

MANAGEMENT OF WALKING HOLIDAYS POPULARIZATION IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

Walking has transformed from a non-formal recreational activity into an economically beneficial tourist product. The walking holiday is a driver of tourism-based local socio-economic development. Last seven decades due to progressive urbanization, millions of people all over the world have been walking and exploring map footpaths in nature. This study aims to investigate factors that could contribute to the extensive popularization of walking holidays in rural areas. Data was collected through a survey method and subsequently processed using the SPSS software. The main result, especially among the educated population from secondary school to higher, specified that the most impactful factor in the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas was the promotion of rural walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, and travel portals and blogs. In addition, the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas was equally important to females and males. The youngest population most preferred the factor of popularization such as the organization of traditional sports events, while students were rather for the introduction of countryside walking competitions. This study contributes to bolstering the advancement of rural tourism development by enhancing the popularization of walking holidays in rural regions.

Keywords: countryside walking tours, rural tourism, socio-economic development, tourism fair, travel portal, travel blog

INTRODUCTION

From an informal recreational activity, walking has grown into a formal recreational activity and a serious tourism product of socio-economic importance. Walking is one of the drivers of socioeconomic development and growth in developed and developing countries. Progressive urbanization and industrialization have contributed to the fact that people around the world, from year to year, are walking in increasing numbers to, with the help of maps of rural walking trails, go around and enjoy untouched nature, have recreation, and breathe clean air. This is supported by research data that the number of adults in England engaging in leisure walking grew by 18% between May 2020 and May 2021, reaching a total of 24 million participants (UK Cycling and Walking Holidays Market Report, 2021). Walking holidays have increased by 52% since the pre-pandemic period (Travel Trends Report, 2023).

The PaRx program in Canada allows doctors to prescribe walking as a therapy to improve mental and physical health, where the recommended time of walking in nature is at least two hours a week, with free entrance to a national park (PaRx, 2022). Prescribing walking as therapy contributes to the popularization of walking because it focuses on it as a simple, natural, and effective way to improve health. When doctors recommend walking as medicine, it gives walking legitimacy as a serious health activity. People are becoming more aware of its benefits, which may attract more people to regular walking. Prescribing walking as therapy contributes to tourism, especially ecotourism, as it stimulates people to explore natural destinations. Increased interest in nature walks can lead to more visits to rural locations, supporting local tourism and economic growth.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors of importance for an even more intensive popularization of walking holidays in rural areas and to point out the measures that the local rural community can take so that more people decide on walking holidays in rural areas. In this way, the research contributes to the improvement of the development of rural tourism by introducing the popularization of rural walking holidays into the strategic planning documents of rural areas.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Physical activity is important for achieving optimal health. It is preventive, but also a cure for many health conditions (Mau et al., 2020; Exercise in Medicine, 2021a). Regular brisk walking, cycling, and swimming have a great impact on health (Kotera et al., 2021; Exercise in Medicine, 2021b). According to the American College of Sports Medicine and American Heart Association, brisk walking is recommended a minimum of five days per week for at least 30 minutes a day (Walking 101, 2023). As per Thoreau, H.D. (2024) "the art of Walking" not many people understand, since "Walker is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People", and "leisure, freedom, and independence are the capital in this profession". The results of Olafsdottir's research indicate that emotions and therapeutic effects as impacts of spending time in nature are relational outcomes that depend both on the effect of nature and on what the individual contributes to the relationship (Olafsdottir, 2013).

A walking holiday means any kind of walk on a mountain, by a river, a lake, a canal beach, across wetlands, or along beaches, but what most walking holidays have in common is that they take place in the countryside (Field, 2017). There are many motivations for going on a walking holiday: views, exercise, company, wildlife, outdoors, a doctor's recommendation for health

