PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH
(in the Balkans)

ISSN 2815-4797 (Print)
ISSN 2815-4800 (Online)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7546/PsyRB.2025.28.02.07

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PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH (IN THE BALKANS)
http://journalofpsychology.org
E-mail: psy_research@abv.bg
Volume 28, No 2, 2025, 183-192

HOW LOCALS EXPERIENCE CULTURE: A STUDY OF COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF VARNA'S CULTURAL CALENDAR

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Abstract. *This study explores the perceptions of local residents in Varna, Bulgaria, toward the city's annual cultural events. In an era where gatherings are increasingly commodified, understanding how locals engage with and interpret these events is vital for sustainable cultural development and effective urban planning. The research integrates psychological theories of perception with event management principles to assess how celebrations influence community identity, social interaction, and urban life. A survey among 183 residents revealed that cultural events are predominantly perceived as opportunities for social bonding and emotional enrichment. Concerts and theatrical performances are the most attended type of events, informational gaps and time constraints remain key barriers to wider participation. Findings indicate that although locals value these events, they often engage with them as passive consumers rather than active contributors. The study highlights the need for improved communication strategies, diversified programming, and more inclusive creative planning. These insights offer practical implications for policymakers and cultural organizers seeking to align events more closely with local needs, values and traditions and foster deeper civic engagement.*

Keywords: Perception, Culture, Cultural events, Consumer behaviour, Tourism.

THE ARTICLE CAN BE CITED AS FOLLOWS:

Filipova, H., Doneva, Y. (2025). How Locals Experience Culture: A Study of Community Perceptions of Varna's Cultural Calendar. *Psychological Research (in the Balkans),* Volume 28, Number 2, 183-192. ISSN 2815-4797 (Print), ISSN 2815-4800 (Online). DOI: https://doi.org/10.7546/PsyRB.2025.28.02.07

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Submitted – 11 July 2025
Revised – 20 October 2025
Published – 30 December 2025

The authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of mass tourism and overconsumption of tourism products, every destination strives to stand out from its competitors. Being different can be achieved in various ways and means. The organization and hosting of events is more than just a business or marketing approach. Events are supported by ideologies, are part of the life of societies, and reflect traditions, customs, and cultural meanings (Moufakkir & Pernecky, 2015). It is precisely through the understanding of these aspects of events that local communities take an active and critical role in presenting them.

Events, as value-laden activities, tell stories: they are mirrors that reveal who we are as a society, as people, and who we would like to become as human beings. Studying the different aspects of events is an invitation to explore the history of specific communities, their values and traditions. (Moufakkir & Pernecky, 2015).

Celebrations can take various forms, including festivals, concerts, art exhibitions, conferences, and theatrical performances. Each type of cultural event offers unique opportunities for interaction and artistic expression, creating spaces where people can share their stories and traditions. On the other hand, local residents play either a passive or active role in organizing these celebrations. They may participate as workers, investors, organizers, hosts, volunteers, or attendees. However, most studies on the image and perception of these events are from the perspective of tourism supply and demand (Lobo, Costa, & Chim-Miki, 2023). The image of destinations or gatherings is usually analysed from the point of view of visitors—guests or tourists—and their evaluation of the attractions. The authors of this article examine annual cultural events from the perspective of local residents and the impact these events leave over time.

Research by Derrett (Derrett, 2003) shows that a sense of community legitimizes the interest in festivals and public events shared by both residents and visitors. Hosts and guests interact based on place and inclusion. Locals act as catalysts in these relationships and use their potential to ensure meaningful communication. On the other hand, the commodification and festivalization of culture in recent years pose a significant threat. The excessive drive for activity leads to the organization of countless events that are unfulfilling or leave no lasting impression.

The focus of this article is the perceptions of local residents regarding the cultural calendar of the city of Varna. The main goal set by the authors is to thoroughly examine the concepts of perception from a psychological point of view and to differentiate the idea of a cultural event. The research methodology includes:

- A survey on how local residents perceive the annual cultural events organized within the city of Varna;
- Comparative analysis and synthesis to identify and trace interrelated processes, events, limitations, and undertaken initiatives.

