
INTERDISCIPLINARY SYNERGY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE, AGRICULTURE, AND FINANCIAL STRUCTURES IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY: SPLIT SUMMER FESTIVAL AS A MODEL OF INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural festivals in sustainable urban development, focusing on the Split Summer Festival as a model of integration between cultural heritage, and tourism. The purpose is to analyze how festivals influence tourist flows, valorize local agri-food production, and contribute to economic resilience. The methodology combines quantitative analysis of overnight stay statistics (2013–2024) with qualitative secondary literature review, supported by a two-way ANOVA to test differences between festival and non-festival regions. Results confirm that festival locations achieve significantly higher growth in overnight stays and stronger links between cultural events and accommodation demand. Conclusions highlight the importance of festival-driven synergies in shaping cultural capital, economic benefits, and sustainable tourism. Recommendations include integrating small agricultural producers, diversifying accommodation, and strengthening collaborative policy frameworks. Additional data underline the growing role of rural households and agri-food products in enriching the cultural tourism experience.

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Introduction

In the context of intensifying challenges related to climate change, economic transformations, and cultural sustainability, cultural heritage is increasingly recognized not merely as a symbolic asset but as a tangible resource for urban development. The city of Split, as a cultural hub of Dalmatia with a layered historical and intangible heritage, represents a paradigmatic space where local identities, global tourist flows, and rural economic potentials converge. Within this framework, the Split Summer Festival emerges as more than a cultural manifestation; it functions as a platform for the integration of cultural production, sustainable tourism, and local economic development.

This paper departs from the premise that sustainable urban growth requires interdisciplinary synergies between cultural policies, agriculture, and tourism, accompanied by a reconfiguration of governance models, participatory practices, and valorization of local resources.

The research seeks to answer critical questions regarding the role of cultural events in strengthening cultural capital, generating economic benefits for local producers, and optimizing infrastructural capacities within Split and its wider region. The methodological framework rests on quantitative analysis of data drawn from the eVisitor system, the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, and the Tourist Board of Split-Dalmatia County, covering the period 2013–2023.

Festival experiences are increasingly perceived as multidimensional phenomena that shape tourism, cultural identity, and local economies. They are particularly attractive to younger generations, for whom music and cultural events represent a form of lifestyle expression and tourist engagement (Iványi & Bíró-Szigeti, 2020). Beyond their economic contributions, festivals foster social cohesion and influence the long-term perception of destinations through shared experiences, amplified in digital environments.

Contemporary strategies of urban development demand the integration of cultural policy with economic and spatial planning, particularly in a context where globalization profoundly reshapes value systems and local traditions (Dragićević Šešić, 2009). As urban economies shift from industrial to service-oriented logics, cultural policy assumes a central role in creating participatory public spaces and generating sustainable value. Cultural capital is thereby positioned as both a driver of development and a medium for reinforcing collective identity.

Theoretical and Cultural Dimensions of Festivals: From Heritage to the Experience Economy

Festivals in continental Croatia represent a powerful instrument for creating a competitive and recognizable tourism offer that integrates economic objectives with the cultural values of local communities. Although today they are primarily perceived as entertainment, their historical genesis is rooted in ritual and religious celebrations.

During the Middle Ages, festivals served as platforms of collective memory and cultural values, while in contemporary urban contexts—particularly music festivals—they have become generators of cultural identity and local development (Richards & Palmer, 2013; Campbell, 2007). From this perspective, festivals in continental Croatia can be reinterpreted not only as tourist attractions but as continuations of cultural heritage and tools of spatial revitalization.

As a form of cultural capital, festivals may be understood through Bourdieu's (1986) tripartite framework of embodied practices, objectified cultural products, and institutionalized forms of knowledge. They function as platforms for active participation, where audiences reinterpret cultural content, thereby developing cultural competence while also reproducing symbolic hierarchies and mechanisms of social stratification (Lee, 2017). Such an approach frames festivals simultaneously as emancipatory and educational spaces and as arenas of power and inequality.