benefits, and fun (Field, 2017; Milojković et al., 2023b, Milojković et al., 2023c). Any kind of walking holiday can be rejuvenated with the feeling of doubled holiday time (Field, 2017). British experts for walking holidays emphasize the importance of having the most important information and advice for a walking holiday available, as well as information on accommodation and food (Encounter Walking, 2023). The development of a walking product includes recreational and amenity development, tourism development, health and fitness promotion, social inclusion, and training and education (Western Region and Western Development Tourism Programme, 2005) contributing the sustainable local socio-economic development (Milojković, 2023a). Carlson et al. (2018) found that rural areas had a lower prevalence of walking than urban areas. Regular walkers, women, highly educated people and those who make \$35,000 or more per year are groups who use the walking trails, but walking trails may be beneficial in promoting physical activity among women and people in lower socioeconomic groups as groups at the highest risk for inactivity (Brownson et al., 2000) taking into consideration that rural residents reported more walking for transportation than urban residents (Bucko et al., 2021). Ways to increase the need for walking include improving infrastructure and walking environments, increasing safety for walkers, adopting policies and planning for walking environments, and educating and encouraging people to walk more (Queensland Government, 2023). In the tourism industry, managers promote places, content, and place offerings (OECD, 2022). Unlike other industries where competition can be local, here it is global. Therefore, rural tourism marketing must build a very good image of its rural destination and use different promotional tools such as the power of electronic media: radio, television, videos, audio, CD-ROM PowerPoint presentations, and other online content such as portals and blogs (Morton, 2018; Milojković, 2023c). The Internet, as a communication tool for travel and tourism, contributes to the promotion, distribution of tourism products, communication, management, and research, and the increasing number of travel blogs affects the mentioned functions of the Internet while the actors in tourism use blogs and portals as part of their business strategy (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Bi & Kim, 2019; Haris & Gan, 2021). A quality tourist experience affects the satisfaction of tourists, and together they contribute to building the trust of tourists, which contributes to sharing the tourist experience on social media (Wang & Wong, 2021; Islam, 2021; Idbenssi, 2023).

In the Fordian phase of tourism (1950-1975), dominated by mass tourism, tourist fairs facilitated the sales function of travel companies (Fayos-Solá et al., 1994; Cai et al., 2019). The social impacts of events financed by local authorities exceed the economic benefits thereof (Getz, 1989; Quinn, 2009). There are festivals as socially and culturally important events that

influence the construction of the identity of places and communities, while large events, such as sports events, are those that can be repeated, have a limited duration, and are developed to increase awareness, attractiveness, and profitability of a tourist destination in the short and /or long term (Brent Ritchie, 1984; Quinn, 2009). Reasons to include a contest in an event are greater visitor engagement, dopamine effect, visibility and humanization of the brand, and greater productivity in the workplace (Bizbash, 2023). Besides fun, interactive, and engaging experience for attendees, competition assists in achieving the event goals (Bizbash, 2023).

Neumeier & Pollermann (2014) indicate that in most rural regions, tourism can have only small economic impacts, but that is why it has important non-economic implications and it is necessary to approach it strategically based on the consideration of the specific regional situation and potential successes. The development of rural tourism contributes to the economic empowerment of the rural environment by encouraging the settlement of villages and the revival of agricultural production (Dashper, 2014; Milojković, 2023a; Fafurida et al., 2023). Dashper (2014) emphasizes that the rich possibilities of rural tourism are the reason for numerous active rural types of research that can contribute to moving consumers away from mass tourism products and creating an offer according to consumer needs. In addition to traditional activities in the village such as walking, horse riding, and bird watching, countryside tourism also includes modern activities such as adventure sports, taking care to preserve the rurality and peace that is absent in the urban environment (Chalip & Costa, 2006). Planning, monitoring, and management would ensure the development of rural tourism that benefits the environment and the local community (Agayi & Gündüz, 2020). The local community is of great importance in implementing the principles of sustainable tourism (Manaf et al., 2018; Ćurčić et al., 2021; Akıncı & Öksüz, 2022).

Research shows that there are various methods of rural tourism development, so by popularizing them, it is possible to combine different methods of development and achieve positive impacts on the observed rural area and in the specific local community (Antonietta, 2021).

By reviewing the literature, the author did not come across a study dealing with the subject of this study, so the current study will have a significant contribution both to the initiation of similar studies in rural areas, and to the completion of knowledge about rural tourism by introducing countryside walking tourism as a new tourist product. Based on above mentioned in the current part of the paper, the author presents the following six interconnected hypotheses: (H1) The promotion of rural walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, and travel portals and blogs is a key factor in the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas.

(H2) The factors of popularization of walking holidays in rural areas are more important for women than for men.

(H3) The middle-aged population prefers the voucher system for countryside walking tours among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas.

(H4) Regardless of marital status, people prefer the organization of traditional sports events are among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas.

(H5) Educated people, starting from secondary school and above, most prefer the promotion of countryside walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, and travel portals and blogs are among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas.

(H6) The students prefer the organization of traditional sports events.

