

Festivals for Local Products in Southern Bulgaria: The Perspective of Organizers

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Abstract In recent years festivals are experiencing a boom and are seen as a tool for tourism development, which has the potential to enhance community integrity and promote local culture. The study investigates the festivals based on local products in the southern part of Bulgaria. As its main goal is to identify current problems and trends in this sphere, it has adopted an organizers-driven perspective, focusing on several main points: organizers' expected and perceived benefits from holding the event, structure of festivals in terms of participants and visitors, issues related to funding and advertising, event organization and authenticity of presented products. The main problem areas that were identified include insufficient public-private partnerships, relatively poor results achieved in terms of attracting tourists and promoting local business, difficulties in funding and advertising and low level of authenticity.

Keywords Festivals • Local products • Traditions • Organizers

1 Introduction

Festivals are a millennia-old phenomenon; yet, their character has been changing through the years. In ancient times, through the Middle Ages and till Modernity most festivals were based on cults and religion, or the agrarian cycle (harvest festivals), even the etymology of the word can be traced back to the Medieval Latin *festivus*, meaning “of a church holiday” (Harper, n.d.). In modern times, festivals are more associated with leisure time and even if they are based on a traditional ritual, the focus shifts towards entertainment. There are numerous definitions in academic literature. Janiskee states that festivals can be perceived as “formal periods or programs of pleasurable activities, entertainment or events having a festive character and publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact” (Janiskee, 1980). Another frequently cited definition is the one of Fallasi, who describes festivals as:

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a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview. Both the social function and the symbolic meaning of the festival are closely related to a series of overt values that the community recognizes as essential to its ideology and worldview, to its social identity, its historical continuity, and to its physical survival, which is ultimately what festival celebrates (Falassi, 1987)

Summarizing the above mentioned and some other definitions, the following characteristic features of festivals can be drawn:

1. Festivals are social events.
2. Local people are (though to various degrees) involved.
3. They are recurrent events.
4. Festivals are limited in time and space.
5. Festivals are rooted in the host community social and cultural life.
6. Festivals have a symbolic meaning related to the host community.
7. Entertainment is one of the prevailing elements.

It should be however noted that in contemporary practice some of these often sound more like recommendations rather than characteristic features. There are examples of festivals held with the main reason of attracting tourists, in which the host community is almost completely ignored (i.e. the Apollonia Festival of Arts in Sozopol, Bulgaria, where the first participant from the host town was registered only a few years ago, or the Jazz Festival in Bansko).

Festivals can take different forms; the most usual classifications are based on scope and theme. McDonnell, Allen, and O'Toole (1999) distinguish four types of event according to their size: local community-based events, major events (e.g. national folk festivals), hallmark events and mega-events. In terms of theme the diversity is greater: arts festivals, harvest festivals, food festivals, music festivals, theatre festivals, storytelling festivals etc.

This paper examines festivals of traditional local products. Thus, it will exclude festivals based on modern art, theatre or music, and will instead focus on intangible heritage in all its manifestations: oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship and livelihood; and traditional food. In the marketing theory a product is "everything that can be offered to a market for attention, utilization, use or consumption and can satisfy a need or necessity" (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005, p. 223). Each of the elements of intangible heritage could become a product and therefore be marketed through a festival after undergoing various degrees of commoditization.

2 Literature Review

In recent years festivals are experiencing a boom and are seen as a tool for tourism development, which has the potential to enhance community integrity and promote local culture. Festivals and events are also seen as a constituent element of place-marketing strategies in the face of increasing competition among cities (Quinn, 2009, p. 486). To remain competitive, “cities are turning to strategies that focus on their own innate resources—their histories, spaces, creative energy and talents” (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p. 2). Thus, the number of events based on local products has seen a boom in recent years; yet, academic literature seems to be focused on large-scale festivals and sports events (Kostopoulou, Vagionis, & Kourkouridis, 2013).

Festivals research seems to be focused on several topics. Economic impact of events seems to be dominant, with abounding theoretical models and empirical studies (Crompron, Lee, & Shuster, 2001). There are also a number of studies that emphasize social influence of festivals, including building pride in the local community (Gibson & Davidson, 2004), strengthening group and place identity (Bres & Davis, 2001). One of the seminal works in this aspect is the one of Delamere, who identified two main groups of factors: social benefits and social costs, with the most influential benefits being enhanced image of community, community identity, uniqueness of local community and festivals as showcase of new ideas, and major costs: disruption of normal routines, intrusion into lives of residents, over crowdedness and overuse of recreational facilities (Delamere, 2001). In important focus on social impacts is community involvement. Anastasiadou and Rogers propose a framework consisting of three indicators to help event planners enhance involvement of local people: involvement of schools; volunteering opportunities; participation in decision making; accessibility; and business cooperation (Rogers & Anastasiadou, 2011).