The lens of the experience economy adds another analytical dimension. Festivals encompass experiential, emotional, and cognitive aspects that allow visitors to temporarily escape everyday routines. Emotional engagement fosters loyalty and encourages recommendation practices in digital contexts (Arnould & Price, 1993; Mitrović, 2022). For continental Croatia—where tourism still predominantly relies on traditional models—the ability to create distinctive and memorable experiences is critical for differentiation and sustainable development.

Agriculture, Gastronomy, and Rural Development in the Context of Cultural Policies and Urban Creativity

A significant dimension of the interdisciplinary approach to festivals is gastronomy and rural development. Gastro-tourism, as a subtype of cultural tourism, enables synergy between local food production and tourist demand. It contributes not only to the economic resilience of rural areas but also to the preservation of local identity (Hall & Gössling, 2016). Nevertheless, planning rural development in Croatia remains challenging due to the involvement of numerous stakeholders with divergent interests (Paparić, Glavaš, & Ravlić, 2024). Linking festivals with local food supply chains enhances integration of agricultural and cultural heritage, strengthening local economies and establishing sustainable practices.

Modern agriculture extends beyond primary production, encompassing processing, distribution, and commercialization within broader socio-economic and cultural systems (Kelić, Turjak, & Unukić, 2018). Thematic and gastronomic festivals, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, valorize agriculture as a source of identity and authenticity. Through these events, agricultural products become markers of regional capital and cultural representation, while short supply chains and direct producer–consumer interactions promote awareness of sustainable practices.

Tourist motives further reinforce this connection, as visitors increasingly seek authentic encounters with heritage and local products, shaping demand and supply alike (Ujko,

Cvijanović, El Bilali, & Berjan, 2025). In this sense, festivals influence not only cultural offerings but also agricultural practices and accommodation capacities, thereby contributing to rural revitalization, strengthening community self-confidence, and affirming agriculture as both an economic and cultural resource.

From a broader perspective, cultural policies and the “creative city” framework underline the role of festivals in urban regeneration. Creativity is understood as multidimensional, encompassing artistic, economic, and spatial dimensions that intertwine in the urban context (Simonton in Florida, 2002). Festivals stimulate not only tourism but also local economic cycles, provide platforms for business visibility, and act as instruments of political legitimization (Zelić, 2023). Food markets, once primarily spaces of economic exchange, today function as social and cultural symbols, reinforcing destination images and experiential consumption (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimitrovski, 2025).

The processes of shaping destination image depend on the interplay of cultural content, heritage, and local products (Kim & Chen, 2016; Milman, 2011). Accordingly, festivals and food markets contribute to building multicultural identities and creating cultural capital. Theories of the creative city emphasize the role of culture and creative industries as drivers of urban regeneration (Landry & Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2000), while the creative class (Florida, 2002, 2017) and cultural policies (Neiva Ganga et al., 2021; Borén et al., 2020; Pintossi et al., 2021) are increasingly recognized as mechanisms of symbolic and economic transformation.

Within this framework, the Split Summer Festival can be positioned as a model of integration that connects heritage, cultural production, and agricultural practices. At the global level, UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that culture in urban contexts is a key driver of sustainable development, revitalization, and inclusive communities. Regionally, Mirkov (2019) demonstrates how cultural policies influence tourism competitiveness in Zadar County, highlighting the economic and symbolic role of cultural content. This interplay illustrates how culture functions as a strategic resource for planning and sustainable development in Croatian destinations.

Split Summer Festival as a Model of Cultural Branding, Financial Structures, and Integrated Management

The Split Summer Festival, alongside the Dubrovnik Summer Festival, represents the longest-standing and most recognizable national cultural manifestation. Founded in 1954 with Jakov Gotovac’s opera *Ero s onoga svijeta*, and initially titled “Split Summer Performances” until 1968, the event has since evolved into a key institution of Croatian cultural identity (Miroslav Krleža Lexicographical Institute, 2025; Dorić, 2023). Over the decades, it transitioned through various organizational models—from the Croatian National Theatre Split to Dalmacija Concert (1970–1978)—and today operates under the City of Split. Its venues include the Peristyle, Diocletian’s Palace, Meštrović’s Kaštet, and nearby towns such as Trogir and Stari Grad (Dorić, 2023).

