

EMPIRICAL VALIDATION OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS' ROLE IN VISITOR EXPERIENCE: THE CASE OF ZAGREB CHRISTMAS MARKET

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Abstract

Purpose – Christmas Markets have become important contributors to the winter tourism activities. They have become popular events, attracting different types of visitors, from young people and families with children, to work colleagues and senior travelers.

The purpose of the present research was to examine the potential differences in visitors' perceptions of the Christmas Market experience with regard to different demographic groups.

Methodology – Data were gathered using an on-site questionnaire. The questionnaire measured the event's atmospherics (ambience, layout/design, service encounter/social interaction), respondents' emotions, respondents' event satisfaction, respondents' event loyalty, and demographic data. Demographic characteristics included gender, age, number of previous visits, level of education, country of residence, marital status, number of people in group, and length of stay. Descriptive analysis and t-test were conducted using data collected from visitors attending the Zagreb Christmas Market during December 2017 and January 2018.

Findings – The research findings revealed, in general, similar perceptions of the Christmas Market experience between male and female visitors, as well as between domestic and foreign ones.

Contribution – The findings generated from this research can contribute to enabling event and festival managers and marketing organizations to better understand specific groups of visitors as well as to establish efficient marketing and promotion strategies.

Keywords event experience, experience measurement, satisfaction, loyalty, demographic characteristics

INTRODUCTION

Experience is becoming increasingly important in events and festivals, which are prime manifestations of the experience economy. Unique and memorable experience is an important part of consumers' lives and arguably the best way for suppliers to gain competitive advantage (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999). As a result, concepts such as the "experience economy" and "experience management" have been widely discussed (Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen, 2009; Nijs, 2003). Robertson et al. (2008) regard events and festivals as "*prime manifestations*" of the experience economy. Events are gaining social and economic relevance as they contribute to the animation and social cohesion of a city, region or country, and yield income as tourist attractions and spending outlets for local inhabitants (Van Vliet, 2012). Events have grown enormously in terms of numbers, diversity and popularity in recent years (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Getz, 2005).

Experience may serve as a settings for high levels of positive emotions for individuals (Bigne, Andre & Gnoth, 2005; Farber & Hall, 2007; Mannell, Zuzanek & Larson, 1988) and happiness (Nawijn, 2011; Nawijn, Marchand, Veenhoven & Vingerhoets, 2010). These positive emotions are exactly what event experiences aim to deliver. Gaining a better understanding of experience and providing a solid base for definition and operationalization, would make it possible to investigate what kind of experiences are most important to people and how they contribute to quality of life.

This paper examines the role of demographic characteristics in visitor experience of the Zagreb Christmas Market. It aims at comparing visitors' perceptions of event experience regarding the gender and visitors' country of residence.

According to Chi (2011), a few researches in tourism literature have investigated the similarities and differences between the two gender segments, as well as mixed results have been revealed regarding the role of country of residence. Therefore, the present research aims to contribute to the existing literature.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, a conceptual background of main concepts of interest is provided. Secondly, research methodology is presented, followed by results of empirical research and main research conclusions.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As the field of tourism and events is relatively new, dynamic and constantly developing, a critical review of the literature currently available is required to support and validate the proposed research. Literature relating to event experience will be critically reviewed.

1.1. The concept of experience

This paper focuses on event experiences as distinct from our day-to-day experiences, happening outside the context of "normal" life (Walls et al., 2011). Experiences in general are seen as a sharp contrast to everyday life (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), and leisure and tourist experiences are often viewed as unique and special (Manell & Iso-Ahola, 1987), extraordinary (Morgan, Lugosi & Ritchie, 2010) or "*peak experiences*" (Quan & Wang, 2004), taking place outside the "usual environment" and "contracted time" (Volo, 2010). Events have also often been conceptualized as "special" or unique types of experience (Getz, 2012). Experiences have been conceptualized in a variety of ways, including approaches based on motivations for experiences (Elands & Lengkeek, 2000) such as Cohen's (1979) tourist experiences modes, or Vespestad and Lindberg's (2010) nature-based tourism experience categories. The experience economy has directly influenced the modern festival industry, with attendees craving "*nuanced, unique and refreshed experiences (to help them) achieve new levels of personal accomplishment and enrichment*" (Yeoman, 2013, p. 254)

However, there is still no consensual definition regarding the essence of experiences (Walls et al., 2011), arguably because of the differing approaches taken to their study (Jensen, Lindberg & Ostergaard, 2015).