The predominant part of literature is focused on the perceptions of visitors. A number of studies is dedicated to visitors’ motivation (Backman, Backman, & Uysal, 1995), segmentation of visitors ((Formica & Uysal, 1996), visitors’ satisfaction (Cole & Chancellor, 2009) etc. Leading motivations for visiting festivals as identified in numerous studies include: socialization, entertainment, cultural exploration, family togetherness, novelty/uniqueness, excitement, escape. A small part of these however investigate festivals of local/traditional products; a recent addition is a study on a Slow Food festival, which finds festival programme, amenities and entertainment to all have impact on visitor satisfaction, while revisit intentions are mostly influenced by food and amenities (Jung, Ineson, Kim, & Yap, 2015). While most studies are focused on on-site visitor experience, a few ones examine behaviour change and level of engagement. Recent research by Organ et al suggests that festivals and food festivals in particular may be used by authorities as a tool for implementing policies aimed at changing food choices. Engagement with food at the festival was found to be a strong predictor of subsequent purchases, which

provides an important value added aspect (Organ, Koenig-Lewis, Palmer, & Probert, 2015, p. 93).

The number of studies that focus on organizers perceptions is limited. The first to explore how special events impact the local community from the organizers' perspective were Kim and Uysal (2003). The findings reveal that perceived economic impacts had four main domains: Community Cohesiveness, Economic Benefits, Social Costs and Social Incentives. Their work was extended and validated by Gursoy, Kim, and Uysal (2004). Almost ten years later, Kostopoulou et al enhanced the research in this aspect by including other key stakeholder groups: in their study they assessed the perceptions of festival organizers, local authorities and tourism market in terms of the economic impact of regional cultural festivals on host communities (Kostopoulou et al., 2013). A recent study based on in-depth interviews with festival leaders has elicited four areas that most significantly relate to sustainability of festivals: the event subject focus, leadership, funding, and the organizational culture (Ensor, Robertson, & Ali-Knight, 2011).

3 Methodology

In order to study current problems in the festival industry an online survey among festivals and local events organizers in the administrative districts of Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali was conducted. The statistical population of respondents includes organizers of events for presenting local products in the regions of Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali of Bulgaria. The comprehensive list of respondents was drawn following an extensive on-line research resulting in a data-base of all festivals on local products held in the area, along with contact details of their organizers. The identification of festivals was performed by applying a three-step approach:

1. Initial data collection and elaboration of a full list of events for each of the surveyed area. At this stage the secondary data collection method was applied, using the official sites of local authorities, the official site of the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian specialized web site for cultural events (<http://www.sabori.bg/>).
2. Elaboration of a set of criteria for inclusion in the final list. The first condition for inclusion was "the central theme represents a local/traditional product". Local/traditional products were defined as both "specific to a given area" and "long-established" and could include folklore, traditional food/cuisine, traditional ritual/celebration, agricultural products, natural resources, cultural/historical heritage. The second condition was the scope—events which were limited only to the settlement they were held in were excluded, unless they had the potential to further develop and attract tourists (e.g. the event presents a rare/unique product, the town is a tourist destination, etc.).

3. Filtering the initial list by applying the above criteria. The final list consists of 107 festivals on local products: province of Blagoevgrad—44, province of Smolyan—20, province of Haskovo—30, province of Kardzhali—12.

The statistical population of the survey consists of 53 organizations and institutions that organize festivals for local products in the area. The number is almost half less than the number of identified festivals, because a lot of the organizations are responsible for holding more than one event. The questionnaires were sent to all units of the statistical population (53) in the period 12.01.2013–05.01.2013. Twenty-one completed valid questionnaires were received, forming a response rate of 39.6 %.