The program has consistently emphasized collaboration with local institutions, centering on opera, drama, ballet, and dance, while also incorporating visual arts, literary evenings, and poetry recitals (Selem, 2004). Institutional awards such as *Judita* and *Peristil* further confirm the festival's status within the system of cultural valorization. Deeply rooted in the city's Renaissance and Baroque heritage—from Juraj Dalmatinac to Ivan Meštrović—the festival today embodies both historical continuity and contemporary cultural management goals, including heritage preservation, multicultural dialogue, and international cooperation (Dorić, 2023).

Analytically, the Split Summer Festival represents a model for studying visitor motivation, loyalty, and satisfaction (Pencinger, 2014; Oliver, 1999), key factors for the sustainability of cultural events. It demonstrates how a cultural brand can integrate symbolic capital with measurable economic effects such as overnight stays, visitor arrivals, and increased consumption of local resources. As such, it enables the application of interdisciplinary research approaches to understanding cultural capital, the experience economy, and urban development. Split Summer, as the most important national theatrical and musical event alongside the Dubrovnik Summer Festival, occupies a central place in the cultural and tourist life of the Republic of Croatia. Its institutional tradition, on-going since 1954, confirms the festival's status as a cultural brand of Split and the wider region.

Ivanov (2020) highlights that digitalization and automation in the tourism and hospitality sector bring substantial changes to the labor market, requiring employees to adapt their skills and prompting the need for more flexible management models. Meanwhile, Ivanov (2017) emphasizes that mass tourism, although often criticized, ensures the sustainability of services dependent on high visitor volumes and generates significant backward and forward linkages with other industries. However, he also notes negative consequences, such as the presence of the “grey economy” in private accommodation, which results in lost fiscal revenue.

In the context of Split, these insights indicate that the Split Summer Festival, while not the primary motivation for all visitors, occurs during the peak season of mass tourism. This timing allows the festival to stimulate increased overnight stays, promote the consumption of cultural content, and enhance the valorization of local products and resources.

From a financial perspective, management of cultural organizations requires adaptability to macroeconomic trends and local risks. Enterprises focus simultaneously on micro-level profitability and macro-level conditions, aiming for flexible investment strategies (Vojinović, Milutinović, Sertić, & Leković, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of tourism-dependent economies, exposing the need for resilient models of cultural and urban development (Mavrin, Šebo, & Glavaš, 2022). The Split Summer Festival thus provides a case for analyzing how cultural heritage, tourism flows, and financial structures intersect in urban strategies.

Its significance extends beyond culture: the festival stimulates demand for authentic Dalmatian products such as wine, olive oil, and prosciutto, reinforcing synergies between

agriculture, gastronomy, and tourism. In doing so, it embodies an interdisciplinary model that connects cultural heritage with economic sustainability and community development.

Finally, management evolution—from classical bureaucratic approaches to contemporary flexible models—illustrates how cultural events adapt to changing social and technological conditions (Zelić, 2025). Effective integration of festival management, hospitality, and tourism accommodation enables strategic planning that balances cultural, social, and economic objectives. This tripartite synergy positions the Split Summer Festival not only as a cultural highlight but also as a driver of sustainable urban development and a reference point for the integration of cultural, agricultural, and financial structures.

Materials and methods

The research employed quantitative methods based on statistical data on tourist overnight stays across Croatian counties, comparing festival and non-festival regions to assess the impact of cultural events on tourism intensity. Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate seasonality and regional distribution, while trend analysis identified patterns and potential festival effects. To ensure interdisciplinarity, qualitative secondary analysis of literature and sources (UNESCO, Florida, Mirkov, Selem, Dorić) was included, linking statistical indicators with concepts of cultural policy, cultural capital, and sustainable tourism. The dataset comprised monthly, regional, and accommodation-type statistics for 2020–2024, systematically reviewed to capture temporal and spatial patterns with emphasis on seasonality, disparities, and the role of accommodation. By integrating descriptive and inferential statistics, the analysis provided insights that extend beyond raw figures, enabling a deeper understanding of the relationship between festivals and tourism dynamics.

