

RURAL DESTINATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EVENTS AND MARKETING

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how elements of rural destinations holding touristic events contribute to the formation of destination identity. Through the analysis of respondents' attitudes, the problem of the sustainability of rural destinations and marketing activities aimed at promoting rural events is analyzed. A quantitative content analysis was conducted to examine the theoretical framework, while primary data were gathered through a survey and analyzed using statistical methods. Field research was conducted in October and November 2024, among 210 visitors from Serbia who participated in at least one such event. The findings suggest that rural events, along with other destination elements, significantly contribute to shaping the identity of the host location. The promotion of rural events requires a holistic approach, with particular emphasis on digital marketing, especially leveraging social media and other platforms that enable the sharing of visitor experiences. The results can serve as a foundation for improving marketing activities targeting rural events and enhancing their visibility and appeal.

Keywords: tourist destination, rural events, sustainability, branding, marketing

RURALNE DESTINACIJE I ODRŽIVOST: ISTRAŽIVANJE ULOGE MANIFESTACIJA I MARKETINGA

Apstrakt

Cilj ovog rada je ispitivanje uticaja elemenata ruralnih destinacija, posebno onih u kojima se održavaju turističke manifestacije, na formiranje identiteta destinacije. Kroz analizu stavova ispitnika, u radu se ispituje i problem održivosti ruralnih destinacija, kao i efekti marketing aktivnosti usmerenih na promociju ruralnih manifestacija. Teorijski okvir analiziran je metodom kvantitativne analize sadržaja, dok su primarni podaci prikupljeni tehnikom anketiranja i analizirani statističkim metodama. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da ruralne manifestacije, zajedno sa ostalim elementima destinacije, značajno doprinose oblikovanju njenog identiteta. Promocija ruralnih manifestacija zahteva holistički pristup, sa posebnim naglaskom na digitalni marketing, uz korišćenje društvenih medija i drugih platformi koje



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omogućavaju razmenu iskustava posetilaca. Dobijeni rezultati mogu poslužiti kao osnova za unapređenje marketing aktivnosti usmerenih na ruralne manifestacije i povećanje njihove vidljivosti i privlačnosti.

Ključne reči: turistička destinacija, ruralne manifestacije, održivost, brendiranje, marketing

INTRODUCTION

Any form of tourism that takes place in a rural area, or in a region characterized by rural elements such as low population density, agricultural land use, and the presence of tradition and cultural heritage, can be classified as rural tourism. Rural tourism encompasses several key components, including the rural destination – characterized by landscapes, natural features, regional cuisine, and traditional crafts; accommodation, and a variety of tourist-oriented activities, such as rural events (Rodrigues et al., 2003). In recent decades, rural tourism has increasingly emerged as a distinct sector within the tourism industry, with organized events and festivals playing a particularly important role in promoting the unique identity of rural communities.

Modern tourism cannot be imagined without marketing activities. At the core of destination marketing lies the promotion of a specific location and its distinctive advantages. Many rural areas suffer from a weak tourist image, often as a result of inadequate application of marketing principles in creating a competitive tourist product (Mihailović & Morig, 2012). Festivals and tourist events can significantly enhance the image of a city or village and, from a marketing perspective, serve as powerful tools for destination revitalization (Ásványia & Jászberényi, 2017). Consequently, marketing efforts should be rooted in the unique characteristics of both the destination and the events it hosts. For marketing to be truly effective, however, it must be based on a comprehensive understanding of the destination – its values, resources, and visitors' perceptions.

Based on a review of relevant literature, this paper identifies and analyzes four fundamental components of rural touristic destinations that are essential for their development and promotion. These include destination image, stakeholder collaboration, consumer behaviour, and sustainable tourism (Abellán & García Martínez, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2023; Soteriades, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to examine how elements of rural destinations holding touristic events contribute to the formation of destination identity. Through the analysis of respondents' attitudes, the problem of the sustainability of rural destinations and marketing activities aimed at promoting rural events is analyzed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The destination and its characteristics lie at the heart of tourism activities and serve as a fundamental factor in attracting visitors. From a theoretical perspective, a comprehensive understanding of a destination requires consideration of four key elements: the destination's image, the stakeholders and their interrelationships, the tourists who visit, and the sustainability of the destination itself.

