

# **Exploring Spectators' Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions: The Case of World Rally Championship Croatia**

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Abstract: This study focuses on the WRC Croatia Rally, currently the largest sporting event in Croatia. The purpose of this research was to assess spectators' satisfaction with the event and their intention to revisit the event in the future. A total of 727 respondents participated in an online survey conducted in April 2024. The findings indicate that respondents were highly satisfied with the general appearance of the event, while the lowest-rated aspects were related to the sanitary facilities and the entertainment in the area. When evaluating the destination, respondents were satisfied with the friendliness of the hosts and the climate, while the main area of dissatisfaction was the price level. Importantly, most respondents expressed a strong intention to re-visit the event in the future. Overall, the research shows that visitor satisfaction is relatively high, though some areas could be improved to enhance the spectator's overall experience.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

International mega-sport events, like the World Rally Championship (WRC), are efficient and powerful tools for attracting various groups of participants to a destination, such as competitors and their supporting teams, event organizers, technical staff, volunteers, official representatives of international sports organizations, media representatives as well as massive numbers of spectators from all over the world. For that reason, such large events are recognized as an important source of demand for inbound tourism and a large income generator for the local economy.

One of the main aspects of successful event organization is to achieve and maintain a high level of visitor' satisfaction, which boosts the local economy and stimulates repeat visits to the event, but also to the hosting destination itself (regardless of the purpose of repeat visits). Although the level of visitors' satisfaction is one of the key determinants of the positive economic impacts of the event on the host destination, research efforts focused on spectators' satisfaction with large sports events are still scarce (Van Leeuwen et al., 2002, p. 99), especially in motorsport mega events like the WRC.

Since 1973, the WRC has been an international rallying series owned and governed by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) (World Rally Championship, 2024). The 2024 edition of the WRC was spread across four continents and 13 countries, including Croatia. The WRC Croatia Rally took place in April 2024 (for the fourth time in a row) gathering around 450,000 spectators, 68 competing crews and their supporting teams, the Organizing team of more than 2,000 people consisting of the core staff, technicians, scrutineers, judges and volunteers, including also journalists, invited guests, business partners, professional service providers, etc. (WRC Croatia Rally, 2024).

The target population in this research were the spectators and the focus was on their level of satisfaction with the event as well as the destination hosting the WRC Croatia Rally. Apart from the visitors'

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satisfaction, the survey was also aimed at discovering their intention to re-visit the WRC Croatia Rally and the destination in the future. A secondary purpose of this research was to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the Croatian edition of the WRC in the eyes of a spectator so that the organizers and tourism destination management can get a clearer picture of how visitors experience and what they expect from this sports event.

# 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Achieving a high level of spectators' satisfaction is essential for the success of events, but also an increasingly difficult task for the organizers. This is due to the increasingly demanding visitors as well as growing competition among large events. In general, spectators will be satisfied if the service performance is above expectations (Alguacil et al., 2018). Accordingly, models are being developed that can be used to measure customer (spectator or visitor) satisfaction. Customer satisfaction can be defined as a "post-purchase psychological status representing the evaluation of the usage experience of a product/service which depends on several elements: expectations (standards), performance, and disconfirmation" (Guido, 2015, p. 1). Based on these three elements, the Disconfirmation of Expectations Model (DEM) has been developed and has been successfully used to explain customer satisfaction for different goods and services, but, due to the complexity of sports events, its ability to measure the spectators' satisfaction is questionable (Van Leeuwen et al., 2002, p. 102). For that reason, Van Leeuwen, Quick and Daniel adjusted the existing model and created the Sport Spectator Satisfaction Model (SSSM) by adding club identification and win/lose phenomenon as well as consideration of both the core and peripheral dimensions of the spectator service. This model was used a lot in later research, but very often it was expanded by adding other variables (Koo, 2009; Pahrudin et al., 2024). Also, variables related to visitor satisfaction are often put in relation to behavioral intentions in research (Armbrecht, 2021; Duan & Liu, 2021; Plunkett & Brooks, 2018; Tzetzis et al., 2014), because, as stated by Oh and Kim (2017), satisfaction and behavioral intention are the most paramount dependent variables. Behavioral intention can be defined as "the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior" (Warshaw & Davis, 1985, p. 214). Behavioral intention, which can be attributed to the intention to visit the event, the intention to re-visit the event, or the intention to visit the destination for some other purpose. In behavioral intention research, besides variables connected with the event, there are often destination attributes like destination image, attractions, accommodation, traffic, shopping opportunities, etc. (Newland & Yoo, 2020; Vassiliadis et al., 2021; Vegara-Ferri et al., 2020). For example, Newland and Yoo (2020) investigated how the characteristics of sports events (reputation, history, challenge, cost, scenery, level of competition) and destinations (shopping, nightlife, entertainment, tours, culture & art, different cultures) influence the intention of returning to the event and the destination in another role.

