

## THE ROLE OF RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND GROUP ANIMATION IN STIMULATING LOCAL TOURISM: A CASE STUDY IN BIHOR COUNTY

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### Abstract

*The promotion and valorisation of locally specific agro-food products represent a fundamental pillar of sustainable development in rural areas, playing a crucial role in strengthening the local economy, preserving traditions, and reducing environmental pressures. The present study explores the market opportunities associated with Romanian agro-food products, with a particular focus on the Bucovina region – a territory renowned for its distinctive gastronomic identity and high-quality agro-food resources. Drawing on a review of the specialised literature and the most recent statistical data, the analysis outlines the theoretical and institutional framework for promoting local products, highlighting current trends and the main challenges in the field.*

*The case study conducted in Bucovina reveals successful models developed by local producers, the role of associative structures, and initiatives aimed at integrating these products into both domestic and international markets. Based on these findings, the paper proposes public policy directions designed to support the certification process, the development of short supply chains, increased collaboration among producers, and the inclusion of traditional products within sustainable tourism offerings. The conclusions emphasise the necessity of multisectoral cooperation between authorities, local communities, and consumers in order to transform Bucovina's agro-food heritage into a viable instrument for economic, social, and environmental sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Bucovina, local products, sustainable rural development, agro-food heritage, short supply chains

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#### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary tourism is undergoing profound transformations driven by changes in consumer behaviour, technological evolution, and an increasing demand for personalised and authentic experiences. In this context, recreational activities and group animation programmes have gained strategic relevance, emerging not merely as supplementary components of the tourism offer but as essential elements in creating experiential value for visitors. Over the past two decades, the scholarly literature has consistently highlighted the shift from “passive” tourism—focused on sightseeing and consumption—to “experiential” tourism, in which active participation, emotional engagement, and social interaction define tourist satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visitation (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Morgan et al., 2010).

Recreational activities—encompassing sports, cultural, educational, creative, and wellness forms of leisure—play a multiplying role in the development of local destinations by strengthening the relationship between

visitors and the place. Likewise, group animation, understood as an ensemble of techniques, methods, and interventions designed to stimulate participation, communication, and cohesion among participants, has become an essential tool in tourism experience management (Gheorghe & Gică, 2010). It creates temporary social spaces through which tourists interact, discover local specificity, and develop an emotional attachment to the destination—an element crucial for loyalty-building and sustainable economic impact.

For regions with significant yet underutilised tourism potential, such as Bihor County, integrating experiential components may decisively contribute to destination repositioning and diversification of the tourism offering. Bihor is characterised by a rich variety of natural and anthropic resources—ranging from the mountainous landscapes of the Apuseni Mountains to internationally renowned spa resorts, multicultural heritage, and the modern urban infrastructure of Oradea. However, the mere existence of these resources is not sufficient

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to generate competitiveness in an increasingly saturated market. To achieve sustainable development, local tourism must integrate holistic products that address the needs of new generations of visitors characterised by increased mobility, a search for authenticity, and a desire for active involvement.

In this regard, recreational activities and group animation become structural drivers of local tourism development, contributing to:

- enhancing the quality of visitor experiences;
- increasing the average length of stay and associated expenditures;
- diversifying the tourist base by attracting families, groups, seniors, and youth;
- generating seasonal or permanent employment opportunities;
- revitalising rural communities through participatory activities;
- strengthening regional cultural identity through thematic animation.

As highlighted in international studies (Sharpley, 2018; Richards, 2011; UNWTO, 2023), tourist animation plays a decisive role in creating “memorable moments”—those experiences that differentiate a destination from its competitors and generate positive digital word-of-mouth, indirectly influencing tourism flows. Furthermore, numerous European destinations have successfully transformed recreational activities into major economic vectors through thematic festivals, animated cultural routes, interactive programmes, and community events that stimulate local consumption.

However, in the Romanian context, research on animation and recreational activities remains relatively limited, with most studies focusing on rural tourism, ecotourism, or health tourism. There is a noticeable lack of in-depth analysis of how animation can function as a strategic development instrument at the local level, particularly in counties such as Bihor, where the diversity of resources enables the creation of complex tourism products. This article aims to contribute to the scientific literature through an integrated approach, analysing both conceptual dimensions of tourism animation and their practical applicability

through an empirical case study in Bihor County.