The festivals that are subject to the study were chosen on the basis of their theme and fall in the following groups:

1. *Folklore festivals*—one of the most common types, based on folk dance and music. To this group we can also add storytelling festivals. Some of the most popular storytelling festivals are The Scottish storytelling festival, the Welsh Festival “Beyond Boundaries,” the USA National Storytelling Festival of and many others. Although storytelling is not a very popular topic in Bulgaria, for several years now there has been a similar event in the country too—Skratska Academy (village of Skrat, Bulgaria).
2. *Festivals based on traditional rites/rituals*—the most popular festival in Bulgaria of this type is the Festival of the Masquerade Games in Pernik. Most festivals of this type are based on ancient traditions connected with the year cycle.
3. *Food/culinary festivals*—these are events that have food as their central theme. The most renowned ones on a world scale are: Napa Truffle Festival, Madrid Fusión, South Beach Wine & Food Festival, Melbourne Food & Wine Festival, etc. In the surveyed area, several such festivals were identified, including a joint event of the Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate and Slow Food Bulgaria.
4. *Festivals dedicated to local agricultural products*—“Festival of the Potato” (Ravnogor, Bulgaria), “Feast of beans” (Smilyan, Bulgaria) and others. Although the obvious topic in most of these is agriculture, the focus is often on traditional food (meals prepared from the product).
5. *Festivals of traditional crafts*. Events of this type are in two varieties—focus on crafts as a whole, or on a particular craft (wood-carving Festival in North Carolina).
6. *Festivals based on gifts of nature/natural resources*—these include herb festivals (Herbfest—Ottawa, Canada), festivals of wild plants (chestnut festival—village of Kolarovo, Bulgaria) and others.
7. *Festivals based on cultural/historical heritage (tangible and intangible)*. In the surveyed area these form the least numerous group.

The questionnaire contains 28 closed questions, which can be grouped in several modules: demographic profile of respondents, aspired benefits, profile of visitors and participants of festivals, funding, marketing and advertising, event duration and

feedback from visitors. An important focus is the perceived authenticity of product/tradition representation within the festival.

4 Results and Analysis

The first module of the questionnaire has a profiling character, and the obtained results are as follows:

Demographic Profile

The predominant share of respondents is between 45 and 60 years old, which corresponds to the actual state in the sectors under review. 91 % of respondents are women, and 9 % are men, which again reflects the current ratio of employees in local authorities and cultural community centres. As far as educational level is concerned, 82 % hold a university degree, while 18 % have completed secondary education.

Type of Organization

Respondents are employed in four types of organizations/institutions: local authorities, cultural institutions (community centres), NGOs and governmental institutions. Local authorities form the largest share of festival organizers in the region, accounting for 48 % of the total, followed by cultural institutions—38 %. By cultural institutions in this case we mean cultural community centres (*chitalishta* in Bulgarian), a type of institution which was established in the Bulgarian National Revival Period (eighteenth–nineteenth century) and whose main activity at present is associated with preserving local traditions. The share of NGOs is relatively small—only 10 % and governmental institutions account for only 5 %. This distribution of respondents reflects the actual situation identified through the exhaustive research conducted prior to the survey. The predominant share of respondents occupies expert positions (64 %), followed by “secretary” (27 %) and members of the management board (9 %).

One of the questions to which this study aims to answer concerns the reasons for organizing festivals on local products. The importance of predefined variables was assessed by using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important). Table 1 displays the findings by dividing the factors in three main groups where as very important were rated items that received a mean above 3.5, items rated between 2.5 and 3.5 fall in the second group (of average importance) and items with a mean lower than 2.5 are described as not important.

The reasons that play the least important role in organizing festivals on local products are the ones related to history and religion. In a second group of reasons that have relatively higher significance we can cite those related to making contacts (with advertisers and sponsors, as well as public opinion leaders), and economic factors. The most important role in motivation is played by promotion (of both place and product), attracting tourists, creating a brand, and last but not least—providing entertainment. These to some extent resonate with the social benefits

Table 1 Reasons of holding a festival for local products/traditions as reported by organizers

Very important	Of average importance	Not important
To raise the prestige of the place	To inform the public	Religious reasons
To increase the popularity of a local product	Economic reasons	Historical reasons
Tourism growth	Contacts with leaders of public opinion	
To create a brand in the festival sphere	Contacts with sponsors, advertisers etc.	
Opportunities for entertainment		