Destination image: As many authors stated, there is a clear connection between the image of the destination and the desire to visit it. When tourists know less about the place or it is completely new for them, they rely on the positive images related to it. The image of the destination is based on tourists' perception, which influences their behavior and finally, the choice of destination. The attractiveness of the destination, the ability to provide interesting content, and the favorable destination image will boost visitors' intention to go to a rural tourism location (Ksouri et al., 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2023).

People travel to a certain destination because of their personal needs and wants, but they are also pulled to do so by the factors attributed to the destination (Juvan et al., 2017). Key characteristics of a tourist destination can form the image of a destination. Some of the main factors that can pull tourists to visit a destination are natural beauties, hospitality of the local population, cultural attractions, microclimatic conditions, gastronomic offerings, and others.

Not all destinations have a positive image. Some tourist destinations, particularly in rural areas, lack a favorable perception, often due to the inadequate application of marketing principles in the development and promotion of a coherent tourism product (Mihailović & Moric, 2012). Creation of a positive destination image is a first step in destination branding. Branding a tourism destination can be challenging due to the diversity of destinations and tourist experiences (Soteriades, 2020). One of the factors that can contribute to the positive branding of a rural destination is tourist events.

The previous research has shown that organization of traditional village events can contribute to the development of rural tourism in a destination (Lazović et al., 2024) and that such events are recognised as important factors of attractiveness, even in small rural communities (Abellán, & García Martínez, 2021; Alves et al., 2010).

In Serbia, a substantial number of rural events are held annually across various locations. Both smaller and larger towns traditionally organize a range of events that are closely linked to the identity and characteristics of their specific destinations. Such events have a significant role in putting the venue on the map and distinguishing it from other, similar places. Therefore, events contribute to creating a community image (Irshad, 2011).

Destination stakeholder collaboration: When visiting a tourist destination, visitors have high expectations. During their short vacation, tourists seek to enjoy the beauty of the place they are visiting, its cultural landmarks, local food, music, and/or educational content. While visitors expect an integrated offer, these services are provided by various individuals, companies, agencies, and organizations. This is why tourism is a fertile field for collaboration (Sotiriadis, 2020), and each provider must be aware that their offer is only one part of the destination's overall offering (Mihailović & Moric, 2012).

Besides the location, the involvement of different stakeholders from the local community is essential for the success of rural tourism. An important segment of this collaboration is to offer everything that a tourist might need and want. One of the major offers refers to food, which is produced and served by local suppliers. According to numerous empirical studies, regional and ethnic dishes are highly attractive to many tourists due to their desire to experience something unique (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Kiper, 2011; Reynolds, 1993).

Other components of the tourism offer, such as cultural monuments and natural resources, are beyond the scope of individual intentions. Therefore, at the destination level, local stakeholders must participate in coordinated action to design and promote a unique experience for tourists.

Consumers' behavior encompasses a wide range of elements such as their preferences and choices, motivations for visit, expectations and needs, but also the necessity to understand tourists' travel decisions. Therefore, the analysis of visitors' behaviour is of vital importance when planning marketing strategies (Sotiriadis, 2020).

Modern marketing orientation places visitors at the centre of marketing activities when it comes to tourism products. Understanding tourists' needs, desires, and preferences, as well as their segmentation, forms the starting point for creating marketing elements not only for the destination itself but also for other tourism activities offered in the region. Ksouri et al. (2015) claim that understanding visitors' perceptions of a destination must be taken into consideration when planning marketing activities, while Priatmoko et al. (2023) argue that tourist satisfaction is a significant pillar that guarantees the future success of rural tourism activities. Juvan et al. (2017: 30) conclude that "without adequate information about tourists' behaviour today, a successful tourist destination will not have the basis for efficient decision-making tomorrow".

Sustainable tourism incorporates environmental, social-cultural, and economic considerations. While all types of tourism should strive to be sustainable, traditional mass tourism usually has some disadvantages for the environment (Priatmoko et al., 2023). In contrast, rural tourism, by its very nature, is expected to be more environmentally friendly.