1.2. Event Experiences

New leisure tourists are youthful, adventurous consumers with a short attention span and an insatiable quest for novelty and escapism (Getz, 2012). They seem less interested in the inherent meaningful values of events and more in playful, fantastical and contrived event experiences. According to O'Sullivan and Spangler (1999), experiences involve variety of meanings. For example, participation and involvement; a state of being physically, mentally, socially or emotionally involved; a change in knowledge, skill, memory or emotion; a conscious perception of having intentionally encountered, gone to or lived through an activity or event; an effort that addresses a psychological or inner need.

Although there have been a number of conceptual studies of the tourist experience (De Geus et al, 2015), the literature on event experiences is fragmented, under-studied and under-conceptualized, with focus commonly on motivations, satisfaction and economic impacts (Berridge, 2007; Morgan, 2008; Gursoy, Kim & Uysal, 2004 in De Geus et al., 2015). There exists little to no linkage between the sparse conceptual discussion and real-life practices, justifying the researcher's intention to create a useful and tangible academic link.

Planned event experiences and the meanings attached to them are the core phenomenon of event studies (Getz, 2012) and it is recognized that special event experiences should be unique, fluid, engaging and memorable, creating an ever-changing perceptual novelty (Schmitt, 1999). Beard (2014) highlights the important role of creative event programming in facilitating engaging and memorable attendee experiences. The researcher intends to use primary research to explore whether the discussed genre's notable focus on these aspects has been instrumental to its success, and to what extent a shift into creative, innovative and holistic festival experiences is fundamental in longevity and avoiding stagnation.

We focus here on event experience or extraordinary experiences in staged events and festival settings. The term "event" or "special event" (Getz, 1989) is used to describe a wide range of phenomena, ranging from mega events to community festivals and local events, all of which have quite different characteristics (Getz, 2005). Events have been defined as a onetime or infrequently occurring event of limited duration that provides the consumer with a leisure and social opportunity beyond everyday experience (Jago & Shaw, 1998). Their special appeal stems from the innate uniqueness of each event, which differentiates them from fixed attractions, and their "ambience", which elevates them above ordinary life (Getz, 1989). Van Vliet (2012) defines festivals as: "*a gathering of a relatively large crowd in a specific public area for a delineated period, during which visitors are offered a unique experience (planned and organized with a specific purposes), including transformation and play elements, making it possible for visitors to behave and feel differently than in their daily lives*" (p. 20). Both definition encompass

for example music, sports, cultural and arts events. They are bound in space and time, and therefore are very suitable for the study of discrete experiences.

Many definitions of “special events” exist, with a general academic consensus that they are unique, infrequent and transient occasions, characterized by celebration, festivity, tradition, community spirit and the opportunity for special, social, cultural or leisure experiences (Getz, 1997; Goldblatt, 1997; Yeoman et al., 2004; Shone and Parry, 2013). As Bodin et al. (2011) recognize, the vastness of the special events industry means it is almost impossible to provide a definition that includes all varieties and subfields within it. Special events commonly provide opportunities for memorable and extraordinary experiences and at no other type of events is this as prevalent as at a festival. Describing a distinct subfield of the event world, Goldblatt (2002, p. 11) says that festivals are: “*public community events symbolized by a kaleidoscope of experiences that find meaning through the lives of the participants*”.

1.3. Experience outcomes

Experiences produce outcomes, such as satisfaction, emotions, cognition and behavior. After all, the individual is also affected by the experience (Snell, 2011) and researchers agree that experiences trigger a multitude of emotion, physical, cognitive and spiritual recreations (Mossberg, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Walls et al., 2011). In addition, Schmitt (1999) proposed five different types of experiences, namely, sensory experiences, affective experiences, creative cognitive experiences, physical experience behaviors and lifestyle, and socio-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture.

Satisfaction is an experiential outcome that has been widely researched in marketing and management, where leisure experiences are regarded as consumer experiences. One common way to measure experiences in the managerial perspective is to analyse service quality perceptions (Mossberg, 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004) and satisfaction (Otto & Ritchie, 1996).

