of this paper, internal statistics from the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board were analyzed, mostly based on data reported through the e-Visitor system.

The situation in Osijek-Baranja County in terms of arrivals and overnight stays during the observed period from 2016 to 2021 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Arrivals and overnight stays of tourists in accommodation facilities in Osijek-Baranja County

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
ARRIVALS					
88,586	94,098	100,415	111,195	47,849	79,970
OVERNIGHT STAYS					
178,826	188,562	202,287	234,029	119,298	180,734

Source: Authors (based on the statistics provided by the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board)

Based on Table 1, it is evident that the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays increased each year, with a decrease occurring in the COVID-19 pandemic year. A noticeable recovery in the number of tourists occurred in 2021, with a significant

increase in the number of both arrivals and overnight stays. Table 2 shows the proportion of domestic and foreign tourists in the total number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Osijek-Baranja County.

Table 2 The ratio of domestic/foreign tourists in Osijek-Baranja County in terms of arrivals and overnight stays

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
ARRIVALS – Domestic tourists					
57,298 (64.7%)	59,052 (62.8%)	62,121 (61.9%)	69,923 (62.9%)	37,129 (77.6%)	57,759 (72.2%)
ARRIVALS – Foreign tourists					
31,288 (35.3%)	35,046 (37.2%)	38,294 (38.1%)	41,272 (37.1%)	10,720 (22.4%)	22,211 (27.8%)
OVERNIGHT STAYS – Domestic tourists					
110,292 (61.7%)	113,070 (60%)	118,600 (58.6%)	137,767 (58.9%)	78,586 (65.9%)	111,436 (61.7%)
OVERNIGHT STAYS – Foreign tourists					
68,534 (38.3%)	75,492 (40%)	83,687 (41.4%)	96,262 (41.1%)	40,712 (34.1%)	69,298 (38.3%)

Source: Authors' analysis (based on the statistics provided by the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board)

Table 2 clearly shows that the majority of tourists arriving and staying in Osijek-Baranja County are domestic. However, it is worth noting that in 2019, which the employees of the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board emphasize as an exceptionally successful year for tourism, the ratio between foreign and domestic tourists was the lowest ever recorded. This suggests that the concerted efforts to promote

rural tourism in Osijek-Baranja County, along with the awards given to tourism entities in the area, have extended beyond Croatia's borders, which is certainly a valuable guideline for further work and improvement in the tourism and hospitality sector.

The age distribution of guests in the years 2019, 2020, and 2021 is as follows:

Table 3 Structure of tourists by age groups from 2019 to 2021

Age	Overnight stays	Arrivals	Overnight stays	Arrivals	Overnight stays	Arrivals
	2019		2020		2021	
0-5	1,802	718	1,185	309	1,583	606
6-11	4,510	1,777	1,876	658	3,108	1,468
12-17	9,921	3,917	5,173	1,218	5,903	2,299
18-24	24,698	9,417	12,611	4,474	20,470	7,446
25-34	47,794	22,538	29,075	11,531	40,733	17,812
35-44	52,668	26,954	29,644	12,995	42,264	20,239
45-54	43,847	22,278	21,641	9,643	35,011	16,587
55-64	29,943	14,873	12,316	5,227	20,325	9,224
65 plus	18,846	8,723	5,777	1,794	11,337	4,289

Source: Authors' analysis (based on the statistics provided by the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board)

It can be seen in Table 3 that the travelers aged 35 to 44 generated the highest number of arrivals and overnight stays in all years analyzed.

5. Events in Osijek-Baranja County

An event as a tourism product can be extremely important for any destination because it can attract a large number of visitors and tourists who spend money in that specific destination, thereby generating revenue for tourism service providers and producers of tourism products. The event can be the primary motive for tourists to visit a destination or it can be an additional attraction within the destination. Moreover, an event can be a decisive factor in choosing a destination because it often serves to brand a specific location, so a tourist may become interested in the destination itself, even if the particular tourism event is not the main attraction for them.

Hernandez Mogollon et al. (2014) state that events have become an essential element in the tourism development of destinations, as they attract visi-

tors, encourage investment, improve the image of a place, and boost the local economy.

