

Quantitative Insights: Analyzing Untold Festival's Impact on Hotel Occupancy Rates and Attendance Growth Trends in Cluj-Napoca

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of international mega events on tourism accommodation, with a specific focus on the Untold Festival, an annual electronic music festival held in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Since the first time it was held in 2015, it has become a key event within the landscape of global cultural and music festivals. Attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees from across the globe, this event has significantly transformed both the local and national tourism sectors in Romania.

A quantitative analysis is used to study the relationship between the festival's attendance and the performance of the HoReCa sector, most specifically hotel occupancy rates. The research finds the fact that Untold brings a significant increase in hotel occupancy during the period when it is held. While it has improved Cluj-Napoca's cultural attraction, at the same time it has been a contributing factor toward year-over-year growth in attendance rates, and therefore in overnight hotel stays, acting as a booster for the economy of Cluj.

Moreover, the explanation stands in support of the observation that the annual growth rate of the Untold Festival audience is steady, meaning that even despite such global challenges as COVID-19, its reach and attractiveness continue growing in a constant manner.

Keywords

International mega events, Untold festival, hospitality sector dynamics, economics of festivals.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of international mega events, pivotal in shaping global tourism and urban landscapes, offers a rich ground for examining how cultural festivities, diplomatic engagements, and urban redevelopment manage to produce significant global impacts. Prior studies have documented the major impacts of international mega events on local economies and urban infrastructures. Building on Brent Ritchie's foundational definition of mega events in 1984 as significant, often unique, or periodically recurring events designed to enhance the host destinations' attractiveness and economic viability, further research has further explored these dynamics. For instance, Brännäs and Nordström (2006) not only demonstrated the positive effects on tourist accommodation during festivals in Sweden but also highlighted the variable impacts depending on the type and scale of the event, suggesting nuanced economic inflows into local economies.

Similarly, Depken and Stephenson (2018) provided an in-depth analysis of how sporting and political events significantly boost hotel demand in Charlotte, North Carolina, employing daily hotel occupancy data to offer detailed insights into event-specific economic surges. Complementing these studies, Cianga (2020) provides a case study of the Untold Festival, detailing its transformative role in Cluj-Napoca by enhancing its global tourism profile and contributing to the local economic landscape.

However, even if these studies provide valuable insights, there is a lack of research on the longitudinal economic impacts of mega events in general, and festivals in particular, specifically how they affect hotel occupancy rates over multiple years

Focusing on this research gap, the study explores the Untold Festival in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, as a key example of the expansive influence of mega events. Since its first edition in 2015, the Untold Festival has become the most important electronic music festival in Romania. Awarded internationally, the festival has transformed Cluj-Napoca into a well-known cultural and tourism base, thereby providing an important case study for investigating the impacts of mega events on tourism and economy.

The research finds the fact that the Untold Festival brings a significant increase in hotel occupancy during the period of its occurrence. While it has improved Cluj-Napoca's cultural attraction at the same time, has been a contributing factor toward year-over-year growth in attendance rates, and therefore in overnight hotel stays, further boosting the economy of the area.

This study contributes to academic literature by being the first to empirically demonstrate the prolonged economic benefits of mega events like the Untold Festival on overnight hotel stays and tourism attendance in Romania. This longitudinal analysis fills a critical gap in the existing literature, providing insights for policymakers. The findings help them devise strategies that use cultural events not just for entertainment but as drivers of economic growth in Romanian cities specific HoReCa and potentially other similar environments.

The paper has the following structure: The first section is an Introduction, the second one is represented by the Literature Review, the third section describes the methodology employed in collecting and analyzing data, the fourth section presents the results, and the fifth section comprises the discussions and the conclusion of the study.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of international mega events, with their expansive scale and multifaceted impacts, occupies a pivotal position in the global tourism and urban development landscape. Defined by Brent Ritchie (1984) as major one-time or recurring events of limited duration, their objective extends beyond mere entertainment, aiming to elevate the global appeal and profitability of the host destinations, enriching both their immediate allure and long-term tourism prospects. The essence of these gatherings transcends mere visitor numbers, embedding deep imprints on the urban infrastructure, enhancing international visibility, and inviting global audiences (Müller, 2015; Richards and Leal Londoño, 2022).