Sustainable tourism can be defined as a way to satisfy the demands of both tourists and regions, without endangering future prospects, success, and wealth (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Although rural tourism generally has less impact on the environment and local community, with its development and popularity, it has become a rising issue. Relevant literature warns about possible negative effects that rural tourism and, more specifically, tourist events can create. Đorđević et al. (2021) state that although events have a positive impact primarily reflected in generating income, they also have numerous negative effects. Among the most mentioned are land pollution, noise, overcrowded transportation, and pressure on local lives (Alves et al., 2010; Ásványia & Jászberényi, 2017), crowds in the events destination, and endangered cultural and historical values of the destination (Đorđević et al., 2021).

These aspects should be carefully considered when planning tourist events in rural areas. Marketing strategies should be developed in harmony with the overall identity of the destination and the diverse expectations of visitors.

METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this paper used desk research methods for defining the research problem and formulating research hypotheses. Theoretical and empirical studies targeting rural tourism were analyzed, with a special focus on the significance and characteristics of destinations hosting rural events. During this process, the content analysis method was used, as an observational research method that

simplifies, compresses, and categorizes text content from numerous sources. Based on the theoretical insights, three research hypotheses were established:

H1: The analyzed elements of rural destinations are important factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit a particular destination.

H2: Rural destinations in Serbia are clearly associated with the events held in them.

H3: Rural destinations in Serbia are adequately promoted by marketing activities among potential tourists.

The second phase of the research involved collecting primary data through a survey technique. To engage valid participants, an online survey methodology was employed. The sampling was conducted using a non-probability sampling method, specifically the snowball sampling technique. The survey questions were formulated based on prior theoretical analysis. The research was conducted in late October and early November 2024, and a total of 210 responses from participants from Serbia were collected, all of which were valid. The data were analyzed using SPSS software.

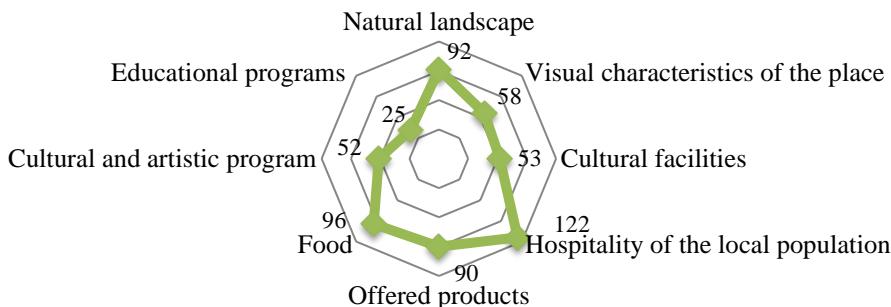
In addition to the aforementioned methods, an observational, qualitative study was conducted, which included a comprehensive analysis of data available on the websites of various tourist destinations and rural events, as well as monitoring the timeliness and content of published information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building on the theoretical framework of destination elements, this paper examines visitors' attitudes toward rural events in relation to these elements.

Destination image was represented in respondents' answers through natural landscape, visual impression (or the characteristics of the venue), and cultural heritage. Natural landscape is an important segment of destination image, and this was recognized in the study, since 92 or 15.6% of the total number of respondents (multiple answers were allowed) referred to this answer. Visual characteristics of the village (58 responses) and cultural facilities (53) are evaluated as less important but still attractive elements of rural destinations (Figure 1). Altogether, elements associated with destination image accounted for 34.5% of the total responses, indicating a moderate but meaningful role in shaping visitors' satisfaction and perceptions.

Stakeholder collaboration was assessed through three key aspects: the quality of food, the hospitality of the local population, and the overall offer, including available products and services. These elements received the most favorable evaluations from respondents, particularly the hospitality of local residents, which was selected in 122 responses (20.7%), followed by the food, mentioned in 96 responses (16.3%). Combined, these components accounted for 52.4% of all answers, indicating that the interpersonal and service-related dimensions of rural events play a crucial role in shaping the overall visitor experience.

Figure 1*Elements of rural tourism destination according to the level of visitor satisfaction**Source:* Authors' research

The obtained results align with previous research, confirming that natural beauty is widely recognized as a key component of a tourist destination and serves as a valuable counterbalance to mass tourism. The significance of natural attractions and territorial characteristics as elements shaping a destination's image has been validated by studies conducted both in Serbia (Lazović et al., 2024) and internationally (Abellán & García Martínez, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022). These studies also highlight the importance of hospitality as a central factor in a destination's appeal. Mihailović and Moric (2012) assert that warm welcome and personalized interactions with tourists are distinctive features of rural destinations.