"The attractiveness of cultural, sports, entertainment, religious, scientific, and economic events is determined by the type and significance of the event, as well as the location and timing of their occurrence. Practice has shown that entertainment and sports events are the most visited ones" (Vrtiprah & Sentić, 2018, p. 271).

An increasing number of global and European tourist destinations are seeking to occupy a specific niche in the tourism market by positioning themselves through various marketing tools, often centered around attractive events. Vrtiprah (2006) emphasizes that the task of tourism organizations worldwide, including those in the Republic of Croatia, is to transform the culture of a destination into a tourism product. She points out that culture or heritage is not limited to heritage and historical traditions, but also represents a valuable resource that can be commercialized for the purpose of promoting a tourist destination. In this way, she links heritage with tourists' need for active vacation and experiences. Furthermore, she connects the experi-

ences with event tourism, arguing that it becomes the task of tourism organizations to integrate events and natural attractions of a destination to create a complementary tourism product. In other words, all these elements serve as a catalyst for the development of tourism in a destination.

There is no systematic platform at either national or local level through which event attendance in Croatia could be tracked and statistically recorded. Few event organizers keep records of attendance, especially for non-ticketed events. Events with tick-

et sales can provide data based on the number of tickets sold and the actual number of actual attendees. Other attendance data may be obtained from interviews with organizers or from their statements in the media, but these are usually subjective estimates. Another source of data on event attendance is the number of overnight stays recorded on the days and at the locations of specific events.

Table 4 below shows the most significant events, along with attendance figures for some of them, for which visitor numbers were available.

Table 4 *The most popular events in Osijek-Baranja County according to event attendance*

EVENT	DATE/PERIOD OF EVENT	EVENT ATTENDANCE
ĐAKOVAČKI VEZOVI	June	over 150,000
VINKOVCI AUTUMN FESTIVAL	September	over 150,000
THE DAYS OF THE FIRST CROATIAN BEER	September	over 50,000/a couple of days
PANNONIAN CHALLENGE	May and June	over 20,000
PANNONIAN BOOK FESTIVAL	May	over 17,000
HEADONEAST	October	over 12,000
DANUBE ART FESTIVAL	June	over 10,000
WINE AND ART EVENING – WINE FAIR	June and July	over 4,000
WINE OS	January	over 4,000
UFO-URBAN FEST OSIJEK	August	No data available
DOBRO WORLD CUP–GYMNASTICS WORLD CUP	May	No data available
SUMMER OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN OSIJEK	June	No data available
FERIVI HALF MARATHON	April	No data available
CRAFT BEER FESTIVAL	May	No data available
OSIJEK SUMMER OF CULTURE	June, July	No data available

Source: Made by authors based on different sources

As shown in Table 4, events in Osijek-Baranja County take place throughout the year, with the majority occurring during the summer. The most attended events are also the most popular ones, including Đakovački vezovi, the Vinkovci Autumn Festival, the Days of First Croatian Beer, Pannonian Challenge, the Pannonian Book Festival, HeadOnEast, and the Danube Art Festival. Additionally, for many of the selected events, we were unable to find data due to the lack of a unified platform or system that tracks such information. All the events analyzed, for which attendance data were available, are exceptionally well-attended and popular among visitors.

Getz (2005) emphasizes the equal importance of both the visibility of an event and the visibility of a

destination, noting that both are equally important for making a region attractive and thereby increasing the number of tourist visits and overnight stays. The websites of Osijek-Baranja County tourist boards provide information about almost all events taking place in these communities. However, these events are generally not categorized, only a few websites provide detailed information, and very rarely do they include links to the events' websites or social media pages. For example, the Baranja Tourist Board website displays only current events, typically posted no earlier than a month before the event, which often prevents tourists from planning their visits in a timely manner.

6. Results and discussion

The research was conducted online (via private e-mails and social networks) in September 2024 on a random sample of 150 respondents. The goal of the research was to get an insight into how many people had heard about events in Osijek-Baranja County, how many of them had attended these events, and ultimately, to what extent these events motivated

them to visit the county. Although the sample size is relatively small, the results of this research can serve as preliminary research for some future, more extensive studies. All data were processed using the statistical software R Studio.

Table 5 shows the gender distribution and number of respondents in the conducted research.