Some of the important limitations during the research relate to the following: potential subjectivity and a clearly expressed seasonality in preferences of the event calendar.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

LOCALS PERCEPTION

The individual receives knowledge from its surrounding flow of information through all of the 5 senses (Gleitman, Gross, & Reisberg, 2010). At the same time, every person perceives reality differently, because he is influenced by his own needs, wants, values, and experiences. Individuals react according to perceptions, rather than objective reality. Perception can be described as the way we see the world. It is the immediate product of sensation (Phillips, Weisbuch, & Ambady, 2014). Shiffman and Kanuk (Shiffman & Kanuk, 1994) define this term as: "... the process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets stimuli into a relevant ... image of the world." Similarly, Brée (2012) explains perception as "a dynamic process by which the perceiving individual gives meaning to information from his environment". Thus making the person not simply a passive observer, but an active participant.

Brunet (1974) conceptualize that perception interpose between the real world and the behaviour as a type of filter between the transmitter (the environment) and the receiver (the individual). For him the term is a complex phenomenon continually shaped by social interactions and communication. Brunet accentuates on the idea that perception depends on and it is built on many factors. Robbins and Judge (2019) categorise them in tree groups: Factors in the perceiver, factors in the situation, factors in the target. They should be taken into consideration when analysing the different steps of this process.

In the Bulgarian research context, several scholars have explored perception and its social dimensions. For example, Todorov (2017) provides evidence that social perception and first impressions

shape how individuals evaluate and respond to others, underscoring the subjective and interpretative nature of perception. Zografova (2019) examines perception in relation to social identity and intergroup context, highlighting how cultural belonging influences how people interpret social events. Stankova and Vessenska (2015) focus on locals' attitudes toward cultural heritage and festivals, demonstrating that residents perceive such events not only as entertainment but as expressions of identity and shared values. They study perception in the field of risk psychology, confirming that in Bulgaria, perceptual responses are deeply affected by personal, social, and cultural background. Varadzhakova et al. (2024) confirm that in Bulgaria, evaluative responses are strongly influenced by personal, social, and cultural contexts.These contributions help position the study of locals' perception of cultural events within the broader psychological and sociocultural discourse.

Understanding how locals perceive cultural events is important for both the authorities and event organizers. The locals, especially the ones who attend the event, play an important role in this process. Their attitudes are shaped by their perception of various factors such as the type of gathering, its location, pricing, accessibility, diversity, and popularity. It is their capacity as consumers which make them most sensitive to, and aware of change (Negrusa et al., 2016). This is especially true for annual festivals, because residents' recurring participation gives them insight into how these gatherings evolve over time. Unlike tourists, locals tend to assess events in terms of their impact on the community. They view them not only as a form of entertainment but as an expression of collective identity, values, and traditions. The impact and success of an event depends on how people perceive it. If locals see it as meaningful, inclusive and representative, they are more likely to engage, support and promote it.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL EVENTS: THE CASE OF VARNA

It is widely recognized that events, in their various forms and expressions, have often been historically decisive for the social structure of everyday life (Shone & Parry, 2001). According to Goldblatt (Goldblatt, 1990), the human need to celebrate is as essential — if not more so — than physical needs. Other scholars have emphasized that events function as channels for expressing and consolidating a sense of community (Delanty et al., 2011) They explore the complex social ties formed during community festivals. These events often create short, intense, or "in-between" experiences (Turner, 1974; Getz, 2010; 2012). Research also highlights how festivals build bridging and bonding social capital (Wilks, 2011). Local events often connect family and friends, strengthen ties to place, boost community pride, and open up new social links beyond familiar circles (Black, 2016). These connections are seen as vital for both internal and external balance — crucial for socially sustainable communities (Macnab, Thomas, & Grosvenor, 2010). From this perspective, events are not merely business phenomena; rather, they are fundamental to the transformation and flourishing of society, engaging deeply with psychological, social, and cultural dimensions.

As defined by Britannica Academic (Arbor) culture encompasses the way of life of a group of people — including behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols — adopted often unconsciously and transmitted across generations through communication and imitation. Culture, therefore, is symbolic communication. Research on culture and personality tends to emphasize the processes through which individual identity is shaped within the context of the cultural environment. This leads to the concept of cultural identity: how individuals self-identify and are perceived within systems of cultural norms, values, symbols, and belonging. The world's richness lies in this diversity, as each society carries a unique imprint. Many destinations, recognizing the competitive advantage of authenticity, deliberately highlight this identity.