Since the focus point of the research was the importance of rural events, we also included two additional elements: the cultural and artistic program of the event and educational workshops. However, these additional elements were ranked poorly (52 and 25 answers) (Figure 1).

Another important topic that should be considered when discussing tourist destinations is the analysis of tourist (consumer) behavior. Tourists highly appreciate and often buy food when visiting rural areas. Agriculture and food production are tightly connected with the rural environment and often present the primary source of income, while tourism stands as an additional activity providing support for the rural economy. Thus, it is expected of consumers to buy food when visiting these areas. This was confirmed in our research, as nearly two-thirds of respondents (65.4%) stated that they buy local food specialties, wine, and other beverages when participating in rural tourism.

Visiting rural areas and attending rural events are often motivated by the desire to spend time with family (113 or 20.5% of the total responses), indulge in region-specific dishes (112 responses), or enjoy cultural heritage or nature (98 and 83 responses, respectively). For most respondents (142 or 67.6%), this is a one-day activity, in a company of spouse or a partner (32.9%), children (an additional 19.0%), or friends (36.2%). Tourists usually choose a destination located up to 100 km from their place of residence (121 or 57.6%), and about one-quarter (25.2%) is willing to travel up to 200 km. Only one in six of the respondents said that they are willing to travel a greater distance.

This is in line with previous studies where it was confirmed that most visitors of rural events and destinations often travel with their spouse and other family members (Cvijanović et al., 2021; Šušić et al., 2016), turning this into a one-day event, or rarely small holidays (Cheng et al., 2022; Kharenko et al., 2018). These findings emphasize the necessity to analyze in detail the characteristics of visitors in order to meet their expectations, achieve positive economic effects for the rural community, and maximize the overall benefits of their short stay.

Sustainability in the tourism industry is one of the most critical topics in contemporary research. Respondents were asked to assess four statements: two positive and two negative, regarding the potential impact of hosting an event on a tourist destination and its local community. These statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement. The first positive statement, *(a) Events have a positive impact on the economic development of rural areas*, received an average rating of 4.12. A majority of respondents (109 or 51.9%) strongly agreed with this statement, while only four respondents strongly disagreed. The second positive statement, *(b) Events contribute to the popularization of the place where they are held*, achieved an even higher average score of 4.30. This statement saw a more pronounced polarization in responses, with 129 respondents (61.4%) assigning the highest rating and only three selecting the lowest.

The positive effects of organizing rural events on a local community are widely appreciated in the literature. Most of the research has focused on the economic benefits of rural events, while evidence of other types of benefits is scarce. Alves et al. (2010) claim that involvement of the local population and suppliers provides economic benefits to the region, so that organizers must insist on building partnerships. Others add that events contribute to a better quality of life of the local population due to additional earnings (Đorđević et al., 2021) and that they have a positive impact on the quality of life of rural inhabitants and on the economic development of rural destinations (Cvijanović et al., 2021).

Another aspect that should be taken into account is the negative effects of rural events on the local community. This is also confirmed in the literature, but most authors underline that tourists perceive negative effects as less important. Some studies show that organizing rural events can have an impact on traffic and daily activities of local inhabitants and price increase (Alves et al., 2010; Cvijanović et al., 2021). In addition to crowds in local institutions, Đorđević et al. (2021) recognized endangering cultural and historical values of destinations as a negative effect, while other authors found that only a smaller part of respondents reported land and noise pollution (Abellán & García Martínez, 2021).