To assess the influence of festivals on tourism performance, the study applied a two-way ANOVA without replication, testing the effects of two independent variables – location type (festival vs. non-festival destinations) and year (2020–2024) – on the dependent variable of overnight stays. This model identified both main and interaction effects, showing how festival presence and time shape tourism trends. Statistical significance was evaluated through p-values and F-critical values, ensuring robust conclusions. The analysis focuses on Split-Dalmatia County as a case study, given that Split Summer represents an event of long historical continuity, institutional support, and international importance. A comparative approach between festival and non-festival destinations highlighted dynamic growth trajectories. By integrating descriptive statistics with inferential testing, the framework provides insights into seasonal and structural patterns while empirically examining the hypothesized relationship between festivals and tourism outcomes. The research aims to determine whether cultural events, with a focus on Split Summer, are linked to levels of tourist activity and accommodation occupancy. The hypothesis states that festivals significantly increase tourist overnight stays while fostering cultural heritage integration. In this sense, Split Summer serves as a model of cultural continuity and urban integration, illustrating how cultural production generates

broadier impacts on tourism, the economy, and social cohesion.

H1: The number and occupancy of accommodation facilities correlate with the scope of the festival program.

H2: Dynamic growth through years is higher in festival locations compared to non-festival locations

Data sources include eVisitor database: number of tourists, overnight stays, visitor nationality (2013–2023), Statistical data from the Tourist Board of Split-Dalmatia County (monthly distribution of tourists, capacities, traffic), Croatian Bureau of Statistics: data on tourism, agriculture, and consumption, Split Summer: program, number of events, number of visitors (if available).

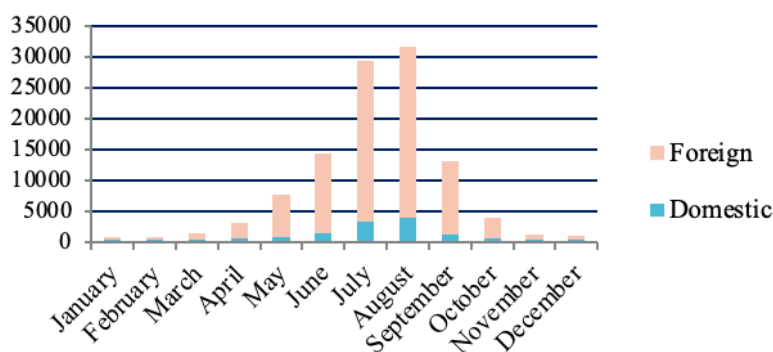
The data in Table 1 offers overview of the monthly distribution of tourist overnight stays in Croatia. Spanning from January to December, it captures a clear seasonal pattern that dominates the country's tourism industry.

Table 1. Overview of overnight stays

Year 2024	Domestic	Foreign	Total
January	273	431	704
February	311	515	826
March	375	1,101	1,476
April	512	2,596	3,108
May	712	6,925	7,637
June	1,381	12,886	14,267
July	3,308	26,145	29,453
August	3,906	27,727	31,632
September	1,264	11,895	13,159
October	518	3,442	3,960
November	414	721	1,134
December	337	655	992

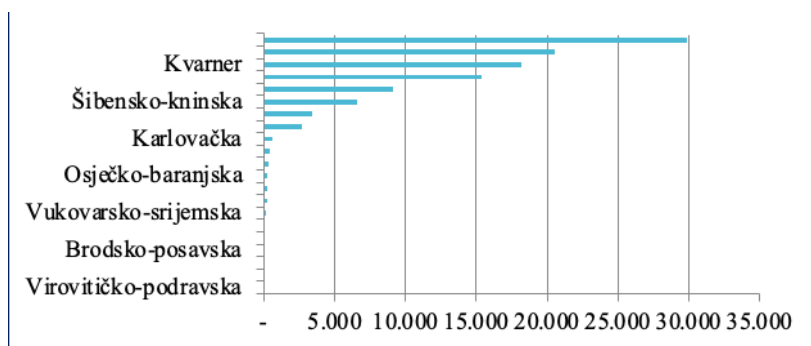
Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