UNESCO frames cultural events (such as festivals and celebrations) within the broader domain of "performing arts and festive expressions", under the category of "social practices, rituals, and festive events." According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (Francois-Xavier Freland):

- Festivals are defined as themed public celebrations;
- They fall under the category of production and celebration in cultural statistics;
- Social and ritual events are described as habitual activities that structure community life, performed either in public or private, and reinforcing group identity.

In this sense, a cultural event may be defined as:

- A public or communal act (festival, ritual, celebration) organized around a specific theme;
- An expression of culture or identity that affirms and transmits values, traditions, and collective memory;

- A structured, recurring practice that shapes social or personal life;
- An event that may range from small and informal to large-scale and institutionalized.

Cultural events are designed to entertain and engage either broad or niche audiences. They serve as significant celebrations centered around various art forms, cultural expressions, and shared values. These events may span multiple genres, including performing arts, musicals, photography, literature, and more.

This study focuses on live, themed annual events held in the city of Varna, examining both their spatial distribution and socio-cultural significance. Each type of celebration requires a suitable physical space, tailored technical implementation, and a strategic dissemination approach. While such events are typically organized by cultural institutions or corporate entities, the cultural sector also includes specialized event production companies. The cultural calendar of Varna includes major celebrations dedicated to music, contemporary and traditional dance, theater, literature, film, culinary arts.

Known as Bulgaria's Maritime Capital, Varna benefits from a favourable geographic location and natural attractions that draw thousands of visitors annually. According to the latest data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) for the Varna region, the demographic and economic profile underlines both opportunities and challenges for cultural-event development. As of December 31 2023, the population stood at 434 191, down from 468 614 in 2021, reflecting a continuing population decline. In the tourism sector, the number of overnight stays recovered from 1 927 181 in 2020 to 4 565 334 in 2023, while accommodation establishments increased from 391 to 411 over the same period. Together, these figures suggest that although seasonality and demographic pressures persist, Varna continues to attract visitor flows and maintain a viable economic base for cultural-event offerings.

The region also demonstrates a comparatively high level of educational attainment and cultural awareness. According to NSI data, more than 30 percent of residents aged 25–64 hold a tertiary qualification, while the city hosts several major universities that sustain a large population of students and academic professionals. This educated demographic not only provides a receptive audience for diverse cultural programming but also contributes to the creation, organization, and promotion of cultural initiatives. The combination of economic vitality, a well-educated populace, and active youth communities enhances Varna's capacity for sustained cultural engagement and supports its evolution as a dynamic cultural and educational centre along the Black Sea coast.

However, the local climate does not support year-round outdoor activities, leading to pronounced seasonality that influences the rhythm of urban life. To accommodate cultural activities, the city has developed a variety of both indoor and outdoor venues. One of Varna's most iconic cultural spaces is the Sea Garden, established in the mid-19th century by Anton Novak and also called the "green heart" of the city. Today, it is one of the main centers for events and among the busiest areas. It hosts numerous celebrations at locations such as the Summer Theater, Shell Stage, and expansive open-air lawns. These are among the most popular and well-used spaces in the central part of the city. Other major green public places include Vazrazhdane Park and Asparuhovo Park, which host annual initiatives. Both offer a versatile open-air space with nicely designed rest areas, alleys lined with ornamental trees and shrubs, plus adjacent sports and playground facilities.

The urban beach also plays a significant role in the city's cultural program, offering performance spaces and venues popular for both organized events and spontaneous cultural expressions. Well-known locations for live music include Street Food Park Varna, Cubo, and Menthol. Their event program is often harmonized, as they share a largely overlapping audience - culturally active urban dwellers.

Another vibrant cultural hub is the Sea Station or Port of Varna, which features cruise ship docks and a yacht marina operated by the "Port Varna" Yacht Club. The marina serves small vessels and regularly hosts regattas and sailing events. The area is spacious, and over the years has hosted large concerts and events, alongside restaurants and an amusement park.

Independence Square, with its spectacular singing fountains reaching up to 41 meters, is another major venue. It regularly hosts parades, processions, theatrical and musical performances, and carnival celebrations—transforming the square into an open-air stage.

Key indoor venues for cultural events include:

- Festival and Congress Center – Varna;
- Varna Sports Hall;
- Stoyan Bachvarov Drama Theater;
- Bulgaran Theater;
- City Art Gallery;
- Varna Archaeological Museum;
- ReBonkers and others.