Table 5 Age of participants by gender

GENDER	N	%	M	SD	Min	Max
FEMALE	80	53.3%	39.5	9.7	23	72
MALE	70	46.7%	43.7	13.0	22	72
Total	150	100.0%	41.4	11.4	22	72

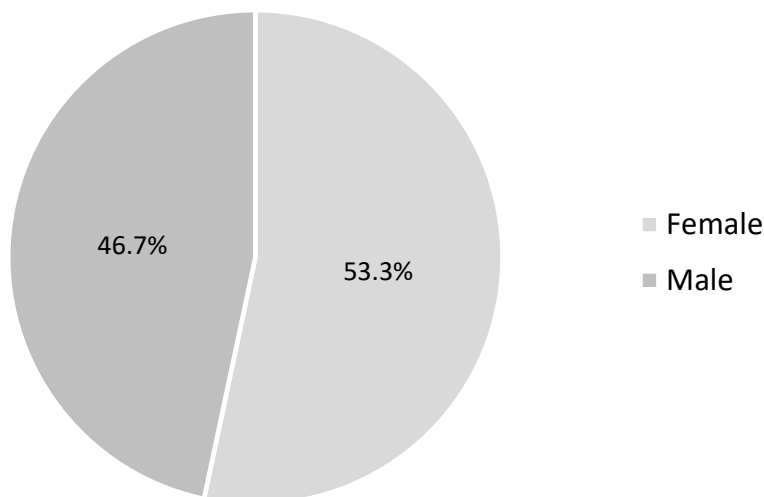
M – mean; SD – standard deviation; Min – minimum value; Max – maximum value.

Source: Authors

In Table 5, it can be seen that there were a total of 150 respondents, of whom 80 were female (53.3%) and 70 were male (46.7%). The age of female re-

spondents ranged from 23 to 72 years, while the age of male respondents ranged from 22 to 72 years.

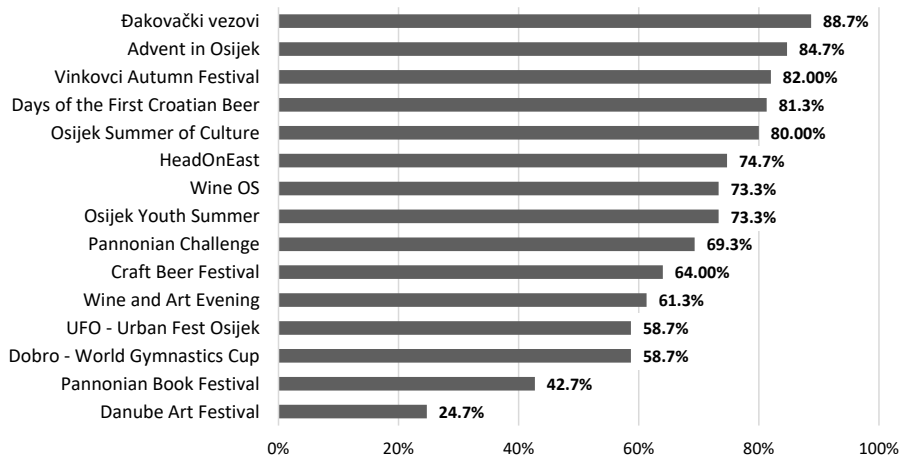
Graph 1 Respondents by gender



Source: Authors

Graph 2 shows the respondents' level of familiarity with events taking place in Osijek-Baranja County.