The study is based on the premise that the tourism potential of Bihor can be better leveraged through the development of recreational and animation programmes tailored to the local context—traditions, multicultural heritage, natural resources, and modern infrastructure. Such programmes may support both urban tourism (through cultural events, street animation, interactive tours) and rural or mountain tourism (through outdoor activities, family-oriented animation, craft workshops, sports, or educational experiences). The city of Oradea, for instance, with its strategic focus on cultural tourism, may benefit from integrating more structured animation elements to strengthen its position in the European city-break market.

From the perspective of local development, tourist animation has a strong socio-cultural, participatory, and community-oriented dimension. It can stimulate social capital, encourage cooperation between local actors—public authorities, tourism operators, NGOs, and communities—and transform localities into interactive, inclusive, and attractive spaces. In Bihor, numerous local initiatives (festivals, outdoor activities in the Apuseni Mountains, sports events, educational programmes in protected areas) reflect an appetite for development, yet they often lack coordination, integrated marketing, and professionalisation that would enable scaling-up.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address several essential research questions:

1. What role do recreational activities and group animation play in generating memorable tourist experiences in Bihor County?
2. How can these activities contribute to the sustainable development of local tourism?
3. What are tourists’ perceptions and preferences regarding animation and leisure in Bihor?
4. Which best-practice models identified in other European destinations can be adapted and applied in this context?

By combining theoretical analysis with empirical investigation at the local level, this

study offers a comprehensive perspective on the strategic potential of tourist animation in Bihor and on the actions that can strengthen destination competitiveness. The case study provides an opportunity to examine in depth both existing opportunities and structural challenges, offering practical recommendations for stakeholders, policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities.

The introduction establishes the conceptual and territorial framework required to understand the role of animation and recreational activities in local development, highlighting the importance of an integrated, participatory, and innovative approach to tourism in Bihor County. The current tourism landscape favours destinations that successfully transform their resources into platforms for memorable experiences, and Bihor possesses all the necessary preconditions to become a model of good practice in this regard—provided that local structures strategically harness the potential of animation and recreation.

#### **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

An extensive literature review was conducted between January and March 2025. Academic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar were consulted to identify conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions on:

- recreational activities in tourism,
- group animation and tourist experience,
- community-based tourism development,
- experiential tourism and destination competitiveness.

Additionally, national and regional reports, strategic documents, and statistical data from Romanian authorities (INS, MDRT, CJ Bihor) were examined to contextualize the evolution of tourism in the region.

Structured and unstructured observations were conducted in several key tourist areas of Bihor County, including Oradea, Băile Felix–Băile 1 Mai, Stâna de Vale, Padiș, and selected Apuseni mountain

villages. Observations targeted aspects such as:

- availability and diversity of recreational activities,
- quality and frequency of animation programmes,
- tourist participation and behavioural patterns,
- seasonality and event types.

This method enabled an authentic understanding of the experiential dimension of local tourism

A quantitative survey was conducted between April and June 2025, employing an online and field-distributed questionnaire. The survey targeted domestic and international tourists visiting Bihor.

- Sample size: 312 valid responses.
- Sampling technique: convenience sampling with stratification by major tourism zones.
- Instrument: a structured questionnaire with closed and Likert-scale items measuring tourist preferences, satisfaction levels, perceived quality of recreational and animation activities, and behavioural intentions (e.g., likelihood to revisit or recommend).

• Statistical tests used: descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), and exploratory factor analysis where applicable.

Data were processed using SPSS Statistics 29 and Excel.

To complement the quantitative analysis, 18 interviews were conducted with key tourism stakeholders:

- hotel and guesthouse managers,
- animation and event organisers,
- representatives of cultural centres and tourism associations,
- local authorities and destination management structures.

Interview guides focused on:

- perceived importance of animation in enhancing visitor experience,
- challenges and barriers in organizing recreational activities,
- best practices and innovation potential,
- views on sustainable tourism development in Bihor.

Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework.

The case study approach targeted Bihor County as a holistic tourism ecosystem. The analysis integrated evidence from multiple sources:

- field observations,
- stakeholder interviews,
- tourist survey responses,
- event and activity mapping,
- local-level strategic documents (2020–2027 tourism development plans).

This multi-source evidence enabled the identification of patterns, synergies, and gaps in the provision of recreational and animation-based tourism experiences.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques was used:

- Qualitative thematic coding: applied to interview transcripts and observational notes.
- Content analysis: performed on promotional materials, event descriptions, and

tourism websites to evaluate the representation of animation activities.

