

Perceptions of “Srem Folk Fest” Participants According to Cultural Tourism Preferences

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Abstract

“Srem Folk Fest” has become one of the most popular and significant international folklore festivals in this part of the Balkans since 2004. For the past 16 years, a town Sremska Mitrovica was a host city for European, Asian, South American and African youth. Besides its historical importance, this town on the Sava river could also be considered as the promoter of culture, tradition and folklore of its guests. Each year, the artistic stylization of folklore stage is accompanied by about 20000 visitors during the four festival nights. In 2015, “Srem Folk Fest” was added to the calendar of events of the International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts (CIOFF). The Festival is also recognized by the Serbian National Commission for UNESCO as the keeper of the intangible cultural heritage. One of the main tasks of the paper is related to the need of considering potential and participants’ intentions to repeat their visit, as well as of improving the offer and promotion of the town and its surroundings. The aim of the paper is to analyze the data obtained in the context of the behavior and preferences of participants/respondents, to determine the specificity of their role and thus to make a recommendation for creating even better offer. Considering the respondents from 10 countries, the result is especially significant in the form of improving the image of Serbia, as well as their preferences for getting to know rural areas and cultural features. The study contains the survey research, while gained results might provide a good basis for further organization in accordance with their expectations. In addition, the results could also find practical implication in terms of providing basic information necessary to expand this event within the surrounding area of Sremska Mitrovica.

Key words: event tourism, cultural tourism, participants’ perceptions, preferences, “Srem Folk Fest”

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Introduction

Worldwide tourism phenomenon, as Getz (1991) defines festivals (Elgammal, 2012), or special events, are important cultural resources of an area that might provide successful hosting of visitors. These events are usually organized to create a positive image of a place and bring in money to the local community (Usyal et al., 1993).

Festivals Organizers' Association from Europe points that "cultural tourism has grown due to development of the folklore festivals". Over 90% of participants of specific folklore festival are tourists (while the rest are the members of the local community); also about 9% of participants are new each year (Iordachce, Popa, 2008).

The beginning of each Festival evening is reserved for a parade of festival participants and visitors through the town streets. As Hall (1992) quotes "in such a climate it represents a means of improving the image of city, adding life to the city streets and giving the citizens renewed pride in their home city" (Richards, Wilso, 2004). In such leisure activities, visitors became more comfortable and they are likely to seek more meaningful travel experiences, involving the deeper and more extended interaction with host communities which events offer (Bjeljac, Ćurčić, 2005). This interaction over the period of the festival's organization identifies possibilities for development of the community's resources and generally encourages a stronger interaction between existing community organizations (Arcodia, Whitford, 2008).

The survey implies the question if the offer could expand and take on more importance, including the rural households, farms, women's associations, small producers and thereby contribute to development of small businesses including them in additional activities. This further paves the way for new research among the local population as potential participants in the offer spreading.

The importance of conservation is perhaps the best described by the proverb "better to disappear a village than a custom". Since its foundation, "Srem Folk Fest" International Folklore Festival has been successfully responding to the challenge of preserving the cultural heritage, while the walls of ancient Sirmium, gathering 20000 visitors, have made Sremska Mitrovica the center of multiculturalism.

Individual's attitudes are guided by the cultural values of their society. Cultural values are the forces that might shape the attitudes, affect preferences and guide actions toward the acceptance or rejection of certain products or services (Pavluković et al., 2017). Without knowledge of the consumers' behavior, it is almost impossible to plan the marketing activities of the festival successfully (Milisavljević et al., 2005). Therefore, participants' attitudes are important because it is necessary to change the offer and promotion of the festival in accordance with their needs. Participants' motives for visiting the festival are direct, already determined by organization, but their needs and wishes for tourist offer could be considered as a potential factor of further development of the festival.

Destination image of "Srem Folk Fest"

"Srem Folk Fest" is an international folklore festival which is organized every year from 11th till 14th August by the City of Sremska Mitrovica, as the main sponsor of this event. The founder and organizer of the festival is the Center for Culture "SirmiumArt". The aim of the festival is to nurture and promote folk songs, dances, music and costumes from different parts of the world (www.sremfolkfest.org.rs).