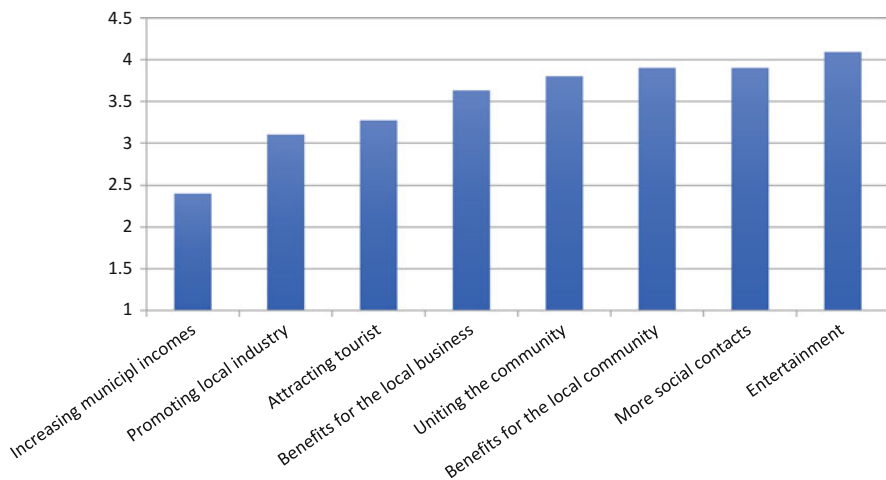


Fig. 1 Assessment of perceived benefits

identified by Delamere (2001), coupled with an emphasis on economic benefits. The results once again show the major role that tourism plays in the organization of festivals and other special events. While only a few decades ago cultural institutions focused their attention on the preservation and promotion of local culture, today an important part of their motives is related to the increase of tourism flow in the destination.

The above mentioned goals, however, are not always fully achieved (Fig. 1).

To assess perceived benefits, again a Likert scale ranging from “Poor” (1) to “Excellent” (5) was used. It was found out that organizers did not achieve their goal with respect to two of the main reasons for organizing festivals: attracting tourists and promoting local production—they were assessed below average. The lowest evaluated benefit was increase of municipal revenues, which is somewhat understandable, since they are not among the important reasons for holding a festival for local products. Benefits associated with local businesses and the local communities

Fig. 2 Distribution of festivals according to origin of participants

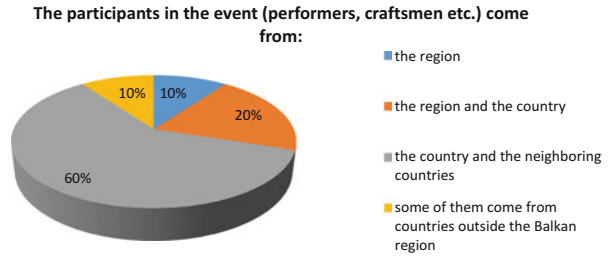
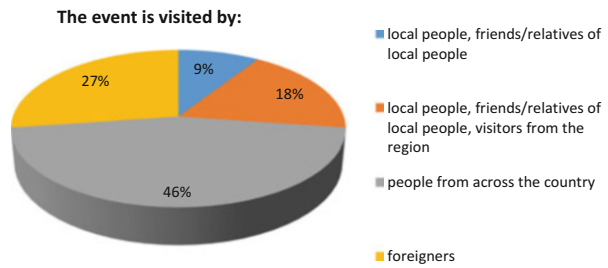


Fig. 3 Distribution of events according to type of visitors



are higher than average, but still do not reach a very good assessment. The opportunities for entertainment and sharing experience and culture are the top ranking benefits according to organizers.

Three of the questions are devoted to determining the scope of the festival activities. The results suggest that 64 % of the respondents held between two and four events related to local culture per year and a significantly lower share (34 % of all respondents) provided more than four festivals whose subject focus in on local products or traditions per year.

The territorial scope of the attracted participants and visitors is depicted in Figs. 2 and 3.

The structure of participants is an important element in the event attractiveness. Moreover, attracting foreign participants is important for enriching cultural exchange, which was identified as one of the main reasons for organizing festivals. More than half of the organizers (60 %) manage to attract participants from both the country and from neighboring countries. 20 % of the surveyed events feature participants from the country, and a relatively small share of events are held only with participants from the region (10 %). However, the share of those that attract participants from outside the Balkan region is quite small—only 10 %.