- Statistical analysis: including frequency distributions, mean comparisons, and correlation analysis to determine relationships between animation experiences and tourism satisfaction.

Interpretation followed a descriptive–interpretative logic, ensuring both analytical rigour and contextual sensitivity.

All participants (tourists and stakeholders) were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of the research. Participation was voluntary, and data were anonymised according to GDPR guidelines. No sensitive personal data were collected. The research followed ethical principles of transparency, informed consent, and responsible data handling.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of 312 valid questionnaires were collected from tourists visiting Bihor County between April and June 2025. The sociodemographic profile of respondents is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of respondents (N = 312)**

Variable	Category	% of respondents
<b>Gender</b>	Male	46.5%
	Female	52.9%
	Other / prefer not to say	0.6%
<b>Age group</b>	18–24	17.0%
	25–34	29.2%
	35–44	23.7%
	45–54	15.4%
	55+	14.7%
<b>Origin</b>	Domestic – Romania	81.4%
	International	18.6%
<b>Education</b>	Secondary	22.8%
	Bachelor's degree	48.4%
	Master's / Doctoral	28.8%
<b>Travel party</b>	Alone	9.6%
	Couple	34.9%
	Family with children	29.5%
	Group of friends	26.0%
<b>Visit frequency</b>	First-time visitors	57.7%
	Repeat visitors	42.3%

*source own interpretation*

The sample is relatively balanced by gender and slightly skewed towards young and middle-aged adults (25–44), a segment strongly associated in the literature with demand for experiential and recreational tourism. The relatively high share of families and groups of friends (55.5%) indicates a

strong potential for group animation activities. More than four out of ten respondents are repeat visitors, suggesting that Bihor already benefits from a certain level of loyalty, which can be strengthened through enhanced recreational and animation offers.

**Table 2. Travel characteristics and participation in recreational and animation activities**

Indicator	Category / Mean	Value
Main purpose of visit	Leisure / holiday	68.6%
	Spa & wellness	17.9%
	City-break (Oradea)	8.7%
	Business / other	4.8%
Average length of stay (nights)	Mean (SD)	3.4 (±1.8)
Participation in any recreational activity	Yes	73.1%
	No	26.9%
Participation in organised group animation (e.g., guided tours, themed evenings, workshops)	Yes	44.6%
	No	55.4%
Most common activities (multiple answers)	Spa & wellness facilities	62.8%
	Hiking / nature walks	54.2%
	Cultural tours / heritage visits	47.4%
	Themed evenings / live music	33.3%
	Children's animation / family games	21.5%
	Adventure activities (bike, via ferrata etc.)	18.3%

*source own interpretation*

Almost three quarters of respondents (73.1%) engaged in at least one recreational activity during their stay, and almost half (44.6%) participated in some form of organised group animation (guided tours, themed events, organised games, workshops). This indicates that there is already substantial demand for structured recreational and animation experiences in Bihor. Spa, hiking, and cultural activities dominate, but the uptake of evening and family animation is

also significant, especially among families and groups. This confirms the strategic role that well-designed animation programmes can play in enhancing local tourism.

Respondents were asked to evaluate, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very poor; 5 = excellent), the perceived quality and availability of recreational activities and animation. The results are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3. Evaluation of recreational and animation offer in Bihor (Likert 1–5)**

Dimension	Mean	SD
Diversity of recreational activities	3.84	0.86
Quality of recreational facilities (equipment, infrastructure)	3.72	0.91
Availability of information about activities (online, on-site)	3.45	0.99
Frequency of organised animation programmes	3.26	1.02
Professionalism of animators / guides	3.98	0.82
Suitability of activities for families and children	3.61	0.94
Integration of local culture and traditions into activities	3.89	0.88
Overall satisfaction with recreational and animation offer	3.87	0.83
Intention to revisit Bihor (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely)	4.02	0.79

*source own interpretation*

Overall, the evaluation scores are above the neutral point (3.0), with most dimensions scoring between 3.5 and 4.0, indicating a good level of satisfaction. The highest scores are registered for:

- Professionalism of animators/guides (Mean = 3.98)
- Intention to revisit Bihor (Mean = 4.02)
- Integration of local culture and traditions (Mean = 3.89)

These results suggest that when animation and recreational activities are present, they are generally well appreciated, especially in terms of human interaction and cultural content.

However, frequency of organised animation programmes (Mean = 3.26) and availability of information (Mean = 3.45) score lower, signalling operational gaps in the consistency and communication of the offer. This supports the argument that improving programme regularity and information channels (websites, social media, on-site signage) could significantly increase participation and satisfaction.