Research shows that mega events boost tourism by immediately increasing visitor numbers and spending, while also providing long-term benefits through improved destination image and infrastructure (Matheson, 2006; Preuss, 2007). Such events have a strategic value in elevating destinations globally, necessitating careful planning and strong stakeholder involvement. Recent studies using advanced econometric models have quantified these positive impacts, which vary depending on the event and location (Kobierecki and Pierzgalski, 2022).

The concept of 'legacy' from mega events now extends beyond economic gains to include social, environmental, and cultural enhancements, emphasizing the need for sustainable planning to secure long-term community benefits (Baade and Matheson, 2016). This expanded view highlights the crucial roles of strategic foresight and stakeholder involvement in ensuring that events support the sustainable development of host destinations. It also underscores the importance of innovative marketing and pricing strategies in the hospitality sector to maximize benefits from the increased demand, which varies by hotel type and location relative to the event venues (Russo and Figueira, 2022).

Cosma et al. (2016) highlight the growing impact of the event industry on global sustainable community development. Festivals and similar events are now seen as essential to the cultural and leisure appeal of destinations, significantly enriching the cultural, social, and economic landscape. This view positions mega events not just as economic drivers but also as key platforms for cultural expression and societal advancement, aligning with the goals of creating a sustainable legacy and boosting the international profile of host destinations.

Adding to the dialogue, recent studies from 2021 and 2022 provide fresh perspectives on the ongoing evolution of mega events and their impacts. For instance, the "East Asian Era" in hosting Olympic and Paralympic Games, along with other sports and non-sports mega events, showcases a significant geographical shift in the international event landscape, highlighting the growing influence of East Asian

nations (Horne and Takahashi, 2022). This shift suggests a broader reconfiguration of global cultural flows and power dynamics in the realm of international mega events.

Moreover, the integration of mega events into the urban fabric and their implications for city planning and development have been explored, offering insight into how these events can serve as catalysts for broader urban regeneration and transformation efforts (Sroka, 2021; Wolfe et al., 2022). These findings suggest that mega events continue to be pivotal in shaping cities' trajectories, not only in terms of immediate economic gains but also in fostering long-term urban and social legacies.

Untold Festival: An International Mega Event's Impact

According to Cosma et al. (2016) Festivals as major events have the ability to mobilize people, create positive experiences for spectators, and create an important impact on their lives by positively changing long-term behavior.

Untold Festival, held annually in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, is the largest electronic music festival in the country, well-known for its diversity when it comes to genres such as EDM, trance, techno, and more (YOUROPE, 2024). Since its first edition in 2015, Untold has significantly impacted local tourism and economy, drawing a record attendance of 420,000 in 2023 (Cluj24.ro, 2023). The festival's success, highlighted by its designation as Best Major Festival at the European Festival Awards in 2015 (IQ, 2016), has contributed to Cluj-Napoca's global recognition as a vibrant cultural and tourist destination.

Untold has become a leading example in the global cultural and music festival scene, attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees and significantly boosting local and national tourism. Studies like Cianga (2020) have documented its transformative effects on Cluj-Napoca, enhancing the city's cultural allure and global visibility, thus driving economic and infrastructural growth. Additionally, Dychkovskyy and Ivanov (2020) noted its positive impact on hotel occupancy and tourism revenues, showcasing the economic advantages of such events. Dumbrăveanu (2023) further confirmed that Untold's success promotes sustainable tourism development, utilizing cultural events to generate economic and social benefits.

Following the overview of international mega events, this paper focuses on a specific case study: the Untold Festival in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Noted for its impact on local and national tourism through higher hotel occupancy rates and increased tourism revenues (Dychkovskyy and Ivanov, 2020), this study explores the relationship between festival attendance and local hospitality sector performance via a longitudinal study. Consequently, the research question guiding this research is as follows:

RQ: How does the attendance at the Untold Festival influence hotel occupancy rates in the host city, and what are the trends in year-over-year growth of festival attendance?

To address this question, the following hypotheses are proposed, based on the extant literature and previous studies:

H1: The rate of overnight hotel occupancy in the host city is positively correlated with the number of attendees at the Untold Festival.

H2: There is a consistent upward trend in the year-over-year growth of Untold Festival attendance, suggesting that the festival's appeal and reach are expanding annually, independent of external factors.