Some differences are observed in the ratio between the types of visitors (Fig. 3). This type of structure is also connected to the objectives that drive organizers, but unlike participants, visitors are more related to tourism and image oriented goals. The proportion of visitors in the surveyed festivals from abroad is significantly smaller compared to foreign participants (27 % compared to 70 % of participants from outside the country). The main share of events (46 %) attract visitors from

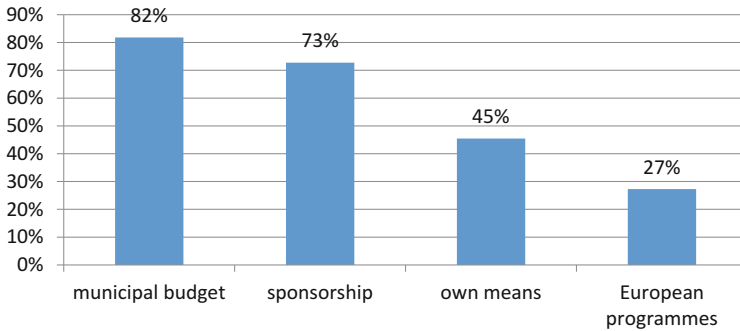


Fig. 4 Funding sources

across the country, 18 % are limited within the region, and 9 % are visited only by residents and their friends and relatives. This distribution is not unfavourable, given that most of the festivals are small community-based events.

A large percentage of organized events (36 %) have no permanent participants, 46 % have some, and 18 % say that almost all their participants are regular ones. The large proportion of organizers who fail to attract regular participation in the event could be explained by the fact that there are several festivals taking place only since a few years ago; it could, however, also be the result of inefficient management. The proportion of events that attract the same participants each year is also of concern as it indicates a lack of development.

Figure 4 shows the most common sources of funding. The largest share of funds comes from the municipal budget, sponsorships and donations, used by 82 % and 73 % of respondents respectively. Almost half of respondents rely on own revenues and less than a third—financing from European projects. Overall, the results indicate untapped potential for funding from national and European programs.

Event duration is important mainly because of economic (especially tourism-related reasons). Longer events provide higher hotel occupancy levels which is an opportunity to overcome (at least for that limited period of time) the weekend-only destination problem. Moreover, an event that is spanned over a longer period allows for a less hectic programme and hence reduces the risk of overcrowding. The present study reveals that the most preferred event duration is 2 days, followed by 3 days (30 %) and a negligible share of 10 % of respondents express preference for 1 and 4–7 days respectively. The identified refraining from longer events could be explained by the increased efforts in terms of organization and need for funding, which is often hard to achieve by smaller communities and organizations. There are however some exception to this trend, one of the best examples being the [Terlik Festival \(n.d.\)](#) in the village of Dazhdovnitsa, which lasts for a day, but is preceded by a rich programme of accompanying events that starts almost a month earlier, including a series of art schools, art workshop with artists from across the country, short films and more, which attract artists, photographers, filmmakers, poets, artists and translators to the village. With its population of 156 people (by 2007) the

village of Dazhdovnitsa is not among the “usual suspects” for such an event—however, the joint efforts of a Youth Art Movement and the Municipality of Kardzhali, succeeded in establishing a sustainable event by involving the local community, expanding the festival duration and thus providing both social and economic benefits. The broad array of participants—both in terms of country of origin and cultural sphere, has the potential to enable cultural exchange.

When asked about the main difficulties they are facing, respondents place high importance on insufficient funds, followed by lack of popularity of the event, lack of interest by the local population, lack of interest by businesses and poor tourism infrastructure (Fig. 5). In the “Other” section some of the respondents indicate the underdeveloped volunteer activity. Assessment is based on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

Regardless of the stated difficulty in securing the necessary financial resources, however, the majority of the organizers do not consider it necessary to introduce fees for participation.

When traditions are used for tourist purposes, it is essential that they be interpreted and presented authentically so as to avoid a negative impact on the culture of the local community. Although almost all respondents said that they have good knowledge of traditions and typical local products, the survey results show a disturbing trend of neglecting authentic representation—18 % of respondents believe that they carry out events which rather do not present local tradition in an authentic way; another 18 % believe that this is done only partially (Fig. 6).

A number of other characteristics of events on local products were also self-assessed by organizers (see Fig. 7). A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from Poor (1) to Excellent (5). The lowest rating was assigned to technical equipment and advertising campaign, which directly corresponds to the main difficulties mentioned above. Entertainment program and the accompanying events are rated above average, and the highest rating was received by transport provision and access to the venue, organization, and time and place of holding the event.