To explore how animation activities influence tourist behaviour, correlation analysis was performed between satisfaction with animation and behavioural intentions (intention to revisit and to recommend Bihor). Table 4 presents the main results.

**Table 4. Correlations between animation experience and behavioural intentions**

Variables (1–5 Likert)	Intention to revisit Bihor	Intention to recommend Bihor
Overall satisfaction with recreational & animation offer	$r = 0.41^{**}$	$r = 0.47^{**}$
Perceived integration of local culture in activities	$r = 0.36^{**}$	$r = 0.44^{**}$
Participation in organised group animation (0 = no, 1 = yes)	$r = 0.29^{**}$	$r = 0.33^{**}$

*source own interpretation*

The results indicate moderate, statistically significant positive correlations between satisfaction with the recreational and animation offer and both intention to revisit **and** intention to recommend Bihor as a destination. In particular:

- Tourists who are more satisfied with animation and recreation are more likely to return and to recommend the destination.
- The perceived integration of local culture into activities also shows a solid positive relationship with recommendation intentions,

supporting the idea that culturally grounded animation strengthens destination image.

- Simply participating in organised animation is associated with higher behavioural intentions, confirming the strategic role of group animation in building loyalty and word-of-mouth.

Observations in the field focused on five main areas: Oradea, Băile Felix–Băile 1 Mai, Stâna de Vale, Padiş–Apuseni and selected rural localities. A synthesis is provided in Table 5.

**Table 5. Synthesis of field observations on recreational and animation activities**

Area / Destination	Main recreational and animation activities observed	Observed strengths	Observed weaknesses
Oradea (urban)	Guided city tours, cultural events, festivals, street performances	Strong cultural animation, good event organisation, high participation	Limited family-specific animation, concentration in peak periods
Băile Felix – Băile 1 Mai	Spa & wellness, pool entertainment, evening music, hotel-based animation	High demand, good infrastructure, presence of some animation for adults	Children's animation and outdoor experiential products underdeveloped
Stâna de Vale	Hiking, nature walks, small-scale animation at accommodation units	Beautiful natural setting, potential for outdoor animation	Few structured programmes, limited promotion, seasonality
Padiş – Apuseni	Hiking, speleology, adventure activities (unstructured), local guides	Strong potential for adventure-based animation	Lack of integrated programmes, high dependence on informal guides

Area / Destination	Main recreational and animation activities observed	Observed strengths	Observed weaknesses
Rural localities (selected)	Traditional gastronomy, local events, occasional folklore evenings	Authentic atmosphere, potential for cultural animation	Activities irregular, few trained animators, weak marketing

*source own interpretation*

Field observations reveal an uneven spatial distribution of animation and recreational activities. Oradea and Băile Felix stand out as animation hubs, especially for urban cultural and wellness tourism. In contrast, mountain and rural areas have high experiential potential, but fewer structured and promoted programmes, often relying on informal or sporadic initiatives.

This asymmetry suggests that Bihor's tourism ecosystem is fragmented in terms of animation: some areas are already moving towards an experiential model, while others

remain predominantly resource-based, without enough mediation through creative programmes. A county-level strategy that connects these micro-clusters through thematic products and animation networks could significantly increase the attractiveness and coherence of the destination.

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism stakeholders (accommodation managers, event organisers, local authorities, cultural institutions). Table 6 summarises the main thematic categories that emerged.

**Table 6. Main themes from stakeholder interviews (N = 18)**

Theme	% of interviewees mentioning it	Illustrative interpretation (synthesised)
Animation as a competitive advantage	83%	Stakeholders consider animation and recreation as key differentiators for Bihor.
Lack of trained animators / human resources	72%	Difficulties in finding or training specialised staff, especially in rural / mountain areas.
Seasonality of demand	67%	Strong concentration in weekends and holidays; off-season events are rare.
Need for better coordination between actors	61%	Fragmentation between public and private sector; need for integrated planning.
Financial constraints	56%	Limited budgets for organising events and animation programmes.
Successful examples of animation (festivals, events)	50%	Stakeholders cite local festivals and city events as good models to replicate elsewhere.
Interest in family-oriented and youth animation	44%	Many see families and youth as priority target segments for future animation products.