Research methodology

This study uses quantitative analysis to examine the relationship between attendance at the Untold Festival and hotel stays in Cluj, along with trends in the festival's year-over-year attendance growth. Data from official festival reports and local government tourism records from 2015 to 2023 were meticulously collected on a monthly basis, focusing on the key festival period each August. Notably, the festival was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2021, the festival dates shifted to September. These variations were carefully considered in the data collection and analysis phases to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the research despite these scheduling changes.

The analysis was conducted using the SPSS 29.0.2.0, which enabled a detailed statistical examination. Descriptive statistics were initially applied to provide a summary of the data sets, including mean attendance rates, standard deviation, and the range of hotel overnight stays during the festival periods.

To test the first hypothesis (H1), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between the number of Untold Festival attendees (Untold Participants) and hotel overnight stays (Hotel Stays). This analysis helped determine the strength and direction of the relationship between these two variables.

Additionally, a regression analysis was performed to understand to what extent festival attendance predicts hotel occupancy rates. This analysis provided a model summary including the r value, r^2 , and Adjusted r^2 values, which indicated the model's robustness of fit and the variance in hotel overnight stays explained by festival attendance.

For the evaluation of the second hypothesis (H2), Year-over-year growth in festival attendance was examined through descriptive analysis, looking for significant increases, decreases, or fluctuations due to external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

This section presents the findings of the longitudinal study, detailing the impact of the Untold Festival attendance on hotel occupancy rates, as analyzed through the collected data over 9 festival editions.

Table no. 1. Hotel overnight stays for the months of august and Untold festival participants data

Year	Hotel Overnight Stays	Untold Participants
2015	84044	240000
2016	10723	300000
2017	136382	330000
2018	137833	355000
2019	134656	372000
2020	68374	0
2021	110188	265000
2022	118836	360000
2023	148324	420000

Source: (Buciu, 2017; Ghitcuta, 2016; Institutul național de statistică, n.d.; Măgrădean, 2015; Măgrădean, 2019; Pirv, 2021; Știri de Cluj, 2022; Știri de Cluj, 2023; Ziua de Cluj, 2018).

Table no. 2. Descriptive statistics of the data

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hotel Stays	9	68374	148324	116207.55	26675.70
Untold Participants	9	.00	420000	293555.55	123268.11

Source: Authors' computation using SPSS.

The Descriptive Statistics provides a numerical summary of two key variables: Hotel Overnight Stays and Untold Participants. For Hotel Stays, the data ranges from a minimum of 68,374 to a maximum of 148,324 with a mean of approximately 116,208 and a standard deviation of around 26,676, indicating a moderate spread around the mean. The Untold Participants data, with a mean of approximately 293,556, shows no festival attendance for the year 2020, reflecting the event's cancellation, up to a high of 420,000 attendees. The standard deviation for Untold Participants is approximately 123,268, suggesting a considerable variation in attendance numbers, likely impacted by the festival's cancellation in 2020.

Table no. 3. Pearson correlation analysis between Untold festival participants and overnight stays

		Untold Participants	Overnight Stays
Untold Participants	Pearson Correlation	1	.898**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	9	9
Overnight Stays	Pearson Correlation	.898**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	9	9

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' computation using SPSS.

The Pearson correlation analysis (Table 3), indicates a significant and strong positive relationship between the number of Untold Festival participants and overnight hotel stays, with a correlation coefficient (r) of

.898. This high correlation coefficient suggests that as the number of festival attendees increases, there is a correspondingly substantial rise in the number of overnight hotel stays. The significance level (p-value) reported at .001, which is far below the conventional alpha level of .05, affirms the statistical significance of this relationship.

Additionally, a regression analysis was conducted to assess how the number of Untold participants influences the number of overnight stays at hotels. The following formula for a simple linear regression model was used:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

where:

- Y represents the dependent variable, the number of overnight hotel stays
- X indicates the independent variable, the attendees at the Untold festival, suspected to influence hotel stays.
- β_0 is the intercept of the regression line, the predicted number of overnight stays when no festival attendees are present.
- β_1 is the slope of the regression line, showing how hotel stays increase with each additional festival attendee.
- ϵ stands for the error term, capturing the variance between the predicted values and the actual observed figures

Table no. 4. Regression analysis summary: predicting overnight hotel stays from Untold festival participants

Model Summary ^b				
Model	Pearson correlation coefficient (r value)	The coefficient of determination (r ²)	Adjusted r ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.898 ^a	.807	.779	12542.53560
a. Predictors: (Constant), Untold Participants				
b. Dependent Variable: Overnight Hotel Stays				

Source: Authors' computation using SPSS.