Our research confirms previous studies. The majority of respondents (78 or 37.1%) expressed complete disagreement with the statement that *events can negatively affect the daily activities of the local population*, with the average score 2.27, while only every tenth respondent showed strong agreement with the given statement. The second statement, that *holding events creates a heavy burden on the place where they are held* (excessive littering, too much noise, traffic congestion, etc.), was rejected by almost half of the respondents (104 or 49.5%) who showed a high level of disagreement, resulting in an average score of 2.68 for this statement. These findings suggest that a large proportion of tourists do not view pollution caused by events as a

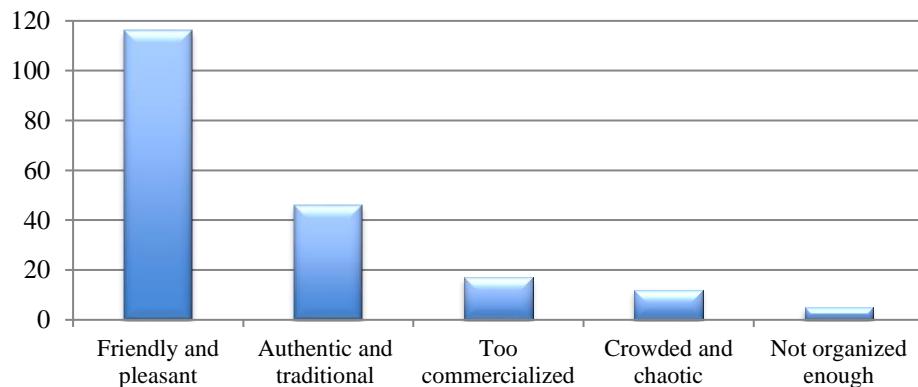
serious concern for the local community or residents' quality of life, although a smaller segment did express strong agreement with the statements highlighting such issues.

The presented results reflect exclusively how tourists perceive the negative effects of holding events on a particular destination, but do not deny their existence. Rural events, especially those that attract a larger number of visitors, inevitably have negative effects on the environment. Drápela et al. (2021) identify four types of negative effects: (1) impact on local infrastructure (parking in inappropriate places, crowded traffic); (2) tourist infrastructure and perception (damage in hiking trails, failure to meet holiday expectations, overcrowding tourist destinations); (3) natural environment (garbage pollution, damaged natural sites), and (4) living conditions (loss of privacy, noise, loss of local authenticity). In addition to pollution, some authors stress "disturbance on the indigenous wildlife and the fragile ecosystems" (Panić et al., 2024), while others emphasize noise, garbage pollution, traffic jams, and destructive impact on the environment (Ásványia & Jászberényi, 2017). The same authors also suggest that one of the possible solutions is the relocation of the festival outside of the settlement. Appealing as it seems from the point of view of the reduction of negative impact on the destination, it might also reduce the positive economic and cultural effects of the event and complicate the organisation of the festival.

Tourists' impressions regarding the potential negative effects on a tourist destination can be confirmed by their rating of the atmosphere at rural events. The majority of respondents rated the general atmosphere as 'friendly and pleasant' or 'authentic and traditional'. Views that could be associated with the negative effects of holding rural events, such as excessive commercialization and being 'too crowded', were not expressed to a greater extent (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Tourists' impressions about the atmosphere of the rural event



Source: Authors' research

BRANDING AND MARKETING OF RURAL DESTINATIONS

Branding and recognition of rural events: When asked to name a rural tourism event they had attended, nearly all respondents mentioned a gastronomic festival. These

events are also widely discussed in the literature, with different standpoints. Some authors argue that, despite a long-standing tradition of rural events in Serbia, starting from the 1990s, they have attracted only a limited number of visitors and hold marginal importance for local communities (Šušić et al., 2016). In contrast, Bjeljac et al. (2016) state that gastronomic festivals are among the most popular and well-attended manifestations, drawing several thousand domestic and international visitors annually, depending on their scale and significance.

Vojvodina, in particular, is noted for its abundance of gastronomic events that showcase authentic local food and beverages characteristic of the region (Čavić & Mandarić, 2021). These festivals typically focus on promoting regional cuisine and specialties. Events dedicated to specific local products – such as cheese, honey, sausages, and other traditional dishes – attract visitors motivated by the desire to experience authentic flavours and to learn about traditional methods of food preparation specific to particular regions. Emphasizing indigenous ingredients and traditional cooking methods, these festivals play an important role in preserving Serbia's gastronomic heritage (Gagić et al., 2013).

In light of the diversity of rural festivals in Serbia, respondents were asked to name one event they had attended. The most frequently mentioned event was *Kupusijada*, the cabbage festival held in Futog and Mrčajevci (43.3%), followed by *Slaninijada* in Kačarevo (23.8%) and *Dani Ludaje*, traditionally hosted in Kikinda (20.5%). *Kobasicijada*, held in Turija (Srbobran municipality), was identified by 18.6% of respondents, while *Grožđebal*, organized in Vršac and Sremski Karlovci, was recognized by approximately 12% of participants.