Graph 2 Familiarity with events in Osijek-Baranja County



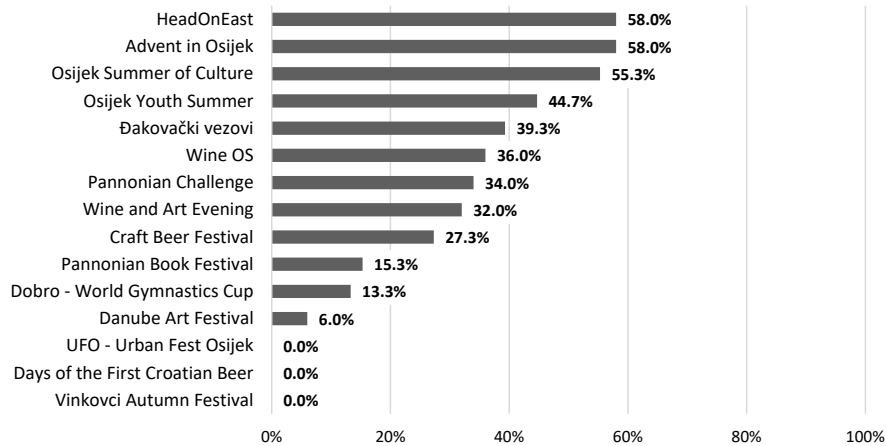
Source: Authors

Most of the participants heard about Đakovački vezovi (88.7%), Advent in Osijek (84.7%) Vinkovci Autumn Festival (82.2%), the Days of the First Croatian Beer (81.3%), the Osijek Summer of Culture (80.0%), and HeadOnEast (74.7%), while the fewest

respondents heard about the Danube Art Festival (24.7%).

Graph 3 below shows the events most frequently attended by respondents.

Graph 3 Event attendance in Osijek-Baranja County



Source: Authors

HeadOnEast, Advent in Osijek (58%), and the Osijek Summer of Culture (55.3%) are the events most frequently attended by the respondents. On the other hand, Urban Fest Osijek, the Days of the First Croatian Beer, and the Vinkovci Autumn Festival

were not attended by any of the participants in this study.

Table 6 below presents a summary of events that respondents were familiar with and had attended.

Table 6 Number of known and attended events (total number of events = 15) among 150 respondents

EVENTS	n	M	SD	Min	Max	Median
Known events	15	10.5	3.8	1	15	11
Attended events	15	5.6	3.6	0	15	5

N – the total number of events that respondents could choose from.

Source: Authors

As shown in Table 6, respondents were familiar with an average of 10.5 events and attended an average of 5.6 events.

The following sections analyze the research hypotheses.

H1: The majority of respondents believe that events are significant catalysts for attracting tourists and developing tourism.

Table 7 shows the distribution of participants' responses as to events that can be a significant catalyst for attracting tourists. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicate strong agreement with the statement.

Table 7 The distribution of participants' responses to the statement: "Events can be a significant catalyst for attracting tourists to a destination" (N = 150)

Answers	f	%
1 – I completely disagree	0	0.0%
2 – I disagree	2	1.3%
3 – I neither agree nor disagree	6	4.0%
4 – I agree	27	18.0%
5 – I completely agree	115	76.7%
Total	150	100.00%

Source: Authors

As shown in Table 7, the majority of participants (76.7%) agree with the statement that events can be a significant catalyst for attracting tourists to a des-

tinuation. Only 1.3% of respondents disagree with this statement, while 4% remain neutral.

Table 8 The distribution of responses to the question: "Do you think that events are a good catalyst for the development of tourism in Osijek-Baranja?"

Answers	f	%
Yes	146	97.33%
No	2	1.33%
I don't know	2	1.33%
TOTAL	150	100.00%

Source: Authors

A total of 97.3% respondents believe that events are a significant catalyst for the development of tourism in Osijek-Baranja County.

Table 9 *The distribution of responses to the question: “Do events motivate you to visit Osijek-Baranja County?”*

Answers	f	%
Yes	128	85.33%
No	11	7.33%
I don't know	11	7.33%
TOTAL	150	100.00%

Source: Authors

A total of 85.33% respondents believe that events motivate them to visit Osijek-Baranja County.

Tables 7, 8, and 9 show that the majority of respondents agree that events can be a significant catalyst for them to visit a destination. Therefore, **hypothesis H1 is accepted.**

H2: There is a relationship between the age of tourists and event attendance.

We tested the relationship between age and the number of events attended using Spearman's correlation coefficient. The results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10 *Relationship between the age of respondents and the number of events attended tested using Spearman's correlation coefficient*

Parameter	Values
N	150
Spearman's correlation coefficient	0.07
Degrees of freedom (df)	148
p-value	0.42

Source: Authors

Table 10 shows that there is no correlation between age and event attendance ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.42$). Based on these results, **hypothesis H2 is rejected.**

We tested the difference in the number of attended events with the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test. The results are presented in Table 11.