Table 4 indicates a high r value of .898, demonstrating a strong positive linear relationship between the number of Untold Festival participants and hotel stays. With an r² of .807, the model explains 80.7% of the variance in hotel stays, signifying a substantial proportion of the variability in overnight stays can be predicted from festival attendance. The Adjusted r² value of .779 suggests that the model fits the data well even after accounting for the number of variables. The standard error of the estimate, 12,542.54, indicates the average distance that the observed values fall from the regression line, providing an estimate of the prediction error. Overall, the high r² value in conjunction with the significant Pearson correlation suggests that festival attendance is a strong predictor of hotel occupancy rates.

Table no. 5. Residuals statistics of the regression model

Residuals Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	59155.1875	140781.9688	116207.5556	23957.09297	9
Residual	-21755.06055	13091.48633	.00000	11732.46775	9
Std. Predicted Value	-2.381	1.026	.000	1.000	9
Std. Residual	-1.735	1.044	.000	.935	9
a. Dependent Variable: Hotel Stays					

Source: Authors' computation using SPSS.

Table 5 reveals a predicted value range from 59,155 to 140,782 with a mean of 116,208, suggesting varied hotel occupancy influenced by festival attendance. The residuals show no bias on average (mean = 0) but vary, with a standard deviation of 11,732, indicating the degree of prediction error. Standardized measures indicate the model's relative prediction performance with a standard deviation close to 1 for both predicted values and residuals.

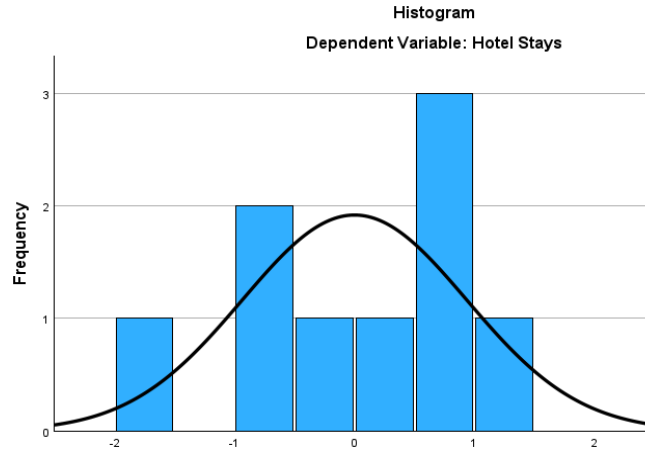


Figure no. 1. Histogram of Regression Standardized Residuals
Source: Authors' creation using SPSS.

The histogram of regression (Figure 1) pertains to the relationship between Untold Festival participants and hotel stays. With a mean close to zero and a standard deviation of 0.935, the distribution of residuals appears to approximate the normal curve. The normality of residuals lends credibility to the regression results, and supports the fact that the number of festival attendees is a significant predictor of hotel occupancy rates.

Table no. 6. The coefficients of the regression analysis

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	59155.188	11357.873		5.208	.001
	UntoldParticipants	.194	.036	.898	5.402	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Hotel Stays

Source: Authors' computation using SPSS.

The coefficient for Untold Participants is 0.194, with a standardized Beta of 0.898, meaning for each additional festival participant, hotel stays increase by approximately 0.194 units. The t-values and significance levels (Sig.) for the coefficient are notably high, with p-values well below 0.05, suggesting these results are statistically significant. The high Beta value indicates a strong positive relationship between festival participation and hotel stays, as confirmed by the statistical tests.

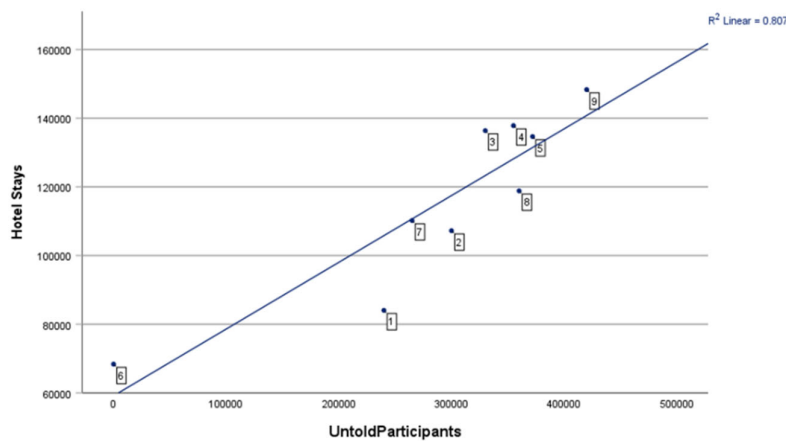


Figure no. 2. Regression analysis of Untold festival attendance and overnight hotel stays
Source: Authors' own creation based on SPSS computations.