These spots host events year-round, including concerts, performances, sports competitions, and both national and international festivals.

Despite the variety of places, over 80% of major events take place in Varna's central urban zone. This spatial concentration results in several logistical and urban challenges, including overcrowding, noise and light pollution, environmental strain, and conflicts between residents and tourists (Marinov et al, 2020). The absence of sustainable crowd-management strategies during festivals has been identified as a risk factor in annual reports from Varna Municipality.

Varna's cultural and entertainment calendar is among the most vibrant in Bulgaria. The city serves as a stage for diverse cultures, fostering creativity and artistic expression. More than 150 events are held annually, with over 40 of international scope. Notable events include:

- The Varna Summer International Music Festival (since 1926);
- The International Ballet Competition (since 1964);
- The Love is Folly International Film Festival (since 1993);
- The Golden Rose Bulgarian Film Festival (since 1961);
- The Varna Summer Theater Festival (since 1993).

In addition to these, numerous jazz, ethnic, and electronic music festivals contribute to the city's cultural diversity. Recently, music and gastronomy festivals have gained significant popularity, such as:

- Street Food & Music Festival;
- Gourmet Fest Varna;
- Wine and Food Festival;
- Urban Wine Fest;
- Asparuhovo Sings and Dances, and others.

These events form a cultural landscape where the global and the local are in constant dialogue. While enriching, this dynamic can sometimes lead to a loss of cultural specificity or destination identity. Visitor profiles are highly diverse, reflecting a range of market segments: youth, families, culinary enthusiasts, and seekers of unique cultural experiences and more.

The governance of Varna's cultural life is decentralized and carried out through a collaborative network of municipal authorities, cultural institutions, private organizers, and civic organizations. Among the key supporters are The Culture Fund of Varna Municipality, The Ministry of Culture, The Theater and Music Production Center– Varna. The Association for Alternative Culture and Art, among others.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in two periods between 10.05.2025 to 10.06.2025 and 28.09.2025 to 15.10.2025. A total number of 190 questionnaires were distributed of which 183 were valid. The participants are all residents of the Municipality of Varna. The data was collected primarily through two methods – via social media and an email campaign with a link to the survey. The questionnaire is in Bulgarian and consists of 20 questions - 19 closed, from which 7 scale questions and 1 open question. They are organized in three main categories: 1) Habits of visiting local cultural events, 2) Perception of local cultural events in Varna, 3) Demographic characteristics of the respondents. The first group of questions is dedicated to analysing the different habits of the respondents towards cultural events. How often do they visit, with whom, how do they gather information, what type of gatherings do they prefer and others. The second group of questions represent the main body of the survey and explore the perceptions of the local residents towards the annual cultural events in their city. Likert's scale questions are mainly used in this part. The last section gathers information regarding the respondents profile including age, gender, status and level of education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of the main demographic characteristics of the participants in the survey is presented in the table below.

The respondents are almost equally represented in gender, with females being 9.9 % more. The sample is composed mostly by middle-aged individuals, with the largest group (33.9%) being between 36–45 years. Over half of the respondents are either married or in couples with children. Additionally over 55% of the respondents hold a master's degree. This research scope represents a relatively balanced group of people who typically engage in cultural events.

Local residents attend different cultural events relatively frequently: 35.5% (65 out of 183) participate every few weeks, 27.3% every few months. Respondents like to keep themselves engaged at least several times throughout the year. Only five individuals doesn't attend such happenings. This indicates

Table 1. The sample characteristics (N = 183)

Characteristics		Number	%
Gender	Male	78	42.6
	Female	96	52.5
	Other	4	2.2
	Don't want to disclose	5	2.7
Age	Up to 18 years old	2	1.1
	19-25 years old	17	9.3
	26-35 years old	38	20.8
	36-45 years old	62	33.9
	46-55 years old	34	18.6
	56-65 years old	16	8.7
	66 and more years old	14	7.7
Family status	Single	43	23.5
	Couple without children	22	12
	Couple with children	30	16.4
	Married without children	12	6.6
	Married with children	64	35
	Other	12	6.6
Level of Education	Secondary school	11	6
	Bachelor's degree	46	25.1
	Master's degree	102	55.7
	PhD	20	10.9
	Other	4	2.2

that cultural events are a recurring component of local leisure activities. These gatherings are most commonly shared with family members (124 out of 183) and friends (103 out of 183). Significantly fewer participants visit them with colleagues or alone. The respondents perceive the cultural events in Varna as a form of celebration and reinforcing social bonds. They want to experience them in the company of individuals that they consider close. This underlines the emotional and relational significance of such gatherings.