Similar to Zagreb International Folklore Festival (Niemčić, Zebec, 2018), "Srem Folk Fest" has never been a competitive event. That sets it apart from the other festivals. Its purpose is to present a rich cultural program to a wide audience.

Supported by The Ministry of Culture, the project "Light of the Imperial City" completed in 2018, gave the town a unique "open stage". Reconstructed Grain Square is now a part of the cultural life, not only for this festival, but also for the everyday life of the town and its rich cultural heritage (Material given by the organizers), not forgetting that the town bears the stamp of the architectural heritage of different epochs, but still known as the residence of many Roman emperors - the Sirmium (Jeremić, 2016).

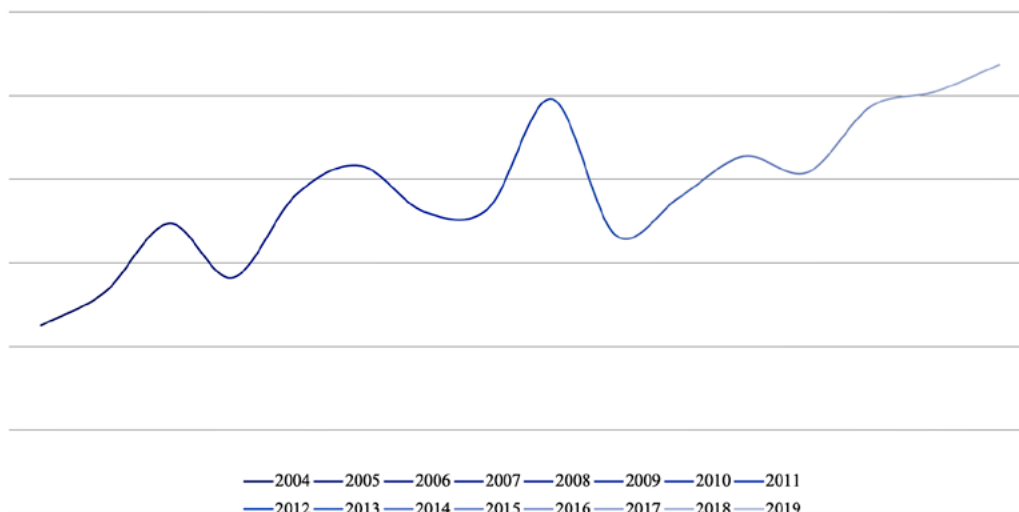


Figure 1. Number of participants of "Srem Folk Fest" in the period 2004-2019

Source: Srem Folk Fest (2019)

With Festival's rising, the number of participants increased 2.5 times (Figure 1). Participants' growth trend was occasionally disturbed by the number of participating countries and ensembles which ranged from 10 to 20, including both domestic and foreign guests. It is important to note that the highest number of participants per group is 30. The largest number of participants and performing groups is recorded in 2019, with 20 ensembles from 16 countries and about 550 participants.

Development and further progress of "Srem Folk Fest"

Intercultural interactions within specific destination, as an integral part of contemporary tourism, raised the question of understanding the different cultures. From the same perspective, Hart and Montage (2016) emphasized the importance of "cultural competence", defined as "understanding and respecting people of different cultures, interacting and effectively communicating, as well as establishing the positive and constructive relationships with them" (Pavković, 2018). Therefore, events such as "Srem Folk Fest" could contribute to better understanding between people with various cultural backgrounds, bearing in mind that besides the host of the festival – a folk ensemble "Branko Radičević" visitors can also enjoy performances of

local ensembles such as Croatian Cultural Center "Srijem", Hungarian Cultural Society "Srem" and Ukrainian Society "Kolomejka", all from Sremska Mitrovica.

All four festival nights have started with ceremonial parade of participating groups through the central streets, while the locals have joined the performance, showing hospitality. Festival concerts are organized every night at the famous site of ancient Roman excavations, with significant visual changes in ambience and scenery. The official opening ceremony begins with the introduction of all participants with the sounds of Strauss's Radetzky March, followed by spectacular fireworks and magnificent Wagner's Zarathustra (Material given by the organizers).