DATA AND METHODS

For this paper, the author used a quantitative approach. The hypothetic-deductive and statistical methods were implemented in the study. The survey was realized using an electronic questionnaire in Serbian and English language developed by structured multiple-choice questions, designed to capture different aspects of motivation, demographic characteristics, and attitudes of respondents towards walking holidays, and disseminated to the public through academic and social media channels. The diverse sample, representing various demographic and socioeconomic groups across cultures, regions, and economic conditions, enables a comprehensive analysis of factors influencing walking holidays' popularity. Conducted via global platforms with culturally neutral questions, the study provides insights applicable to diverse contexts. The cumulative count of collected questionnaires was 467 between March and May 2022. The data was analysed using the SPSS software. The t-test and Kruskal-Wallis H Test were utilized to attain a detailed analysis of statistically noteworthy based on the following classification factors: gender, age, marital status, offspring count, educational attainment, employment status, and yearly individual expenditure on tourist trips and holidays. The t-test compares means between two groups (males and females) to identify significant differences, assuming normal data distribution. The Kruskal-Wallis H Test, a non-parametric test, evaluates differences among multiple groups (e.g., age, marital status, or education) without assuming normality. Together, these tests analyse demographic and socioeconomic impacts on walking holiday popularity, ensuring robust results.

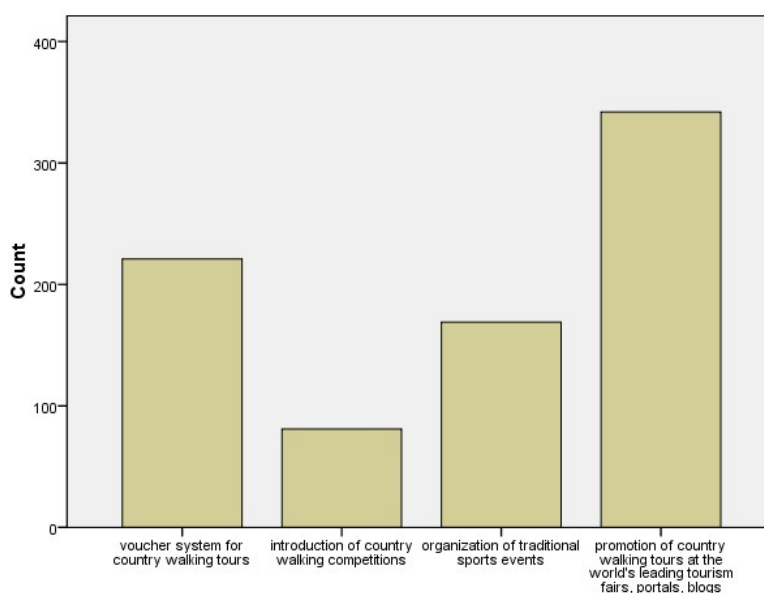
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the study, 467 respondents participated. From the aspect of demographic characteristics, more women participated than men did. The structure of respondents indicated the following lead: aged from 36 to 55 years, married, with children, university educated, employed, and respondents who annually invest in tourist vacations up to EUR 1,000 (Tab. 1).

Table 1 Survey participants' data analysis

CLASSIFICATION FACTOR	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Gender	female (310)
	male (157)
Age	≤ 25 (82)
	26 – 35 (54)
	36 – 45 (119)
	46 – 55 (128)
	≥ 56 (84)
Marital status	single (125)
	cohabitation (61)
	married (238)
	divorced (29)
	widow/widower (14)
Offspring count	0 (182)
	1 (100)
	2 (142)
	3 (41)
	4 (2)
Educational attainment	without formal education (2)
	primary education (3)
	secondary education (92)
	college (60)
	university (310)
Employment status	student (71)
	unemployed (30)
	self-employed (46)
	employed (280)
	retired (30)
Annual personal investment for a tourist trip	other (10)
	<500 EUR (180)
	500 – 1,000 EUR (159)
	>1,000 EUR (128)

The results of the study of what would contribute to the popularization of walking tourism in rural areas are shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 Analysis of contributions to the popularization of walking tourism in rural areas

Source: Author's analysis

The most frequent factor was the “promotion of countryside walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, portals, blogs” (F4) supported by 342 (73.2%) respondents. In addition, factors followed: “voucher system for countryside walking tours” (F1) 221 (47.3%), “organization of traditional sports events” (F3) 169 (36.2%), and “introduction of countryside walking competitions” (F2) 81 (17.3%). The results of descriptive statistics confirmed hypothesis H1.

The study examined the existence of differences in looking at the factors of popularization of walking holidays in rural areas between females and males. (Tab 2).