The main sources for gathering information about the upcoming festivals, concerts, exhibitions and others are interpersonal communication with family and friends (i.e., world- of -mouth) and through social media. The official site www.visit.varna.bg is placed in last position, only 10.9% of the respondents perceived it as a source of viable information. This result indicates a significant gap in the municipality's communication strategy. To address this, the Municipality of Varna should consider revising and updating its official tourism website to enhance its usability, visibility, and relevance. This step can improve public perception and engagement with the annual local events.

The most frequently ate

nded types of events In Varna are concerts, followed closely by theatrical performances. Film screenings rank third in popularity. Exhibitions, festivals, and dance performances attract fewer visitors. Literary readings and other events are the least attended. These results can be interpreted that more mainstream and entertainment-oriented gatherings draw higher attendance, while other types requiring more focused cultural engagement tend to attract smaller, more specific audiences.

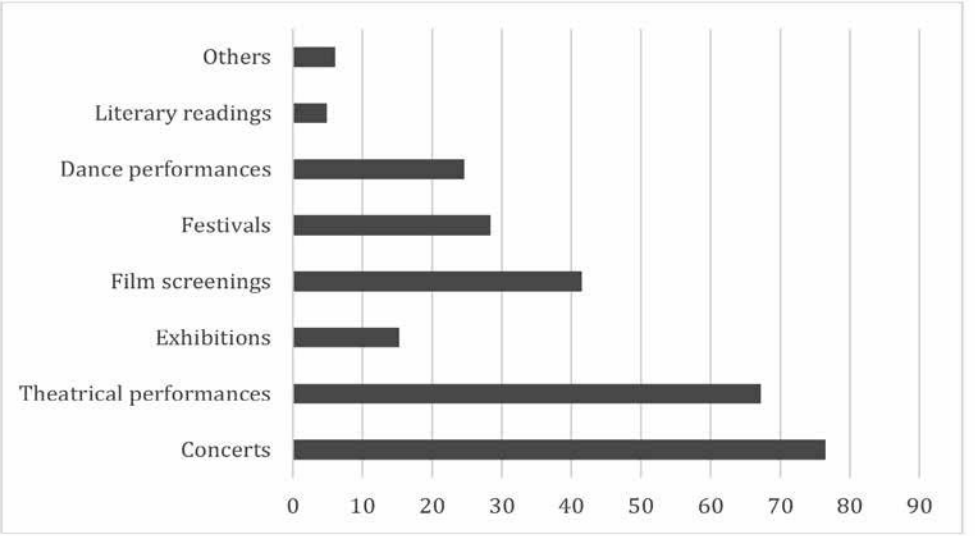


Figure 1. Most frequented events by type (choose up to 3 responses)

Table 2. Perception of various annual cultural events in the city of Varna

Annual Cultural Event	I have attended this cultural event	I know about this cultural event, but never attended it	I have never heard about this cultural event
International Music Festival „Varna Summer“	89	91	3
International Theater Festival „Varna Summer“	79	93	11
Golden Rose Bulgarian Feature Film Festival	47	117	19
CineLibri – book-film festival	37	96	50
International Ballet Competition – Varna (Varna IBC)	58	85	40
Varna Jazz Fest Festival	48	119	15
„Asparuhovo sings and dances“	69	102	13
International Festival „Sea and Memories“	8	94	81
QUARANTINE International Short Film Festival	48	81	54
„May Choir Competition“	23	69	91
July Morning – sunrise celebration with music on the harbor/beaches	81	79	23
International Film Festival „Love is Folly“	107	63	13
International Folklore Festival	59	95	30
International Music Festival „Varna Summer“	111	53	19
International Literary Festival VARNA LIT	23	94	66
Street Food & Art Festival	115	52	15
RADAR Festival Beyond Music	16	75	92
Night of Literature	42	102	39
European night of museums and galleries Varna	146	36	1

Annual events are perceived mostly as social activities with friends and family (107 of 183) and as a place to have fun (89 of 183). Other notable motivations include the possibility to see a favorite performer, enrich their culture and learn new things. The participants were asked to disclose the main reason that prevents them from attending such gatherings more often. In the first place they cited the lack of time. In second place is the absence of information for a specific event and inconvenient hours or date of the event. In third place are the high ticket prices and lastly the inaccessibility of the venue. The results of the survey indicate that practical and informational barriers are more impactful than financial or logistical ones.