It is not common for professional ensembles to participate in amateur folk art festivals, but for the jubilee 10th "Srem Folk Fest", as the star of the evening, the Bulgarian national ensemble "Trakija" from Plovdiv performed. The members of the ensemble are musicians and dancers who graduated from prestigious music academies and this is their lifelong commitment (Samardžić, 2013). The 11th "Srem Folk Fest" (2014) had a humanitarian character, as the organizer wanted to donate folk costumes to a guest ensemble from Bijeljina (Bosnia and Herzegovina), whose costumes were damaged in the floods that hit the region. For the first time, Russia had its representative in 2015 with the ensemble of folk songs "Russian Beauty" of Moscow State Pedagogical University (Srem Folk Fest, 2019).

The arrival of the Ambassador of Mexico in Serbia, the first secretary of the Embassy of Ukraine in Serbia and president of the CIOFF National section of Bulgaria, as well as representatives of the National Costume Conservation Foundation from the Netherlands, confirmed the justification of a great organization, as good as preservation of the intangible cultural heritage (Srem Folk Fest, 2019).

Examples of already existing European festivals could represent a good basis and guide for the promotion of festival events and programs, both for the audience and the participants.

The Dragačevo Trumpet Festival in Guča, Serbia - the famous festival in Serbia plays a great role in the the preservation of the tradition and the intangible cultural heritage of Serbia and the local area. It is unique competition of folk brass bands in the world and one of the most important events of the overall national creativity and cultural amateurism in Serbia (Stamenković et al., 2013).

The International Folklore Festival Op Roakeldais in Warffum, the Netherlands - Its speciality is reflected in the great involvement of the local community in its organization - for example, all festival guests stay in private homes in over 20 villages around Warffum, hosts take care of their food and leisure activities. Also, many other professionals of different profiles appear as volunteers in the organization of the festival. The social component of the festival is also important, as the organizer places the performance of the games in institutions that accommodate the less mobile population (Nikolić, 2011).

Billingham International Folklore festival, United Kingdom - this festival includes volunteer professionals in its work. Its peculiarity is the additional development of the contents of the programs in which the audience, primarily children and young people, participates and thus the organizer ensures an increase in the number of visitors (Nikolić, 2011).

There are different potential elements and events that could complement the festival content, which indicates the fact that might be good to: prolong the duration of the festival, as well as the duration of the festival activities throughout the day or to provide the expansion throughout the seasonal activities, similar to Yeoman's opinion (2004) that festivals can lengthen tourist seasons, extend peak season or introduce a "new season" into a community (Raj, Vignali, 2010). It is also important to provide diversity of festival program models as well as the involvement of the audience in the festival activities (through education, entertainment,

handmade workshops) and intensive presentation of traditional lifestyle (education lecture), in order to provide preserving traditional values of the intangible cultural heritage. In respect to that, this research is oriented towards identification of different aspects that could complement the current content of "Srem Folk Fest".

"Srem Folk Fest" as the part of international organizations

An international folklore festival is one of the means to safeguard, to promote and to diffuse the intangible cultural heritage, mainly through such genres of expressions as music, dance, rituals, customs, handicraft and the other arts. In order to have a significant contribution to the maintenance and enhancement of cultural identity and diversity, a folklore festival has to be implemented in an appropriate cultural context (www.cioff.org; Cultural Context of a CIOFF Festival).

During 2015, the efforts and involvement of the organizers were deservedly raised to a higher level, which resulted in a fact that "Srem Folk Fest" became a member of CIOFF Serbia. CIOFF is the International Council of Organizers of the Festival of Folklore and Traditional Culture (Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d'Arts Traditionnels), founded in 1970 in Confolens, France. The aim of the organization is to promote folk festivals around the world, to improve the program of the festivals, and therefore the festival groups, to harmonize the conditions that the festivals should provide to participating groups (food, lodging, pocket money, health and life insurance for participants) (www.cioff-serbia.org). At the end of the festival, each participant evaluates the festival (accommodation, food, organization, activities, guides).

Festival's ability to attract performers and promote repeated visits is linked to satisfaction and loyalty; contents provided during the festivals and even complaints may positively affect performers' loyalty via satisfaction. Loyalty of performers and visitors is a sign of the success of festivals that contribute not only to festivals themselves but also to local communities by generating economic benefits and promoting community cohesiveness and social pride (Elgammal, 2012).