In the first quarter (January–March) Croatia records relatively low tourist activity, with overnight stays remaining under 1.5 million, confirming the marginal role of winter tourism. The trend shifts in April and accelerates in May, when over 7.6 million stays are recorded. A sharp increase follows in June with more than 14 million, setting the stage for the summer peak. July exceeds 29 million overnight stays, and August surpasses 31 million, together representing nearly half of the country's annual tourism volume. This concentration highlights Croatia's strong appeal as a summer seaside destination. After August, the numbers decline, producing a bell-shaped seasonal curve dominated by the summer months.

Figure 1. Number of overnight stays by foreign and domestic tourists

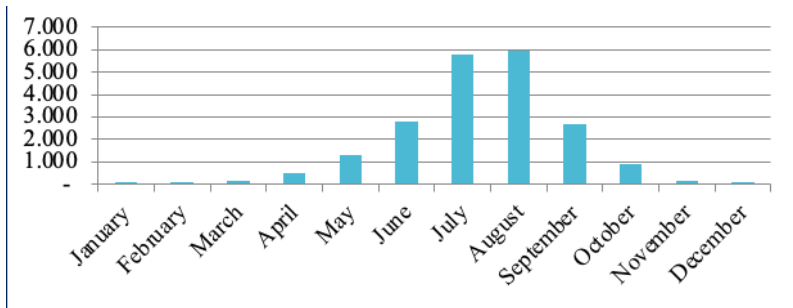
Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the 2024 distribution of overnight stays between domestic and foreign tourists in Croatia. Foreign visitors dominate almost every month, with their share most pronounced during the summer peak. The Adriatic coast, warm climate, and beach tourism drive this seasonal concentration, while spring and early autumn show moderate activity and the off-season remains subdued. Domestic tourism maintains a steady presence year-round but is clearly overshadowed by the scale of international arrivals, particularly in the high season.

Figure 2. Number of overnight stays by county

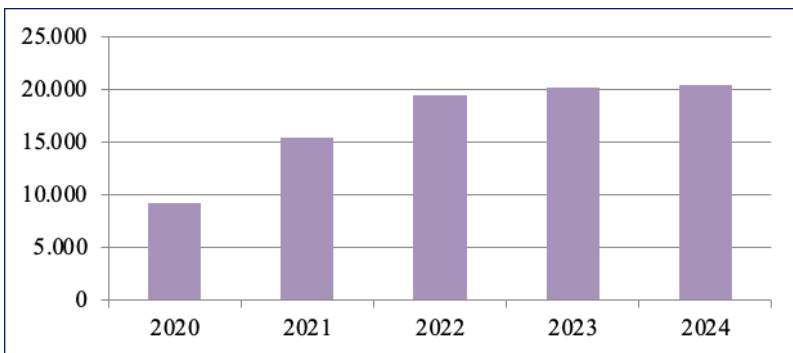
Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

The data show that Istria, Split-Dalmatia, and Kvarner dominate Croatian tourism, each recording tens of millions of overnight stays, driven by beaches, islands, festivals, and developed infrastructure. In contrast, continental counties such as Virovitica-Podravina, Koprivnica-Križevci, and Požega-Slavonia register far fewer visits, in some cases under 100,000. Monthly data for Split-Dalmatia in 2024 reveal a strong seasonal pattern that mirrors national trends on a larger scale: from just over 71,000 stays in January, numbers steadily rise through the first quarter, more than doubling by March to 172,816, marking the onset of the tourist season.