The participants in the survey had to choose which factor influenced their decision the most when going to cultural events. For 42.6% of them it is the featured performer, in second place is the type of the event (21.3%), followed by time and date (15.3%). Recommendations from others (10.4%) weren't perceived as important. Locals also don't consider the price of the ticket among the main factors influencing their decisions (6.6%), as well as location (2.2%) and other commodities (1.6%). The participants in the survey perceive cost and comfort as a less essential factor influencing their decision.

Question 10 is dedicated to the participant's familiarity with 19 annual local cultural events.

Based on the results of the survey the most visited annual cultural event is the European night of museums and galleries Varna with 79.8% attendance form the respondents. After that is the relatively new Street Food & Art Festival (62,8%) and the International Music Festival "Varna Summer" (60.7%). The least attended event is the International Festival "Sea and Memories", only 8 people have visited. People are overall familiar with most of the happenings nevertheless, they choose to not visit them. The locals have less information or are unfamiliar with the RADAR Festival Beyond Music (50.3% don't know it), the "May Choir Competition" and the International Festival "Sea and Memories". These results highlight a potential gap in the marketing campaign or the way locals perceive it.

According to the SPSS analysis the respondents have rated the statement: "After visiting the cultural events in Varna, I am emotionally charged and inspired!" highest, with a mean of 4.27 and a mode of 5. This shows that locals have a strong positive association with such gatherings. "I recommend the cultural events in the city to tourists!" was also positively viewed (mean = 3.85, mode = 5), suggesting that residents consider the happenings as representative for the city of Varna. The "Overall experience" received a mean of 3.83, pointing to general satisfaction among participants. The statement "The events in Varna reflect the cultural identity of the city!" has a mean of 3.45, and a mode of 3. This shows that the respondents don't necessarily perceive these gatherings as aligning with their culture, values and traditions. "Access for all" had a lower mean of 3.35, indicating that inclusivity or accessibility may be areas needing improvement when creating future events in the city. The respondents have given the lowest mean (2.66) and mode (1), to the statement involving them to be volunteers in the organization of cultural events. This shows a limited motivation to further engage in these gatherings. The respondents perceive themselves mostly as consumers, rather than active cultural contributors. Therefore, organizers should seek meaningful and creative ways to engage more with locals.

The responses to the final open-ended question provide valuable insights into the preferences and needs of the city's residents. While it is evident that Varna has a well-established alternative music scene, the absence of a stadium capable of hosting large-scale concerts featuring internationally renowned artists remains a significant limitation. The survey results indicate a strong public demand for major events, such as pop and rock concerts, as well as for the revival of previously held initiatives like MTV Presents Varna Beach.

Table 3. Mean and Mode to Likert's scale questions

		allexperience	culturalidentity	accessall	positiveemotion	volunteer	recctourist
N	Valid	183	183	183	183	183	183
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.83	3.45	3.35	4.27	2.66	3.85
Mode		4	3	3	5	1	5

CONCLUSION

Attending events and festivals involves a complex and multi-layered context of co-creating value and meaning. An in-depth study of how these celebrations are perceived by local residents can have important implications for establishing best practices, marketing applications, and research. In an increasingly globalized and digital world, it is clear that cultural events must adapt to the changing needs of their audiences. In addition to promoting sustainability, culture, art, and gastronomy, they must also provide an emotional experience for visitors—engaging them even before they reach the destination, facilitating access to cultural heritage, and being smartly positioned in time.

Varna is a famous tourist city on the Black Sea, nevertheless, the success of a festival or event largely depends on the local residents, who are the main consumers of such gatherings. The residents are still the primary audience, and their perceptions are a key criterion for the fulfilment of any activity. Beyond attracting locals, cultural events can also have significant global impact. By involving artists and creators from different parts of the world, intercultural dialogue can be fostered, contributing to mutual understanding and collaboration between nations and cultures. This could help to create an environment of respect and openness, where ideas and experiences can be freely shared.

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