The Organization enjoys the support of UNESCO particularly in the field of the protection of the intangible cultural heritage enshrined in the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. At the 2015 CIOFF Annual Meeting held in Peru, Serbia returned a full member status in the international CIOFF organization (www.cioff.org).

Table 1. Festivals belonging to the CIOFF Serbia

Festival name	The venue	Founded year
„Interetno“ fest	Subotica	2002
International folklore fest "Srem Folk Fest"	Sremska Mitrovica	2004
International fest of the folklore	Pirot	2005
"Razigrana Mladost"	Nova Pazova	2006
International folklore fest "Vršачki venac"	Vršac	2006
International folklore fest of students	Niš	2008
International fest for children "Licidersko srce"	Užice	2009
"ETNOFEST" Čačak	Čačak	2016
"Bečej folk fest"	Bečej	2017

Source: www.cioff-serbia.org

All 9 international festivals belonging the CIOFF Serbia (Table 1), received the patronage of the National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO in the period 2019-2021. This is a huge success for “Srem Folk Fest“, as a recognized event of great importance, which aims to preserve the intangible cultural heritage (www.cioff.org).

The figures of the annual report have shown the importance of the tourist movements of the festival participants. The Annual Report of National Sections 2014 was prepared based on the reports received from 59 National Sections. In 256 international and 78 national folklore festivals, 1762 foreign and 4423 national folklore groups with 136961 participants took part. Festival presentations were observed by 10304047 spectators; there were 1027 TV and 3586 radio transmissions from these events (The Annual report).

Methodology

In order to achieve the aim of this study, the survey research has provided data on 96 festival participants'/dancers' attitudes. Respondents were asked to express their viewpoints as participants/tourists, but also to provide their recommendations for further development according to their general preferences. The survey research was conducted during August 2019 in Sremska Mitrovica, during the festival. It was conducted by using the questionnaire of 12 closed questions, on the basis of the standard pen and paper procedure. The first part of the questionnaire was related to basic information about the respondents, the second part was related to the participants' attitudes regarding the festival and their overall experiences, while the third group of questions was focused on ideas about potentials for further development and expansion to surrounding areas. Considering the fact that the respondents were from different speaking areas, the survey was translated into the English, French and Spanish language, while some participants also completed the survey in the Serbian language. Data analysis was processed in statistical package for social sciences (software) SPSS 20. Data have been collected in cooperation with festival organizers.

Results and discussion

Out of the total number of respondents, majority of the questionnaires were filled out by the female population, which makes up 62.5% of the total sample, while the rest of the sample were males (37.5%). Furthermore, majority of the respondents consisted of generations up to the age of 20 with 60.4%, while respondents between the age of 21 and 40 years represent 36.5% of the total sample. During the 16th festival, 20 ensembles from 16 countries took part, which resulted in a fact that the survey research obtained 96 participants from 10 countries. Majority of the respondents were the French (16.7%), the Mexicans (14.6%), the Bulgarians (13.5%), the Turks (11.5%) and the Poles (10.4%). Such a sample is not surprising because the questionnaire was translated into French and Spanish, while most respondents completed the questionnaire in the English language.

Considering duration of the festival, as well as its promotion by the local town ensemble worldwide at similar international events, it is not surprising that 80.2% of the respondents have already heard for the festival.

According to the previous findings, events may also encourage people to visit a place more than once and, by hosting a series of different events, a town may profile itself in a number of

different potential markets (Hall, 1992; Richards, Wilso, 2004). This is supported by the fact that 20.8% of the respondents have already participated in the festival in the previous years, which only confirms the good organization and pleasant memories that the participants wanted to repeat. Besides that, each year, festival organizers put effort in hosting groups that have not previously participated in the festival.

As already mentioned, participants of the 16th "Srem Folk Fest" came from different parts of the world. However, even 61.5% of the participants did not know anything about the history of Sremska Mitrovica. This result was confirmed by the answers of over 60% of the respondents, who indicated that they do not know that Sremska Mitrovica, formerly Sirmium, was one of the four capitals of the Roman Empire. No matter the fact, 57% of the respondents indicated that it is important for them to know something about the history and the heritage that they could see while visiting some place. This is a good reason for the organizers and local authorities to fill the town streets and squares with as many boards as possible to inform visitors interested in learning something new.