Experience also stimulate senses and evokes emotions (Gupta & Vajic, 1999). Experiences encompass multiple sensory dimensions (tastes, sounds, colors and scents) (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O’Leary, 2006) and sensations (Gupta & Vajic, 1999). In addition, previous research (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010) has used emotional measures to capture tourism and leisure experiences.

To conclude, event experiences are viewed as a process: when certain conditions are met, an experience can occur, resulting in multiple outcomes. This experience has cognitive, conative and affective components.

1.4. Tourist satisfaction and loyalty towards festivals

Tourist satisfaction is defined as “*a collection of tourists’ attitudes about specific domains in the vacationing experience*” (Pizam et al., 1978, p. 317) and is considered to be one of the key judgments that tourists make regarding a tourism service (Song and Cheung, 2010).

Tourist loyalty, however, is commonly measured in terms of a tourist's intention to continue buying the same product or his/her intention to buy more of the same product and willingness to recommend the product to others (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Since tourists' feelings can affect their judgments of the destination's performance (Baker & Crompton, 2000), the evaluation of their experience and satisfaction will determine whether they would likely return to the food festival or recommend it to others. Previous studies have proven that festival attendees' satisfaction levels have a direct association with their loyalty towards a particular festival (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Ozdemir and Culha, 2009; Thrane, 2002; Yuan and Jang, 2008). Tourist loyalty in this study refers to their intention to return to the food festival or recommend it to other people.

Previous researchers have examined the factors that affect the levels of festival attendees' satisfaction and their loyalty towards festivals. Lee et al. (2008) concluded that controllable environmental characteristics, such as food quality and planned program content, affect attendees' emotions including their satisfaction and loyalty towards festivals. Saleh and Ryan (1993) discovered that festival program content was the most crucial factor in attracting tourists to a festival. Crompton and Love (1995) found that the ambience of the environment, source of information on the site, comfortable amenities, parking and interaction with vendors were the most important factors. In addition, some researchers have argued that the size of a festival may influence its popularity. Large-scale festivals and events can better help to position a host city as an international tourist destination and facilitate and support other touristic activities after the event (Yeoman et al., 2004). Lee et al. (2008) also argued that festivals that combine food, drink and music are often able to create a playful consumption environment.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research objectives

The present research aimed to compare visitors' perceptions of the event experience with regard to the selected demographic characteristics of the respondents. In particular, the role of gender and visitors' country of residence was evaluated in the empirical stage of the research.

2.2. Research instrument

The research instrument was divided into five parts, comprising four main research constructs (event atmospherics, respondents' emotions, respondents' event satisfaction, and respondents' event loyalty) and respondents' demographic characteristics. Multiple-item scales were adopted for measuring each construct. All measures were derived from previous literature and modified according to the context of the present research.

Measures for event atmospherics were adopted from the literature on service environment (Bitner, 1992; Lee et al., 2008) and the literature relating to festivals (Baker and Crompton, 2000). The construct was divided in three dimensions, namely ambience, layout/design and service encounter/social interaction. A total of 22 items were used to

measure event atmospherics, with a scale ranging from “very poor” (as 1) to “excellent” (as 7).

Respondents’ emotions were measured with six basic emotions proposed by Shaver et al. (1987). A 7-point scale with anchors “never” (as 1) and “very often” (as 7) was utilized to measure these items.

Eight items for respondents’ event satisfaction were adopted from Oliver’s (1980, 1997) evaluative set of satisfaction measures. The level of agreement with these items was rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (as 1) to “strongly agree” (as 7).

Respondents’ event loyalty was assessed by adopting measures suggested by Jones and Taylor (2007). The construct consisted of twelve items, grouped in four dimensions (repurchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay more, and strength of preference). Items were measured with a 7-point Likert scale with anchors “strongly disagree” (as 1) and “strongly agree” (as 7).

Finally, the fifth part of the research instrument was designed to gather demographic characteristics of the respondents. These included gender, age, number of previous visits, level of education, country of residence, marital status, number of people in group, and length of stay.

2.3. Data collection procedure

Data were collected using an on-site survey, conducted in December 2017 and January 2018. In order to ensure sample representativeness, the questionnaires were randomly administered to visitors at various sites at the Zagreb Christmas Market. Each potential respondent was asked whether he or she was willing to participate in the survey. The questionnaires were collected on the site as soon as they were completed.