The scatter plot (Figure 2) showcases a positive relationship between the number of participants at the Untold Festival and hotel stays, as indicated by the ascending regression line. The R^2 value from the regression analysis, which is noted on the plot as 0.807, confirms that a significant portion of the variance in hotel stays is explained by festival attendance. This visual representation and the statistical findings from the regression analysis, suggest a strong correlation. Therefore, the results of the Pearson Correlation Analysis and the Regression Analysis prove that H1 – The rate of overnight hotel occupancy in the host city is positively correlated with the number of attendees at the Untold Festival – is valid.

To address our second hypothesis (H2), which states that here is a consistent upward trend in the year-over-year growth of Untold Festival attendance, suggesting that the festival's appeal and reach are expanding annually, independent of external factors, a nuanced analysis of trends over the study period is made. This involves examining the trajectory of festival attendance from 2015 to 2023, including the deviations in 2020 due to the festival's cancellation and the shift in festival dates in 2021, from August to September. The Untold festival was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as also other aspects of the social and economic life in Romania (Tudorache, 2021; Tudorache and Nicolescu, 2023) and other countries (Tudorache, 2024).

The formula used to compute the year-over-year Growth is the following:

$$YoY\ Growth\ \% = \frac{Participants\ in\ Current\ Year - Participants\ in\ Previous\ Year}{Participants\ in\ Previous\ Year} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

Table no. 7. Annual attendance and year-over-year growth rates for the Untold festival (2015-2023)

Year	Untold Participants	Year-over-year Growth (%)
2015	240000	0
2016	300000	25
2017	330000	10
2018	355000	7,58
2019	372000	4,79
2020	0	0
2021	265000	-28,76 (with the previous year being considered 2019, since the event was not held in 2020)
2022	360000	35,85
2023	420000	16,67

Source: (Buciu, 2017; Ghiteuta, 2016; Institutul național de statistică, n.d.; Măgrădean, 2015; Măgrădean, 2019; Pirv, 2021; Știri de Cluj, 2022; Știri de Cluj, 2023; Ziua de Cluj, 2018).

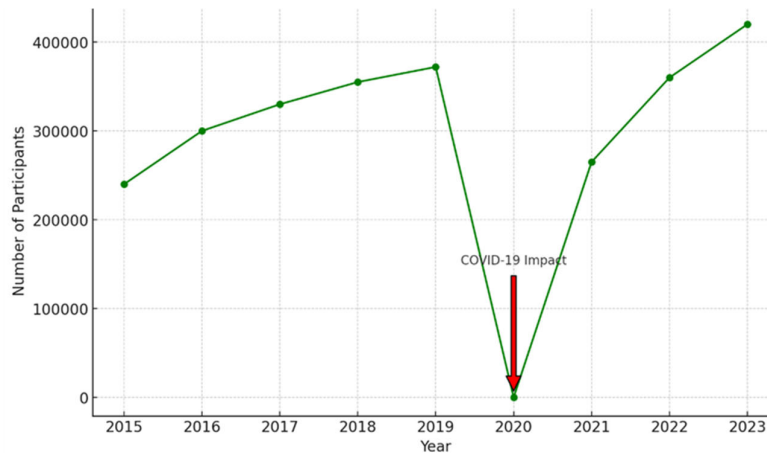


Figure no. 3. Trends in Untold Festival attendance from 2015 to 2023

Source: Authors' creation.

In Figure 3, a distinct narrative of progressive growth, pandemic-induced disruption, and subsequent recovery can be seen, highlighting the event's escalating appeal and resilience. The initial phase (2015-

2019) is characterized by a consistent upward trajectory in attendance, indicative of the festival's expanding popularity and its effective engagement strategies, which likely included comprehensive marketing efforts, an evolving lineup of performers, and an enhanced attendee experience.