*source own interpretation*

Stakeholder perspectives confirm that animation and recreation are perceived as strategic assets for Bihor's tourism development. However, several barriers hinder their scaling-up:

- **Human resources:** lack of specialists in tourist animation, particularly outside urban centres.
- **Coordination:** insufficient collaboration between municipalities, destination management organisations, private operators and NGOs.
- **Financing and continuity:** events are often project-dependent or seasonal, making it difficult to build long-term brands.

At the same time, interviewees identify promising trajectories, such as:

- replicating and adapting successful urban festivals and cultural events in rural areas;
- developing family- and youth-oriented programmes;
- investing in training and professionalisation for animation staff.

These qualitative insights complement survey and observational data by explaining why certain gaps persist despite evident demand from visitors.

Taken together, the survey, field observations and stakeholder interviews suggest that:

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- Demand exists and is strong: a majority of tourists participate in recreational activities and a significant share already engage in group animation, evaluating it positively.

- Experiential factors matter: satisfaction with animation and recreation is statistically linked to intention to revisit and to recommend the destination.

- Offer is uneven and under-communicated: urban and spa areas are relatively advanced, while rural and mountain zones lack structured, visible programmes.

- Institutional and organisational barriers (staff, coordination, funding) limit the full exploitation of Bihor's potential.

These findings support the central hypothesis of the article: recreational activities and group animation can function as powerful levers for stimulating local tourism in Bihor, provided they are integrated into a coherent strategic framework and supported by adequate human and material resources.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that recreational activities and group animation represent significant drivers of tourism development in Bihor County, contributing not only to enhanced visitor satisfaction but also to increased destination competitiveness. By integrating survey data, field observations, and stakeholder interviews, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on the experiential dynamics shaping tourist behaviour in the region.

First, the results reveal that demand for recreational and animation activities is substantial and diversified. A large majority of surveyed tourists engaged in at least one recreational experience during their stay, while almost half participated in structured group animation programmes. These patterns confirm that contemporary tourists visiting Bihor seek participatory, interactive, and meaningful experiences—aligned with global shifts toward experiential tourism. The high levels of satisfaction recorded for animation-

related dimensions, especially the professionalism of guides and the integration of local cultural elements, reinforce the importance of designing activities that blend entertainment with authenticity.

Second, the study highlights that animation has a measurable influence on tourist behaviour, as indicated by statistically significant correlations with intention to revisit and willingness to recommend Bihor to others. Participation in animation activities is associated with stronger emotional engagement, deeper understanding of local culture, and an overall improvement in the quality of the visitor experience. These mechanisms underscore animation's potential as a strategic tool not only for enriching the tourist offer but also for cultivating loyalty and generating positive word-of-mouth—factors essential to long-term destination sustainability.

Third, the research identifies notable spatial disparities in the availability and organisation of recreational and animation activities across the county. Urban and spa areas such as Oradea and Băile Felix show a relatively mature and well-structured offer, whereas rural and mountain areas—despite possessing exceptional natural and cultural resources—lack consistent programming, professionalised staff, and visibility. This fragmentation suggests that Bihor's tourism ecosystem could benefit from a more coordinated approach, linking its micro-destinations through thematic trails, shared event calendars, or county-level branding initiatives.

Fourth, stakeholder perspectives highlight a series of structural constraints that limit the full exploitation of animation's potential. Among these, the shortage of trained animators and guides, limited financial resources, seasonality, and weak inter-institutional collaboration emerge as the most pressing issues. Despite these challenges, stakeholders express strong interest in expanding family-oriented and youth-focused animation, drawing inspiration from successful cultural events and festivals that already function as regional anchors.

Overall, the study concludes that recreational activities and group animation

can act as powerful catalysts for stimulating local tourism in Bihor County, provided they are strategically developed and supported through coherent policies, professional training, and partnerships between public and private actors. Transforming Bihor into a more experiential destination requires not only investments in infrastructure and human resources but also the creation of integrated, culturally grounded products that offer visitors a distinctive and memorable sense of place.

From a broader perspective, the Bihor case study illustrates the increasing relevance of animation within the contemporary tourism landscape, particularly in regions seeking to

differentiate themselves through creativity, authenticity, and community involvement. Strengthening animation-based tourism development can enhance local identity, diversify economic opportunities, and foster sustainable rural and urban revitalisation.

Future research could expand this investigation by analysing longitudinal changes in visitor behaviour, exploring digital forms of animation (augmented reality, gamification), or comparing Bihor with other regions in Romania and Central Europe. Such extensions would deepen understanding of animation's potential and inform more precise strategies for its implementation in diverse tourism contexts.

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