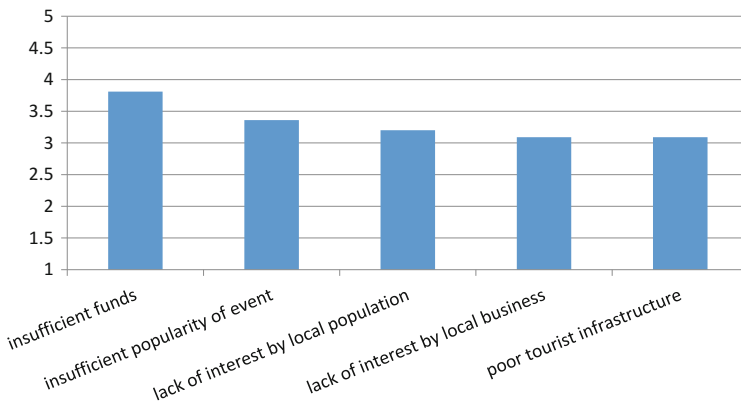


Fig. 5 Major difficulties in holding the event

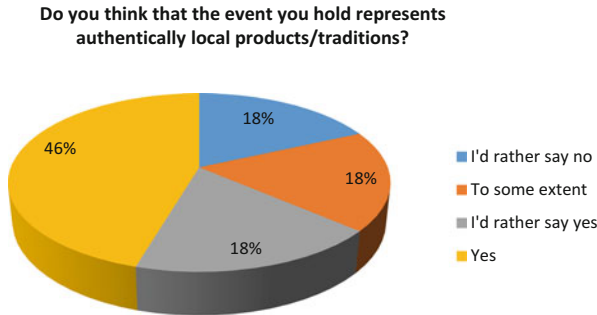


Fig. 6 Assessment of authentic representation of local products/traditions

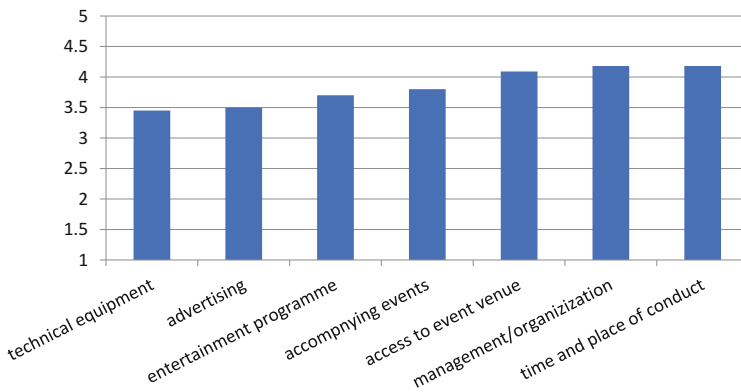


Fig. 7 Assessment of event characteristics

Advertising and promotion of events is done through the employment of various channels, the most popular of which are regional media (indicated by all respondents). The Internet ranks second (91 %), national media are used by 64 % of respondents, almost half of them rely on personal contacts, and a relatively small share used email lists, brochures and printed media.

Successful event planning is strongly dependant on feedback from both visitors and participants. The majority of the organizers study the opinion of participants and visitors, mainly by following the positive comments and complaints (60 % of respondents) and assessment of the program, the time and venue of the event. There are some festival organizers however who do not conduct any research on stakeholder satisfaction.

5 Conclusion

The study provides a generalized picture of the festival activity in a region, where research on events is extremely limited—the southern part of Bulgaria. Its aim therefore was not to go into detail but rather to outline major trends and issues. It has taken the perspective of organizers as one of the most important stakeholders. Future research might be focused on other stakeholder groups—tourists/visitors, local community, local business with the aim of identifying and comparing different attitudes and expectations.

It might be of interest to compare the findings with similar type of research in other regions. The main reasons for organizing a festival for local products/traditions in the surveyed area are associated with increasing the prestige of the place, the promotion of local products and traditions, and supporting tourism activities, which to a great extent reflects the trends worldwide. The entertainment aspect is of significant importance too. At the same time, respondents assessed relatively low the results achieved in terms of attracting tourists and promoting local business. The exchange of experiences and culture, and entertainment were stated as benefits from holding the event. This once again confirms the role of festivals and special events in tourism development and image building.

While the majority of the organizers manage to attract foreign participants, visitors of the events are mainly from the country, and more than a quarter of all visitors are residents, their relatives/friends and residents of nearby settlements. The main difficulties in organizing the event are related to insufficient funds and insufficient or ineffective advertising. In this regard, more attention should be paid to opportunities provided by the European operational programs, public-private partnerships and wide involvement of volunteers. The identified lack of interest on the part of local communities and the low degree of volunteer activities are very disturbing in terms of sustainability of the event. They could be due to the irrelevant choice of festival subject focus or insufficient efforts by the organizers to collaborate with local communities.

More than one third of respondents feel they do not present local traditions and products in an authentic way. This could lead to an undesirable level of commoditization and as a result lower the quality of the event.

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