When it comes to motorsport, particularly the WRC, there are several scientific research papers and studies (Borges et al., 2020; Hassan & Connor, 2009; Pischedda et al., 2020; Rasku & Turco, 2017a, 2017b) that are focused on investigating spectators' satisfaction and behavioral intention. Several other studies related to the WRC are focused on measuring the economic and socio-cultural impacts of the event on hosting destinations (Hassan & McCulloch, 2007; Mackellar, 2013; Naess & Tickell, 2019; O'Connor, 2005; Perna & Custodio, 2019).

# 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of this research, the authors conducted a survey that shed light on the WRC Croatia Rally 2024 spectators' profile, and their satisfaction with the event and the destination visited. The primary research was conducted using a quantitative approach and convenience

sample. The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire distributed via the official social media networks of the WRC Croatia Rally organizers. The questionnaire included questions on spectators' demographic characteristics, previous experience with WRC competitions, and spectators' satisfaction with the event and the destination.

The data was collected during the four days of the WRC Croatia Rally 2024 and shortly after the event in April 2024. The target population consisted of on-site spectators from Croatia and abroad attending the WRC Croatia Rally 2024. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The study is based on a convenience sample, with 727 collected questionnaires being valid and used for further analysis. The collected data was analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics.

#### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

From a total of 727 respondents, 27.5% were temporary visitors, while 72.5% were residents of the region where the WRC Croatia Rally 2024 took place. Additionally, 88.3% of respondents attended at least one of the previous WRC Croatia Rally events, showing that respondents are familiar with the event and remain loyal to it.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of spectators

Gender	n	0/0
Male	578	79.5%
Female	149	20.5%
Age group	n	0/0
18-24	164	22.6%
25-34	222	30.5%
35-44	167	23%
45-54	128	17.6%
55-64	40	5.5%
Over 65	6	0.8%
Level of education	n	0/0
Primary school	7	1%
Secondary school	376	51.7%
College	116	16%
University	187	25.7%
Master's or Doctor's degree	41	5.6%
Professional status	n	0/0
Student	104	14.3%
Self-employed entrepreneur	89	12.2%
Employee	507	69.7%
Unemployed	12	1.7%
Retired	15	2.1%
Civil status	n	0/0
Single	226	31.1%
In a relationship	203	27.9%
Married	274	37.7%
Divorced	23	3.2%
Widowed	1	0.1%

**Source:** Own research

An overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the spectators can be found in Table 1. When analyzing the characteristics of the spectators, it is evident that the male audience predominates, considering that 79.5% of the audience was male and the rest female. This was to be expected given that

this is a motor sports competition. Spectators were mainly from younger age groups as more than 50% of them were in the age groups of 18-24 years (22.6%) and 25-34 years (30.5%). More than half of the respondents (51.7%) have completed a secondary school as their highest level of education, while the other half (47.3%) graduated from either college or university. From the above data, it can be concluded that secondary education is predominant, which could be because the majority of respondents belong to younger age groups. When analyzing the professional status of spectators, it is noticeable that the vast majority of them work as employees and more than 14% of them declared themselves as students. From the marital status point of view, more than a third of respondents (37.7%) were married, 27.9% were in a relationship, and a slightly larger percentage of them (31.1%) were single.

The focus of the research was to examine spectators' satisfaction with the event and the destination, and consequently, their intentions to re-visit future editions of the WRC Croatia Rally. Therefore, 15 variables (aspects of satisfaction) were created to examine spectators' satisfaction with the event and 10 variables were created to examine spectators' satisfaction with destination. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with each variable on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 5 - "very satisfied" to 1 - "very dissatisfied" or 0 if they could not provide a rating. Therefore, the responses that were rated 0 were excluded from further analysis.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for spectators' satisfaction with the event

	n	Mean	Median	Mod	Std. deviation
Price level	674	3,29	4	4	0,978
Atmosphere at the event	712	3,77	4	4	0,735
General appearance of the event	715	3,77	4	4	0,729
Safety of the event	705	3,74	4	4	0,742
Entry to the area	702	3,54	4	4	0,892
Moving around in the area	706	3,54	4	4	0,873
Spectator direction in the area	700	3,60	4	4	0,869
Availability of food and drinks in the area	674	3,38	4	4	0,921
Selection of food and drinks in the area	671	3,33	4	4	0,943
Entertainment in the area	662	3,28	4	4	0,995
Quality of entertainment in the area	660	3,31	4	4	0,987
Number of toilets in the area	646	3,13	4	4	1,062
Cleanliness of toilets in the area	626	3,16	3	4	1,017
Waste management	669	3,29	4	4	1,020
Overall satisfaction with the event	712	3,74	4	4	0,756