Table 2 The t-test results and statistically significant differences by classification factor “gender”

Factors of the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas	t-test for Equality of Means						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
F1	1.24	315.49	0.217	0.06	0.05	-0.04	0.16
F2	1.19	287.07	0.234	-0.05	0.04	-0.12	0.03
F3	1.45	302.80	0.149	-0.07	0.05	-0.16	0.02
F4	1.29	295.85	0.197	0.06	0.04	-0.03	0.14

Source: Author's analysis

The independent samples t-test was used to compare the results of the examination of the factors of the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas women and men. There were no significant differences between women and men, as indicated by the following analysis of the results:

- F1 between females (M=0.49, SD=0.50) and males (M=0.43, SD=0.50), $t(315.49)=1.24$, $p=0.22$, Mean difference 0.06, 95% CI: -0.04 to 0.16, eta square=0.003, meaning that the gender difference for factor F1 was very small;
- F2 between females (M=0.16, SD=0.37) and males (M=0.20, SD=0.40), $t(287.07)=-1.19$, $p=0.23$, Mean difference -0.05, 95% CI: -0.12 to 0.03, eta square=0.003, meaning that the gender difference for factor F2 was very small;
- F3 between females (M=0.34, SD=0.47) and males (M=0.41, SD=0.49), $t(302.80)=-1.45$, $p=0.15$, Mean difference -0.07, 95% CI: -0.16 to 0.02, eta square=0.005, meaning that the gender difference for factor F3 was very small;
- F4 between females (M=0.75, SD=0.43) and males (M=0.69, SD=0.46), $t(295.85)=1.29$, $p=0.20$, Mean difference 0.06, 95% CI: -0.03 to 0.14, eta square=0.004, meaning that the gender difference for factor F4 was very small.

Based on the results of the t-test, hypothesis H2 was not confirmed.

The study analysed the existence of significant differences in the perception of the factors of popularization of walking holidays in rural areas by the following classification factors: age, marital status, offspring count, educational attainment, employment status, and yearly individual expenditure on tourist trips and holidays (Tab 3).

Table 3 The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by age group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	13.73	4.06	20.16	2.07
df	4			
Asymp. Sig.	.008	.398	.000	.723

Table 3 (continued)

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by marital status group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	5.63	4.48	12.22	2.44
df	4			
Asymp. Sig.	.229	.344	.016	.656

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by offspring count group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	2.11	4.88	1.79	1.29
df	3			
Asymp. Sig.	.550	.180	.618	.733

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by education group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	9.38	14.96	6.36	11.19
df	4			
Asymp. Sig.	.052	.005	.174	.025

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by employment status group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	10.02	7.28	20.93	3.58
df	5			
Asymp. Sig.	.075	.020	.001	.611

Factors influencing the popularity of walking holidays in rural areas by yearly individual expenditure on tourist trips and holidays group				
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Chi-Square	4.61	.86	1.97	3.14
df	2			
Asymp. Sig.	.100	.649	.373	.208

Source: Author's calculations

Implementing the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, the following factors had statistically significant differences:

- F1 between the classification factor *age* (≤ 25 , $n=82$, 26-35 $n=54$, 36-45 $n=119$, 46-55 $n=128$, ≥ 56 $n=84$), $c^2(4, n=467)=13.73$, $p=0.008$, $Md=1$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F1 was at the highest level in the 26-35 and 36-45 *age groups*, and the lowest level in the other *age groups*.
- F3 between the classification factor *age* (≤ 25 , $n=82$, 26-35 $n=54$, 36-45 $n=119$, 46-55 $n=128$, ≥ 56 $n=84$), $c^2(4, n=467)=20.16$, $p=0.009$, $Md=1$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F3 was at the highest level in the ≤ 25 *age group*, and the lowest level in the other *age groups*.

Among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas, the youngest age group (up to 25 years) most prefer the organization of traditional sports events. Generation Z, in addition to a limited travel budget, escapes from everyday life by traveling (Akgiş İlhan et al., 2023). Young tourists are attracted by cultural, historical, and architectural features, as well as traditional cuisine, choosing transport they have not used before (Akgiş İlhan et al., 2023). The younger age group (26-35 years) and the middle age group (36-45 years old) prefer voucher systems for countryside walking tours. Based on the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, hypothesis H3 was confirmed.