2.4. Data analysis

Data was analyzed using statistical program SPSS 23.0. The data analysis included descriptive and bivariate statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics was used to examine the demographic profile of the respondents, and to empirically evaluate event atmospherics, respondents’ emotions, respondents’ event satisfaction, and respondents’ event loyalty. The independent samples t-test was performed to determine the significance of differences between the scores in each construct regarding the respondents’ gender and place of residence.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Respondents' profile

The sample consisted of 107 respondents, mostly domestic visitors (86 per cent). There were more females (64.5 per cent) than males (35.5 per cent), approximately 32 years of age. More than half of them have visited the Zagreb Christmas Market three or more times (52.3 per cent). In terms of education, most of the respondents completed secondary school (41.1 per cent) or university (32.7 per cent). The main information source regarding the Christmas Market was friends and relatives (58.9 per cent), followed by TV/radio commercials (55.1 per cent), and the Internet and social media (50.5 per cent). Most of the respondents in the sample were married (38.3 per cent) or single (37.4 per cent), visited the event in a group of 3 to 5 people (43.9 per cent), and stayed more than three days at the location (43.9 per cent).

3.2. The comparison of construct scores with regard to the selected respondent demographic characteristics

The results of descriptive and bivariate analyses are presented next. Firstly, the comparison in the mean scores of event's atmospherics between male and female respondents, and between domestic and foreign ones are shown.

Table 1: The comparison of event's atmospherics scores

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
<i>Ambience</i>						
Availability of activities/programmes for all ages	5.00 (1.394)	5.74 (1.024)	-3.091*	5.43 (1.257)	5.80 (0.789)	-0.912
Quality of entertainment	5.24 (1.480)	5.52 (1.256)	-1.022	5.38 (1.374)	5.40 (1.075)	-0.044
Uniqueness of themed activities/programs	4.86 (1.530)	5.28 (1.247)	-1.490	5.10 (1.399)	5.10 (0.994)	-0.005
Availability of types of food/refreshments	5.16 (1.590)	5.42 (1.528)	-0.817	5.26 (1.596)	5.80 (1.135)	-1.038
Quality of food/refreshments	4.54 (1.660)	5.43 (1.334)	-3.016*	5.02 (1.519)	5.70 (1.567)	-1.304
Availability of various souvenirs/products	4.49 (1.644)	5.14 (1.546)	-2.045**	4.86 (1.628)	5.20 (1.619)	-0.630
Feeling of safety on site	6.11 (1.173)	6.03 (1.124)	0.336	6.00 (1.186)	6.60 (0.516)	-2.929**
Affordable	4.22 (1.357)	4.75 (1.418)	-1.887	4.42 (1.424)	5.30 (0.675)	-3.370**
<i>Layout/design</i>						
Visually appealing decorations	5.35 (1.844)	6.01 (1.207)	-2.230*	5.73 (1.549)	6.10 (1.101)	-0.738

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
Easy access to parking lots	3.28 (1.907)	3.97 (1.861)	-1.791	3.67 (1.830)	4.10 (2.644)	-0.677
Availability of restrooms	3.81 (1.704)	3.99 (1.883)	-0.480	3.77 (1.798)	5.33 (1.871)	-2.398*
Availability of proper signs for site directions	4.16 (1.642)	5.12 (1.441)	- 3.089**	4.68 (1.598)	5.60 (1.430)	-1.742
Enough available information (e.g. event programmes, food venues, etc.)	4.16 (1.756)	5.42 (1.322)	- 4.153**	4.84 (1.633)	5.90 (0.994)	-2.013*
Convenient access to food/event venues	5.46 (1.406)	5.87 (1.212)	-1.570	5.62 (1.341)	6.50 (0.527)	-2.051*
Cleanliness of the site	5.08 (1.479)	5.61 (1.153)	-2.030*	5.37 (1.298)	6.10 (0.876)	-2.370*
Safe and well-maintained equipment and facilities	5.30 (1.222)	5.62 (1.072)	-1.420	5.40 (1.139)	6.30 (0.823)	-2.419*
<i>Service encounter/Social interaction</i>						
Acceptable crowd level	5.05 (1.598)	5.32 (1.430)	-0.843	5.15 (1.526)	5.70 (1.160)	-1.099
Attentive staff who willingly respond to my requests	5.43 (1.463)	5.68 (1.343)	-0.862	5.53 (1.418)	5.78 (1.093)	-0.503
Friendly and courteous staff	5.62 (1.534)	5.91 (1.290)	-1.029	5.75 (1.403)	6.11 (1.269)	-0.742
Staff's willingness to help visitors	5.49 (1.484)	5.94 (1.301)	-1.619	5.75 (1.434)	5.89 (0.928)	-0.290
Knowledgeable staff in response to my requests	5.24 (1.402)	5.82 (1.304)	-2.121*	5.52 (1.401)	6.20 (0.919)	-1.504
Availability of prompt services	5.11 (1.487)	5.35 (1.464)	-0.796	5.21 (1.486)	5.50 (1.434)	-0.595