An exception to typical gastronomic festivals is *Kosidba na Rajcu*, an event dedicated to natural and rural life, which emphasizes the preservation of natural landscapes and the promotion of a healthy, traditional lifestyle. Events such as harvest celebrations, mowing competitions, and livestock fairs reflect the occupational and everyday customs of rural communities (Bjeljac & Čurčić, 2005), contributing to the promotion of natural values and fostering environmentally responsible tourism. By highlighting traditional rural labour and the natural environment, these events enhance ecological awareness and offer visitors an authentic rural experience.

However, the recognisability of certain events is diminished when they are replicated across multiple locations. Festivals dedicated to a single product, such as pork cracklings, sausages, or wine, are often held in several towns, which weakens their association with any specific destination. Respondents in this study mentioned crackling festivals in Valjevo, Kać, and Sivac; sausage festivals in Turija, Belo Blato, Šid, and Bački Petrovac; and various wine festivals across Serbia, particularly in February or during autumn grape harvests (e.g., in Belgrade, Smederevo, Irig, Zrenjanin, Novi Sad). Although these events attract substantial interest, their replication in multiple locations limits distinctiveness and reduces potential for symbolic destination branding. To enhance recognition and tourist appeal, greater engagement from travel agencies is needed – both through incorporating these events into tour packages and by strengthening promotional efforts targeting wider audiences (Stojanović et al., 2020).

In contrast, a long-standing event dedicated to pumpkins, *Dani Ludaje*, held exclusively in Kikinda since 1984, stands out as a successful example of place-based

event branding. With a unique name, a singular thematic focus, an established market position, and thousands of annual visitors, it represents a rare case of strong brand identity within Serbia's rural event tourism landscape.

One of the ways in which rural festivals can become unique is to shift from product to service orientation. In the conditions of high tourism competition, it is not enough to offer specific products to attract visitors to a certain destination. Tourist easily lose their interest and transfer to another activity, destination, or festival, especially if the marketing communication is not sophisticated enough. To attract and retain tourists, rural festivals must provide more personalized and engaging experiences. Personal consumption may provide tourists with the opportunity to enjoy rural activities through personal participation. This requires not only a more complex organisation of the event, but also flexible and sophisticated marketing communication strategies.

Promotion of Rural Destinations and Events: The importance of marketing and promotion is particularly evident in tourism, where, through the process of mass communication, information is exchanged between supply and demand with the aim of stimulating the sale of tourism products and services (Ubavić, 2015). A broad spectrum of marketing tools is employed to promote tourism destinations and events, both globally and within Serbia. These tools range from the development of event names, logos, and slogans, to the creation and distribution of promotional materials, media sponsorships, participation in tourism fairs and press conferences, as well as effective use of the internet and social media as channels for engaging potential visitors.

To develop a recognizable tourism destination, the priority is to attract visitors, which can be achieved by raising awareness and generating interest in the destination. In the context of rural manifestations, brand recognition can be cultivated both through the destination itself and the events hosted there. Some authors believe that branding an event will contribute to the overall perception and image of the rural destinations (Ásványia & Jászberényi, 2017; Čavić & Mandarić, 2021). However, as discussed earlier in this paper, the destination's intrinsic characteristics can also contribute significantly to the festivals' recognition, so it is of the utmost importance to establish how tourists first become aware of the event and destination.

The results of this study indicate that most tourists first learn about rural events through friends and family (42.9%). Social media and the internet also serve as important sources of information (42.5% combined). Traditional media channels, such as television commercials, printed media, and billboards, play a comparatively minor role (see Table 1). It is important to emphasize that other sources identified by respondents were mainly business associates, while only one of the total 336 responses (respondents were allowed to provide multiple answers to this question) referred to a tourism organization.