H3: Women attend more events within the Osijek-Baranja County

Table 11 *Difference in event attendance between male and female participants tested by the Mann-Whitney U test*

Parameter	Values
N	150
Mann-Whitney U test	3549.5
p-value	< 0.01

Source: Authors

Table 11 shows that there is a significant difference in the number of events attended between women and men in this sample ($U = 3549.5$, $p\text{-value} < 0.01$). Contrary to expectations, male respondents attended significantly more events than female re-

spondents ($\text{Median}_{\text{Male}} = 7$, $\text{Median}_{\text{Female}} = 4$). Based on these results, **hypothesis H3 is rejected.**

7. Conclusions

The rural tourism offer in Osijek-Baranja County is rich, diverse and attractive, greatly supported by various events held throughout the year. The region attracts a large number of visitors, testifying to the quality of its tourism offering. Osijek-Baranja County, with its rich cultural and tourist offerings, provides a wide array of interesting events throughout the year, which significantly contributes to the promotion and visibility of this region. Ultimately, this is reflected in the growth of tourist arrivals and overnight stays. This paper analyzes data from 2016 to 2021, collected through the e-Visitor system and provided by the regional Osijek-Baranja Tourist Board. The analysis shows that the number of tourists has increased year by year, with a noticeable drop only in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily halted many activities.

For the purposes of this paper, primary research was also conducted among randomly selected respondents in Osijek-Baranja County to gain insight into their familiarity with events in the county, whether they had attended any of these events, and ultimately, to what extent they view events as a motivator or catalyst for visiting Osijek-Baranja County.

The research results showed that the majority of respondents consider events to be a significant incentive, motivator, and, therefore, a catalyst for visiting Osijek-Baranja County. Respondents were presented with a list of 15 events held throughout the year in Osijek-Baranja County and were asked to indicate how many of these events they had heard of them and how many they had attended. The results indicated that the most well-known events, according to the respondents, were Đakovački vezovi (88.7%), Advent in Osijek (84.7%), the Vinkovci Autumn Festival (82.2%), the Days of the First Croatian Beer (81.3%), the Osijek Summer of Culture (80.0%), and HeadOnEast (74.7%). On the other hand, only 24.7% of respondents were familiar with the Danube Art Festival (24.7%).

HeadOnEast, Advent in Osijek (58%), and the Osijek Summer of Culture (55.3%) were the most attended events among respondents. Urban Fest Osijek, the Days of the First Croatian Beer, and Vinkovci Autumn Festival were not attended by any participants in this study.

The results of our primary research confirm that events can indeed be a significant motivator and catalyst for visiting Osijek-Baranja County. However, efforts should be made to improve their visibility and popularity. For some of the events analyzed, we were unable to obtain specific information, such as attendance data.

We recommend the creation of a unified platform dedicated to events, which would enable event news and participant registration, offering clearer insights into individual event attendance. If this platform proves successful and useful, it could be expanded to other counties in Croatia and beyond.

Although our research included only 150 respondents, this study can serve as a pilot for more detailed and larger-scale research with a broader sample of respondents, focusing on events as important catalysts for tourism development. Future studies could include additional variables such as age, gender, number of children, income, and similar factors, allowing for correlations and comparisons with event attendance.

During the research, certain limitations were observed. The primary limitations included the lack of statistical data and general information about tourism in rural areas of Croatia, specifically in Osijek-Baranja County, as well as the absence of a theoretical distinction between rural and countryside tourism (by the Ministry of Tourism). Another limitation was the lack of valid information on the number of visitors for most events analyzed in this paper. To address this, it is necessary to develop a model for collecting data on the number of visitors, allowing for effective monitoring and providing a foundation for future event development.

Additionally, there is a need to develop a new strategy focusing on rural tourism, especially emphasizing the continental parts of Croatia, as rural tourism in the continental region differs significantly from that in coastal regions. Furthermore, it would be ideal to create a unified platform at the Osijek-Baranja County level where all rural tourism stakeholders could collaborate, network, and offer a unique tourism product. If it were established and successful, the platform could be expanded to encompass all rural regions of Croatia and beyond.

In conclusion, our research study shows that events hold significant potential and serve as powerful motivators and catalysts for attracting tourists to Osijek-Baranja County.

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