Figure 3. Split – Dalmatia Country

Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

Tourist activity rises markedly in spring, surpassing 500,000 overnight stays in April and exceeding 1.3 million in May. The peak occurs in July and August, with nearly 5.8 and 6 million stays, coinciding with the Split Summer Festival, Croatia’s leading cultural event. By combining theatre, music, dance, and visual arts, the festival attracts domestic and international audiences and reinforces the seasonal tourism boom. Together, July and August generate more than half of the county’s annual overnight stays, highlighting the synergy of coastal tourism and cultural programming. The data for Split-Dalmatia County from 2020 to 2024 reveals a strong and consistent recovery and growth in overnight stays after the initial pandemic-hit year (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Split -Dalmatia County – Overnight stays per year (in 000)

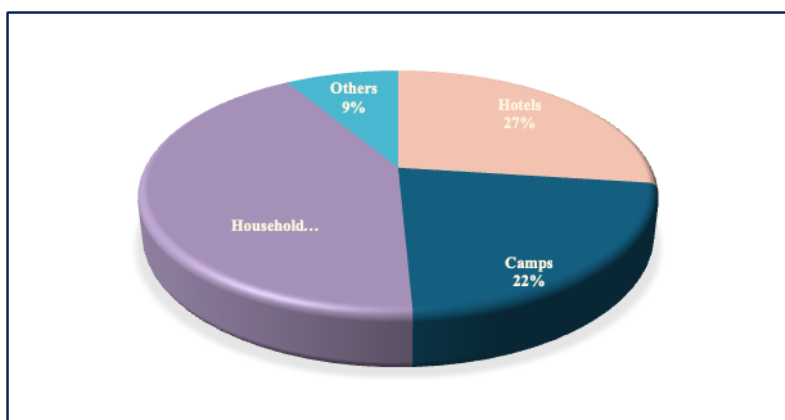
Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

In 2020 Split-Dalmatia recorded 9.27 million overnight stays, a sharp decline due to COVID-19 restrictions. Recovery followed quickly: 15.5 million in 2021 (over 67% growth), 19.5 million in 2022, 20.2 million in 2023, and a peak of 20.53 million in 2024, surpassing pre-pandemic levels and reaffirming the region as one of Croatia’s top destinations. The Split Summer Festival has been central to this resurgence, attracting culturally motivated tourists and revitalizing urban tourism while stimulating the local economy. Its impact extends to local agri-food products, as visitors increasingly consume

Dalmatian cuisine, wines, olive oil, and produce from nearby rural areas during the high season. This synergy between cultural events and local agriculture highlights the potential of festival-driven tourism as a model for sustainable regional development.

On the Figure 5 is presented data about share of different accommodation types, while table to presents more detailed overview of overnight stays, comparing 2023 and 2024.

Figure 5. Most relevant accommodation types by overnight stays



Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

Data for 2024 show that household facilities, mainly private apartments and homes, dominate Croatian tourism with 39.6 million overnight stays, well ahead of hotels (25.4 million) and camps (20.8 million). This highlights Croatia’s strong orientation toward personalized, informal tourism along the Adriatic coast. Hotels, despite slight growth from 2023, remain the second most used form of accommodation, attracting visitors seeking comfort and full-service options. Camps recorded a minor decline but continue to be popular among Central European tourists. The “other hospitality facilities” category grew modestly, indicating diversification, though it still accounts for only a small share of the total.

Table 2. Overnight stays (in 000) by accommodation type from 2020-2024

Year	Hotels	Camps	Rural Households	Household facilities	Other accommodation facilities	Other	Restaurants
2020	6.996	9.051	61	22.159	3.273	8	3
2021	15.687	17.380	95	32.147	5.523	30	3
2022	22.910	20.798	172	39.405	7.408	52	5
2023	24.613	21.042	184	39.543	7.676	53	5
2024	25.445	20.831	191	39.808	8.091	46	4

Source: <https://htz.hr> – “Information on touristic statistical indicators”

Table 2 highlights the steady growth of rural households within Croatia's accommodation sector, rising from 61,000 overnight stays in 2020 to 191,000 in 2024, more than tripling in five years. Although modest compared to hotels or private apartments, this increase is highly relevant for sustainable tourism and rural revitalization. Rural households, often linked to small-scale agriculture, provide authentic gastronomic and cultural experiences, support local food systems, and distribute tourism benefits beyond coastal hotspots. In Split-Dalmatia, family farms (OPGs) are increasingly active in the tourism economy, offering farm-to-table dining, accommodation, and experiences tied to festivals and seasonal events.