Source: Own research

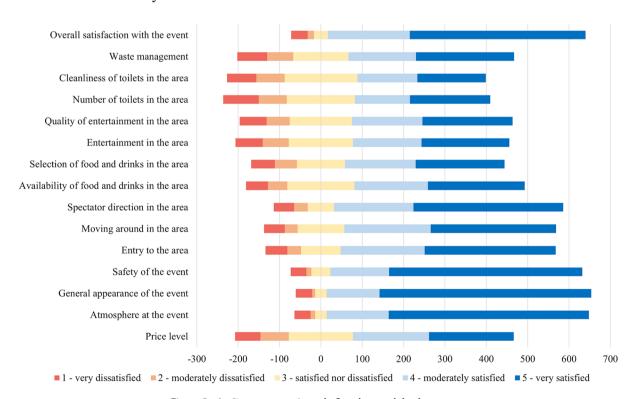
**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for spectators' satisfaction with the destination

	n	Mean	Median	Mod	Std. deviation
Transport accessibility	694	3,51	4	4	0,921
Choice of accommodation	597	3,48	4	4	0,896
Quality of accommodation	601	3,47	4	4	0,896
Cultural offer	642	3,51	4	4	0,885
Shopping offer	659	3,47	4	4	0,896
Entertainment offer	656	3,38	4	4	0,956
Price level	676	3,23	4	4	1,006
Tourist information accessibility	641	3,40	4	4	0,965
Kindness of the host	689	3,64	4	4	0,844
Climate	693	3,65	4	4	0,817

Source: Own research

Descriptive statistics for spectators' satisfaction with the event are shown in Table 2. The measurement items of spectators' satisfaction with the event ranged from 3.13 to 3.77, which suggests that all mean scores were above 3.0, with a mean score of 3.46. When examining spectators' satisfaction with the event, the variables - general appearance of the event (M=3.77) and atmosphere at the event (M=3.77) had the highest and equal mean scores. The most frequently given rating is 4 - indicating moderate satisfaction. A closer look at these highly rated variables reveals that over 70% of respondents (71.6%) were very satisfied and 17.9% were moderately satisfied with the general appearance of the event, with only 5.6% expressing strong dissatisfaction. Similarly, the atmosphere at the event was rated positively by 68% of respondents as very satisfied and 21.1% as moderately satisfied. A further 3.9% were neutral and 5.5% were very dissatisfied. These results highlight the event's strong appeal in terms of its visual presentation and overall ambiance. The third highest-rated aspect was the safety of the event with 66.2% of very satisfied respondents and only 5.4% of them expressing strong dissatisfaction. In addition to ensuring road safety during the competition, particularly protecting spectators from potential hazards, such as cars leaving the track, safety is a crucial consideration for events of this nature. Finally, it is worth highlighting that overall satisfaction with the event was notably high (M = 3.74), with 87.5% of respondents reporting being either very or moderately satisfied, which underscores the strong positive perception of the event.

The greatest areas of dissatisfaction among respondents were the number of toilets in the area (M=3.13), the cleanliness of the toilets (M=3.16) and the entertainment in the area (M=3.28). These factors are critical to address, as they directly impact the overall image of the event. Satisfaction with the price level and waste management was also notably low (M=3.29), both of which are key aspects of economic and environmental sustainability. Around a fifth of spectators expressed dissatisfaction with the price level, more specifically 9.1% were very dissatisfied, while 30.4% were very satisfied. Similarly, 10.8% of respondents were very dissatisfied with waste management, while 35.4% were very satisfied.