Additional contents of this event gave visitors a chance of tasting the local gastronomic specialties, sweets, buying souvenirs, various gifts and forms of entertainment for all ages; it justifies 52.1% of the respondents who agree that they like this kind of facilities.

This research started from the assumption that participants who are already engaged in preserving the cultural and traditional values, will sympathize with traditional similarities at destination. Half of them share the opinion that visiting the rural areas could contribute to a better understanding of surroundings and 72% of the respondents agree, partly and completely, that they would like to visit surrounding area as well. This is related to (Blešić et al., 2014) the statement that less favored rural areas in Serbia rely on traditional economic activities as the main source of income and jobs. Having unique cultural values which are not recognized as a development factor they should improve the management of cultural values, connecting them with festival organization, in order to contribute to economic and social development of less attractive areas.

Not only that festivals attract the visitors to the venue, but they could also contribute "the creation of a positive image of a destination and they could enhance the tourists' experience and shape the length of their staying" (Besermenji et al., 2010). According to that, when participants were asked if participation in the festival and visiting the city improved their perception of Serbia, 67.7% of them positively and highly rated this attitude, which is one of the main goals of tourism practitioners. Participation in the festival, organization, quality of the program, expertise and dedication to the performers, top-notch equipment, were all highly rated by the participants and they agree that this is the real professional experience for them. Respecting the claims of Zakić et al. (2009), it might affect the future visits of festivals in Serbia (in the narrow and broad sense) by foreign tourists, as well as spreading the positive word of mouth, as an effective marketing tool for creating the favorable image of this destination.

Appropriate communication is a precondition for its success. Understanding and appreciating cross-cultural differences in communication is essential (Pavković, 2018). The aforementioned fact should be considered as very important because results of this research also showed that "easy communication", even with a large range of answers, as evidenced by the standard deviation of 1.312 is not a problem for visitors even though they do not speak the Serbian language.

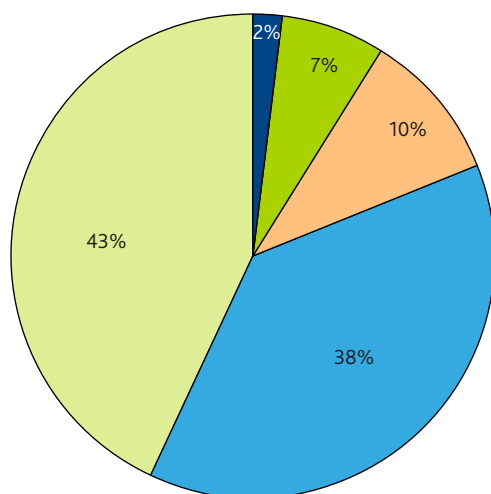
Table 2. Descriptive statistical analysis for questions concerning individual attitude of participants

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
Visiting this town and the festival is a real experience for me	96	1	5	4,23	1.071
Visiting this town raised my interest for finding the additional information about the sites and things I saw	96	1	5	3,74	1.240
I will definitely recommend visiting this town to the others	96	1	5	3,96	1.151
I was able to communicate easily with the locals even though I do not speak the Serbian language	96	1	5	3,44	1.321

Source: Authors, SPSS

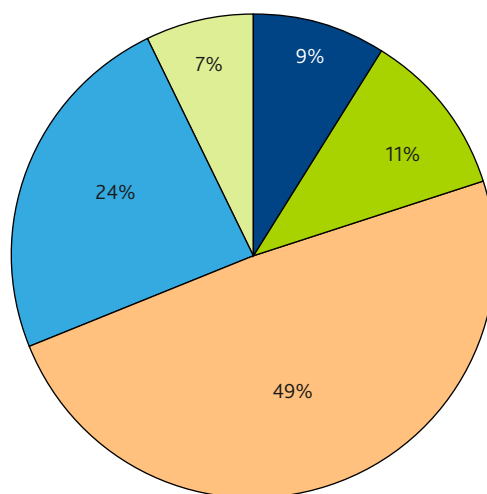
Recommendation (Agapito et al., 2011) from relatives and friends constituted the most credible informative agent in the process of choosing a holiday destination and as a result, special attention should be paid to this particular variable. Therefore, it is not surprising that research results showed that 66.7% of the respondents share the opinion that they will recommend the others to visit this destination, and for 76.1% of the respondents visiting the festival and the town represents real experience, and therefore they rate this answer with 4.23.