Note: values in parentheses are standard deviations; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01
 Source: Authors

As noted in Table 1, the mean scores of male and female respondents ranged from 3.28 to 6.11 and from 3.97 to 6.03, respectively. Both groups of respondents rated with the lowest score the item “easy access to parking lots”, while the highest score was given to the item “feeling of safety on site”.

The analysis of difference in event’s atmospheric scores between males and females indicated higher scores in the female sample. Only for one item (“feeling of safety on site”) were the scores higher in the male sample. However, the results showed that only in 8 out of 22 items were significant differences found between male and female respondents. These items were “availability of activities/programmes for all ages”,

“quality of food/refreshments”, “availability of various souvenirs/products”, “visually appealing decorations”, “availability of proper signs for site directions”, “enough available information (e.g. event programmes, food venues, etc.)”, “cleanliness of the site”, and “knowledgeable staff in response to my requests”. Female respondents gave significantly higher score to these items.

Furthermore, in the context of domestic and foreign respondents, the mean scores ranged from 3.67 to 6.00 and from 4.10 to 6.60, respectively. Both groups of the respondents rated with the lowest score the item “easy access to parking lots”, while the highest score was given to the item “feeling of safety on site”.

The analysis of difference in event atmospheric scores between domestic and foreign visitors indicated higher scores in the foreign sample. However, the results showed that only in 7 out of 22 items were the significant differences between these two groups of respondents. These results indicated that foreign respondents gave significantly higher scores to the following items: “feeling of safety on site”, “affordable”, “availability of restrooms”, “enough available information (e.g. event programmes, food venues, etc.)”, “convenient access to food/event venues”, “cleanliness of the site”, and “safe and well-maintained equipment and facilities”.

Next, the significance of difference in emotions scores regarding the gender and visitors’ country of residence are presented.

Table 2: The comparison of respondents’ emotions scores

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
Loved	4.32 (2.056)	5.32 (1.419)	-2.635*	4.90 (1.795)	5.60 (1.075)	-1.204
Joyful	5.14 (1.494)	5.94 (1.056)	-2.918**	5.61 (1.326)	5.80 (0.919)	-0.444
Surprised	4.24 (1.739)	5.19 (1.559)	-2.857**	4.80 (1.684)	5.10 (1.729)	-0.533
Angry	2.25 (1.779)	1.77 (1.275)	1.423	2.02 (1.553)	1.20 (0.422)	3.870**
Sad	1.65 (1.252)	1.26 (0.563)	1.801	1.41 (0.923)	1.11 (0.333)	2.032*
Fearful	1.41 (0.829)	1.54 (0.953)	-0.701	1.48 (0.897)	1.60 (1.075)	-0.407

Note: values in parentheses are standard deviations; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$
 Source: Authors

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of male and female respondents for the emotions construct ranged from 1.41 to 5.14 and from 1.26 to 5.94, respectively. Both males and females reported that they mostly felt joyful. On the other hand, they did not feel sad and fearful.

The analysis of difference in respondents' emotions scores between males and females indicated higher scores in the female sample. Only for two variables ("angry" and "sad") were the scores higher in the male sample. However, the results showed that in 3 out of 6 variables significant differences were found. According to these results, females felt significantly more loved, joyful and surprised than males.

On the other hand, mean scores of domestic and foreign respondents for the emotions construct ranged from 1.41 to 5.61 and from 1.11 to 5.80, respectively. Both groups reported that they mostly felt joyful. On the other hand, they did not feel sad and fearful.