- F3 between the classification factor *marital status* (single, $n=125$; cohabitation, $n=61$; married, $n=238$; divorced, $n=29$; widow/widower, $n=14$), $c^2(4, n=467)=12.22$, $p=0.016$, $Md=0$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F3 was at the same level in all *marital status groups*.

Among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas, all marital status groups prefer the organization of traditional sports events. Based on the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, hypothesis H4 was confirmed.

- F2 between the classification factor *educational attainment* (without formal education, $n=2$; primary education, $n=3$; secondary education, $n=92$; college, $n=60$; university, $n=310$), $c^2(4, n=467)=14.96$, $p=0.005$, $Md=1$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F2 was at the highest level in the primary education group, and the lowest level in other education groups.
- F4 between the classification factor *educational attainment* (without formal education, $n=2$; primary education, $n=3$; secondary education, $n=92$; college, $n=60$; university, $n=310$), $c^2(4, n=467)=11.19$, $p=0.025$, $Md=1$; regarding the mean values of group

ranks, F4 was at the highest level in the secondary, college, and university *educational attainment* groups, and the lowest level in other *educational attainment* groups.

Among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas, the primary *educational attainment* group prefers the introduction of countryside walking competitions, while the secondary, college, and university *educational attainment* groups prefer the promotion of countryside walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, and travel portals and blogs. Based on the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, hypothesis H5 was confirmed.

- F2 between the classification factor *employment status* (student, n=71; unemployed, n=30; self-employed, n=46; employed, n=280; retired, n=30; other, n=10), c^2 (5, n=467)=7.28, p=0.020, Md=0; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F2 was at the same level in all employment status groups.
- F3 between the classification factor *employment status* (student, n=71; unemployed, n=30; self-employed, n=46; employed, n=280; retired, n=30; other, n=10), c^2 (5, n=467)=20.93, p=0.001, Md=1; regarding the mean values of group ranks, F3 was at the highest level in the student employment status group, and the lowest level in other employment status groups.

Among the popularization factors of walking holidays in rural areas, the student prefers the organization of traditional sports events, while all employment status groups prefer the introduction of countryside walking competitions. Based on the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, hypothesis H6 was confirmed.

Key discussion points include the importance of promotion, demographic influences, and motivators. Global promotion via fairs, portals, and blogs is crucial. Gender shows no significant impact, while middle-aged groups favour vouchers, and younger ones prefer sports events. Traditional sports appeal broadly, and competitive activities attract diverse respondents.

CONCLUSION

A walking holiday serves as a catalyst for fostering local socio-economic development through tourism. To improve the development of rural tourism, in strategic planning documents (strategies, plans, and programs) as a basis for the realization of the concept of good management of local community resources, it is necessary to pay special attention to the popularization of walking holidays in rural areas. Promotional activities of countryside walking tours at the leading world tourism fairs, tourist portals, and blogs represent the crucial activities of popularizing walking holidays in rural areas, and in connection with that, they should be

foreseen in the strategic planning documents of the rural areas. The popularization of countryside walking holidays is equally important for both women and men, so there is no need to undertake special strategies "tailored" for gender affiliation. Bearing in mind that the middle-aged population is most interested in using vouchers for countryside walking tours, it is necessary to plan and budget for the establishment of a system of vouchers for countryside walking tours and thereby contribute to the success of the popularization of rural walking holidays programs as an integral part of the strategic planning documents.

People, regardless of marital status, would be motivated to participate in traditional sports events, and their inclusion in strategic planning documents would be important for the popularization of rural walking holidays and overall rural tourism development. Educated people are left with the strongest impression by the promotions of walking tours at the world's leading tourism fairs, tourist portals, and blogs, so these activities should be foreseen in strategic planning documents. Students are motivated by organizing traditional sports events in rural areas, and for this target group, the program for the promotion of rural walking tours should include the organization of traditional sports events. The impression of the event triggers commitment to the event, but not loyalty to the destination (Kusumah, 2023), which indicates that in addition to the popularization of rural walking holidays by introducing traditional sports events, it is necessary to manage the tourist destination efficiently and effectively. Regardless of employment status, people are attracted to competitive activities in the field of rural walking, so they should be included in strategic planning documents. The findings of this study should not be generalized to demographically different environments, but future research should focus on additional, area-specific factors that influence the popularization of rural walking holidays.

Key conclusions emphasize integrating walking tourism into rural development strategies, tailoring promotional activities to diverse target groups, and leveraging walking to boost local socio-economic growth while preserving cultural and natural heritage. Future research should explore local factors to enhance walking tourism's appeal.

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