The growing popularity of festivals as tourism drivers has intensified interest in their impact on overnight stays and local agri-food sales. To test this, a two-way ANOVA without replication was conducted, examining the effects of location type (festival vs. non-festival counties) and year (2020–2024) on overnight stays. Festival counties—including Dubrovnik-Neretva, Zagreb, Osijek-Baranja, Požega-Slavonia, Šibenik-Knin, Split-Dalmatia, Varaždin, and Zagreb County—were contrasted with non-festival counties, where tourism relies less on cultural capital. This design enabled analysis of both spatial and temporal effects of festivals on tourism behaviour.

Two hypothesis will be tested:

H1: The number and occupancy of accommodation facilities correlate with the scope of the festival program.

H2: Dynamic growth through years is higher in festival locations compared to non-festival locations

The two-way ANOVA revealed significant results regarding the main effects of both Location (location type) and Year on overnight stays. The Location factor, which distinguishes between festival and non-festival destinations, had a significant effect on overnight stays. This suggests that the type of location plays a crucial role in attracting tourists, with festival-driven destinations likely seeing spikes in overnight stays during peak seasons. Additionally, the Year factor also showed a significant effect, indicating that overnight stays varied across the years.

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Location	< .001	1,70
Years	< .001	2,49

The interaction effect between Type and Year revealed that the influence of festivals on tourism varies over time. The significant interaction term indicated that changes in overnight stays differed between festival and non-festival destinations. Festival locations showed sharper increases in certain years, especially when major events were held, while non-festival destinations displayed steadier, more gradual growth linked to general demand and year-round attractions.

Overall, the two-way ANOVA results confirm that festivals significantly affect tourism, with their impact shaped by both location type and year. This highlights the dynamic relationship between cultural events and tourism trends and provides valuable insights for evidence-based decision-making in the sector.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that festivals—particularly the Split Summer Festival—have a strong impact on the dynamics of tourist overnight stays and the structure of demand in Croatia.

Hypothesis H1, which assumes a correlation between the scope of the festival program and the number and occupancy rate of accommodation capacities, is supported by statistically significant differences between festival and non-festival destinations.

Hypothesis H2, which posits that dynamic growth over the years is more pronounced in festival-hosting counties, is also substantiated by empirical findings. In addition to quantitative indicators, the qualitative analysis emphasizes the importance of the triple synergy between festival management, the hotel sector, and private accommodation. Only through integrated strategic planning is it possible to balance the cultural, economic, and social goals of the season. Such collaboration enables an increase in tourist accommodation capacity, better integration of cultural offerings with hotel and hospitality services, and the promotion of local agricultural product consumption.

In conclusion, festivals should not be viewed merely as cultural events, but rather as strategic instruments of urban and regional development—linking cultural heritage, tourism, and the local economy. In this context, the Split Summer Festival represents a sustainable model of cultural-tourism integration that can serve as an example for other Croatian and European destinations.

The research suggests several key recommendations for public policy and festival management. First, it is necessary to strengthen the synergy between festivals, hotels, and private accommodation through joint strategic planning, ensuring balanced tourist flows and improved service quality. Second, local agricultural producers (OPGs) should be integrated more directly into the festival offer to promote domestic gastronomy and generate added value for the local economy. Third, diversification of accommodation should be encouraged by developing rural and cultural tourism in inland areas of Split-Dalmatia County, which can reduce seasonality and relieve pressure on the coast. Fourth, sustainable funding models must be established, combining public and private sources, sponsorships, and partnerships with the tourism sector. Finally, coordinated marketing strategies are needed to position cultural events such as the Split Summer Festival as a central component of Croatia's tourism brand, emphasizing cultural diversity and international recognition.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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