The analysis of difference in respondents' emotions scores between domestic and foreign respondents indicated higher scores in the foreign sample than in the domestic sample. Only for two variables ("angry" and "sad") were the scores higher in the domestic sample. However, the results showed that significant differences were found in only 2 out of 6 variables. According to these results, domestic respondents felt significantly more angry and sad than foreigners.

Table 3 presents the comparison of satisfaction scores between male and female respondents, and domestic and foreign ones.

Table 3: The comparison of respondents' event satisfaction scores

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
My choice to visit this Christmas market was a wise one.	5.27 (1.539)	6.18 (1.132)	-3.148**	5.83 (1.419)	6.11 (0.782)	-0.592
I am sure it was the right decision to visit this Christmas market.	5.54 (1.538)	6.25 (1.077)	-2.484*	5.96 (1.358)	6.20 (0.789)	-0.555
My experience at this Christmas market was what I expected.	5.81 (1.101)	6.01 (1.194)	-0.860	5.92 (1.170)	6.10 (1.287)	-0.448
This was one of the best Christmas markets I have ever visited.	4.89 (1.807)	5.46 (1.596)	-1.679	5.21 (1.707)	5.60 (1.713)	-0.692
My experience at this Christmas market was exactly what I needed.	4.62 (1.460)	5.25 (1.705)	-1.895	4.92 (1.679)	5.56 (1.333)	-1.094
I am satisfied with my decision to visit this Christmas market.	5.62 (1.341)	6.19 (1.167)	-2.262*	5.90 (1.293)	6.60 (0.699)	-1.675
This Christmas market made me feel happy.	4.78 (1.618)	5.71 (1.373)	-3.108**	5.32 (1.526)	6.00 (1.563)	-1.345
I really enjoyed myself at this Christmas market.	5.19 (1.543)	6.01 (1.309)	-2.890**	5.63 (1.435)	6.17 (1.606)	-1.117

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01
 Source: Authors

As shown in Table 3, the event satisfaction scores were very high and ranged from 4.62 to 5.81 for male respondents, and from 5.25 to 6.25 for female respondents. Generally, respondents were fairly satisfied with their overall event experience.

The analysis of difference in respondents' satisfaction scores between males and females indicated higher scores in the female sample than in the male sample. In addition, significant differences were found in 5 out of 8 variables. According to these results, females were significantly more satisfied than males.

On the other hand, mean scores of domestic and foreign respondents for the satisfaction construct ranged from 4.92 to 5.96 and from 5.56 to 6.60, respectively. Thus, both groups were highly satisfied with their overall event experience.

The analysis of difference in respondents' satisfaction scores between domestic and foreign respondents indicated higher scores in the foreign sample. However, the analysis showed that these differences were not statistically significant.

The comparison of respondents' event loyalty scores regarding the gender and country of residence are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: The comparison of respondents' event loyalty scores

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
<i>Repurchase intention</i>						
I would probably visit this Christmas market again next year.	5.86 (1.517)	6.13 (1.303)	-0.959	6.06 (1.401)	5.80 (1.398)	0.547
If I decided to go to any Christmas market, I would return to this one again.	6.06 (1.305)	5.94 (1.326)	0.423	5.99 (1.328)	5.90 (1.370)	0.200
It is possible that I will visit this Christmas market in the future.	6.00 (1.328)	6.06 (1.256)	-0.221	6.01 (1.320)	6.10 (0.994)	-0.206
<i>Positive word-of-mouth</i>						
I would say positive things about this Christmas market to other people.	5.29 (1.743)	6.13 (1.183)	-2.558*	5.77 (1.506)	6.50 (0.707)	-2.662*
I would recommend others visit this Christmas market.	5.40 (1.769)	6.12 (1.216)	-2.153*	5.80 (1.501)	6.70 (0.675)	-3.388**
I would encourage friends and relatives to go to this Christmas market.	5.09 (1.946)	6.00 (1.172)	-2.552*	5.56 (1.580)	6.60 (0.699)	-2.060*
<i>Willingness to pay more</i>						
I do not mind paying a little bit more to attend this Christmas market.	3.91 (1.900)	4.61 (1.753)	-1.833	4.28 (1.878)	5.25 (1.035)	-2.337*
I am willing to pay more for	3.79 (2.019)	3.88 (1.863)	-0.237	3.84 (1.951)	3.70 (1.703)	0.213