According to the previous findings, Pearce added that preferences are more specific than motivations and are revealed by where the tourists go and what the tourists do (Pearce, 1988). This statement should be understood as a fact that the festival participants are not classical tourists, since the whole arrangement with the visits is subordinated to the festival organizers. Considering that, it is necessary to explore their preferences that actually make their stay more enjoyable and later more desirable to others in the form of recommendations.



- tour of the rural area in surroundings
- attending events (wedding, field work, ...)
- souvenir shopping
- gastronomic offer (tasting food, drinks, ...)
- culture, customs, everydaylife of the locals

Figure 2. Visiting the rural property



- visiting the areas of exceptional natural features
- visiting the monasteries
- visiting the forest, rivers, lakes, spa
- visiting the preserved local traditional sites and landscapes
- traditional hospitality of the Serbian people

Figure 3. Most attractive rural tourism facilities

Visiting rural properties (Figure 2) as a potential offer shows great interest in responding to the customs and culture of the locals' everyday lifestyle (43%). With a less share, respondents are also interested in the gastronomic offer in the form of tasting the local food and drinks (38%). The area of Sremska Mitrovica owns a part of the National park "Fruška gora", it is precisely the area where some of the oldest vineyards in Serbia have originated, when the Aurelius Probus once brought the vine (Material given by the organizers).

According to the research results (Figure 3), participants are the most interested in visiting nature facilities (49%). The proximity of the National park, the oldest in Serbia, which abounds in a rich offer of natural beauties and rarities, also supports preferences of respondents. Visiting the preserved local traditional sites and rural landscapes showed 24% of interest. It is in a correlation with the previous question (Figure 2) about culture and everyday life of local population. With the total of 17 monasteries on Fruška gora, only in this local area, there are four monasteries for which respondents also expressed interest in the survey.

The festival organizers use the historical and cultural themes to develop annual events to attract visitors and create a cultural image in community settings. This is a good chance for prosperity of local and rural area since the hosting of events is often developed because of tourism and economic opportunities additional to social and cultural benefits (Raj, Vignali, 2010).

Conclusion

A continued success of the Festival has made its loyal audience for the past 16 years. Considering the status of the Festival, that process also has an influence on the cultural policies of the international organizations and the City of Sremska Mitrovica, making its role even more challenging.

According to the research, it could be concluded that it is necessary for visitors to provide adequate information about the history of the town, especially related to significance of the Sirmium in the world history. Additional festival content should be planned and monitored in accordance with the sympathy for culture and tradition. This would justify the research results, due to the fact that respondents are interested in culture, customs and daily life of the local people within the rural properties surrounding Sremska Mitrovica. Additional activities should also be planned in the way that would support their interest in gastronomic offer of local food and drink. In this way, local government and rural households would be empowered, directing their one-way agricultural production to additional activities and creating the extra profit. Respondents' preference for visiting the rivers, lakes, spas and forests should not be neglected, regarded to mostly young respondents up to the age of 20, which could be linked to water-based recreation and tourism or some unique offer that they will recommend to other visitors. The organization of the festival justified its high criteria and the respondents rated their participation as significant personal experience. In addition to a good evaluation of the festival, which is certainly one of the most important indicators of success, it is also important to note that respondents mainly positively improved their image of Serbia, which is an important aspect of the festival image itself, even after their participation.

Limited access to the research could be related to the fact that only festival participants were interviewed. This lack could also be considered as a proposal for further research of the wider audience and potential visitors of the festival, which could provide new ideas and suggestions for improvement of the festival offer, regarding their attitudes and suggestions. It should not be ignored that locals could be considered as a potential part of the team, while on the

other hand, most of the locals are festival visitors. However, in respect to all mentioned findings, this research could be useful for the organizers, in order to provide improvement of the offer, according to the participants' needs.

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