Table 1
Source of information about rural destination

Source of information	Number of answers	Percentage
Recommendation of friends and family members	144	42.9
Social networks	73	21.7

Internet	70	20.8
TV	20	6.0
Newspapers and magazines	11	3.3
Billboards	11	3.3
Others	7	2.1

Source: Authors' research

The importance of word-of-mouth communication, coming from friends and family, as a source of information for rural events is supported by other studies. While some authors identify it as the most influential channel (Cheng et al., 2022; Kharenko et al., 2018), others find that the internet holds slightly greater importance (Šušić et al., 2016). These insights point to both strengths and weaknesses in the current marketing of rural manifestations. Many researchers note a lack of engagement from tourism organizations, along with insufficient marketing efforts to promote such events effectively.

Tourism organizations in Serbia typically present information about rural events in the form of brief announcements, most often compiled collectively through an event calendar featuring various locations. This approach appears inadequate, as it remains virtually unrecognized by potential tourists. Furthermore, there are other notable shortcomings in the area of marketing. A number of manifestations lack their own website, although some disseminate information via social media. The majority of these events are promoted sporadically on various tourism-related websites, in local newspapers, and on local web portals, primarily on a seasonal basis, that is, shortly before the manifestation is held. If an event has a website, it is usually inactive for most of the year, becoming operational only during a brief period immediately before and after the event itself.

While increased participation in tourism e-commerce platforms is often recommended, such initiatives are associated with certain financial costs. Therefore, it is essential to assess the effectiveness and economic feasibility of promotional activities, especially for events that attract a limited number of visitors. A potential solution lies in collective marketing efforts, such as a centralized website or application featuring an events calendar with comprehensive information on upcoming rural manifestations. This approach could improve event visibility while reducing individual promotional costs.

In today's service-oriented economy, marketing is not merely advisable but essential for success in tourism. It plays a vital role in the development of rural tourism and encourages tourists to visit specific rural destinations, involving the rural population, with the goal of improving their socio-economic status (Ray & Kumar Das, 2011).

Based on the study's findings, the implementation of integrated marketing strategies for rural tourism destinations is recommended. Such strategies would allow greater flexibility and adaptation to diverse tourist profiles. A key element in this process is the internet. In contemporary society, digital platforms, social networks, and mobile applications are widely utilized and offer powerful tools for building a positive and recognizable image. As Rodrigues et al. (2023) suggest, such a global perception of a particular destination motivates travelers to visit the location and participate in its attractions.

In this context, word-of-mouth marketing remains a powerful yet underutilized promotional method. After attending rural festivals, tourists often share photographs and videos on social media platforms, along with comments about their experiences. These personal testimonials can significantly enhance the impact of official promotional materials. Moreover, word-of-mouth marketing serves as a bridge between rural destinations and potential visitors, helping in the decision-making processes and increasing event appeal (Cheng et al., 2022; Ksouri et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

One of the critical factors contributing to the success of rural tourism events is the location in which they are held. The image of a destination can be conceptualized as a combination of multiple elements: location characteristics, stakeholder collaboration, consumer behaviour, sustainability, and destination branding and promotion. Research findings indicate that the natural landscape is among the key motivators for tourists attending these events. Visitors also reported high levels of satisfaction with the hospitality of local residents and service providers, as well as a strong interest in the gastronomic offerings. Therefore, when planning a successful rural tourism event, it is essential to engage various stakeholders and provide a diverse range of products and services that meet tourist expectations. In particular, gastronomy plays a central role, as rural areas are traditionally linked with food production, and Serbia is known for its rich culinary heritage. Thus, the gastronomic offer is a crucial element for the sustainability and branding of rural tourism destinations.

Visitors are highly satisfied with the atmosphere at rural events, which they describe as pleasant, friendly, and authentic. They are also aware of the impact rural events have on local environments. Although positive effects on the community tend to receive greater attention, some negative consequences related to the environment, infrastructure, and local living conditions have also been observed. The findings confirm that all analyzed destination attributes, along with the fact that rural events are held there, contribute to shaping the identity of the destination. Thus, the first hypothesis, that the analyzed elements of the identity of rural destinations are important factors when choosing a specific destination, has been confirmed.

A considerable number of events in Serbia have achieved a level of specialization and recognition among tourists, contributing to the positioning of certain destinations within the national tourism landscape. Respondents effectively associated particular events with specific locations, especially in the case of gastronomic festivals tied to unique agricultural products or events that preserve traditional lifestyles and customs. Based on these insights, the second hypothesis that rural destinations in Serbia are clearly associated with the events held in them has been confirmed. However, not all rural events in Serbia hold substantial tourism potential. Some remain underdeveloped or have only local significance. Contributing factors may include limited content appeal, low visitor interest, inadequate financial resources, insufficient infrastructure (e.g., roads, accommodation, transportation), and weak public-private collaboration in event organization.