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 precipitated a stop of activities, as evidenced by the complete absence of festival attendees, reflecting the global halt in large-scale public gatherings to comply with health and safety regulations. This disruption reflects the broader challenges faced by the entertainment and tourism sectors during the pandemic, underscoring the vulnerability to external shocks.

However, the narrative progresses to a phase of remarkable resilience and recovery in the subsequent years (2021-2023), as attendee numbers not only recover but also surpassed pre-pandemic levels, reaching a peak in 2023. This recovery trajectory not only demonstrates the demand for live events after the pandemic, but also attests to the festival's enduring appeal and the efficacy of its strategic responses to unprecedented challenges.

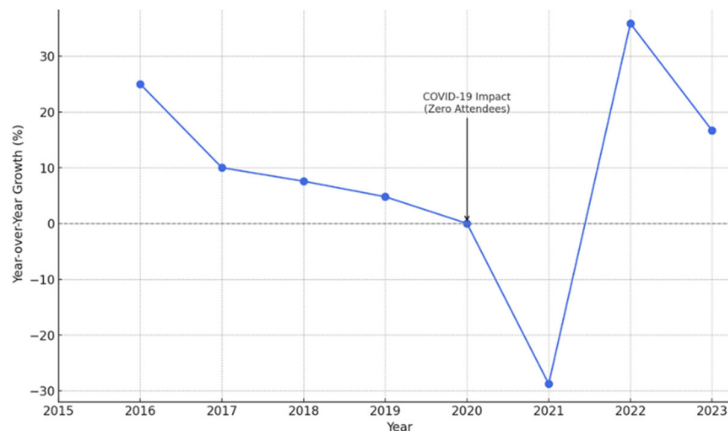


Figure no. 4. Yearly growth rates of Untold festival attendance (2015-2023)

Source: Authors' creation.

In Figure 4, the year-over-year growth data shows a trajectory of expansion, significant pandemic-induced interruption, and subsequent resilience and recovery. The progression from 2015 to 2019 demonstrates a consistent upward trajectory in festival participation, with growth rates of 25%, 10%, 7.58%, and 4.79%, respectively. The annotation for the year 2020 shows the complete cessation of attendance due to the fact that the festival was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent period from 2021 to 2023 reveals a recovery and growth phase. In particular, in 2021, the festival experienced a -28.76% growth in attendance compared to 2019, reflecting the lingering effects of the pandemic.

However, this phase marked the beginning of the festival's recovery trajectory, as evidenced by a substantial increase in participation in the following years – 35.85% in 2022 and 16.67% in 2023. These rates indicate not only a rebound from the pandemic's impacts but also an expansion beyond previous attendance records. Therefore, the analysis of attendance growth rates from 2015 through 2023 confirms Hypothesis 2, illustrating that the Untold Festival's appeal and reach continue to expand annually. This growth is achieved despite the significant external disruption posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, affirming the festival's robust position within the cultural and entertainment landscape.

Discussions and Conclusion

The results of this empirical investigation resonate with the conceptual frameworks laid out in the literature, illustrating the multifaceted influence of such international mega events on tourism and urban development (Ritchie, 1984; Müller, 2015; Richards and Leal Londoño, 2022). The first hypothesis (H1) conjectured a positive correlation between festival attendance and hotel stays. This positive correlation is indicative of the immediate economic stimulus that major events impart on host cities, affirming assertions by Matheson (2006) and Preuss (2007).

In addition, the second hypothesis (H2) anticipated a consistent increase in festival attendance, asserting that the appeal of the Untold Festival broadens each year, independent of external variables. The data upholds this hypothesis, highlighting an enduring trend of growth that mirrors the literature's depiction of

the escalating significance of events in the cultural and leisure contexts (Cosma et al., 2016). The recovery of the Untold Festival following the pandemic reinforces the role of festivals as cultural expressions and vital components of societal development. The findings confirm that the Untold Festival has effectively leveraged its cultural assets to not only stimulate economic and infrastructure growth, but to also enhance the social fabric of Cluj-Napoca (Dychkovskyy and Ivanov, 2020).

The research presented in this paper confirms that the Untold Festival significantly impacts hotel occupancy rates in Cluj-Napoca, with a substantial correlation between festival attendance and hotel stays. Moreover, the consistent upward trend in attendance underscores the festival's expanding appeal. Future studies may focus on a longitudinal approach to investigate the long-term legacy of the Untold Festival and similar events in their host cities.

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