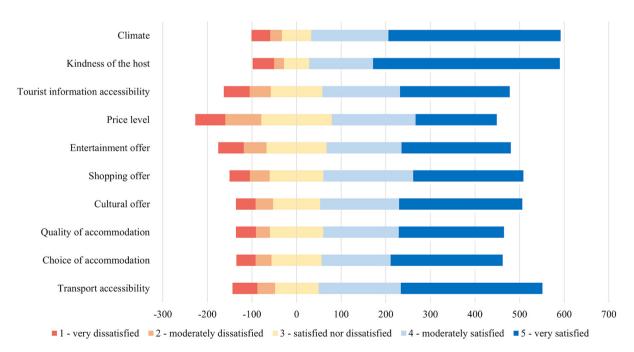


**Graph 1.** Spectators' satisfaction with the event

**Source:** Own research

Descriptive statistics for spectators' satisfaction with the destination are presented in Table 3. The measurement items of spectators' satisfaction with the destination ranged from 3.23 to 3.65 with a mean score of 3.47. All items had mean scores above the neutral midpoint of 3.0, suggesting a generally positive evaluation. The most frequently given rating was 4, indicating moderate satisfaction. The highest rated aspects included the climate conditions (M=3.65), the kindness of the hosts (M=3.64), accessibility of transportation and cultural offer (M=3.51), while the lowest rated aspects were price level (M=3.23), entertainment offer (M=3.38) and tourist information accessibility (M=3.40). Most spectators (60.8%) were very satisfied with the kindness of the hosts, while 20.8% of respondents were moderately satisfied, indicating over 80% of spectators as mostly satisfied. Furthermore, climate conditions were undoubtedly the highest-rated aspect with more than half of respondents (55.7%) being very satisfied, while only 6.1% were very dissatisfied. Transport accessibility, another crucial factor for reaching and navigating the destination, also received positive feedback, as 45.8% were very satisfied, and 26.5% were moderately satisfied, and just 8.1% were very dissatisfied. Aspects such as cultural offers also appeared to be well received by the spectators, as 43% of respondents were very satisfied and 27.6% moderately satisfied.

The aspect with the lowest satisfaction ratings, on the other hand, was the price level, with which 9.9% of respondents were very dissatisfied and 12% moderately dissatisfied. This clearly shows that prices of products and services at the destination were higher than expected, leading to dissatisfaction among visitors. Furthermore, it can lead to negative reviews of the destination and perhaps even a decline in tourist consumption due to boycotts of the purchase of overpriced products. Spectators were also unimpressed with the entertainment offer. Only 37.3% were very satisfied and 25.6% were moderately satisfied, while more than a fifth of them (20.6%) were neutral on this question. In addition to the entertainment offer, visitors also expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of tourist information, which can be a very limiting factor when considering tourist consumption. More specifically, 16.3% of respondents were either very or moderately dissatisfied.



Graph 2. Spectators' satisfaction with destination

Source: Own research

The second part of the survey covered behavioral intentions to attend the WRC Croatia Rally in subsequent years and to recommend it to others, which is shown in more detail in Table 4 and Table 5. Thus, 83.5% of respondents stated that they definitely intend to re-visit the WRC Croatia Rally, while 13.6% are likely to come back sometime in the upcoming years. Only 2.3% of respondents are not sure if they will attend the event again, while less than 1% of respondents (0.3%) do not plan to attend the event again.

About 88.4% of respondents would strongly recommend the WRC Croatia Rally to the others, 9.2% would probably recommend it and 1.7% are neutral, which is a good indicator for promoting future editions of the event, especially through positive online reviews, but also by using a still quite powerful tool - word of mouth. Only 0.1% have no intention of recommending the WRC Croatia Rally to others.

**Table 4.** Spectators' intention to re-visit the WRC Croatia Rally

Intention to re-visit the WRC Croatia Rally	Yes, for sure	Probably yes	Not sure	Probably not	For sure not
n	607	99	17	2	2
%	83.5%	13.6%	2.3%	0.3%	0.3%

Source: Own research

**Table 5.** Spectators' intention to recommend WRC Croatia Rally to others

Intention to recommend WRC Croatia Rally to others	Yes, for sure	Probably yes	Not sure	Probably not	For sure not
n	643	67	12	4	1
%	88.4%	9.2%	1.7%	0.6%	0.1%

Source: Own research

# 5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although this research was designed to cover all key aspects of WRC Croatia Rally spectators' satisfaction, the study has three limitations one should consider when interpreting the results: 1) Although the findings of this research are based on a relatively large sample of respondents (727), the size of overall population of spectators (450,000) makes the sample rather small; 2) Most of the respondents in the analyzed sample were domestic spectators (72.5%), which somewhat distorts the picture of the satisfaction of all visitors since residents are more familiar with a destination and related offer; 3) Older generations of spectators, which are not active on online social media used for the distribution of questionnaire, were not able to participate in this research.

Further studies should consider developing new approaches and variables for measuring spectators' satisfaction specifically designed for large international rally championships. To gain a clearer insight into the understanding of the satisfaction of certain groups of spectators, additional independent variables such as the country of origin of the spectators, the participation of competing team(s) from the same country and their final ranking can be included. Despite the mentioned limitations, the results of this research can still be of great value to the organizers of major sports events and the management of tourist destinations for improving the elements of the offer that will enable the improvement of the overall experience of the spectators.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

The level of spectators' satisfaction is considered one of the key measures of success in managing major sports events, such as the World Rally Championship. Based on the survey conducted during the 2024 edition of the WRC Croatia Rally, this research revealed spectators' profiles, levels of satisfaction, and respective behavioral intentions. The results of this study showed that WRC spectators are predominantly young adult males, employed and in a relationship who travel in small groups and at relatively short distances. Regarding their satisfaction with the event or with a hosting destination, spectators expressed their high levels of satisfaction with the majority of analyzed aspects. Related to that, most respondents expressed their strong intention to revisit the event and the destination in the future, regardless of the purpose of the visit. Apart from the positive feedback from the spectators, this research also revealed some weaknesses of the event and hosting destination offer that could be improved to enhance the spectator's experience in the coming years.

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