To expand their reach and become key drivers of rural development, these events must be improved in terms of organization, content, infrastructure, and overall quality. They must also evolve in alignment with modern tourist preferences and trends. However, the most crucial component remains the application of effective marketing strategies. Research findings indicate that personal recommendations, such as word-of-mouth from friends and family, are the primary source of information about rural events, while tourism organizations play a negligible role in promotion. The potential of word-of-mouth marketing remains largely untapped. Future development of rural event tourism must leverage digital platforms and smart technologies. Unused marketing opportunities include better utilization of modern communication tools, enhanced business networking, and the development of customized, niche-focused tourist offers. Consequently, the third hypothesis that rural events in Serbia are adequately promoted through marketing activities has been **rejected**.

This research draws upon both a review of existing literature and original empirical findings. Its primary limitation lies in the sample: the survey targeted only visitors of rural tourism events. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the destinations where rural events are organized and the associated marketing strategies, future research should include representatives from the local economy and resident populations. This broader perspective would facilitate the design of more effective, inclusive, and sustainable rural tourism models.

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REZIME

Intenzivna urbanizacija, jačanje ekološke svesti potrošača i potraga za novim turističkim proizvodima rezultirali su povećanim interesovanjem za ruralnim turizmom. Srbija obiluje ruralnim turističkim destinacijama, a kao jedan od sredstava za animiranje turista i jačanje njihove motivacije za posetu ruralnim područjima koriste se turističke manifestacije. Za izgradnju brenda određene turističke destinacije, pored održavanja manifestacije, koriste se i sledeći faktori: imidž destinacije, saradnja lokalnih stekholdera, ponašanje posetilaca i održivi turizam. U cilju sagledavanja uticaja navedenih faktora na izgradnju imidža destinacije i turističkih manifestacija koje se realizuju u njima, sprovedeno je istraživanje među posetiocima ruralnih manifestacija u Srbiji u periodu oktobar – novembar 2024. godine, na uzorku od 210 ispitanika. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da ruralne manifestacije, zajedno sa ostalim elementima destinacije, značajno doprinose oblikovanju njenog identiteta. Raznolika ponuda različitih manifestacija koje se održavaju širom Srbije tokom cele godine oslikava bogatu gastronomsku ponudu, prirodne lepote, kulturne znamenitosti i bogatstvo običaja u kojima turisti mogu da uživaju. Posebno su rasprostranjene gastronomске manifestacije, kao i turistički događaji posvećeni jednom poljoprivrednom ili prehrambenom proizvodu. Međutim, njihovo replikovanje u većem broju lokacija otežava izradnju brenda određene destinacije te je potrebno aktivirati različite aktere u lokalnoj zajednici kako bi, kroz zajedničke aktivnosti, stvorili bogatu turističku ponudu koja će doprineti izradnji motivacije kod turista. Za razliku od masovnog turizma, ruralne destinacije privlače posetioce prirodnim lepotama, gastronomskom ponudom i bliskim kontaktom sa tradicionalnim vrednostima, što je kompatibilno sa preferencijama savremenih turista koji su, sve češće, ekološki osvešćeni. Stoga je od velike važnosti uskladiti diverzifikovane potrebe savremenih turista sa pritiskom koji povećano interesovanje može imati na lokalnu zajednicu i živote njenih stanovnika. U tom smislu, poštovanje principa održivosti u kreiranju ruralnih turističkih proizvoda postaje imperativ. Konačno, u izgradnji pozitivnog imidža ruralne destinacije neminovno je korišćenje marketing pristupa. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da je usmena preporuka porodice, prijatelja i drugih posetilaca važan izvor informacija, ali i da je potrebno značajnije angažovanje turističkih organizacija u cilju diverzifikacije pojedinih ruralnih destinacija. Promocija ruralnih manifestacija zahteva holistički pristup, sa posebnim naglaskom na digitalni marketing, uz korišćenje društvenih medija i drugih platformi koje omogućavaju razmennu iskustava posetilaca.