Item	Gender			Visitors		
	Male	Female	T-value	Domestic	Foreign	T-value
entertainment/food at this Christmas market.						
Price is not an important factor in my decision to revisit this Christmas market.	4.34 (2.014)	4.03 (2.052)	0.736	4.02 (2.044)	5.33 (1.936)	-1.842
<i>Strength of preference</i>						
I would prefer going to this Christmas market, rather than visiting other.	4.82 (1.800)	4.59 (1.847)	0.612	4.64 (1.854)	4.70 (1.829)	-0.096
I would rank this Christmas market as the most enjoyable one amongst the others I have visited.	4.46 (1.597)	4.90 (1.631)	-1.306	4.67 (1.656)	5.30 (1.418)	-1.162
This Christmas market provides the best entertainment among the alternatives I have visited.	4.46 (1.442)	4.97 (1.701)	-1.525	4.63 (1.652)	6.00 (0.943)	-2.562*

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors

According to the results presented in Table 4, loyalty scores ranged from 3.79 to 6.06 for males, and from 3.88 to 6.13 for females. Generally, respondents displayed positive loyalty to the event.

The analysis of difference in respondents' loyalty scores between males and females indicated higher scores in the female sample for most of the variables. However, these differences were statistically significant for only three variables, meaning that females were significantly more likely to spread positive word of mouth than males.

On the other hand, mean scores of domestic and foreign respondents for the loyalty construct ranged from 3.84 to 6.06 and from 3.70 to 6.70, respectively. Thus, both groups revealed positive loyalty to the event.

The analysis of difference in respondents' loyalty scores between domestic and foreign respondents indicated higher scores in the foreign sample for most of the variables. However, the analysis showed that these differences are statistically significant for only five variables. These results imply that foreigners are significantly more likely to spread positive word of mouth and pay a bit more, and they perceive the event as being the best entertainment among the alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Events like Christmas Markets have emerged as city branding strategies, and have become one of the major tools in winter tourism development in cities and towns, particularly in the continental area. They grow in popularity, attracting different types of visitors each year. The present research aimed to compare visitors' perceptions of the Zagreb Christmas Market experience with regard to the selected demographic characteristics of the respondents. In particular, the role of gender and visitors' country of residence was evaluated. Visitors' event experience and experience outcomes were measured using four constructs, namely event's atmospherics, respondents' emotions, respondents' event satisfaction, and respondents' event loyalty.

The results of scores comparison showed that in the majority of event's atmospheric items there were no significant differences in perceptions between male and female respondents, as well as between domestic and foreign respondents. This implies that these groups of visitors have similar perceptions regarding the Zagreb Christmas Market atmospherics attributes. After they experienced various activities and locations at the Christmas Market, females felt significantly more loved, joyful and surprised than males, while domestic respondents felt significantly more angry and sad than foreigners. Females were significantly more satisfied with the Christmas market experience than males.

However, there were no significantly different satisfaction levels between domestic and foreign respondents, meaning that both groups of visitors were similarly satisfied. Although the majority of variables in the loyalty construct are not significantly different between males and females and domestic and foreign respondents, it is worth noting that females and foreigners are significantly more likely to spread positive word of mouth. In addition, foreigners are significantly more likely to pay a bit more and in comparison with domestic visitors, they perceived the Zagreb Christmas market as providing the best entertainment among the alternatives.

These findings can offer important implications to event and festival managers, as well as marketing organizations. Feeling of safety on site is important atmospherics item that contributes to positive perception of the event. Furthermore, positive emotions (e. g. joyful feelings) are associated with visitors' experience of the event. Positive word-of-mouth is the most effective way for event's promotion. On the other hand, more attention should be paid to the parking facilities. In addition, the understanding of how different groups of visitor rate event's atmospherics, satisfaction and loyalty, enable managers to develop appropriate segmentation, positioning, and advertising strategies.

However, the present research has several limitations that could lead to recommendations for future research. One such issue is that it takes into account only two demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender and country of residence). Different characteristics might influence visitors' perception in event experience. Accordingly, future research could investigate the role of other demographic characteristics on visitors' event experience.

Another topic deserving attention is particular event's atmospheric attributes. Although a number of these were included as items in the present research, there could be others that are likely to influence visitors' perceptions of the event. Therefore, future investigation should take into consideration additional atmospheric variables.

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